

**Fire On The Horizon**



# **Fire On The Horizon**

**By**

**Daniel Derrett**

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*For my parents, who were the most convincing when they  
said they liked it.*



# Chance Meetings On A Train

Loneliness is cumulative, you save it up all your life. Everywhere you have been alone, your old houses, your walk to work, your local pub, the shop you used to buy a newspaper every morning, the station that used to be your stop. You will pass these places and the memory will only seem half there, as if it is just a shadow or a dream. A person, any person, who shares that memory, even if they are long gone, cements the moment into your mind, makes it real. Memory is designed to work with people, it can record places, things, sounds, and words if forced to, but it is far superior at remembering people. Any memory of a person is a snapshot, the person holds it there like an anchor, dragging the background detail, the scenery, the soundtrack, back into focus.

You will pass these places, where you shared no experience with no other person, and your time there, now ended, will seem somehow unreal, as if the past is less another country but another world far far off. You will wonder where all that time went. Every day I got off the train at St. Margarets, and now it is gone, seemingly without trace, the only one who remembers those days is me. You will wonder how you got from there to here. Your path

through time seems fleeting, you barely seem to have touched the ground, disturbed the surface. You are traveling at breakneck speed towards the grave leaving no trace of your presence in your wake - leaving no wake.

I had not thought the girl was all that attractive at first. She was reading a manuscript of some sort which had caught my interest simply because it was unusual, but it was probably just some work document. I suppose there was nothing wrong with her, she was young, slim, and good looking enough, but there was something about her, some sense of attitude I could not put my finger on. Perhaps it was just her choice of clothes, tight jeans and a black polo neck, perhaps those thick rimmed lesbian glasses, perhaps simply something in the way she held herself, flipping disdainfully through the pages of her reading matter, or perhaps something else entirely, but she exuded to me an attitude of self-conscious cool, of stuck-up, pretentious, pompous, snobbery.

I opened my novel but did not read a word, I looked out of the window and thought about all the times I had taken this train. All those years gone now.

And then she spoke. Her phone rang and she answered it. And she bubbled, she cooed delightfully and excitedly, she laughed playfully. In a second that veneer of austerity I had assumed, vanished, and all there was beneath was an open, honest, natural person full of vigour and life. And I, I was snapped right out of my wistful musings back to the present. While she engrossed herself in her phone-call I could not help but stare. There was magic in her voice, and I was in love.

Oh this is not entirely unlike me, this sudden obsession. There is a tendency to become maudlin on trains. A public carriage is an isolating and solitary place, and an ache for companionship will sometimes rise. I have a track record of daydreaming and daydreams are dangerous to the lonely



man. In a second you can imagine a life with any person, sitting there, perhaps idly watching their reflection in the window, you picture yourself next to them, talking and sharing the journey, sometimes you picture more. I pictured myself going home with this girl, I pictured myself making her breakfast the next morning, I pictured breakfast every morning, I pictured marriage and children and growing old together, all in seconds, all chimed into existence at the call of her voice.

What did I do? I did nothing.

And we continued to sit on opposite sides of the train. A Chinese couple got out at Twickenham leaving us the only ones in the carriage. I glanced up at her often, trying not to make it obvious, if she looked at me, I never noticed. I effected an interest in my book I no longer had. She gathered her luggage ready to leave the train at Whitton. Outside the window the world sped by. It looked like shadows, like ghosts long gone, the endless leafy suburbia of West London was being subsumed into the night and our little carriage was held into the world only by its speed. We slipped out from between the silken fingers of the dusk and sped on towards the retreating sun.

She got up and stood by the door as the train slowed approaching the station. Did she spare me a glance, if she did it meant nothing. I turned back to my book, I did not want to watch her go. The words swam on the page, sentences twisted and jumbled, I could not remember the plot.

And then she gasped. It was a strangled, squeaky intake of breath and it felt like ice down the back of my neck. It was unmistakably terror. I looked up and could see she was clearly alarmed. She glanced quickly up and down the carriage. She looked at me but the look seemed to pass right through to the back of the seat, we caught each others eyes but she was looking for something specific and I was

not it. I could see her breathing fast. The train hissed to a stop. She looked out the window and back the way we came. I could see her bottom lip tremble. The alarm went, signalling the doors were now ready to open, and she dashed down the carriage away from the doors, further away from me, and ducked between the seats, hiding.

I watched, nothing happened, I listened and could just make out her panting breath. The train stood at the station and there was a dull hum of noise, of people, and of the electric motors still turning.

Then two men appeared on the platform, walked up to the very door she had been about to depart by, opened it, and boarded the carriage. There was little to distinguish them, they were youngish, both dressed in charcoal suits, both smart and clean shaven. You would never normally spare them a glance.

They got on without saying a word to each other and both turned to me. I looked up from my book and looked at them, there was nothing in their gaze to notice, it was not threatening, or searching, or suspicious, it was nothing, an emotionless glance at another passenger. They turned away and walked further down the carriage, towards where the girl was hiding, I watched, trying very hard to look disinterested, to look like I was still reading that bloody novel. Mentally I totted up what I had that might be used as a weapon. Nothing much, a pen, a shoulder bag with a couple of files in it that might be swung by its strap. I tensed ready to run to the girls rescue. In those few seconds I did not consider any other option than going to her defence.

The men walked right by her. There could be no mistake. I had watched her hide. I knew exactly where she was, but they walked right by that row of seats without sparing her a glance. They could not ... they physically could not have missed her unless they were blind but they walked by and left the carriage at the next set of doors. The trains hissed, grumbled, and lurched forward and the men just

stood there. Watching me ... watching us depart.

I put my book down and leaned out to get a better look. The girl had to be there, there was nowhere else she could have gone. I was about to go and look for myself when she appeared. She stood up from exactly where I had saw her duck down, brushed some dust off the front of her jacket, and walked back and sat in the seat opposite mine.

‘Thank you,’ she said. Her voice was thinner now. It was still a good voice, but it seemed weak, it betrayed her fear.

‘For what?’

‘For not giving me away.’

I waved my hands. ‘It was nothing,’ I said.

‘No,’ she said, ‘it was a lot more than you realise, and a lot harder, I didn’t know if...’ She tailed off and looked out of the window, distracted by something that flashed by.

I followed her gaze, but saw nothing.

‘Who were they?’

‘They were ...’ she started, but then went silent, seemingly still distracted by something beyond the window. I could not see what she was looking at, maybe she was like me, maybe she could loose herself simply watching the world go by.

‘Where does this train go?’ she asked after a couple of minutes of silence.

‘Feltham is next,’ I said, ‘Windsor eventually.’

‘Where are you getting off?’

‘Staines.’

‘Are there ticket barriers there?’

‘What?’

‘Ticket barriers, the gate things.’

‘Oh yes... no there aren’t any, there’s sometimes a man, but not often.’

She said nothing.

'If you had a ticket to Whitton it shouldn't be a problem,' I said, 'I think you can just pay a bit extra.'

'No,' she said, 'I can't afford to get stopped, not by anyone, not now...' Again she tailed off, distracted, preoccupied by something. She took her phone out of her jacket pocket and held it on her lap.

I tried to think of something to say, anything to keep her talking to me, to try and spark a friendship, but she clearly did not want to be drawn on what had just happened at the station and to talk about anything else seemed trite, stupid.

The train pulled in to Feltham and she remained sitting, watching the platform anxiously. No one got on the carriage, no one even walked by the window.

'Can I ask you a favour?' she said as we pulled away, she addressed the words directly to the window, never turning to me.

'Go on.'

'Could you get off with me at Staines and walk me to a taxi rank?'

'Yes, err... sure. I can do that.'

'Thank you.'

I looked out the window, her reflection looked right back directly at me. It smiled, a warm and thankful smile.

At Staines we both rose and stood by the door as the train pulled in to the station. Just like in Feltham she watched the platform suspiciously but there was only a couple of young girls waiting.

The train shuddered to a stop and we waited for the doors to activate. I put my hand out and said 'my name's Mitchell by the way.'

She looked at my hand as if not sure what she was supposed to do with it. 'That's my first name,' I rambled self consciously, 'Mitchell, Mitchell Wallingford.'

The beeper sounded and she stabbed the door button and then took my hand in both of hers and shook it briefly.

‘Selkie,’ she said.

We walked together out of the station, it was pouring with rain and I positioned my umbrella over both of us for the brief thirty yard dash to the minicab office.

‘Whitton,’ repeated the fat man behind the counter, ‘sure thing love, be about a twenty minute wait okay?’

Selkie wrung her hands together, looked at her phone as if for confirmation, and bit her bottom lip. ‘Can you not get anything quicker?’

‘No chance I’m afraid love, all booked up with some works Christmas do.’

‘Oh,’ she said to herself, ‘it’s too long to wait.’

She turned to me. ‘It’s too long to wait.’

I shrugged, ‘there’s another taxi place on the high street, do you want me to take you there?’

She nodded vigorously.

I nodded farewell to the fat man behind the counter, he rolled his eyes in a gesture of commiseration, the instant brotherhood of men at the mercy of insane women. He was wrong, I was not at anyone’s mercy, I was doing this entirely of my own volition, I still just wanted to spend time with this enchanting woman.

The obvious did not occur to me until we were walking back over the footbridge. ‘Hold on,’ I said, ‘why don’t I drive you?’

‘You’d do that?’

I smiled. ‘It’s that or watch telly with the flat-mate.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah, come on.’

I only lived a five minute walk from the station, closer than the next minicab office in fact. Selkie thanked me in that thin, distracted voice on the way there but other than that we did not talk.

‘Hello.’ I announced my presence loudly as we walked in the door.

‘Hey,’ answered Bob the flat-mate, audible from, doubtlessly, his usual horizontal perch in front of the television.

‘Do you want a cup of tea or anything?’ I asked.

Selkie shook her head. ‘I need to get back. Mum...’

‘Sure,’ I said, and dropped my bag on the kitchen table, picked my umbrella up again from the corner of the hallway where I had leaned it, and walked back out the door.

‘Goodbye,’ I shouted to the flat-mate.

‘Bye.’

I beeped the lock open on the car, it flashed it’s lights in the dark like a puppy pleased to see me.

‘I’ve got to ask again,’ I said once we were driving, ‘but who were those men and how did you hide from them?’

She looked across at me, she had calmed down a little now we were on our way back to Whitton, there was no longer that lost little girl quality to her voice and it had regained some of the qualities that initially charmed me on the train. She was still unsure though, grasping for different words before finally saying ‘it’s complicated.’

‘I’m not harbouring a terrorist or anything like that am I?’ I said, and then laughed to show it was not meant seriously. Although at some small place near the back of my mind the thought was being entertained.

‘No... well...’ she said. ‘You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.’

‘Maybe, but if you don’t tell me anything who knows what I’ll believe.’

‘Okay,’ she said, ‘short easy version. I’m not a terrorist but those men were kind of from the security services, a branch of it anyway.’

‘Go on.’

‘This is going to sound silly.’

‘Silly I can cope with.’

‘They think I’m a witch.’

‘A what!’

I turned to look at her and she gestured anxiously that I should look at the road. I did and immediately slammed on the breaks to avoid hitting a lorry turning out in front of us. The car skidded on the wet surface and the back wheels were just beginning to slide out before we safely came to rest a several feet from the lorry. It was scary nevertheless and I sat there, stationary, hands gripping the steering wheel tight and breath coming fast as my heart pounded furiously.

‘Sorry.’ I said.

She smiled a thin smile and exhaled slowly. ‘I’ve had worse scares today,’ she said.

I found first gear and pulled away. ‘A witch?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she replied wearily, ‘they were from the office of the witch finder general, it’s a little know branch of the home office.’

I thought for a moment, trying to work out if she was having me on or was genuinely nuts. ‘And is that how you hid from them?’ I asked.

‘Kind of,’ she said, ‘actually you did most of that, without realising it.’

‘I don’t think I did anything.’

‘That would be the “without realising it” part.’

I drove on in silence, we were approaching Whitton and she directed me where to go. ‘You’re right,’ I said, as I began to suspect we were nearly there.

‘About what?’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Your loss,’ she said, ‘go right here.’

We turned up a long gravel driveway with a large house at the end of it. As soon as the headlights illuminated the

front door it opened and a woman ran out. Selkie undid her seat-belt and had the door open before the car had completely stopped. 'Mum,' she shouted, and ran towards the woman. They embraced and then spoke urgently and quietly, too quietly for me to hear.

I killed the engine, and stood by the car, waiting to be thanked. Eventually both women approached me.

'My thanks to you young man,' said Selkie's mother, 'you have no idea what a service you have provided for my daughter.'

'That's right,' I said with an awkward smile, 'I have no idea.'

She shook my hand, kissed me rapidly on both cheeks, and then held me by my shoulders at arms length examining me.

'I'm afraid my daughter and I have work to do,' she said, releasing my shoulders, 'other wise I'd offer you a cup of tea.'

I got the feeling I had failed a test of some kind. 'That's fine,' I said, 'I should get home anyway. It's late.'

'You must think me very rude.'

'Not at all.'

'Well thank you again, come on Selkie.' She turned her daughter towards the house with a brush of her hand and they both walked away. Then Selkie turned, ran up to me, kissed me once on the cheek and held my hand in both of hers as she had done so briefly on the train.

'Thank you,' she said, and then, 'I'll be in touch.'

And without another glance back they disappeared into that big house, that big heavy door slamming shut behind them. I turned my car around and drove home. She'll be in touch, I thought to myself, she'll be in touch.

At home I collapsed onto the sofa opposite the flat-mate.

'Where'd you go?' he said.



‘Gave a lift to a girl I met on the train.’

‘A girl?’

‘A real live female girl of the opposite sex.’

‘What was it like?’

‘What was what like?’

‘Giving her a lift.’

I thought for a moment. ‘Confusing. You want a beer?’ I got up and headed for the fridge.

‘Nah thanks mate, I drank ‘em all earlier.’

I stood looking in to the empty fridge. It was probably a good thing, I had to work in the morning.

‘I’ve got this plan,’ shouted the flat-mate.

I walked back into the lounge and sat down. ‘What plan’s that?’

‘I’m going to be an inventor.’

‘An inventor?’

‘Yup.’

‘What are you going to invent?’

‘Well I haven’t decided that yet, I need to do research you see, find out what needs inventing.’

‘Cold fusion,’ I said, ‘that would be useful.’

‘Not like that. Something like, I don’t know, matches.’

‘Matches?’

‘Yeah matches, something real simple, just a little stick of wood but incredibly useful, what did people do before matches, they just rubbed sticks together.’

‘Actually I think flints were more the thing.’

‘Still...’

‘What about the sulphur compound?’

‘The what?’

‘You can’t just invent a stick of wood, you’ve got to invent the sulphur bit at the end.’

‘Lighters then.’

‘Valves,’ I said, ‘flints, pressurised gasses. Lighters are complicated, difficult to machine at home.’

‘I dunno,’ he said, ‘something else. Those little umbrellas you put in cocktails, what are they called?’

‘Cocktail umbrellas.’

‘Yeah. I’ll invent something like them.’

‘Good luck,’ I said.

He flicked through channels with the remote, finding nothing he liked. ‘So this girl?’

‘Yes.’

‘What was she like?’

I thought about the question for a bit and answered, ‘curious.’

‘No, what did she look like?’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘brunette, slim, pretty...’

‘How old?’

‘She didn’t say.’

‘How old did she look?’

‘I don’t know. Old looking twenty four, young looking thirty two.’

‘So twenty eight.’

‘Like I say, I don’t know.’

‘But she looked twenty eight.’

‘No, she looked like she might be anywhere between twenty four and thirty two.’

‘Which is twenty eight.’

‘Twenty eight is one of several possible ages.’

‘But the most likely.’

‘It’s the median of the distribution.’

‘The what?’

‘Never mind.’

‘Still. Younger than you.’

‘Only by a couple of years.’

‘Still...’

‘What?’

‘Chicks dig older guys.’

I rolled my eyes.

He said, ‘maybe that’s what I’ll invent.’

‘What?’

‘A device for picking up younger chicks.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘it might be an idea to still get a day job, you know, to pay the bills while your inventing.’

‘Oh yeah,’ he said defensively, ‘that’s still the plan, I’m still looking.’

The remote found its way to the music channels and the channel hopping slowed as he evaluated each song in turn.

‘She said she was a witch,’ I said, half to myself.

‘What?’

‘Sellkie, this girl, she said she was a witch.’

‘That’s funny,’ he said.

‘Is it?’

‘That’s what you’re supposed to say six months from now when she dumps you for someone her own age.’



## A Favour

Nothing happened in the following few days. I went to work, came home, watched television, went to bed, went to work again the following morning. I watched the telephone like a hawk in case Selkie might call despite the fact that I had not given her my number. I watched the platform at Whitton every day as my train passed through but never saw a sign of her, her mother, or the two men. I carefully timed my journey to always get that same train home. I looked up ‘witches’ and ‘the office of the witch finder general’ on the internet but found nothing that was of the slightest use. I bought more beer, the flat-mate drank most of it, I still drank too much of it. It continued to rain. The weekend eventual deigned to roll around. Nothing happened.

Saturday, watching nothing at all of interest on the television, that same bloody novel open in my lap, I said to the flat-mate, ‘fuck this, lets go to the pub.’

He groaned sleepily.

‘Come on, I’m going stir crazy sitting here.’

‘Could do. I’m a bit short this month.’

‘I’ll pay. We’ll go for lunch.’

‘In that case...’ he said, but still didn’t move.

I threw my book at him. ‘Get your lazy arse off the sofa soldier.’

He staggered up to something approaching the vertical. ‘Okay ... okay ...’ he said, ‘I’ll go put some shoes on.’

I stood up and turned off the television. There was a knock at the door.

It was Selkie, she was out without a coat and soaking wet and shivering.

‘Blimey!’ I exclaimed, ‘it’s you.’

‘Most of me,’ she said, ‘can I come in?’

‘Yes, yes, come in. I’ll err... I’ll get you a towel.’ I fussed her through into the kitchen and sat her down and then ran upstairs, found my closest to clean towel and gave it to her. She rubbed her hair vigorously.

‘I’ve probably got some dry clothes you could fit in to somewhere.’

‘That’s okay,’ she said from beneath the towel.

‘It would just be for a while, we can stick yours in the dryer.’

She lifted the towel and looked down at where her polo-neck clung closely to her chest. She lifted it away from her skin but it sucked straight back down again.

‘Actually yes,’ she said, ‘that is a good idea.’ She dropped the towel over her shoulders.

I found her a t-shirt, a thick knit sweater, and a pair of combat trousers I had barely ever worn since buying them. She changed in the bathroom and then, rather coyly I thought, would not let me handle her wet clothes, demanding to be directed to the dryer.

‘Tea?’ I offered. She nodded her head and the towel, which she had wrapped around her hair turban style, wobbled precariously.

She sat down at the kitchen table. ‘I need to ask you another favour,’ she said.

‘Shoot.’

‘In a moment, when you’ve made the tea.’

I busied myself watching the kettle and the flat-mate walked in the room. ‘I couldn’t find any socks,’ he said, ‘so I invented a way of using pants instead.’

He lifted each foot in turn, both of them appeared to have been stuffed uncomfortably inside his shoes along with two or three differently coloured boxer shorts.

‘Well...’ I said, but he wasn’t listening.

‘Hey Mitchell,’ he said, ‘there’s a woman in here.’

‘This is Selkie,’ I said, ‘Selkie, Bob the flat-mate, Bob, Selkie.’

He looked at her quizzically.

‘Selkie’s the girl I was telling you about, from the train.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said the flat-mate, and stuck out his hand. She shook it in the normal style, with only the one of hers. The flat-mate asked her how old she was.

‘Twenty eight.’

He gave me a proud look, and then his face dropped. ‘I suppose this means we’re not going to the pub.’

‘Probably not, no.’

‘Oh well,’ he said, ‘in that case I will get to work, these socks are not perfect, they’re kind of tight.’

‘Tea?’ I asked.

‘Please.’

I put an extra bag in the pot and poured the water.

‘Milk and sugar please,’ said Selkie without being asked, ‘lots of both.’ I put all the ingredients on the table and let her help herself.

‘So,’ I said, ‘this favour.’

‘Something’s up,’ she said, ‘we don’t know what. I need you to drive me to Salisbury Plain.’

‘Salisbury Plain?’

‘Yes.’

‘Today?’

‘Please.’

‘Why?’

‘I told you, I don’t know.’

I nodded. She had said ‘we’. ‘You said “we”, “we don’t know.”’

‘I did?’

‘Who’s “we”?’

‘That’s um...’ she bit her lip, ‘can I answer that question later?’

I shrugged. ‘I can’t force you.’

‘Sorry.’

‘So something is up,’ I said, ‘but you don’t know what?’

‘That’s right.’

‘What makes you think it’s up, this something.’

‘Little things,’ she said, ‘signs, suspicious behaviour. Somebody must have shopped me to those men on the train.’

‘Signs?’ I said, remembering this was a woman who was supposedly a witch, ‘what sort of signs?’

‘Just small ones at the moment,’ she said, ‘it’s rained for five days straight but it always stops at twenty minutes to and twenty minutes after the hour.’

‘It does?’

‘It took us a long time to notice, it only stops for a minute or two, but it does it every time.’

‘That’s it,’ I said, ‘no calves being born with two heads, nothing like that?’

‘Every train to Liverpool Street yesterday was exactly two minutes late.’ She hid an apologetic smile behind her mug of tea.

‘Every train?’



‘Yes.’

‘Exactly two minutes?’

‘Yes.’

‘And nothing more traditional, tea-leaves and the like.’

‘We could try if you like,’ she said, gesturing to the teapot.

‘It’s bags,’ I said and remembered that the flat-mate had wanted a cup, I poured it for him and shouted the single syllable ‘tea’. He answered with an entirely syllable free noise.

Selkie said ‘bags will do’ and took the pot from me. She emptied the last of the tea into her own mug, swirled the pot around, lifted the lid and looked inside. She shrugged and showed it to me. It was just three tea bags in a tea pot.

‘Means nothing to me,’ I said.

‘Me neither,’ she said, ‘like I say, we don’t know what’s up.’

I drank my tea and looked at her.

She said ‘you think I’m mad, don’t you?’

I was trying to think of a polite way to answer that question when the flat-mate walked into the room carrying a notebook and a biro. ‘I’m on to something now,’ he said, ‘this one is going to be good.’

I handed him his tea and peered over to see what he had written in the notebook that was so good but he quickly hid it from me. ‘No, no,’ he said, ‘my muse must work in secrecy for the time being, but you will be the first to know.’ He spooned two sugars into his tea, stirred it with his pen, and left.

‘I think he’s mad.’ I said. Selkie smiled. ‘And I saw how you hid from those men on the train. And but for that I’d think you were even madder.’

‘And will you drive me to Salisbury?’

‘Will I be back in time for work on Monday?’

‘Oh yes. We’ll come back today.’

‘Oh well,’ I said, ‘I’ll do it anyway.’

She smiled a smile that I would have driven her to Moscow and back for, and said ‘thank you Mitchell.’

We both drank our tea.

It took another forty minutes till Selkie’s clothes were dry enough to wear. She revealed that her mother had gone to Salisbury Plain yesterday to see what was ‘up’ and had not been in touch. I was the only person she knew with a car. I asked her the one other thing that had been on my mind since she arrived, why was she out without a coat, and she just shrugged and said she had left in a hurry. On everything else of note, she was as evasive as ever. We ended up talking about television, I don’t quite know how that happened.

While she changed back into her own clothes I found her a spare raincoat and said goodbye to the flat-mate, he was pacing about the living room tapping his pen against his teeth and occasionally rushing back to his notebook to jot down important notes. I left him to it.

As we set off in the driving rain I remembered that I had not had lunch. ‘Have you had your lunch?’ I asked Selkie.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I haven’t eaten since yesterday.’

‘Do you want to stop for something on the way.’ She looked unsure, anxious to get on. ‘Or just pick up some sandwiches,’ I suggested.

‘Sandwiches would be good.’

It stopped raining twice on the journey, at both exactly twenty minutes after two, and twenty minute to three, and only for a couple of minutes each time before resuming with increased vigour as if the rain had simply been delayed on it’s way down.

We reached Stonehenge at about three o’clock. I could not tell you how many tourists the rain had kept away

because I have never actually been there before, on a sunny day or a rainy one, at that time of year or during summer; but the car park was nearly half full which made me suspect that most people just came whatever the weather. I remarked upon the fact to Selkie.

‘They’re being drawn,’ she said.

‘They’re being what?’

‘They’re being drawn here, they can sense something’s up subconsciously and they immediately head for the nearest important place. It’ll all be people on their own.’

‘Why people on their own?’

‘Because you need to be on your own to sense that sort of thing, unless you know what your listening for, and people with a family tend to have better things to do on a Saturday afternoon anyway. Plus there’s the disbelief thing.’

‘The disbelief thing?’

‘When you watch a scary movie by yourself it’s easy to believe in what you are seeing, monsters, that sort of thing, but if you are with another person it’s much harder.’ I parked the car and she turned to face me, looking serious. ‘People are all connected, not by any silly psychic mumbo jumbo, but by the normal five senses, well not taste so much,’ she blushed, ‘not to everyone anyway. Think of it like a big net, all these people connected with each other. It’s that net that binds you to reality, to sanity if you like, if it weakens, say because you live alone and don’t see other people much, especially at the weekend, it’s easier for you to become uncoupled from the real world, you can believe in things, and you can sense things, that you could not with another person around. Why do you think spiritual men are often hermits and monks take vows of silence?’

She stopped, waiting for an actual answer. ‘To be closer to God,’ I suggested.

‘To be further away from man,’ she said. ‘which is the same thing in its way.’

‘So all these people ...’ I said, looking round at the parked

cars - all of them, indeed, had solitary people sitting in the drivers seats, perhaps waiting for the rain to stop. 'All these people are somehow sensitive to what? Psychic phenomena.'

'Psychic, magic, supernatural, mystical, these are just throwaway words that don't really mean anything. If something actually exists then by definition it can't be any of those things, and there are people here, so the effect does exist.'

'So what is it?'

'It's the world,' she said, 'and it's people.' She paused, and looked away out of the window, thinking. Then she turned back to me and rested both hands, one on top of the other, on my knee. 'Listen,' she said, 'there have been some effects, like the rain thing, that most people don't know to watch for, but they notice them anyway, subconsciously. This makes them curious, they suspect that something strange is going on. They don't have the words for it so they call it magical, mystical, supernatural. And they know that Stonehenge is a mystical place. They know it because they've learnt it, culturally, and because it's iconic, because the shape of it stirs something inside of them. So they say, lets go to Stonehenge, and those of them who have wives or husbands, the wives or husbands say "don't be stupid, it's raining", so they don't come, only the ones who live alone make it.'

'So what is Stonehenge?'

'Just some rocks, arranged into a pleasing shape.'

'You said it stirred something inside people. Not some primitive memory?'

'Who knows. It's the effect that's important, an iconic structure is powerful in its own right. It's the effect that is important not the edifice. That's what the hippies always get wrong. They are too quick to take people out of the equation. Listen, the human tendency to...' She tailed off, her attention caught by something in the car park. 'Oh

crap,' she said.

'What?'

'See that man there,' she pointed to a man in a raincoat leaning down by a car window talking to the occupant. 'He just walked over from another car.'

'So?'

'I told you, everyone here is here alone, why would he go talk to that person.'

'Any reason,' I said, 'perhaps he wants a light.'

'No, they're both in suits and raincoats and they're both driving dark saloons. It's the government, they're watching this place.'

I peered at the man she was talking about. 'Don't look,' she squeaked urgently. 'We already look suspicious enough because there are two of us.' She put her face in her hands. 'How could I be so stupid, Stonehenge is far too obvious, of course they'd be here.' She turned to me and said 'come on, let's go.'

'Where.'

'Avebury,' she said, 'it's just as good but nobody ever thinks of it because it's just up the road from here.'

'Aren't we going to look for your mother.'

'If they're here, she's not. Avebury is a good bet. We should have gone there first anyway. If I'd have been thinking straight.'

'Okay,' I said and started the engine.

She squinted at the two men. 'Are they the same two?' she asked, 'I can't tell.'

'Same two as what?'

'From the train.'

'I don't know.'

She said 'I'd better hide just in case,' and ducked down into the passengers foot-well, curling up into a ball.

I looked down at her, feeling a little exasperated by all this, and drove out of the car park. ‘Which way to Avebury?’

‘Turn right,’ she whispered.

I turned right, windscreen wipers working double time, neither of the men seemed to give me a second glance.

‘You can probably get up now.’

Selkie climbed awkwardly back into the seat. ‘There are too many army bases round here,’ she said, ‘its bound to be a section forty-four zone.’

‘A what?’

‘A section forty-four zone, don’t you watch the news.’

‘Obviously not that particular article.’

‘Section forty-four of the anti terrorism act, in certain zones important to national security they can arrest you and search you without evidence. It’s basically a license for a police state.’

‘So are you a lefty activist as well as a witch?’

‘No,’ she said, sounding offended, ‘just a concerned citizen. You don’t think it’s a bit draconian, the right to detain and search who they feel like.’

‘Like you say, only in certain places. I can see how that would be necessary.’

‘Do you know where these place are?’

‘I didn’t even know they existed until you told me.’

‘London is one.’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘well does seem a bit drastic.’

She turned away from me and looked out of the window, doubtlessly disappointed with my inadequate liberal credentials. I indicated the road atlas sitting on the back seat. ‘You’d better tell me where to go,’ I said, ‘I’ve never even heard of this place.’

## An Argument In A Pub

As we approached Avebury, Selkie put the map away and guided me from memory. We passed through A-roads, descending to B-roads, all hooded with a dark corridor of skeletal trees that reached over our heads as if ready to spring shut like a trap and wrench the tarmac road from the earth. It reminded me of skin softly healing a wound, the trees were scar tissue forming a canopy overhead, ready for the real work to begin.

I pointed out the fact to Selkie, mentioning that the trees were shielding us from the rain but made it dark as night beneath. She grunted a disinterested agreement and steered me into a National Trust car park. Again there were cars there, when considering the weather you would have expected none, but not nearly as many as at Stonehenge. I noticed as we drove past that nearly every car had a solitary figure in it, sitting at the driving seat watching the weather, waiting for the rain to stop. I glanced at the clock, it was about quarter past three, they only had five minutes to wait.

I pulled up right next to the Pay and Display machine and pulled my raincoat over my head, ready for a quick dash to and from the machine, when Selkie put a hand on my arm and stopped me.

‘Listen,’ she said, ‘there may be things ... people ...’ She

took her hand away and looked forward, finding it easier to speak directly if she was facing away from me. 'I haven't told you everything about myself,' she said, 'and I have not always been what I am now, but what I have told you is the truth. Please try and remember that.'

She turned back to look at me. Her eyes were big and brown and ever so slightly moist. At that point she could be an escaped nazi war criminal for all I cared. I nodded because I didn't trust myself to speak and not say something stupid and melodramatic.

Once I was out of the car and safely out of earshot I said it anyway. 'I don't care what you've done, I forgive you, I will always forgive you.' The rain fell unperturbed, the Pay and Display machine made no response to my emotional outpouring. 'God, I really think I love you,' I told it. It spat out a paper ticket as a response.

We waited till twenty minutes past before we moved because Selkie wanted to see if the rain still stopped here. It did. As we left the car and began walking, following the signs to Avebury stone circle, others got out of their cars and followed us. Most of them turned back again the moment the rain restarted. I wondered how long they had been here doing this dance, back and forth from the shelter of their cars, always driven back before they got out of sight of the car park. I wondered how many had noticed the regularity with which it happened, very few I suspected. If I was one of them I doubt I would have noticed.

We walked down a small muddy footpath out into Avebury village, as we emerged onto the road another small muddy footpath wound off to our right and followed the route of the stone circle. I asked Selkie why we were not following that.

'No point,' she said, 'who wants to stand out on a stone circle on a day like this.'

'I just assumed ...' I said, 'isn't the stone circle the reason we're here?'



‘The reason we are here is to look for my mother, the reason she might be here was to find out what’s going on.’

‘And she doesn’t need the stone circle?’

‘What could a stone circle tell her?’

‘I have no idea, but there must be some reason she came to one.’

‘Mother, if she still has an ounce of sense, will be in the very nice warm dry pub round the corner. There she can find out what’s going on in the usual way, by asking.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘You thought what, that we’d go out into the centre of the circle and sacrifice a chicken?’

‘I didn’t really think anything I suppose.’

‘Well it doesn’t work.’

‘You say that in the manner of one who’s tried.’

‘I’ve tried a lot of things.’

‘Maybe if you danced around the chicken naked by the light of the moon, I’ve heard that can be good.’

Selkie stopped and turned to me, with a face, as far as I could make out through the rain, that was not amused.

‘Just trying to make a joke,’ I said.

‘Come on,’ she said, ‘it’s just round here.’

We rounded a corner and turned straight into a large pub. Once inside we shook the worst of the water of our jackets and hung them up by the door. The pub was, as Selkie had described, very warm, very dry, and very nice. It was also very nearly empty.

‘Selkie,’ called the landlord when he spotted us, ‘what brings you here?’

Selkie walked up to the bar and I followed. ‘Looking for my mother,’ she said.

‘You’re in luck,’ he said, not dropping in volume a decibel now that we were standing right across the bar from

him, 'she's just nipped out, should be back any minute. Now can I get you a drink.'

'Ooh,' exclaimed Selkie, 'pint of Guinness today I think.'

'That should warm you up,' said the landlord, and looked at me.

'Just a half,' I said, 'I'm driving.'

'Rightyho,' he shouted, and fetched the two glasses and began to fill them. He looked directly at Selkie and said very quietly 'that the only reason you're here?'

Selkie nodded a very slight nod.

'Rightyho,' shouted the landlord again, and turned away from us to concentrate on pouring the drinks.

'Can you err...?' said Selkie, looking at me.

I took my wallet from my pocket.

The two of us sat in a corner near an open fire. Selkie took a long drink and then said 'I'm taking you a bit for granted aren't I?'

I took a sip from my own glass, noticing how half a pint was far less suitable for hiding your feelings behind. 'Maybe a bit,' I said, 'there's a lot you haven't told me.'

'The thing is,' she said, 'I'm part of an organisation...'

'A secret society?'

'Well not secret as such, just that, it's generally easier not to mention it.'

'I think I know why.'

'Why?'

'Because nobody would believe you?'

'Something like that. You still don't believe in magic do you?'

'You said yourself, it isn't real.'

'It is and it isn't. What you call magic is the same as what you call science, is the same as ...' she waved her hand in a

circular motion searching for the right word, ‘is the same as religion, is the same as that sort of earth mother spirituality thing. All those sorts of things, voodoo, astrology, tarot, that wiccan white witch thing that’s big in America. In so much as they are not a load of bollocks, they are all the same thing.’

‘Which is?’

Everything, the world, the universe. How the world works.’

I looked at her blankly.

She said ‘you don’t understand do you?’

‘Not really.’

‘Well the important thing to remember is it’s all about people really. If something is not about people then it is almost certainly bollocks.’

‘Like the thing you said about Stonehenge.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Okay...’ I said, mulling this over, ‘you were telling me about an organisation.’

Before Selkie could say anything the pub door opened and her mother walked in accompanied by a bedraggled, long haired man I had not seen before. The two of them hung their coats up and shook themselves dry and looked over towards the bar. The barman gestured to us with his eyes and Selkie’s mother turned to look at us.

‘Selkie!’ she shouted, sounding both surprised and alarmed, ‘what are you doing here?’

‘You didn’t call,’ said Selkie, ‘I came looking for you.’

‘I told you to stay at home.’

‘You told me you’d call.’

‘Uh,’ interjected the bedraggled looking man. ‘Do you want a drink Vinny?’

Selkie’s mother thought for a moment and said ‘just a cup of tea please Kenneth.’ She came and sat down with us

and shook my hand. ‘Nice to see you again Mr Mitchell.’

‘It’s just Mitchell, Mitchell is my first name.’

‘Oh,’ she said, casting an accusing glare at her daughter, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know...’

‘Wilhelmina,’ she said, ‘and this is Kenneth.’ She gestured to the bedraggled looking man who came over to the table with a cup of tea and a pint of cider.

‘Stokes,’ he said, extending a less than pristine hand, ‘everyone but Vinny calls me Stokes.’ His long hair hung in matted greasy wet strands over a well worn sweater that may once have been white, he was wearing a pair of combats that were more mud than trouser, and shoes I literally could not see beneath a layer of muck. Wilhelmina on the other hand was wearing an fashionable looking fleece top and utterly untarnished blue jeans. Only a few minor flecks of mud on her green wellies betrayed the fact she had been walking outside in the rain.

‘Mitchell,’ I repeated, shaking the mans hand, ‘pleased to meet you.’

‘Are you a friend of Selkie’s then?’

‘Oh yes,’ I answered, ‘we go way back, all the way to last week.’

He thought about that a moment. ‘Oh right I see,’ he said finally, ‘you’re the guy with the car.’

‘Selkie’s own private taxi service, yes.’

‘So,’ Selkie interjected frostily, ‘what did you find out?’

‘Not much I’m afraid,’ said her mother.

‘Oh I don’t know,’ said Stokes, ‘we’re definitely certain it’s the black goat now.’

Selkie shot her mother a look that could have withered flowers and rotted fruit. ‘The black goat mother?’ she said very slowly.

‘Well dear ...’ said Wilhelmina, ‘yes.’

‘You knew?’

‘We suspected.’

‘So that’s why you left me behind?’

‘To protect you, yes.’

‘For Christ’s sake mother,’ Selkie nearly shouted, ‘you know perfectly well that I can look after myself.’

‘Oh can you indeed, and what about what happened on the train last week.’

Selkie threw up her hands. ‘I looked after myself.’

‘You mean your knight in shining armour rescued you,’ said Wilhelmina sarcastically, shooting me a look of disdain.

‘I used the tools at my disposal,’ hissed Selkie, ‘just like you always taught me to, Mother.’

I did not like Selkie referring to me as a tool any more than I liked the sarcastic tone in Selkie’s mother’s voice, but I glanced sideways at Stokes and in a simple look and the slightest shake of the head he made it vividly clear that I should definitely keep my silence for the time being.

‘I also recall telling you to stay at home,’ shouted Wilhelmina, ‘but you seem to have decided to ignore me on that.’

‘Well maybe if you trusted me enough to tell me what was going on,’ Selkie shouted back, ‘I might feel more inclined to believe a bloody word you say.’

‘Are you calling me a liar?’

‘You heard what I said.’

‘You’re just the same stupid willful little girl you always were. I have never, ever, not once in your entire life, lied to you.’

‘Well if you can’t trust me how can you expect me to trust you?’

‘I’m sorry dear but trust is something you earn, and you haven’t.’

‘Oh you bitch.’ Selkie nearly screamed.

‘What did you call me?’

Stokes gave me a sideways glance that meant something between *wish me luck, I’m going in*, and *flee, save yourself*, and said, ‘calm down.’

Wilhelmina said ‘you keep out of this Kenneth,’ and Selkie was just turning towards him when two men in suits walked in the door.

The argument stopped short, all four of us turned and looked at the two men who turned and looked at us, for a moment nothing happened, if there had been a jukebox it would have shut up, if there had been a breeze it would have stilled, if there had been a pool table, balls would have skidded to a sudden impromptu stop. We looked at them. They looked at us. They were definitely, absolutely, positively, the same two men from the train.

Without moving my head I glanced sideways at Selkie, she was looking sideways at me and looking terrified. She made the smallest, quietist, nervous squeak, like breathing in through a whistle.

The two men both moved their hands underneath their jackets, one of them pulled out a badge, the other did not pull out anything, he kept his hand concealed by his breast. The one with the badge held it up for us to see.

‘Selkie Pffinnenwinken,’ he said, ‘I’m arresting you under section twenty three of the thaumaturgy, occult, and sorcery act of sixteen ninety four.’

Sellie’s eyes looked left and right but she did not move and she did not say anything. Her mother stood up.

‘The hell you are,’ she said.

‘Step aside mam,’ said the man still holding the badge.

‘Make me,’ said Wilhelmina.

The man not holding the badge pulled out a gun and aimed it directly at Wilhelmina.

‘Mum!’ cried Selkie.

‘You are not arresting my daughter,’ said Wilhelmina,

apparently undaunted.

‘Mrs Pfinnenwinken,’ said the man with badge, ‘I am placing you under arrest for obstructing an agent of the crown.’ He calmly put the badge back in his pocket and took a pair of handcuffs from another pocket. ‘Hold her down Jim.’

The man with a gun took a step towards Wilhelmina before he was cut short by a shout.

‘Hold it right there gentlemen.’

All heads turned towards the bar behind which the landlord stood holding a huge double barrelled shotgun.

‘Sir,’ said the man with the badge, ‘we are special agents of the home office and these people are dangerous terrorists.’

‘Dangerous terrorists my arse,’ said the landlord, ‘one of them is one my regulars, two of them is my personal friends I’ve known for years, and I’d wager you all the beer in this pub the fourth is exactly as harmless as he looks.’

‘I have to advise you sir,’ said the man, ‘that it is a criminal offence to obstruct an officer of the crown in the course of his duties.’

‘Well maybe you gents want to put that firearm away, and come over and allow me to inspect them badges you was so freely waving about a moment ago because I ain’t never seen no policeman round here go about the course of his duties in a pin stripe suit.’

‘I’m afraid we are under no obligation to justify ourselves to you sir.’

‘In my pub you bloody are. Now before you arrest my friends you prove to me you are what you say you are.’

The men looked at each other, and looked at both barrels of the shotgun, its lidless hollow eyes looking blankly back at them. They nodded to each other and slowly stepped towards the bar.

‘Uh uh,’ said the landlord, ‘you put the firearm away

first.’

The man without the gun looked to the man with the gun who carefully secreted it back in beneath his jacket. The landlord responded by pointing the shotgun away from them, off to one side. Both men walked up to the bar and placed badges down on it. They said something but I didn’t catch it because at that moment I was grabbed by both Selkie and Stokes and pulled off my chair and straight out the door.

‘Leg it,’ shouted Selkie as we ran out into the rain, and she followed her mother who ran across the pub garden and vaulted over a fence into a field. The rest of us followed close behind her.

‘Follow the stones,’ shouted Wilhelmina, ‘get to the standing tree.’



# The Standing Tree

I'll admit I was scared, bloody terrified in fact. I am a nice middle class boy, I have drunk too much and caused some trouble a few times in my life, but not a lot. I am thirty years old now and beginning to act like it, these days I go home quietly at closing time, I more or less stick to the speed limit, I keep the volume to within reasonable levels, I try hard not to swear in front of children, and I do not run away from policemen, no matter how sinister. It is an anathema to me, it just felt wrong. The whole time we ran I wanted to stop and say that this was silly, we should cooperate, it must all be a big mistake and I was sure it would all be worked out soon enough. Two very good reasons stopped me.

The first was that I was clearly not even remotely aware of all the facts. I didn't know you could be arrested for being a witch, I didn't know what the black goat was, I didn't, without exaggerating at all, know what the hell was going on.

The second was that I was fairly certain, based on my limited experience watching well researched crime dramas on the television, and my even more limited experience in real life, that your actual genuine policemen does not go around pulling guns on unarmed civilians. At least not in

this country.

If I am honest there was a third reason, that I did not want to appear to be a coward in front of Selkie, but the first two reasons were plenty good enough on their own.

We ran, coatless I might add, through the rain and over a muddy path through what, but for the curved line of standing stones, was a sheep paddock. The stones were not the massive carved building blocks of Stonehenge, but disorderly, unworked, random rocks of various sizes planted upright in the ground. They formed a wide curve encompassing the village and frequently intersected by roads.

I looked back, and through the rain saw the men emerge from the pub, both with pistols drawn now, I felt a brief pang of worry for the fate of the landlord - please god don't let him have done anything stupid - but this was quickly replaced by fear for myself. I heard a gun go off and a chunk of stone exploded from one of the rocks in front of us, if he had meant to hit us and missed, or if it was merely a warning shot, I did not know, but everyone immediately ducked down behind one of the larger stones and I eagerly did the same.

'Tell me you were out putting a charm on the tree,' hissed Selkie urgently.

'Some hair and a bit of cloth,' replied her mother, 'it should do us if we can get there.'

Stokes peeped out around the rock. 'Why aren't they following?' he said.

Selkie looked out the other side and whispered 'I don't know, waiting for backup maybe.'

She turned to me and I tried to explain my confusion with a look. She smiled a pitying sort of a smile mixed with a certain remorse, she had, after all, only really asked me for a lift. 'We need to get to the standing tree,' she said.

'How far is it?'

'Another one of these enclosures.'

‘If I go out with my hands up,’ I said, ‘maybe that will buy you enough time.’

Selkie’s mother looked like she was ready to agree but Selkie interjected before she could say anything. ‘No way,’ she said, ‘besides I doubt they’d fall for that again.’

I quickly glanced around the edge of the stone, the two men were standing in the pub garden, watching intently. ‘I don’t think they meant to hit us,’ I said, ‘or they would have fired more than one shot.’ Stokes nodded but the two women looked less certain. ‘Besides,’ I said, ‘the rain would make it difficult.’

Selkie turned to her mother, who bit her lip in the exact same way her daughter sometimes did. ‘It could work,’ said Wilhelmina, ‘we’d need a match, or a lighter, something.’

Stokes fumbled in his pocket and produced a Zippo lighter.

‘Good,’ said Wilhelmina, ‘when I say, drop it between us.’ She turned to Selkie and both women squatted on their haunches and held hands forming a small circle. ‘Now,’ said Wilhelmina, and Stokes flicked the lighter alight with one movement and carefully placed it in the centre of the circle between the two women, miraculously the flame stayed burning in the rain.

Nothing happened. I glanced back at the two men who had not moved. I looked back, the lighter was still burning. Selkie and her mother were staring silently into each others eyes. I looked at Stokes, ‘watch the flame,’ he said with a grin.

I watched the flame. It flickered but still burned. Then the rain started to increase. I only heard it at first, pounding heavily onto the rock behind me, but then I felt it, the large drops thudding uncomfortably against my skull. I looked back around the rock and noticed the two men were harder to see through the increasing rainfall. The rain grew stronger and stronger until it was as strong as anything I have seen outside of the tropics. The flame on the lighter

struggled against the onslaught, it flickered, dimmed, hissed, and finally it died.

Selkie grabbed it off the ground and handed it back to Stokes, ‘come on,’ she said, ‘it won’t last for long.’

We ran, visibility was barely a few yards and we could only see from one rock to the next. We followed the curve of the stones, at the end of the first field we crossed a road and into another. This time the path led outside the ring of the stones over a raised rampart of earth that ran, along with a deep inner ditch, around the outside of the circle.

We dashed along the top of the earthwork, the rain already beginning to ease back. In front of me I saw Selkie slip in the mud and, unable to stop herself, careen down into the ditch. I dived forwards and caught her, whilst Stokes, running just behind me, skidded around and held out his hand. I pulled Selkie up and she grabbed his wrist, he pulled her up on to the path and without a word they both continued running and I staggered to my feet and followed. Behind me there was a roaring which I first too to be thunder, but then the ground in front of me lit up and I looked back to see one bright white light shining down at me. It took me a second to realise it was a helicopter following us.

I shouted forward to the others and Selkie looked back and yelled ‘ignore it.’ She shouted something else but I did not catch what. I continued running. I imagined I heard gunshots behind me but such was the noise and confusion at that point, it could have been anything.

We skidded down the bank at the end of the dyke and across another road and up another bank onto the continuation of the rampart. At the top of this was a large wide oak tree and, as soon as they were underneath the shelter of its branches, Selkie, her mother, and Stokes staggered to a halt. All three of them leaned against the trunk of the tree and panted furiously, I joined them.

‘Thank you,’ said Selkie between breaths.

I nodded and said ‘there’s a bloody helicopter.’

‘I know.’

‘What do we do now?’

‘We’re safe here for the moment,’ she said, and slid down and sat on the ground. I leaned doubled over with my hands on my knees and slowly regained my breath. I cursed myself for never keeping up with the running I always planned to do.

Under the tree everything was peaceful again, the rain did not penetrate the branches which curled down around us enclosing the space where we now rested. If the helicopter was out there I could no longer hear it - I could no longer hear the rain. I looked up at the branches and saw many things tied to them, fragments of ribbon, feathers, little bundles of twigs and leaves. Charms, I thought.

‘Why is it called the standing tree?’ I asked.

Selkie shrugged, ‘because it’s standing.’

‘All trees stand.’

‘Not where this one stands,’ said her mother, a tinge of irritation in her voice.

‘Have you noticed the roots,’ said Selkie. I looked down to see that the roots of the tree were laying only half under the ground, in fact the entire ground upon which we stood, the entire top of the knoll upon which the tree stood, was nothing more than a solid tangle of roots, raised veins with puddles of fallen leaves between. I looked up at Selkie - that seemed to be it, interesting roots.

‘The roots are great,’ said Stokes, ‘they always were, but the man has a point. What do we do now?’

Selkie and her mother looked at each other. ‘Give it a few minutes,’ said Wilhelmina, ‘they’ll start looking elsewhere.’

‘But they saw us run under here?’ I said.

‘But they can’t see us now and soon they’ll think they

made a mistake.'

'Hopefully,' added Selkie.

'After that we can cut in through the village,' continued Wilhelmina, ignoring her daughter, 'and get to the car park.'

'I hate to tell you this,' I said, 'but I left my car keys in my coat pocket.'

'Then we will just have to go back via the pub.'

'Mother,' said Selkie, 'these aren't just ordinary policemen, they'll be watching the village, they'll be watching the pub, and they'll certainly be watching the car park.'

Wilhelmina looked as if she were about to argue for a moment, but then nodded, agreeing with her daughter.

'How long will the charm last?' asked Selkie.

'Only a few hours,' said her mother.

Stokes coughed. 'Your car keys may be with your coat,' he said to me, 'but do you happen to have a mobile phone on you?'

I reached into my jeans pocket - sure enough my mobile was there, I pulled it out and held it up.

'Then we'll just sit tight for an bit,' said Stokes, 'and call in the cavalry.'

Stokes took my phone from me and made a call.

'Hello boy, it's Stokes.'

...

'I know, I am borrowing someone else's phone.'

...

'In a bit of a tight spot actually, I was hoping you might be able to help us out in your inimitable style.'

...

'Vinny and Selkie and some friend of Selkie's.'

...

‘Yes, I know.’

...

‘What it is, is that we are in Avebury doing a little research and we seem to have struck some bother of the law enforcement type.’

...

‘Apparently not, no. This is, I should mention, not your average carabinieri.’

...

‘So far just two suits packing pistols and, get this, a bloody helicopter. Though doubtless they will have friends on the way.’

...

‘Since you mention it, yes, the helicopter was black, so we might well be talking governmental types here.’

...

‘I didn’t think it would.’

...

‘That would be just the ticket.’

...

‘We are currently laying low under the old standing tree.’

...

‘Of course you do.’

...

‘Well that is superb my friend, I shall see you then.’

...

‘Yes I most certainly will.’

He snapped my phone shut between thumb and forefinger and handed it back to me. ‘Relax ladies and gent,’ he said, ‘help is on the way.’

I looked at him quizzically, but he just smiled like he

definitely was not going to tell me if I asked, so I did not ask. He sat down on the ground, and then lay down on his back with his hands behind his head. Selkie watched him, shook her head, and turned away. Wilhelmina stalked around the tree and stopped opposite to where Selkie was sitting, for a moment it looked as if they were either going to apologise or continue their earlier argument, I could not tell which, but she just walked away and found herself somewhere to sit. I sat down with my back to the tree trunk, next to Selkie.

‘I hope Tolly’s okay,’ she said.

‘Tolly’s the landlord?’

‘Yes.’

‘That was brave of him, what he did.’

‘Either brave or stupid, I just hope he knew when to give up.’

‘So do I.’

‘I’m sorry to drag you into all this,’ she said.

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

‘It was though, I knew they might still be looking, I knew for sure after Stonehenge. I should have just had you drop me off and then sent you home.’

‘I wouldn’t have gone.’

‘I could have persuaded you,’ she said. I wasn’t sure what she meant.

I said ‘you didn’t know they’d pull guns and start shooting.’ I was not sure what I would say if she disagreed.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I didn’t know that.’ She turned to face me. ‘It’s been something of a whirlwind friendship so far hasn’t it.’

I shuddered just a touch at the word ‘friendship’ and then inwardly chastised myself for acting like such a teenage girl. ‘You could say that,’ I said.

‘I just did.’



I rolled my eyes and she laughed this quiet, breathy gentle little laugh.

‘You must have a lot of questions,’ she said.

‘Many, many questions’ I said, ‘and not a moment seems to go by without more forming.’

‘Ask one.’

‘One?’

‘Well ask as many as you like but I promise now to answer one, absolutely straightforwardly and truthfully. You may only end up with more questions at the end but I will answer it. If I can.’

‘One question?’ I said.

‘Yes.’

‘And you won’t sidetrack me, or prevaricate, or equivocate, or answer something else.’

‘Promise.’

‘Okay then, one question ...’

‘Yes.’

‘Pfinnenwinken?’

Selkie laughed again, holding her lips shut with her hand to keep it quiet. A huge grin spread across her face and finally she said ‘I knew there was a reason I liked you.’

I will admit it, I liked it a lot hearing her say that.

‘Answer the question,’ I said.

‘It’s my name,’ she said, ‘unlike most surnames I got it from my mother,’ she lowered her voice and said ‘dad and her are very much separated.’ She looked back to see if her mother was taking any interest but evidently she was not. ‘He lives in Rotterdam now,’ Selkie continued, ‘I see him two or three times a year. I don’t know what the name means or where it comes from, but both it and my forename were the bane of my life at school so thank you very much for bringing it up again.’

‘I quite like it,’ I said, ‘it’s unusual.’

‘You must have more questions.’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘but not the sort that would make you like me.’

‘Go on, you have a free pass, one question and I absolutely will not judge you for asking it.’

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘the black goat?’

The smile vanished from her face. ‘Well you’re right,’ she said after a moment, ‘that’s the one I didn’t want to answer.’

I said nothing, but I smiled apologetically.

‘The Black Goat is very bad juju,’ said Selkie, ‘they’re a sect, a druid sect.’

‘Druids?’ I said, ‘as in long beards and dancing around stone circles.’

‘Sometimes,’ she said. ‘Druids are normally okay, just another bunch of new age pot heads looking for something spiritual to base their lives around. But the Black Goat is, well ... radicalised, to use the parlance of our times.’

‘Radicalised?’

‘There’s always been an element of... sacrifice to druid rituals. Normally that’s just harvest festival stuff. Chickens if you’re bad-ass enough. The Black Goat are more into that side of it than most.’

‘Is this like devil worship?’

‘No. Druids predate religion by millennia. They’re sacrificing to the earth mother that sort of thing, Not that that means anything.’

‘It doesn’t.’

‘You sacrifice to yourselves. Every ritual, from the first slaughtered cow to the sacrament that will be given tomorrow morning in churches across the globe. It’s a sacrifice to those who are present for it, it’s them it empowers.’ She stopped. ‘I said empowers didn’t I?’

‘Yes you did.’

‘God! You can’t debunk new age crap without using the

bloody language, it's like a disease, you touch it once and you're stuck with it forever.'

'I can't say it really bothered me.'

'Well it bothered me, I read the telegraph,' she said, 'have you ever heard someone who reads the telegraph say empower?'

'I sometimes buy it for the crossword,' I said.

'I figured you as a Guardian reader.'

'I would be,' I said, 'but I can't do the crossword.'

'I suppose that's as good a reason as any.'

I looked at my watch, 'it's nearly twenty minutes past again,' I said.

'Technically even if we peep out we risk breaking the charm.'

'How does it work?'

She held up her hand to silence me, and cocked her head to one side. 'Can you hear that?' she asked.

I listened, there was a dull roar just penetrating the branches of the tree. 'The helicopter back again?' I suggested. Selkie shook her head.

Stokes sat up, turned to us, and said 'damn that was quick.'

Selkie relaxed but I kept listening, the noise waxed and waned but never disappeared. For about five minutes it seemed to come from all around us, sometimes it would concentrate from one direction, sometimes another, but always there was this low thrum that seemed to rise up from the very earth. I ducked down, to try and see beneath the branches, but could make out nothing through the grey veil of the rain. Then, just after the noise had seemed to rise to a crescendo and drop again, I saw the dark silhouette of a figure outside the tree, it appeared out of the rain and, before I could make even a sound of surprise, it pulled back the branches and entered.

The effect was sudden and dramatic, the moment this

figure penetrated the tree he brought the noise with him, the dull roar clarified into what was very clearly the sound of several motorbike engines, I could hear the rain drumming on the earth again, and I could see out between the branches where I could not see before.

The figure was dressed in a black leathers and carrying a motorbike helmet, he was completely bald and had a large bushy tangled beard. The thing I noticed most of all though was how much of him there was - there was a lot, he was about six foot five up and nearly that across.

Stokes jumped up and shook the man by the hand. 'That was bloody fast,' he said.

'Well it sounded like you was in a little trouble,' said the man, 'so we may have bent a few speeding laws on the way.'

Stokes turned around and said 'everyone, this is Corner.'

Wilhelmina stepped up and kissed the man on both cheeks. 'Thank you for coming,' she said.

'Vinny you know,' said Stokes, 'this is her daughter Selkie and Selkie's friend Mitchell.'

'We have met before,' said the man to Selkie, 'but you weren't knee high at the time so I doubt you'd remember.'

'Pleased to meet you anyway,' said Selkie, and exactly as her mother had done kissed the man on both cheeks. I extended my hand to be shook, it felt like a child's in his.

'Right then,' said Corner, 'we've had a look around and you've got two goons watching the car park, another two in the village, and another two standing out in the rain by the pub.'

'Is Tolly alright?' said Wilhelmina.

Corner laughed. 'He's fine, holed up in there like it was the bloody Alamo. Wasn't half glad to see us I'll tell you.'

'Thank god,' whispered Selkie.

'So what I've done is, I've got a few of the boys trailing each of these bastards like they was a bad smell. Whatever they want to do my boys is under strict instruction not to

let them. What we did not see, is any helicopter, but I figure it may well have gone off and refuelled.'

'How long will that take?' asked Stokes.

'Depends,' said Corner, 'if they is military affiliated there's enough army bases round here and they could be back in no time, if not, they might have to go as far as Bristol.'

'Corner is ex-special forces,' said Stokes.

'Stokes is telling an untruth,' said Corner, 'I is ex-regular army nothing more, but I know some guys.' He stopped mid flow and looked at us. 'Are you lot all right,' he said, 'you looks froze to the bone.'

It was not until he said this that I realised I was shivering, I looked across and noticed that Selkie, Wilhelmina and Stokes were all shivering too, we were all soaking wet.

'It's the charm,' said Wilhelmina, 'you broke it when you gave away our location.'

'Never mind that,' said Corner, 'we need to get you somewhere warm quick. My sister's got a place near Swindon we can be in five minutes. You all got your own transport.'

'We need to get coats and car keys from the pub,' I said.

'No problem,' he said, he took off his leather jacket and wrapped it around Wilhelmina and then pulled apart the branches of the tree and shouted down to the road 'One of you go get their stuff from the pub, and you three give us your jackets, these poor buggers is colder and wetter than a bunch of fucking Africans gone for a swim off Skegness.'



## Tea And Cake

Once reunited with our own coats and escorted by about a dozen large men to the car park, we drove away in a convoy with the same men all on motorbikes, Corner leading the pack all the way. We never saw a trace of the men in suits but I gathered they were probably not having a whole lot of fun. We followed Corner north a few miles to a suburb on the outskirts of Swindon, I put the heating in the car on full blast but Selkie still shivered the whole journey, her teeth chattering loudly.

We arrived outside a house and a woman emerged who, judging by the similarity in size, I assumed to be Corner's sister. She greeted us all enthusiastically and then, after taking one look at Selkie, said 'Christ girl look at the state of you, you've gone blue, lets get you up and under a hot shower,' and whisked her away. Stokes and me were provided with dry clothes so ludicrously oversized that only by keeping at least one hand in our pockets could we prevent the trousers from falling down. We were hustled and rushed about at the still centre of a tornado of activity, never permitted to help in any way. Eventually we found ourselves sat on a sofa with mugs of tea and thick slabs of rich chocolate cake surrounded by a crowd of large bikers all tucking enthusiastically into the same. Selkie appeared wrapped up in more towels than could be found in the

most branches of Debenhams, and was sat down on the sofa opposite and provided with her own tea and cake.

Corner sank, with an ominous creak, a long way down into an armchair and beamed at us. His sister, by now introduced as Ruth, perched herself on the arm of the sofa but never for more than two minutes before some vital need sent her back into the kitchen only to emerge moments later with yet more to eat.

I looked across at Selkie and she smiled, I must have looked confused because she gestured downwards to show me two enormous pink fluffy slippers with bunny faces on them. She picked up her feet and waggled them in turn.

‘So,’ said Corner, ‘what’s been going on?’

‘We don’t know exactly,’ said Wilhelmina, ‘but something big.’

Corner smiled, ‘big things I like, what do you know?’

‘You’ve noticed the rain?’ said Wilhelmina.

‘I’ve noticed it hasn’t stopped for a week.’

‘It has,’ said Selkie, ‘twenty minutes to and twenty minutes past every hour, it stops for just a moment.’

‘That’s weird,’ said Corner.

‘You’re telling us,’ said Stokes through a mouthful of cake.

‘So what’s doing it?’

‘England,’ said Wilhelmina, ‘it’s reacting to something.’

‘And you don’t know what?’

‘We know who.’

Selkie and her mother looked at each other, I could not decipher either look and Stokes was too interested in his cake to catch my eye.

‘So,’ said Corner, ‘don’t act all mysterious, who?’

‘It’s the Black Goat.’



The room went silent, half a dozen bikers stood with mugs of tea or slices of cake held to their lips, but suddenly not chewing or drinking.

‘Crap,’ said Corner, ‘I thought it was just going to be more government nerks.’

The bikers fidgeted, one of them put down his empty mug on a coffee table with a nervous rattle and everyone turned to look at him.

‘I’ll err...’ he said, ‘I think I’ll go out to the garage and join the others.’

‘Yeah,’ said another, ‘me too.’

The remaining two bikers standing in the room muttered that they would go too.

‘Tell the lads it’s The Black Goat,’ said Corner, as loud and as confident as ever, ‘and tell them we’ll have a chapter meeting when the others get back.’

The bikers nodded and shuffled out of the room, each of them thanking Ruth for her hospitality as they went.

‘I can’t order them to do anything,’ said Corner, directly to Stokes, ‘but I’ll ask them to do whatever you need and they’ll all agree to do it.’ He turned to Wilhelmina. ‘Don’t you worry, we’re still on your side.’

‘I’m afraid,’ said Wilhelmina, ‘that there may not be much more you can do. Thank you all the same.’

‘I’ll go back,’ said Selkie.

Everyone turned to her, she was looking at the floor between herself and her mother. ‘I’ll go back to them,’ she said, ‘and find out what they are up to.’

Nobody said anything in reply. Selkie looked up at her mother who did not say anything.

‘I’ll make another pot of tea,’ said Ruth, ‘who wants more tea?’

Corner drained his mug and said ‘me please Ruth. And could you see if the lads want a drop more.’

‘Of course,’ said Ruth.

‘You’re a wonder me love,’ he said. Ruth smiled indulgently and left.

‘I can’t let you do that darling,’ said Wilhelmina to her daughter.

‘I have to,’ said Selkie, ‘we need to know or we might as well just go home.’

‘Your mother’s right Selkie love,’ said Corner, ‘the Black Goat is very dangerous.’

‘I know all about the Black Goat,’ said Selkie.

‘I won’t let you,’ said Wilhelmina.

‘It isn’t your decision mother,’ answered Selkie.

‘Just supposing ...’ Stokes interjected very fast before the two of them had a chance to get an argument going. ‘Just supposing we can’t find another way and you do this, whether the rest of us like it or not, how would you do it?’

‘How did you find out it was them?’ asked Selkie.

Stokes looked to see if Wilhelmina was going to answer and, seeing that she was not, said ‘they have been seen over the past two months, first at Grey Wethers, Flagstone and Stanton Drew, then almost certainly on the Isle of Man although we cannot be one hundred percent sure of that, and then finally at Avebury just last week. That is for certain, there is enough folks at Avebury would recognise ‘em from a hundred yards away and know very well to keep further than that if possible.’

‘So they’re not hiding?’ said Selkie.

‘No. Definitely not.’

‘And the rain thing is obvious by now, to anyone who knows what to look for?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I’d just find them, and tell them that whatever they’re doing is obviously big and I want to be a part of it.’

‘The bigness of the thing,’ said Wilhelmina, ‘is the

problem, they are going to be nervous, and suspicious.’

‘Trust me,’ said Selkie, ‘they’d be more suspicious if I didn’t want in.’

‘Either way,’ said Stokes, ‘we’ve got to find them first.’

‘Just promise me,’ said Wilhelmina to her daughter, ‘that you won’t do anything without letting me know.’

Selkie nodded. ‘I promise, she said.

‘I know you started to tell me,’ I said, ‘but who are the Black Goat?’

‘If you don’t know, you’re better off not knowing,’ said Corner.

I looked at Selkie but Selkie just looked at Stokes.

‘Listen,’ said Stokes, ‘there’s not a lot that is known about the druids, they didn’t write anything down and the only people who wrote anything about them were the Romans right before they killed off the lot - which once you’ve met the Black Goat, you’ll agree was a good idea. The culture survived a bit longer in Ireland and there are a few stories but that’s all folklore and fairy tales. Everything anybody thinks they know about druids was all invented by a few posh wankers with nothing better to do in the eighteenth century. Ninety percent of the people who think they are druids are just tree huggers with a penchant for dancing about in the buff. The Black Goat is different.’

At that point Ruth reappeared with a pot of tea and set it down on the coffee table, there was a brief pause while everyone who needed refilling was refilled.

‘Would you like some sandwiches?’ asked Ruth.

We all hastily thanked her but declined. Corner looked disappointed and said ‘maybe later Ruth love.’ Ruth perched herself on the end of the sofa again.

‘How is the Black Goat different?’ I asked.

‘The Black Goat were not interested in lore, they did not want to learn anything from any other man, they wanted to discover it, to rediscover what Caesar had, in his wisdom,

bumped off.’

Stokes took a drink of his tea. ‘When was this?’ I asked.

‘First off,’ he said, ‘about thirty-five, forty years ago. They messed about, when everyone else was cooing over Stonehenge prattling on about how it was a big sun calendar or whatever they thought it was at the time, the Black Goat were trying to work out what it actually did. They were sacrificing chickens on it, they were screwing each other on it, they were chanting round it. Anything they could think of that might get an effect. They were trying to do the magic from the fairy tales, they wanted to stop rivers flowing and blow mountains over with a single breath. ‘Course there was this whole big paganism subculture thing going on about then, but nobody in the community liked the Black Goat and the Black Goat didn’t like them. Anyway, eventually the police put a stop to all these idiots mucking about on stone circles and the Black Goat disappear up north to some site in Scotland they’d bought, and do you know what they did?’

I shook my head.

‘They built their own bloody stone circle up there and continued their experiments. They’d appear sometimes, at solstices and that, but mostly they just kept to themselves up on their bit of private land, eating god knows what and getting up to god knows what. They’d recruit a bit by word of mouth, every so often someone who was into being a druid but realised it was all robes and bullshit might hear about the real thing up in Scotland and go and see if they could get in, and every so often someone came out and back into the community, and they told some nasty stories.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like ritual killings, torturing animals, living wild. There were always rumours of human sacrifice but that was always someone who knew someone who met a guy ... probably bullshit.’ Stokes put his mug down and jabbed his finger on the table. ‘But this is the thing,’ he said, ‘everyone who went up there went because they thought it was all

bullshit and wanted to find the real thing, nobody who came back said it was bullshit, they all said it was scary but definitely real, and these were the smart ones, the ones who weren't taken in by the usual crap.'

'Tell him about the travellers,' said Corner.

'Oh yeah the travs,' said Stokes, 'this was what, eighty-nine, ninety?'

'About then,' said Corner.

'A bunch of travs had gone up there, just doing what they do, but got on the wrong side of these guys somehow. They were never seen again. Nobody found their vehicles, nothing, not a shred. Rumours were ... well the rumours were real nasty but just rumours. What's fact is that the police investigated and two officers were killed.'

'Killed?'

'Stabbed, with ritual daggers, and the hearts removed - that's the actual text of your coroners report there.'

'They must have done something about that?'

'Oh you bet they bloody did, sent an army of fucking armed police in, killed four of them resisting arrest and took one back to be tried for murder. He's still in nick up in Scotland somewhere.'

'Killed five guys inside,' said Corner. 'Yardies, Angels, you name it, pissed off everyone you shouldn't piss off but none of them touched him.'

'Calls himself Mug Ruith,' said Stokes, 'nobody knows what his real name is.'

'They all call him the druid of course,' said Corner, 'you talk to anyone who's been inside, they know who the druid is.'

'Of course you'd think the cops would have broke them up after that, put a stop to it, but you know what they did?'

'No.' I said.

'Not a bloody thing. Nobody knows why, somebody somewhere was got to, that's the only explanation. And you

never saw a Black Goat druid south of Hadrian's wall after that. Not till last month.'

'And that,' said Wilhelmina, 'is who the Black Goat are.'

'You said they bought this land in Scotland?' I said.

'Yes.'

'So there must be money behind them.'

Stokes shrugged, 'who knows, maybe one of them was rich.'

'But who did they buy it off?'

'I have not got the faintest idea,' said Stokes, 'it's in the highlands, just tundra and forest, worthless really.'

'They must have bought it off someone,' I said, 'perhaps the government.'

'Perhaps,' said Stokes, 'whoever sold it was probably glad to get rid of it.'

At that moment there was the noise of more motorbikes pulling up outside the house, Selkie, I noticed, tensed as if ready to run. The doorbell rung and Ruth got up and answered it and three more bikers walked in. Corner beamed when he saw them, 'lads,' he said, 'what's the news?'

'Well,' said the first, a gaunt grizzled man not a day under fifty, 'there was six of those blokes in suits in total, we kept close as stink to them while you were leaving, they guessed you'd gone of course but they didn't see where.'

'Good,' said Corner.

'You boys look soaked through,' said Ruth, 'can I get you some tea and sandwiches?'

'That would just be the ticket thanks Ruth,' said the grizzled biker.

Corner said 'I'd fancy a sandwich Ruth dear,' as she disappeared out of the room and then, turning back to the biker, asked 'any bother?'

'One of them got all riled up and pulled a piece,' he said, but Mickey was standing behind him with a baseball bat at

the time and you know what Mickey's like about guns, broke the fella's wrist just like that. Wham!' He mimed the action and at least Selkie and I flinched in horror.

'Anything else?' asked Corner.

'No, after that they were pretty begging us to take their guns off 'em. Well, nothing that'll show in the morning anyway.'

Corner laughed, 'what did you do with them?' he said.

'Well we figured we couldn't really let them go or they'd have the rozzers down on us faster than a curry shite, and it was fair pissing it down, so we took 'em to the Red Lion for a session.'

'I like it mate, and Tolly was okay?'

'Tolly was so glad to see us it was drinks on the house all night, but a couple of us need to get home to our loving wives or there'd be all kinds of trouble, thought we'd better drop in and let you know the score.'

'The score is one nil to us I think, who's there?'

'Mickey, Ted, the Coman brothers, all that Melksham crew.'

'That'll be a good night.'

'They've got your lads bricking themselves in the corner force-feeding 'em drinks that is more spike than drink. They'll dump 'em in a barn once they pass out and they'll wake up tomorrow not knowing what hit 'em.'

Corner laughed again, 'I like it mate, I like it, you've done well.'

'Look Corner,' said the man, 'the lads out there is saying it's the Black Goat.'

'Yeah mate, it is.'

'Well some of the younger ones, there just talking all sorts of shit don't know what they're on about.'

'Alright,' said Corner, 'I was going to wait till everyone was here but I suppose that ain't going to happen for a

while now. Bring ‘em in and I’ll tell ‘em how it is.’

‘Right you are,’ said the biker and went outside to fetch the rest of them, who were, I gathered, all standing about in the garage talking about motorbikes. There was some difficulty fitting them all in the room, but despite our protests we were not allowed to move from the sofa, and once all arranged around the walls everyone had to be provided with tea and sandwiches which took even longer. Somehow I ended up holding a huge ham and mustard sarnie I thought I had declined. I ate it anyway, it seemed impolite not to.

‘Right lads,’ said Corner, now sunk so far down into the steadily subsiding armchair it was questionable if he would be able to rise under his own power, ‘it seems these pinstripe coppers might not be our only problem, Vinny and Stokes and their friends says the Black Goat might be involved.’

There was a general murmur around the room.

‘Now listen up,’ said Corner, ‘there’s a lot of shite talked about the Black Goat but both me and Stokes here have tangled with them in the past and we’re both still in one piece.’

‘More or less,’ said Stokes. Several of the bikers laughed.

‘Sure they are a bunch of amoral anti-social dangerous bastards,’ continued Corner, ‘but what the fuck are we eh?’ He looked around the room and then with growing laughter said ‘a bunch of amoral, anti-social, dangerous, fucking bastards.’ Corner let the laughter die down and then continued. ‘Now we don’t know what they’re up to yet, and whatever it is, it’s no problem of ours, so if anything is asked of us, that’s what it is, asked - no obligation, and if any of you don’t want to tangle with the Black Goat, well I won’t have no quarrel with that.’

‘Fuck that,’ said one of the bikers, it was greeted with a general murmur of agreement. Corner smiled broadly and proudly.



‘What are you going to do now?’ asked one of the bikers.

‘We’ve got to find them,’ said Stokes, ‘and find out what they’re up to.’

‘How will you do that?’

‘Right now,’ said Stokes, ‘we don’t know.’

‘Should go to Bedford,’ said a voice from the back of the room.

‘What’s that Nugget?’ asked Corner.

A young biker spoke up. ‘I was just saying,’ he said, ‘that you should go to Bedford. They’ve got this pagan metal band on tonight, there’ll be loads of druid types there. I was going to go myself but - well - this happened.’

‘The Black Goat don’t exactly socialise with you average druids,’ said Corner.

‘Yeah,’ said the biker called Nugget, ‘but this crowd is pretty hardcore, it was one of them first told me about the Black Goat, one of their road crew used to be one.’ I noticed both Corner and Stokes looked towards Selkie and she gave the tiniest of shrugs.

‘If there’s druid stuff going on,’ continued Nugget, ‘someone there will know.’

‘Worth a shot,’ said Stokes, ‘and it’s not like we have anything else.’

Nugget looked at his watch, ‘we could still get there in time,’ he said.

‘Right then,’ said Corner, ‘anyone who fancies seeing a rock and roll band in Bedford saddle up, the rest of you clear out of my sister’s house, you’re making the place look untidy.’

Ruth tutted and fussed about collecting empty mugs. Corner raised an arm the size of a side of beef into the air and shouted out ‘and one of you bastards pull me up.’

There was a lot more commotion, our dry clothes had to be returned to us, every single biker had to shake hands

with us all and say goodbye before going, Ruth had to be dissuaded from making us something to eat on the way. Somewhere in the confusion Selkie grabbed my arm.

‘I can’t really ask you...’ she said.

‘I’ll go,’ I replied.

‘I won’t,’ said Wilhelmina from behind us. Selkie turned and gave her a questioning look. ‘there’s other things I could be doing,’ she continued, ‘and besides, heavy metal clubs aren’t exactly my scene these days.’

‘It might not be safe,’ said Selkie, ‘going home.’

‘If they knew where we lived they’d have turned up a long time ago,’ said Wilhelmina, ‘besides, I can make it safe if I have to.’

‘Be careful,’ said Selkie.

Wilhelmina clasped both her daughter hands in hers. ‘You too,’ she said. They each seized each other in a tight hug for a second before springing apart. Wilhelmina turned to me and took my hand. ‘Goodbye Mitchell,’ she said, ‘yet again you’ve been more help than I think you realise.’

‘You not coming Vinny?’ said Stokes.

‘No,’ she said, ‘but you go, you’d be a lot more use there than I ever would.’

‘Well I’m going,’ bellowed Corner, thumping hands the size of dinner plates on mine and Stokes’ shoulders, ‘ages since I’ve had a good knees up.’

## Heavy Metal

By the time we finally extricated ourselves, thanked Ruth for all her hospitality, each of us in turn crushed within her embrace, and sorted out with Nugget where we were going, it was about half past six in the evening.

‘Takes about two hours on a bike,’ said Nugget, ‘three in a car.’

‘Two and a half it is then,’ said Stokes, giving me a wink.

We stood under the shelter of the house to wave Wilhelmina off and then prepared to leave ourselves. Stokes and Selkie rode in my car, Nugget, Corner, and two others rode on ahead.

‘Is it safe to ride bikes with this much water on the ground?’ I asked Corner.

‘It isn’t safe to ride bikes,’ he replied.

‘I reckon you two are going to want to talk even more than you did under that tree,’ said Stokes climbing into the back of my car, ‘so I’ll just go to sleep if it’s all the same to you.’ And sure enough, before we were even out of Swindon, he had closed his eyes and was gently snoring.

‘It’s amazing,’ said Selkie leaning round to look at him, ‘he’s always been able to sleep anywhere just like that. I wish I could.’

I watched the road, the taillights of the bikes shivered in the rain and reflected in dappled shimmering lines on the wet surface of the tarmac. I would rather be in a car, I thought.

‘There will be floods soon,’ I said, peering upwards into the dark sky as if expecting to find some end to the rain.

‘But hose-pipe bans come summer,’ said Selkie.

‘You really are a Telegraph reader aren’t you.’

She laughed and said ‘not religiously.’

I paused. ‘You were in the Black Goat then?’

‘A long time ago,’ she said.

‘Why?’

‘Like Stokes said, I was looking for the real thing.’

‘I’ve seen what you can do, it looked pretty real to me.’

‘I was young,’ she said, ‘I wanted more.’

‘And was it as bad as he said, is that why you left?’

‘I was the typical Black Goat acolyte,’ she said, ‘I messed about with druidic rituals, I smoked some weed, took some acid, and had a lot of fun, but I was smart enough to see it was all bullshit and knowledgeable enough to know there could be more. So I went up to the Scotland and they took me in for a bit, but I got freaked out by what they were doing, not to mention sick of living like a wild animal, and I left before I had to spend a winter there.’

‘What did they do,’ I said, ‘that freaked you out?’

‘It’s not what they did so much as ... they were in to ritual sacrifice of animals like Stokes said, but you could see the killing meant nothing to them, they could kill a person just as easily, they were ... they were beyond a point at which life and death have any meaning.’

‘So you just left.’

‘I had my doubts, and I got to thinking that if they discovered I had my doubts it might be me on that alter. Not that I hadn’t already been on the alter once or twice’

she smiled mischievously, 'sex was still a big part of it.'

'Sex?'

'Hell yeah, why do you think everybody does it, dropping tabs and chanting up the sun is only so much fun. Fertility ritual is just another word for orgy.'

'So not only have you been part of the Black Goat, you've slept with them.'

'What did you think, that I was saving myself till you came along.'

I looked sideways at her and she smirked wickedly. 'You're teasing me,' I said.

'Yeah, but you shouldn't be bothered by that sort of thing it's just part of the scene. Sex with druids is strange,' she said, 'one the one hand they are in tune with the natural rhythms of the earth, which is kind of hot, but on the other hand they don't tend to shower very often.'

We drove on in silence for a bit, passing from an unlit cross-country artery onto a brightly illuminated town bypass. The yellow light casting the world as an unnaturally sharp, distinct, video image. The spray kicked up by the motorbikes, the reflected streetlights brushing over the slick black leathers of the bikers, the bright headlights of oncoming traffic broken up by the rain, it looked more like a painting than the real world, more like a rendered computer graphic. And then, in minutes, we passed back onto dark A-roads - the world formless and intangible again, shadows and ghosts crowding in on either side as we raced between islands of light.

'Why are you doing this?' I asked.

'Doing what.'

'This, driving around the country looking for a druid sect when you could be sat at home in the warm and dry.'

'Gets me out of the house,' she said completely deadpan.

'You mentioned in the pub that you were part of an

organisation.'

'It's a coven,' she said.

'A coven?'

'And no we don't dance around naked, ride on broomsticks, gather around caldrons, or predict the fates of Scottish kings. I have never made anybody's crops fail or made anybody's cow give sour milk.'

'Do you have a pointy hat?' I asked, because I could not resist asking. She hit me in the shoulder, which I probably deserved.

'Matter of fact,' she said, 'mum and I are the only ones in the UK. There are five of us in total. We mostly just send each other e-mails. And no, to answer your next question, we have no sacred duty to defend these shores or battle druid sects, but there are very few of us with the knowledge to do so, so we do what we can.'

'Is it really illegal?'

'What?'

'What you do.'

'And what do I do?'

'You know what I mean, being a witch.'

'Technically,' she said, 'there's a lot of laws still on the statue books from the middle ages.'

'And this branch of the home office, the witch finders?'

'They don't actually normally find witches, but there are dark forces at work in this country, the Black Goat to name one, they are the government's somewhat inadequate response.'

'So why aren't they after the Black Goat themselves?'

'That,' said Selkie, 'is a very good question.'

Eventually we arrived in Bedford and followed Nugget through the one way system to the club. By the time we had found somewhere to park and walked back it was nearly ten o'clock. As I held the door open whilst he clambered

sleepily out of the back seat Stokes said ‘you know, we all did stupid things when we were young.’

‘I thought you were asleep,’ I said.

‘I was,’ he said, ‘but it was pretty obvious what you two were going to talk about.’

There was a short queue standing outside the door shivering and cursing the rain, which Corner bypassed entirely,. He went straight up to the bouncer and shook the man vigorously by the hand, which is an expression I mean literally: he shook the whole man, by his hand - and the bouncer was not small. Some agreement was reached and we were let straight in. Somebody from the queue complained and Corner shouted out ‘sorry, but I’m old, I can’t go standing out in the rain, but you young folks, it’ll do you good, build character.’ He laughed loudly at his own joke, made sure we all got in ahead of him, and waved goodbye to the sulking queue.

We were in a cramped entrance hall, the end of which was packed with people moving between the bar and the toilets. Nugget arranged us in a circular queue and shepherded us each in turn past the ticket window, Selkie only having to give me a quick apologetic look before I paid for her. It was only five pounds.

Nugget directed us up a short thin staircase to where we emerged in a small room with a bar at one end and a stage at the other. At the bar Corner was already talking to another bouncer, on the stage five teenagers were squeezing as much of a racket as they could out of a rig designed for a room at least four times larger. A singer stalked from side to side clutching a microphone in white knuckles and shouting into it like he was really mad about something - but not making himself clear enough that anyone had a hope of working out what. Behind him a gawky long haired band played to themselves, apparently oblivious to the presence of the crowd, except for the girl on keyboards who occasionally let a shy smile emerge briefly from behind an unruly mop of black and red hair. One of the bikers

asked what I'd like to drink and I ordered a coke.

'Is this pagan rock then?' I shouted to Nugget who stood right by me.

'Nah,' he shouted back into my ear, 'this is the support act. I don't know what you'd call them, sort of goth grindcore I suppose. Not bad mind.'

I was handed my drink and stood and rocked back and forth slightly on my heels, the sticky floor sucking at the soles of my feet. I hadn't been anywhere like this in years. I felt simultaneously out of place and back home again, and the out of place was only the sobriety speaking.

The crowd was thin but enthusiastic, they jumped around and collided with each other, they head-banged, they threw up the horns. They did not, I noticed, look like druids, even accounting for the lack of robes.

'Thank you,' said the singer, intelligible for the first time, 'we are the Sumerians good night.'

In the momentary quiet that followed before the DJ started up I asked Nugget what the band we were here to see were called.

'The Munstermen,' he said, 'they're from Norway. I wouldn't go nuts over them but they're rocking live.'

'What is it that makes Pagan Rock pagan?'

'Fucked if I know, it's more about who listens to it and what they wear than what it sounds like. Me, I just like what rocks.'

I nodded, it struck me as a very astute answer. Nugget waved a fist with the index and little fingers extended in the sign of the devil's horns and shouted 'Heavy fucking metal man, heavy fucking metal,' which struck me as slightly less astute. Over his shoulder I saw Selkie gesturing to me so I went and talked to her.

She was standing with Corner and Stokes talking to a tall, thin, long haired man in black jeans and a black t-shirt with a skull on it. 'This is Ambrose,' she said, 'he's part of



the druid scene from way back.’ Ambrose looked more like a network admin guy than a druid to me, but what did I know.

‘I was just saying to your friends,’ said Ambrose, shouting slowly and clearly despite the relative quiet, ‘I had heard the Black Goat was abroad, but no more than that.’

‘He means abroad as in not at home,’ said Corner, ‘not another country.’

‘I haven’t heard anything about them leaving Britain,’ shouted Ambrose, ‘I’d just heard they were back down south.’

‘I get it,’ I said, ‘abroad in the Tolkein sense.’

‘Johannes might no more,’ shouted Ambrose.

‘Who is Johannes?’ asked Stokes.

Ambrose extended a long thin nicotine stained finger towards the stage. ‘That is Johannes,’ he said.

On the stage, to the a loud approving roar of the crowd, appeared a figure hidden under a long hooded cowl carrying an elaborately painted fender telecaster guitar. Behind him half a dozen similarly hooded figures took up positions. They stood without moving, apparently staring down the crowd, who gradually stilled and quietened, the lights dropped till there was only a dim green glow illuminating the band. Slowly, by degrees, an ominous driving bass line began to build, joined by a muffled but insistent drum beat. As it built the front man pointed out to us as Johannes raised his right hand, the crowd answering the salute in kind. Then, when the crowd were risen to a tremulous frenzy of tension, he dropped it and the entire band launched into an ear-splitting assault of what I can only describe as really, really awful heavy metal.

Ambrose dropped his head and oscillated it up and down and back and forth in a cascading waterfall of hair. Nugget punched the air and barged his way forwards through the crowd to the front. Corner stood with a fist

clenched to one side punching the air in time to the music. I caught Selkie's eyes and she stuck her tongue out and mimed two fingers down her throat, I grimaced back, she gestured towards the door, I nodded, she grabbed Stokes and the three of us headed out.

'That was,' I said once we were out in the relative quiet of the stairwell, and then struggled for words, 'err ... just ... bad.'

'Yeah man,' said Stokes, 'they're no Sabbath.'

'You saw Sabbath?'

'Hell yeah,' he said, 'back in the day. Fucking Ozzy Osbourne man, he was wild, had these eyes.' He pointed to his own eyes with two hooked fingers, though I don't think he meant Ozzy had the very eyes he was now sporting.

'This is a washout,' said Selkie, and she sat down on the steps. 'A complete waste of time.'

I walked down to a lower step. 'Yeah,' I said, 'but I quite liked the support act.'

'That's not what I meant.'

'I know.'

'Nobody here knows a thing. Just a bunch of posers and washouts.'

I yawned loudly. It had been a long day.

'We may as well stay to the end,' said Stokes, 'maybe this bloke Johannes can help.'

'I doubt it,' said Selkie.

'Well he's got to be good for something,' said Stokes, 'because he's no musician.'

The music momentarily raised in volume as a man nearly the size of Corner but with a lot more hair walked out the door and picked his way past us. 'Bit shit isn't it?' he said. We nodded. 'They do a club night downstairs, that's normally okay.'

'Cheers,' said Stokes.

‘You folks come far?’

‘You could say that.’

He gave us a cherubic and apologetic smile from behind a thick black goatee beard and then left. We sat in silence and watched him go.

‘I’ve been meaning to ask,’ I said, ‘why do they call you Stokes?’

‘I drive a steam train,’ said Stokes with a grin, ‘run a miniature railway in Watford.’

‘A miniature railway?’

‘Yes.’

‘Cool.’

Selkie gave me a look of utter despair.

‘What?’ I said, ‘miniature railways are cool.’ She shook her head. Stokes laughed.

‘Why is Corner called Corner?’

‘He came off on one once,’ said Stokes, ‘years and years ago. Somewhere in Wales I think, went skidding down this bank, broke something like half the bones in his body. Anyway, when everyone stops and runs down to him they know not to move him but they open his helmet visor and he says “who put that bloody corner there?” and then passes out. After that everyone called him Corner.’

‘Where you there?’

‘No that was ages before we met.’

‘Where did you meet?’

‘At a Yes concert, he talked me down off this really fucking bad trip. I mean really really bad ‘cos that was shortly after I’d met Vinny, Selkie’s mother, and I’d had the doors of my perception blown wide open by some of the things she’d shown me so when I saw scary shit, well it wasn’t so easy for me to believe it wasn’t actually happening anymore. And I was seeing all sorts of scary shit, devils pulling peoples’ guts out their arseholes, that sort of thing.

But Corner he just turns up, and he's the most solid real thing there, and he's got this sort of zen cool about him, so when he talks I believe it. Really helped me out then 'cos I was about ready to gouge out my eyes or something.'

Selkie cringed.

The door opened again and somebody else left the gig, I recognised him as the front man of the support band. 'Hey,' he said, 'are you the folks asking about druids?'

'Are we just asking everyone here now?' said Selkie.

'Might as well do,' said Stokes.

'Hell,' said Selkie, 'we'll get badges made, ask me about druids.'

'Well,' said the kid at the door, 'is it you or not?'

'Yeah,' said Selkie with a sigh, 'it's us.'

'Well all I was going to say was, there's a bunch of them down near where I live, in Newhaven, been making a nuisance of themselves.'

'Right,' said Selkie, rolling her eyes, 'cheers.'

'Well you were asking,' said the kid and turned to go.

'Hey,' I called to him, 'you were in the support band weren't you?'

'Yeah.'

'You guys were pretty good.'

'Cheers.'

'Much better than this lot.'

'Yeah I know,' he said, 'all the way from Norway - needn't have fucking bothered.'

'Wait,' said Selkie, 'where did you say you were from?'

'Newhaven.'

'And these druids, they were near there?'

'Yeah.'

'Where exactly?'

‘I don’t know, somewhere out on the South Downs.’

Selkie looked at Stokes, who looked blankly back at her for a moment and then his jaw dropped and he said ‘crap, of course.’

Selkie nodded.

‘You mean the long man,’ said the kid, ‘you get loads of druids out at that.’

‘What?’ said Selkie, ‘oh the chalk man, no not that, the Seven Sisters, the cliffs,’ she turned to me, ‘it’s a very important site.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Anyway,’ said the kid, ‘if you want a lift we can probably fit you in the back of the van. We’re already giving a lift to one of these guys’ roadies’

We looked at each other. ‘Nugget said one of their roadies was ex ...’ I said.

‘Perhaps not that ex after all,’ said Stokes.

‘We need to tell Corner,’ said Selkie, standing up.

‘Well,’ said the kid, ‘do you want a lift or not?’

‘No thanks,’ said Selkie, ‘and don’t mention us to this other guy okay.’

‘Okay,’ said the kid, bemused. Selkie pushed past him and back into the venue. Stokes and I followed.

Inside, the darkness and the loudness of the music disorientated me, everywhere kids cavorted, jumping around, throwing themselves into each other, getting in the way. Selkie pointed out Corner, still standing near the bar. She shouted something to Stokes.

‘What?’ he shouted back.

‘Go get Nugget,’ she yelled and pointed to where Nugget was head banging near the stage. She weaved her way through the crowd towards Corner.

At the side of the stage I noticed a strange figure, not that the figures on the stage were not strange, but this one

was crouched down poised as if ready to leap and swaying from side to side. He did not look like he was listening to the music, he looked like he was watching the crowd. He looked somehow feral. The thought that this might be the druid roadie struck me immediately. The thought that he might be dangerous struck me maybe seconds too late.

I went to point him out to Selkie but she was already halfway across the room towards Corner. I looked towards Stokes, who was shouting something to Nugget. I looked again at the figure, who was unmistakably looking at Stokes. He had a knife in one hand. He pounced.

What happened next happened in only a few seconds. The figure leaped maybe eighteen feet to land right on top of Stokes and sink the knife into his chest. I saw them both tumble down beneath the crowd where I could not see them anymore. I saw the silhouette of the knife raised and brought down again. I saw Nugget try to pull the figure off and I saw his throat slit in one swift backhand movement. He stepped backwards and a spray of blood arced up into the green stagelights. The music stopped, the crowd screamed and surged towards the exit. I saw Corner wade through them towards Nugget. Then Selkie grabbed me and together with everyone else we ran for the door.

# Arrested

‘Corner,’ she shouted, ‘where’s Corner?’

‘He went forward.’

‘But where is he?’

‘He went forward,’ I shouted, ‘when everyone else ran away he went forward.’

‘Oh no.’

‘I’ve never seen anyone move that fast.’

We stood outside watching the door. Selkie clung to my arm, I had one hand holding hers, kids streamed out of the club, the Bouncers looking confused, unsure what had just happened.

‘Stokes?’ said Selkie, ‘did you see what happened to Stokes?’

‘I saw him go down,’ I said, ‘and Nugget.’

‘I saw that,’ she said, ‘we all saw that.’

‘I’ve never seen anyone move that fast,’ I said again.

‘Oh god,’ whispered Selkie, starting to cry. More and more people ran from the door. None of them were Corner. I put my arm around her and held her. I could feel my heart beating violently against the weight of her skull

resting on my chest. This is what shock feels like, I thought. My eyes were dry but everything was confused. I couldn't process a coherent thought. I couldn't concentrate on the people running past me. I couldn't even begin to think what we should do. We just stood there.

Then we heard the sirens.

'Shit,' said Selkie, 'come on.' She tugged at my arm and together we ran away from the noise. Selkie dashed down an alleyway around the side of the building. I heard a voice behind me shout 'Oi, stop,' and I halted dead. It was not really a conscious decision, I was not thinking for myself at that point and simply obeyed when I was ordered. If Selkie had told me to keep running I would have. She did not. She stopped and looked back at me, confused and scared. She was already around the corner, the police would not have seen her. Flashing blue light spilled around me onto the tarmac.

I mouthed the word 'go,' and she turned and ran, almost ending up straight under the wheels of a white van that screeched to a halt just in time. The kid from the support band poked his head out of the passenger side window.

'It's you,' he said, 'we're getting the fuck out of here.'

'I need that lift,' she said. He held open the passenger door and she jumped in on top of him. The van was moving again before her feet had left the ground. I stood, rooted to the spot, breathing rapidly but otherwise still, and watched the van disappear around the corner before I was grabbed from behind - my arms twisted back and handcuffed, and dragged away.

I was put in the back of a police van with a crowd of kids looking on. I was not the only one, anyone acting even remotely suspicious was arrested. I did not care. I was done for. I had reached the limit of my capabilities. I had nothing else to give. I wanted to be arrested. I wanted to be taken care of. More than anything, I wanted to sleep.



I was woken at some point in the middle of the night - I did not know when but it was still dark outside - and taken from the cell and placed into an interview room and given coffee in a paper cup. About twenty minutes later a tired looking man walked in the door accompanied by a uniformed officer. The tired man sat down opposite me, yawned, and introduced himself as Inspector Thorne.

‘Mitchell Wallingford,’ he read from the form that had been filled in when I was first processed, ‘let’s start with why you were in Bedford tonight.’

‘I came to see the band,’ I said, ‘the Monstermen.’

‘Are you a fan?’

I shrugged, ‘kind of,’ I said.

‘Long way to come for “kind of”’

I shrugged again.

‘Who did you come with?’ he asked.

‘I came alone.’

He looked up at me and said, ‘are you sure?’

I nodded.

He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head and yawned again. ‘You know Mr Wallingford, supposedly you can spot a guilty man because when you arrest him, he instantly goes to sleep, an innocent man’s troubles have just begun but a guilty man’s can finally relax. Have you heard that before?’

‘I think so.’

‘I can’t say I’ve ever noticed it in my experience but other’s swear it’s true. Now when we take into account the fact that you were arrested fleeing the scene, and that after you were put in the cell you instantly went to sleep, and that you claim to be a fan of the,’ he looked at his notes and read the word very slowly and carefully, ‘Munstermen,’ he looked at me pointedly, ‘but you pronounce their name wrong, and you claim to have come alone when I have numerous statements identifying you as arriving in the

company of the two victims. When we take all that into account, it all begins to look somewhat suspicious. Wouldn't you say, Mr Wallingford?'

'Yes,' I said weakly.

'Now we're both tired,' he said, 'and I'm not looking for a murderer, he's already been taken care of, all I want to do is understand. So why don't you cut the crap and just tell me what happened.'

A thought struck me, 'what happened to Corner?' I asked.

'Corner?' he said, 'oh you mean Edward Teffler.'

'I don't know,' I said.

He looked at his notes, 'yes, Edward Teffler, AKA Corner, AKA Big Ed. You know him Mr Wallingford?'

'Yes,' I said, 'well I only met him today, err ... yesterday.'

'He was stabbed three times and lost a lot of blood but the doctors say he should be okay - which is more than I can say for the other guy.'

'The other guy.'

'Our unnamed Norwegian murderer, your mister Teffler hit him on the head so hard he crushed three of his vertebrae and killed him instantly, broke about every bone in his hand doing it.'

'He killed the ... the murderer?'

'With one blow to the head, yes.'

'And he's okay.'

'He'll live.'

'And Stokes and Nugget?'

'Don't you call anyone by their names? Kenneth Proser, AKA Stokes, and James Wilkes, AKA Nugget. I'm afraid they're both dead.'

I did not react, it was all that I had expected. I felt dead inside, empty, incapable of emotion.

‘So Mr Wallingford,’ said the Inspector, ‘I take it you will not deny arriving with the three aforementioned individuals.’

‘No,’ I said.

‘As well as,’ he looked at his notes, ‘two other men in motorcycle leathers, and a woman, all of whom have disappeared.’

I nodded my head.

‘And I don’t suppose you would be able to tell me their names.’

‘The two men,’ I said, ‘I’m afraid I don’t know, we only met yesterday.’

‘And the woman.’

I swallowed. ‘Selkie Pfinnenwicken,’ I said.

He made a note of this and then asked me to spell it. I told him I’d never seen it written down.

‘Do you know where she or the two men are?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘we got split up when we left the club. I was looking for her when I was arrested.’

He looked at me suspiciously. ‘Okay then,’ he said, ‘how did you and all these people you’d only met for the first time yesterday end up coming here tonight.’

I closed my eyes, trying to think what to say. ‘If I tell you,’ I said, ‘you’ll think I’m mad.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure of that Mr Wallingford,’ he said, ‘I’ve spent most of tonight talking to a Norwegian pagan rock star call Johannes Darkwater, who says that the murderer was a druid from the sect of the Black Goat called Cathbad. I’ve had him give a blood sample out of pure curiosity to see what the hell he’s been taking.’

‘The murderer,’ I said, ‘was a druid from the Black Goat sect.’

The inspector dropped his face into his hands. It was still in his hands when there was a knock at the door and he

left the room.

I took the opportunity to try and work out what I was willing to tell him. He knew Selkie's name, so there was little that was worth keeping secret anymore apart from where she had gone. I decided I would still prefer not to mention that we were already wanted by the witch finder people, if for no better reason than it still made very little sense to me. I tried to figure out some sort of story, perhaps leaving the entire trip to Avebury out in case it was already well known that suspects evaded the security services there but my mind went blank - I was not up to the job of inventing.

'That,' said the inspector the moment he opened the door, 'was the biggest shit storm I've ever seen landing right on my head, and all because of one Miss Selkie Pffinnenwicken, who I'd never heard of until a few minutes ago. It seems that locating and apprehending this Miss Pffinnenwicken is of the highest importance to national security, and that Miss Pffinnenwicken, together with her mother, one of the three deceased, and an unknown man matching your description, escaped arrest in the town of Avebury yesterday afternoon with the aid of several unidentified bikers.'

'Ah,' I said.

“Ah” indeed Mr Wallingford. And now lots of very important and very powerful men are casting down shit from up on high, and most of it appears to be heading my way. I have three dead people Mr Wallingford, and another in the hospital, I don't need to find a murderer and I sincerely doubt any charges will be brought against Mr Teffler. All I have to do is wrap this up and go back to bed. And all this talk of druids and black goats, Mr Wallingford, isn't making that any easier to do.' He looked at me, a long searching gaze. 'So here's what I'm thinking of doing, I'm going to throw Mr Darkwater and you to whatever dogs will take you in the hope that this shit pile follows you and

avoids me entirely, then I will hope to god that the coroner finds something illegal in this dead Norwegian that would explain his actions, then I shall forget all about the lot of you and go back to bed.'

And with that he stood up and walked out of the room. Shortly afterwards I was escorted back to my cell where thoughts of shadowy security service spiriting me away to some unknown Guantanamo Bay style prison never to be seen again prevented me from sleeping. I lay on my back, listening to the drunks shout at each other, looking up at the ceiling, and worrying. Worrying about Selkie hitching a ride to the South Coast in a van, about Corner fighting for his life in some hospital, and most of all about myself, just laying there doing nothing but worrying.

In the bunk across from me a large man turned trying to get comfortable. He swore in English, but with a heavy Norwegian accent, and propped himself up on his elbows and looked across at me.

'Hey you dude,' he said, 'what are you in for?'

'Leaving the scene of the crime,' I said.

'Everything is a crime in this country,' he said, 'in Norway I would be home by now.'

I doubted that but did not argue. 'Are you Johannes?' I asked.

'How did you know that?'

'I recognised you.'

'Yes,' he said, 'they would not let me keep my cowl on. Now I am worried that the fans will discover I'm here and storm the police station like in night of the living deads.'

I doubted that too, especially after the performance tonight, although - to be fair - the fans had seemed to be enjoying the show a lot more than I had.

'Were you at the concert tonight?' he asked.

I nodded and he clambered laboriously down from his

bunk and walked over to shake my hand. I introduced myself.

‘Pleased to meet you Mitchell,’ he said. ‘You do not look like our fans normally look like.’

‘I’m not really a fan,’ I said, and then, shifting my position to avoid looking him in the eye whilst I said it, ‘but it was good, I enjoyed it.’

He lay back on his bunk and said ‘cool.’

‘That was scary,’ I said, ‘what happened.’

‘That was Cathbad,’ he said, ‘he was batshit loco nuts man, batshit loco nuts. He only wanted to come to England this time to join the Black Goat sect so we said he could come with us if he did our show for us. He is actually a very competent roadie.’

‘The Black Goat sect?’ I asked.

‘They are batshit loco nuts. In Norway when we have these people we arrest them because they become dangerous. I do not know why you do not in England.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘perhaps they never actually broke any laws.’

He laughed loudly but fleetingly. ‘You English,’ he said, ‘always valuing law above everything, even justice. Everything that is right and everything that is wrong with England is because of this.’ He rolled over onto his side and propped himself up uncomfortably on one arm so he was looking right at me. ‘When men like the Black Goat remove themselves from society they become something apart from society, if they live in the wild, after a time they are not the same type of man as one who lives in a house. They become dangerous, like wolves, they see so much death they cease to think death important, they live so close to each other, and so removed from anyone else, that they only care about themselves. They are like a wolf pack.’

He looked at me as if expecting an answer so I nodded my head.

‘In Norway we recognise this, it is only natural, often in Norway men used to be trapped alone in the winter and when the summer came you would go and find them but the man you once knew had changed. Sometimes they went mad in little cabins in the hills, sometimes they killed the first man they saw. Now the roads are better it does not happen so much, but we recognise that men must not be allowed to live apart from civilisation because it changes them. In England you worry about the law, but there are higher laws, and unwritten laws. If you wish to keep sheep you must kill the wolves, that is a law.’

‘Why did he want to go back?’ I asked.

‘Cathbad,’ said Johannes, ‘he said they were on the cusp. Those were his words, in English, on the cusp.’

‘On the cusp of what?’

‘I do not know. I do not think Cathbad knew either. But look at me, I am a priest, I talk to the older gods, the wind and the sun and the rain, and here, especially the rain. I talk to them and ask them what is happening.’

He looked at me expectantly. ‘You did this, or you are going to do it?’ I asked.

‘I did this.’

‘And...?’

‘They do not answer.’

I slumped back on my bunk. I was not sure exactly what I was hoping for from a man who talked to the rain.

‘But,’ he said, ‘they tell me I should go back to Bergen, they tell me soon trouble for Norsemen here. But I do not listen and I play the show anyway and now I am in jail. You see.’

There was a bang on bars of the cell. I looked and saw the police inspector accompanied by the two men in suits, one of whom had his wrist in a plaster, neither of whom looked happy.

‘That’s the one keeps raving about magic,’ said the

Inspector, 'and that's the one was seen with Selkie Pfinnenwicken.'

'We'll take that one,' said one of the men pointing at me.

'Don't you want the Norwegian?' said the Inspector.

'No.'



# The Chain Of Command

I was escorted out of the building by the two men with only a brief pause of say, an hour and a half, while they filled in all the correct forms. I was sat off out of the way and ignored while my transaction was arranged, apparently no more necessary to my own fate than a litter of kittens about to be drowned. Finally they woke me up and led me outside and stuck me in the back of a car.

‘I’ve got to ask,’ I said from the back seat as we pulled away, ‘but how did you get away so soon?’

They did not respond.

‘I don’t mean anything by it,’ I continued, ‘but the last I heard you were being force fed spiked drinks and yet here we are, not twelve hours later, and you both seem sober.’

Again, no response, though I thought they may have looked sideways at each other.

‘And I know you’re the same two guys because you’ve got that cast on your wrist, and I heard one of you got hit on the wrist when you tried to pull a gun.’

Nothing.

‘Actually, I heard he broke it.’

Still nothing. I started feeling mischievous, I would goad

them into talking to me. ‘That must have really hurt,’ I said, ‘serves you right for pulling a gun I suppose.’

‘Just,’ said the man with the cast, ‘drop it, okay.’

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘but I’ve got to know, how did you get away?’

‘We’re not complete amateurs,’ said the other man, ‘when we didn’t check in a team was dispatched to check on us.’

‘How did you sober up?’

‘A lot of hot coffee, a trip to casualty, and right royal bollocking,’ said the man with the broken wrist.

I laughed despite myself, I was genuinely trying to get on their good side, no matter how incompetently. ‘Where are we going?’ I asked.

‘You’ll find out when we get there,’ said the man driving, ‘now shut up.’

I shut up. I leaned my head against the window and watched the world go by. I thought about Selkie, then I thought about breakfast, then I thought about my car and wondered if I was going to get a parking ticket, then I thought about Selkie some more. Then I went to sleep.

I did not sleep well, and was finally woken properly by the sun coming up. We were driving through London down the Holloway road. Once upon a time I had had a lot of friends in the area and driven there frequently. That had been what ... ten years ago, we used to drink regularly in a pub just down from Highbury and Islington but I could not remember the last time I had been there. What had happened to that crowd. James and Claire had split up, she lived in Germany now, he had gone back up north, Stephen had moved to Nottingham and was living with some girl I had not even met, Chris and John were still in London, Chris in Walthamstow and John in Hampstead, but we did not see each other very often anymore.

Everybody wants change, we want our lives to be

moving forwards, but sometimes it is hard to leave things behind. We had fun back then, and I have the memories, but it is still sad to see the area and think that those times will never return, that we allowed them to peter out and die, that we never marked their passing.

We drove down towards Westminster, and then, in some street I did not know, turned off and into an underground car park. The two men led me out of the car, up a lift, through a long corridor, and into a plush office. There was wood panelling, a carpet that seemed to come up to my knees and made me suddenly aware that my shoes were still muddy from yesterday's adventure, a window from which, through the rain, you could see the sun rising over the houses of parliament, and, in front of the window, a huge oak desk. Behind the desk sat a man in his mid fifties, he was wearing a pin stripe suit and a pair of round wire frame glasses. The glasses gave him a slightly eccentric look but other than that he appeared the archetypal civil servant.

He rose, extended his hand to be shook, and introduced himself as Weatherby, John Weatherby. I sat on a chair at the desk, and the two men who had brought me there sat down on a couch near the door. I looked straight past John Weatherby, admiring the view.

'Marvelous isn't it,' he said, 'I never tire of it.'

'Are you always at work this early?' I asked, seeing a clock on the desk. It was a quarter past seven.

'Sometimes,' he said, 'but not always.'

'Shame to miss the sun rise.' I said, 'it must be marvellous on a clear day.'

He smiled. 'Clear days, Mr Wallingford, are just one of our worries.'

'It might be helpful,' I said, 'if you told me who you are, and why you have arrested me.'

'Mr Wallingford you have not been arrested, you have merely been invited here for an informal chat. I apologise if

my colleagues have given the wrong impression.'

'In that case,' I said, rising from my seat, 'I think I'll be on my way.'

'However,' he said forcefully, I noticed the two men behind me had also stood up, 'I do have the authority to detain you without charge if necessary.'

I sat down again.

He smiled. 'Good,' he said, 'you asked who we were, which is not an easy question to answer. These two gentlemen are Mister Cholderton and Mister Bauer, MI5 operatives on secondment to the Office of the Witch Finder General. I have a number of titles, but this morning I am talking to you in the capacity of Deputy Witch Finder General.'

'And who is the Witch Finder General?' I asked, 'and why haven't I heard of you before.'

'The witch finder general is Lord Angus Lepusstrom, who is currently abroad on business,' he said. 'You have not heard of us because very few people have. We are a small office, consisting of only two permanent employees, myself and Lord Lepusstrom, and we are funded as part of the home office under the title Department for the Moral Well-Being of the Nation.'

'You must get noticed.'

'Every new Home Secretary notices us eventually, and there seems to be a new one every other week these days, it is part of my job to justify our very small expense when they do.'

'And how do you do that?' I asked.

'Justify our existence,' he said, 'I'll admit it is not always easy. There are dark forces at work in this land Mr Wallingford, and there have been for thousands of years, long before England was Christian, before England was England even. We have enough evidence in our archives to justify ourselves to the most hardened sceptic. Even as hardened a sceptic as a politician. But I suspect you have

seen enough already.'

I said nothing. I had seen a lot in the past forty eight hours but had drawn no conclusions, although in a way he was right, I was not nearly as hardened a sceptic as I had been.

He looked at me. 'No more questions?' he asked.

I shook my head.

'Then allow me to ask some of you. Do you know the whereabouts of one Miss Selkie Pffinnenwicken?'

'No,' I answered.

He nodded. 'Do you have any idea where she might be?'

'Yes,' I said, 'but I do not believe I am under any obligation to tell you.'

'No,' he said, 'you are not. I could make it so you are but it is a very inconvenient business. Not half as inconvenient for me as it is for you, but still, very inconvenient.'

'Then persuade me.'

'Persuade you,' he said, 'I am surprised that is necessary. It should be obvious that we are both on the same side.'

'Side?' I asked, a touch angry at the suggestion.

'Yes, side. We are both combating the forces of darkness are we not.'

'No,' I said, 'all I've been doing is helping out a friend.'

'Oh.'

'And for someone on the same bloody side, you certainly have a strange way of behaving.'

'Ah,' he said, 'I understand there were some, err ... misguided tactical decisions made in the heat of the moment.'

'Misguided tactical decisions!' I spluttered, and then wheeled around in my chair and pointed at the two men. 'They bloody shot at us.'

'Actually,' said the man without the broken wrist, who

had been introduced as Mister Cholderton, ‘that was a warning shot.’

‘Warning shots’, I said in a voice scraping along the edge of shouting, ‘are normally accompanied by a warning. Otherwise they might be miss-con-bloody-strued.’ I turned back to face Weatherby before either of the two men had a chance to answer. They remained silent.

After a short pause Weatherby said ‘I see there has been some misunderstanding, which is largely our fault.’

‘When a witch finder tries to arrest a witch,’ I said slowly, measuring my words, ‘I don’t see that there is much room for misunderstanding.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘they are an unfortunate pair of titles. Lord Lepusstrom is very attached to tradition, which is why we keep ours. I imagine the Pffinnenwicken women keep theirs for much the same reason.’

‘Titles and misunderstandings aside,’ I said, not wanting to get sidetracked, ‘that doesn’t explain why you tried to arrest two innocent citizens who you now claim to be on the same side as.’

‘I assure you Mister Wallingford,’ he said, ‘our only aim was to take Miss Pffinnenwicken into protective custody.’

‘Protective custody?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what the bloody hell does that mean?’

‘There are things afoot Mister Wallingford, as I am sure you are aware, things that we as the government are better qualified to deal with than a have-a-go amateur like Miss Pffinnenwicken.’

‘You mean the Black Goat.’

‘The Black Goat?’

‘Yes. They were who we were looking for.’

‘The official view of this department,’ he said, ‘is that the Black Goat are harmless.’

‘Harmless!’ I shouted the word at the top of my voice. ‘One of them killed two of my friends last night.’

He turned the pages of a report on his desk. ‘I’m afraid stabbings are a bit beyond our remit here. We deal with a more ... esoteric threat.’

For a moment I said nothing, spluttering half formed words. Finally I said ‘the Black Goat are harmless?’

‘That is departmental policy.’

‘So what the hell do you think you are protecting Selkie from?’

‘Black Goat or not, she will investigate until she gets herself in danger, we intend to prevent that.’

‘Who the hell makes up this policy?’

‘All policy comes from ...’

‘Don’t tell me,’ I interrupted him, ‘the illustrious and conveniently absent Lord Lepusstrom.’

‘Lord Lepusstrom does have final say, yes ...’

‘This is a conspiracy,’ I said.

‘I assure you it is not.’

‘Isn’t it? Then why is it painfully obvious to a man like me, until last week completely ignorant of anything remotely supernatural, and still with no more experience of magic than watching people make it rain slightly harder when it was already raining, that the Black Goat are extremely dangerous and almost certainly behind whatever the hell is going on; but you, an apparent expert in the subject, just sit there and blithely spew out platitudes like “it is the policy of this department that the Black Goat are not a threat.”’

He looked a little taken aback. ‘Well ...’ he said.

‘And,’ I said, marching forward whilst I had the momentum, ‘who the hell sold them that land they’ve been doing god knows what on for the past thirty years, who made sure they weren’t moved off even after they murdered two policemen, and who the hell isn’t even interested when

they start murdering people who stand in their way.’

‘That’s, err ...’ he said, ‘that’s a lot of different points.’

‘You ...’ I shouted. ‘You stuck-up pillock. Whilst you’ve been running about trying to arrest an innocent girl, and you can’t even get that right, Selkie and her friends have put their lives on the line to actually combat these “dark forces at work in this country,” and now, when I tell you what is going on, you aren’t even bloody interested.’

I twisted in my chair so I didn’t have to look at the prat. I suppose in retrospect it is obvious, but I had not realised how much seeing my friends murdered, being arrested, kept up all night, abducted to a strange location, and threatened, had annoyed me. I had had a real head of steam to let off, and now I had vented the room was plunged into an awkward silence. You could hear the rain rapping against the window, it was a reminder, to me at least, that whilst we sat in the warm and the dry others worked for our benefit facing unknown dangers.

Weatherby placed both his hands flat down on the desk and coughed, adopting the air of someone about to say something important, when a voice from behind me said ‘he’s got a fucking point.’

I wheeled round, it was Mister Bauer that had spoken, the man with the broken wrist. In retrospect, he had even more cause than I to be pissed off.

‘Yes,’ said Weatherby, ‘he may have a point, but I don’t see what I can do about it now.’

An idea struck me. ‘I know exactly what you should do,’ I said. ‘You should talk to Mog Ruith, ask him what’s going on. You do that and I’ll tell you where Selkie’s gone.’

‘Mog Ruith?’

‘The Black Goat druid currently held at her majesty’s pleasure.’

‘I don’t know if we can ...’

‘You’re part of the home office aren’t you,’ I said, ‘pull



some bloody strings.’

‘I could not,’ he said, ‘but Lord Lepusstrom might be able to.’

I gestured to the phone on the desk. ‘Call him,’ I said.

He picked up the receiver and hesitantly dialled. I glanced back at Mister Bauer and Mister Cholderton. Mister Bauer winked at me.

‘Lord Lepusstrom please,’ said Weatherby.

...

‘It’s John.’

...

‘John Weatherby.’

...

‘Hello sir, I was hoping you could arrange something.’

...

‘We need to talk to an inmate in the prison system.’

...

‘The only name we have is err ...’ He looked at me.

‘Mog Ruith,’ I said.

‘Mog Ruith,’ he repeated.

...

‘Yes sir, that Mog Ruith.’

...

‘Well the thing is, we have Mister Wallingford here and he refuses to tell us where Miss Pffinnenwicken is until we investigate the Black Goat angle.’

...

‘I know what our policy is sir.’

...

‘We could do that, but it would be awkward and might not do us any good.’

...

‘Yes sir, he seems very determined.’

...

‘Well the way I look at it sir, is that Miss Pfinnwicken is apparently in search of the Black Goat herself, so if they are genuinely harmless, then we can afford to waste the time, but if they are actually not, then it will not have been a waste of time. If you follow sir.’

...

‘Yes sir.’

...

‘I think there was some business about a land deal, but I doubt that would be relevant.’

...

‘No sir, it will all be completely off record.’

...

‘Yes sir I will.’

...

‘Thank you sir.’

He put the phone down. ‘He’ll make some calls,’ he said, ‘it will be arranged.’

‘Do we know which jail?’ asked Mr Cholderton.

Weatherby looked at me. ‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘somewhere in Scotland I think.’

‘Better call in a helicopter,’ said Cholderton.

# Mog Ruith

I had never been a helicopter before. We were picked up from the rooftop of the building by an unmarked black one, I remarked to Bauer and Cholderton that they were not doing anything to dispel the government agent cliché. They just laughed. Other than that we did not talk much, the two agents seemed quite friendly now I had talked back to their boss but they still kept to themselves, Mister Weatherby, cowed and attacked from all corners, sat by himself and sulked.

We stopped to refuel twice, once in Bradford, and again in Glasgow. I looked out of the window and watched the country change beneath me, the urban sprawl and concrete roads of London gave way swiftly to the ordered and neatly divided squares of home counties farms, which in turn surrendered to the more rural but still managed landscape of the north with occasional woods and dry stone walls surrounding hillsides and grazing land. After Glasgow even this amount of human intervention became rare and we passed frequently over wild forests and empty mountains until we eventually arrived in Peterhead in the midst of what seemed to us, passing swiftly overhead, to be nothing more than a barren snowy wilderness.

I thought of Selkie, somewhere down there, headed

South and now I was headed North. The country seemed very big, and two people so far apart seemed very small.

The helicopter set down inside the prison grounds on a windswept stretch of empty snow brushed field. I got out, wrapped my coat around me, and shivered. The rain there was a thick grey sleet that hammered like needles into any exposed skin and sucked all colour out of the landscape. A prison officer in a thick black coat ran out to greet us, shouted something I did not catch over the noise of the helicopter engine, and led us back into the relative warmth and comfort of the prison building where Weatherby was required to fill in several forms. The officer seemed somehow both put out that we were disturbing his routine and equally eager that we should get what we needed. A call from the illustrious Lord Leppusstrom obviously worked wonders.

‘We’ve shackled him to the desk,’ he said as he led us down a clammy stone walled corridor, ‘but you still need to be careful, he’s an unpredictable bastard. He’s killed five men since we’ve had him and he’s put three times that many in the infirmary. Are you certain you don’t want an officer in there with you?’

Weatherby looked like he might, and I was all for it, but Cholderton spoke first and refused the offer. I looked at him and he patted the bulge over his left breast and said ‘we’ll be fine.’ I realised that he had not told anyone about the gun he was carrying and the prison staff probably would not appreciate him having it. I kept my mouth shut. I appreciated him having it.

‘If he makes any sudden moves, anything, you shout like you mean it and bang on the door, I’ll be right outside.’

‘What can he do,’ said Weatherby, ‘if he’s chained down?’

‘With this one you just never know,’ said the officer, ‘chains ... well you just can’t be sure.’

I was about to ask him what he was going to say about chains but he stopped and drew back the bolt on a heavy

metal door. 'This is it,' he said, looking at us as if asking us if we were really sure about this. Suddenly I was not sure, and I do not think Weatherby was either, but Bauer and Cholderton just opened the door and walked confidently in.

Inside the room was a sturdy metal desk screwed down to the floor. In front of the desk were two plastic chairs. Cholderton and Bauer avoided the chairs and stood to either side which meant Weatherby and I were kind of forced to use them. I think both of us would rather had stood in the corner, as far away as possible from what was behind the desk.

It was hard to think about what was behind the desk as a human being, he was clean, and his hair was shaved close, and he was wearing blue prison issue clothing, but there was something strange about him I could not put my finger on. His very presence as a physical object was unnerving, he seemed to be too big for the space he occupied, which is an expression that makes no sense to me now but is the best one I can come up with to describe what I saw. I would also swear he shifted unnaturally out of the corner of my eye, as if partially decoupled from the stricture of the usual three dimensions. As a man he was no less disturbing, he was heavily scared and weathered, it would have been impossible to tell his age, he could have been anything from eighteen to eighty, he exuded a wiry strength and leather toughness and, but for the shackles, I do not think the four of us could have held him down. He slouched in his chair like a coiled spring - I flashed back to the druid in the nightclub - he was like an animal poised ready to pounce, a snake coiled ready to strike. He was missing several teeth and a long scar across the top of his head was an unnatural white slash where no hair grew.

His eyes were what really troubled me, they fixed me with a long cold determined stare, sizing me up, when he looked at me I immediately remembered Selkie's comment, *beyond a point at which life and death have any meaning*, the moment I thought this I knew, knew for certain, that he

could tell exactly what I was thinking. The barest hint of a smile flickered across his thin cracked lips.

‘How is dear Selkie?’ he said slowly in a quiet dry growl that seemed to be dredged up from stones scraping together deep within his chest.

Weatherby looked at me, thankful perhaps that it was not him being addressed.

‘I don’t know.’ I said, truthfully. The man behind the desk let his features gradually twist into a broad wolfish grin.

‘Mister Mog Ruith,’ stuttered Weatherby, the grin vanished and the man immediately switched his malevolent stare to Weatherby, ‘we wanted to ask you about the Black Goat.’

The man turned back and looked at me again. ‘What about the Black Goat would you like to know?’

I licked my lips, which seemed to have gone very dry all of a sudden, and asked ‘why is it raining?’

He smiled again, and chuckled even, it was the least pleasant chuckle I have ever heard. It was rather like being a fish on a hook held up and examined by an angler who chuckled to himself while watching it suffocate and die. ‘The rain,’ he said, again very slowly and quietly, ‘is a reaction, it is fever sweats, it is the salivation of hunger.’

‘What are the Black Goat doing,’ I asked, ‘to cause it?’

‘We are fulfilling our side of the bargain, we are delivering what we were paid for.’

‘What,’ I said, ‘were you paid for?’

He looked about the room. ‘Your two friends can not protect you,’ he said, ‘their guns would not be fast enough.’ Bauer and Cholderton did not react, no doubt they were not so easily spooked as I was. ‘But,’ he said, and sniffed, ‘Selkie protects you, the witch has claimed you for her own, I will honour this.’

‘Is Selkie safe?’ I asked, the question just popped into my

head and I asked it. In retrospect I think I was under a form of hypnosis, I was not interviewing him in any normal sense, I was simply exposing my thoughts with every question, revealing my ignorance.

‘She may be,’ he said, ‘if she returns to the fold. Do not look surprised, she is thinking of returning, they all think of returning, this is why she has left you behind, she does not want to hurt you. But this is not what you flew all this way to ask.’

I asked ‘what were you paid?’

‘Land.’

‘By whom?’

‘The wolf.’

‘For what?’

‘To wake the dragon.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘You will, soon.’

‘When will it happen?’

‘The earth trembles with anticipation, the stones shiver with excitement, the rain is washing the land clean ready for his arrival. But first he must be called, there must be a clamour loud enough, he must hear the screams of his women and children, there must be an enemy he recognises.’

‘Who is the dragon?’

‘He is the son of this land. He never truly died. He rests, waiting till he is called.’

‘Who is the wolf?’

He looked across at Weatherby and back at me, ‘have your friend ask his Lord.’

‘Lord Lepusstrom?’

He smiled again.

‘Where,’ I said, ‘are the rest of the Black Goat?’

The smile vanished. ‘The land loves us,’ he said, ‘we have slept in its fold, we have shared our blood with it, we have shared our love with it, we have given it all it has desired, when it has desired blood we have given it blood, when it has desired love we have given it love. These stones would turn at a word from me, they would crush you at my command, the metal in that door would bend at my wish, would bow before me. We will give the land back its master and for this it loves us. Ask me another question I do not like and I shall pull out your windpipe.’

He looked around the room at each of us in turn. ‘Go ahead,’ he said, ‘run. Call for help. Draw your guns. Bang on the door and summon the guard.’

Not one of us moved. I swear my feet were rooted to the spot. I had lost all power over my own limbs.

‘Your time,’ he said, ‘will end. The land will be given back to men and women. Not these sexless things. Your bickering organisations will be dismantled. Leadership will come from a leader. Rule will come from a ruler. Men will willingly place their lives in his hands. The land will flourish where he treads. Death and life will follow in his wake. The people shall be whole again.’

At that moment, my eyes were fixed on him, I felt like a statue. It was not that I tried to move and failed, it was that I could not even try.

He reached across and touched me lightly with one finger at the nape of my neck. ‘You,’ he said, ‘I release.’

I stood up like I had been hit by an electric shock and immediately walked back to the door and knocked on it. The guard opened it and all four of us, able to move again, dashed out into the corridor. I looked back and saw that Mog Ruith’s wrists were still securely shackled to the desk. I touched the point on my neck where he had touched me, I could still feel his finger, just resting on my skin, the threat that at any moment it might hook in and strike. For about an hour afterwards I held my hand around my neck, it was the only way I felt secure.



We walked in silence down the corridor and were led to a small staff canteen, a bare room with a kettle in one corner and two kitchen tables. We sat while the officer, who apparently had seen our reaction before in others, made the tea.

‘That was creepy,’ said Cholderton, finally. The rest of us nodded, and grumbled agreement.

The prison officer slapped four mugs of tea on the table together with a large plastic bottle of milk and a bowl of white sugar turned brown and clumped together from too many people using a wet spoon to serve it. He said ‘I’ll give you some time,’ and left the room. We stared at the apparatus on the table as if we had forgotten how to use it. Finally Cholderton moved and poured milk into his tea, the rest of us followed.

I knew that if just one of us spoke, the spell would be broken, but I struggled to find something to say. I have always been like this, I am always the one at parties who clams up when meeting new people, I am always the one who lets a conversation die. I looked at the others, they moved slowly, we avoided each others gaze, it occurred to me that perhaps they did not even realise they were still under the spell, that it was entirely up to me to break it. I searched for something to say, my mind felt like porridge, simply trying to remember what had happened was like a complicated mathematical problem.

‘What,’ I finally managed, ‘do you think he meant by the dragon?’

Like that, the spell lifted, it was like having water in your ear and then knocking it clear, everything seemed much closer and more distinct. I felt an almost overwhelming desire to feel another human being’s flesh on mine, but well, we were all men and English men at that, and that was not going to happen.

‘What did any of it mean?’ said Bauer, ‘stones coming alive, giving love to the earth.’

‘He mentioned a bargain,’ said Cholderton, ‘with someone that Lord Lepusstrom knew about.’

‘It was for land,’ I said, ‘we need to find out who gave them the land they live on.’

‘That should be possible,’ said Cholderton, ‘but a lot of work, you’ve no idea where it is or when it was given to them.’

‘Sometime in the seventies or early eighties I think, and no, apart from being in Scotland, I’ve no idea.’

‘We could go back in there and ask him,’ suggested Bauer, and it took me a horrible moment to realise it was a joke.

‘There are few forces on earth,’ said Cholderton, ‘that would compel me to go back in there.’

‘I think we now know for sure that the Black Goat are behind whatever is going on.’

Cholderton nodded. ‘So,’ he said to Weatherby, ‘are you going to ask your boss about this deal.’

Weatherby did not answer, we were all looking pale but he looked like he might faint at any moment.

‘I think we can assume,’ continued Cholderton, ‘that Lord Lepusstrom and the wolf are one and the same.’

‘I’ll ask,’ said Weatherby in a thin, sallow voice, ‘but he won’t like it.’

‘Well we’re not doing it for his bloody pleasure,’ said Bauer taking another two spoonfuls of sugar and stirring them into the remains of his tea before downing it in one go. ‘Dragons waking doesn’t sound good, but enemies he recognises, and the screaming of women and children, that all sounds like exactly what we ought to be preventing. Come on,’ he said, ‘we’ve got work to do.’

The rest of us finished our tea and stood up. On the way out the officer shook us all by the hand, I gripped his hand eagerly, with both of mine, and was reluctant to let go, the touch of skin on skin, the contact with another human

being, the warmth of him, felt so good. He smiled like he understood, and patted me on the back.

‘You’ll be fine,’ he said.

As we climbed back in the helicopter Weatherby said ‘you haven’t fulfilled your side of the bargain, where is Miss Pfinnenwicken?’

‘She was headed to the South Downs,’ I said, ‘apparently there were some druids seen there she thought might be the Black Goat.’

Weatherby nodded. ‘We’ll head there for the goat,’ he said, ‘if we find her, we’ll just ask her to come with us.’

‘What about you,’ shouted Cholderton over the roar of the engines starting up, ‘where can we drop you?’

‘Can’t I come with you?’ I shouted back.

‘No civilians,’ he said, ‘not in the field.’

I was angry, but in a way, I think, I was relieved. I wanted to hand over the problem, I wanted to believe that these people were competent to handle it, I wanted to be a child, and let the grown ups worry about grown up things. I had felt like a child in the presence of Mog Ruith. I wanted to go back to my simple and safe and ordinary life. I wanted to go to work on Monday morning like nothing had happened, confident in the knowledge that I was being protected by my government.

‘Bedford,’ I shouted, ‘I left my car there.’

Cholderton gave me the thumbs up. ‘Plenty of air-bases near Bedford, I’ll get on the horn and make sure there is somebody to drive you in to town.’

With a whine, the helicopter floated up into the swirling sleet.



## Home Sweet Home

I was dropped off at a small army base near Bedford and driven in to town by an extremely talkative private who, without pausing once for breath, related to me the complete history of American Football in Britain. Apparently there is a team from Milton Keynes who are particularly good, beyond that I can't remember a word. Neither could I remember at the time just where I had parked, and we drove around randomly for about twenty minutes before it occurred to me to tell him it was near a nightclub where we saw a rock band. He took me straight to the place. The car had a ticket but had not been clamped, I got in it and drove home. The private, I think, was going on to meet some friends for a drink.

I got home about seven in the evening and collapsed like a sack onto the sofa opposite the flat-mate.

'Hey,' he said.

'Hey.'

'I thought you were coming back yesterday.'

'So did I.'

I lay there, thinking first that I was very tired, second that I was hungry, third that I had put my feet up on the sofa without taking my shoes off and they were all muddy,

fourth that I was too tired to care, fifth that I needed a drink, and sixth that there was something wrong, something deeply, profoundly, irksomely wrong.

‘What’s going on,’ I asked the flat-mate, ‘why isn’t the television on?’

He looked up at me from where he was sitting at the table - he never sat at the table - and proudly held up his notebook. ‘I’m working,’ he said.

‘What on?’

‘Can’t tell you yet man, got to wait till I’ve ironed out all the little details, but I’m almost there.’

I dragged myself up and into the kitchen and towards the fridge. It was empty.

‘Have you drunk all the beer again?’ I shouted.

‘It’s hard work this inventing.’

I rolled my eyes and weighed up my options. ‘I’m going to buy some more,’ I shouted, ‘do you want anything from KFC?’

‘Yeah please,’ he shouted back, ‘some chicken.’

I shuddered at the unpleasant sensation of pulling on an already sodden coat, and stepped out once more into the dark, the cold, and the rain. As I trudged down the street, with that one-two quickstep to avoid staying too long in the elements, that is definitely not a run but is faster than a walk, I planned my evening. Beer and fried chicken, I thought, followed by a long hot bath accompanied by another beer, and then maybe a bit of telly, but more likely straight to bed. I had a lot of things to worry about, what with Selkie, and the Black Goat, and everything else, but the time and place to worry about them was at my desk at work tomorrow. I made a mental note to make sure the hot water was on when I got back and bought six bottles of lager and two chicken meals. I caught myself wondering, as I walked home, if and what Selkie had eaten that day.

‘You’re a star,’ said the flat-mate as I dropped an open

beer and cardboard box of greasy chicken on the table in front of him. I sat down opposite and started eating greedily.

‘So,’ said the flat-mate between mouthfuls, ‘did you spend last night with that girl then?’

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘I spent most of it in a prison cell.’

‘Cool, where you raising hell together?’

‘No,’ I said, unable to see any humour in the misunderstanding, ‘I got involved in a murder.’

‘Christ!’ he said, dropping his half eaten drumstick back in the box, ‘what happened?’

‘It wasn’t anything really,’ I said, ‘someone got stabbed in this nightclub we were at and I got arrested because I was running away.’

‘I bet you were bloody running.’

‘It really wasn’t anything,’ I said, lying easily, ‘I barely saw it happen.’ I do not know why I did not tell him the truth, perhaps just because it would have been hard to explain. He looked at me with such sympathy and understanding I felt bad about lying to him but the real story would have elicited more compassion from him than I deserved, more than I had any right to ask.

I went quiet after that, the memory still too close for me to easily put aside, and god bless him he kept the silence away, describing in detail an old war film he had watched on the telly and a long phone call he had received from his sister. I was withdrawn, not really listening, I was thinking of Stokes, Nugget, and Corner. Most of all I was thinking of Selkie.

‘Hey,’ he said, ‘do you want to see what I’ve got so far?’

I made a deliberate effort to snap back to the present, shaking my head vigorously. ‘Sure,’ I said.

He opened his notebook and spun it round on the table for me to see, in it there was a biro sketch of a cross between a spoon and a fork. ‘I’ve invented the spork,’ he

said proudly.

I looked at him to see if this was all a joke designed to cheer to me up.

‘What?’ he said.

‘That’s already been invented.’

‘Has it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh.’

‘You can buy them in camping shops, you get little plastic ones in with those expensive salads from Waitrose.’

He grabbed the notebook back, scribbled in it frantically and pushed it back over for me to see. ‘I’ve invented the spife.’

‘That’s stupid.’

‘The knork?’

I sat in stony silence, I was too tired, I had been through too much, I could not see the funny side. ‘That’s it,’ I said, ‘that’s what you’ve done all day.’ I opened my mouth and all I could hear was my father talking. I hated myself but I could not stop it. ‘That’s it.’

‘Well,’ he said with a smirk, ‘it was Sunday.’

‘I suppose you need to borrow the rent off me again this month?’

‘Kind of.’

I closed the flap on my half eaten box of chicken. ‘I’ve ...’ I said, ‘I’ve got things I have to do.’ I stood up.

‘What things?’ he asked.

‘Things,’ I said, and then ‘I don’t know when I’ll be back.’ I walked into the hall and put my rain sodden shoes



back on. The flat-mate followed.

‘You’ll be back tomorrow night right,’ he said, ‘I need you to help with application letters and my CV. You’re much better at that sort of thing than me.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said truthfully, it was not inconceivable, where I was planning to go, that I would never be coming back. ‘Write them without me,’ I said, and if I get back in time I’ll read them over for you. You can use my computer.’

‘Cheers mate.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, pulling on my coat, ‘cheers.’ We stood apart for a moment, and then I gave him the briefest brotherly hug, no more than a quick pat on the back, and then I left quickly.

When I sat in the car I had every intention of driving straight down to the South Downs and looking for Selkie, but before I even turned on the ignition I realised there was something I had to do first. I turned left at the end of the road and headed towards Whitton. Somehow, by trial and error, I retraced our route from a week ago and drove to Selkie’s mother’s house.

It was late by the time I arrived and there were no lights on and I was not one hundred percent sure I had found the right house. I rang the bell anyway. I waited, and just when I was about to give up a light turned on and Wilhelmina opened the door.

‘Mitchel,’ she said, sounding surprised.

‘I didn’t get you up did I?’ I asked.

‘No,’ she said, ‘come in.’

I stepped over the threshold. ‘I’ve got bad news,’ I said.

‘About Stokes,’ she said, ‘I know.’

‘How?’

‘Ruth called me.’

‘Was she ... is Corner alright?’

‘He’ll live.’

‘Nugget ...’ I began.

She nodded her head to confirm she also knew. ‘Would you like a cup of coffee Mitchell?’

I said I would, and took off my shoes before taking another step into the house, not wanting to mess up yet another carpet, and then promptly realised that I was still wearing yesterday’s socks. I decided that the smell was the lesser of the two evils and padded after her into what looked like a kitchen out of one of those kitchen magazines that come through the door. Huge it was, and all gleaming chrome and tasteful soft browns. It was hard to imagine anything had ever been cooked in there, it was the sort of kitchen beautiful people came home to after exciting and interesting nights on the town and, never too drunk, uncorked a bottle of very good wine and retired to a not so comfortable but achingly stylish leather sofa in the living room to have brilliant conversations late into the night. It was exactly the sort of kitchen I would have pegged Selkie as having back when I first saw her and instantly took against her.

Make no mistake, this streak of inverted snobbery of mine is pure jealousy.

‘I’m a bit surprised,’ said Wilhelmina, filling a designer chrome kettle from a designer chrome tap, ‘to find you here without my daughter.’

‘That’s the other thing I have to tell you,’ I said, sitting down on a stool at the breakfast bar and trying to wind my feet together so that they each kept in the smell of the other, ‘she went to the South Downs in search of the Black Goat.’

‘Seven Sisters?’

‘Yes.’

‘Alone?’

‘I’m afraid so, she got a lift with from a band, but only as far as Newport I think.’

Wilhelmina did not say anything, instead she took a tin of coffee from the fridge and spooned some into a cafetiere. ‘There ought to be a word,’ she said finally, ‘for the pleasing way ground coffee behaves on a spoon.’ It was such a whimsical non-sequitur that, for the first time, she reminded me of her daughter.

‘What should we do?’ I said.

‘You want to go down there and rescue her?’

‘Yes,’ I said, surprised at my own certainty.

She smiled, filled a china jug with milk and put it in the microwave, and said ‘what hope do you have of finding her tonight?’

‘I thought maybe you would know something.’

She shook her head and poured boiling water over the coffee releasing an oddly satisfying cloud of steam. She placed the cafetiere, milk jug, and two large mugs on the table and sat down opposite me. She looked at her watch.

‘There’s more,’ I said.

‘Yes?’

I told her about being arrested, about Cholderton and Bauer, about Weatherby and about the Lord Lepusstrom. Finally I tried to tell her of our trip all the way into Scotland to see Mog Ruith, but still my brain felt muddy and confused and I was unable to give a clear account of it.

‘Wait,’ she said, ducking down and looking into my eyes, ‘you need a ritual.’ She looked around and then at her watch. ‘Give me your hand,’ she said. She took my hand and placed it flat on top of the cafetiere plunger, she placed her hand flat on top of mine, told me to put my other hand on top of that, and sandwiched that in with hers.

‘Now,’ she said, ‘look me in the eye, and push.’

We pushed the plunger down very slowly. She took the both mugs, poured the milk very slowly, poured the coffee, twisted one mug around so the handle face me and slid it across the table top towards me.

‘Now,’ she said, ‘take it in both hands, and when I say, drink.’ I lifted the mug, as instructed, to my lips. ‘Drink,’ she said.

Immediately the veil lifted, it was like my mind kicking into a higher gear, the whole interview with Mog Ruith snapped into focus.

‘Wow,’ I said, ‘how did you do that?’

‘I didn’t do anything,’ she said, ‘you did.’

‘But what?’

‘Just ritual,’ she said, ‘I made it up on the spot.’

I was impressed, and I felt something, the beginning of an understanding, a flicker off to the side of my brain, just out of view, but growing. Wilhelmina seemed to sense it too. ‘Selkie was right about you,’ she said, ‘now tell me about Mog Ruith.’

‘I’m afraid,’ I said, ‘that not much of what he said makes any sense.’

‘Try me.’

‘Well he said the Black Goat are fulfilling their side of a bargain they made for land of their own. He said they are going to wake the dragon.’

‘Wake the dragon?’

‘Exactly those words, does it mean anything to you?’

‘Maybe,’ she said, ‘go on.’

‘He said a lot about the land loved them, and the stones would obey his every command.’

‘Load of horse manure,’ she said.

‘It didn’t feel like it at the time.’

‘Just stuff to scare you,’ she said, ‘if the stones obeyed his command what’s he still doing in prison. He weaved a

pretty good spell on you lot by the sound of it.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘he actually reached across and touched me at one point, despite the fact his hands were shackled to the table.’

‘No, you just thought he did. If his hands were shackled they were shackled. What else?’

‘He said that in order to wake the dragon they had to summon an enemy he would recognise.’

Wilhelmina nodded.

‘And err... oh yes, he said they made this deal with “the wolf.” He said something else which made us think that might be Lord Lepusstrom.’

‘It is.’

‘Is it?’

‘Angus Lepusstrom, used to be known as the wolf, years ago.’

‘You know him?’

‘I knew him,’ she said, ‘I knew them both. Mog Ruith’s real name was ...’ she looked upwards, remembering, ‘Neil something. He was always a bit of a strange customer, but talented. Angus Lepusstrom used to be one of us but he took a job with the government back in, god knows, seventy nine perhaps. Anyway, what else?’

‘Not much, he said a lot about stones and them giving the land blood and loving it. He said Selkie had claimed me.’

‘Oh did he?’

‘Yes. And he said she was thinking about returning to the fold.’

Wilhelmina said nothing, she just drank her coffee and looked thoughtful.

‘Is that true?’ I asked, ‘about Selkie.’

‘Maybe,’ she said thoughtfully.

The conversation ground to a halt, both of us sitting

there not saying anything. I had been told once, years ago, I do not remember by whom, that those awkward little silences in conversations only happened at twenty minutes to the hour, or twenty minutes past. Idly, I looked at my watch.

‘It’s not an awkward silence,’ said Wilhelmina.

‘What?’

‘You were looking at your watch.’

‘Tell the truth,’ I said, only half joking, ‘can you read my mind?’

‘Not a word of it,’ she said, ‘but you looked at your watch, and we were sitting in silence, and those awkward silences are only supposed to happen twenty minutes and twenty minutes after the hour, so I figured that was why you were looking.’

‘Lucky guess.’

‘Not really. Anyway not every silence is awkward. I don’t feel awkward, do you?’

‘No.’

‘Good.’

‘Is it true?’ I asked.

‘Sometimes,’ she said. Only later did it occur to me that this was another way of saying no.

‘Is it related to the rain thing?’

She started to answer but then turned to the window. I followed her gaze, and then looked back at my watch, and then at the window again. It had stopped raining, and it was exactly nine forty-eight in the evening.

Wilhelmina asked ‘are you a fast driver?’

‘I ... err ...’

‘Come on,’ she said, ‘we need to go.’

# Floodland

At Wilhelmina's insistence, I drove fast. I think I get caught by a camera heading out of London, after that I raced around a blessedly empty stretch of the M25 and then south down the M23 towards Brighton. We could not always see what the weather was doing from within the car, but we both noticed the stars appearing from behind the thinning clouds.

'It's going to be cold,' said Wilhelmina, 'there will probably be a fog by morning.'

'Do you think Selkie's alright?' I asked.

She looked out the passenger side window, away from me. 'I don't know,' she said.

'How will we find her?'

'I don't know that either.'

I drove on in silence. A glance at the dashboard clock revealed it was exactly twenty minutes to eleven.

'Go left at the A27 just before Brighton,' she said, 'we'll go to Seven Sisters.'

'What is Seven Sisters?' I asked.

'Cliffs,' she said, 'but a powerful place.'

'Why?'

‘Because of how they look. They’re a monument, but a natural monument, which makes them more potent.’

‘Selkie said something,’ I said, ‘that it’s all about people, not about places or things.’

Wilhelmina turned round to look at me. ‘She told you that?’

‘Yes. Is it supposed to be a secret?’

‘You’d think so wouldn’t you, what with all the trade in herbs, and dreamcatchers, and spirit sticks, and books about leylines and that rubbish. Actually it’s the opposite, those of us who understand used to try and try to explain it, but people take no notice, they like their totems, they want to put their trust in solid things.’

‘Are people not solid?’

She looked back out the window, at her reflection. ‘Flesh is solid,’ she said, ‘but a person is more than flesh.’

‘I suppose.’

‘Mostly,’ she said, ‘we’ve given up trying to correct people. Selkie must have thought you were worth telling.’

I smiled to myself and drove on. The roads were empty and soon we made it on to the A27. Wilhelmina, with the help of a road atlas, directed me from that onto the A26, through the town of Newhaven, which seemed to be entirely shut up for the night, along a coastal road through the even sleepier town of Seaford, and then up into the countryside, finally pulling up in the entrance to a very shut national trust car park. I cut the engine and killed the lights. The intense silence of the night penetrated straight into the interior of the car and the darkness drew in about us, kept only inches away from the windows by the small interior light. Wilhelmina reached up and turned it off.

‘Listen,’ she said quietly. We listened. I did not hear a thing. If Wilhelmina heard anything I do not know, after a moment she seemed satisfied and got out of the car. I followed and was immediately hit by a wave of freezing cold air. It penetrated my clothes and tightened itself



around my throat. I reached back into the car for my coat and pulled it around me, it was colder there than it had been in Peterhead. I stamped my feet. Wilhelmina blew into her hands but seemed otherwise unbothered.

‘What now,’ I asked.

‘We go to the Cliffs,’ she said, ‘pointing down the valley.’

‘In theory,’ I said, ‘there should be a rash of government agents in helicopters around here.’ I looked around the sky but saw nothing.

‘I doubt that,’ said Wilhelmina, already striding off. I locked the car and followed.

I have returned since to that particular point of Seven Sister, their western most point, at the mouth of the river Cuckmere. Normally the river winds sleepily through a rather picturesque valley, but after over a week of rain it had flooded and in the moonlight all we could see at the bottom of the valley was a vast black slick. The path was under the water, so we picked our way over rough land on the eastern side of the valley, neither of us able to keep our footing in the dark and both slipping frequently in the mud. We struggled on in silence, Wilhelmina leading the way, me shivering behind her.

After some time, and I would be hard pressed to say how long with any degree of accuracy, perhaps as much as an hour, perhaps not even twenty minutes, Wilhelmina stood stock still and put her hand up. I stopped, and listened, and heard a splash. I looked down and, my eyes better adjusted to the dark by now, I saw ripples in the dark water beneath us.

Wilhelmina grabbed me and pushed me flat onto the ground, diving down besides me. She put her finger to her lips and then took my hand and interlaced her fingers with mine, and pointed urgently at the moon with her other hand. I looked at it, she held out her free hand so as to appear to pinch the moon between her thumb and forefinger, then she moved her hand slightly, giving the

impression that she was holding the moon in her fingers like a coin, and then, with one quick movement, flipped the moon around so that it no longer shone. The effect was immediate, the darkness drew about us, concentrating and strengthening into a black formless shroud that immersed us. Wilhelmina looked me directly in the eyes, I do not know how I knew, but I knew for certain that she needed me to keep absolutely still and absolutely silent.

Another splash came, and then another. From beneath us, moving through the shallow edge of the floodwater, I could just make out a line of figures. Barely shadows under the starlight, shifting silhouettes over the inky surface of the water, the ghostly suggestion of forms. They had all the requisite features of men and women, the right number of arms and legs and that sort of thing, but watching them move I would have sworn that they were wild animals - some previously undiscovered species of great ape, malevolent and carnivorous. They travelled with none of the difficulty Wilhelmina and I had suffered, instead they waded through the water as confidently as if it were a paved road.

There was about two dozen of them, travelling wordlessly in single file. From the little I could make out most had long hair and torn and tattered clothing. I held my breath as they walked past, trying to press my body into the sodden earth so they would not see us. Wilhelmina squeezed my hand tight and at first I thought she was trying to tell me something but when I looked at her, moving only my eyes, I saw it was nothing but terror. With only a few small splashes, only a few yards away, the Black Goat sect filed slowly but purposefully past us. Then I noticed what had scared Wilhelmina, the added darkness that she had drawn about us was wearing off, it was thinning and dissipating like smoke. I looked down, barely half of the druids had gone past us and all around us the moonlight was penetrating, I could see the yellow of my coat begin to reflect the light. They moved so confidently they must have been able to see in the dark. All one of them had to do was

glance up and they would surely see us.

Then one did. He stopped dead, and the moment he ceased to move I ceased to be able to see him at all, but I had seen him stop right below us and I knew he was there. The last of the druids filed past, skirting around the stationary figure and swiftly disappeared into the night. There was no noise, no movement, nothing but the knowledge that he was standing there in the darkness beneath us. The last of the shroud Wilhelmina had conjured lifted. We could see no better than before but knew we were far more visible to outside observers. Still the druid did not move.

I might have thought I had made a mistake and that there was nobody there but for the fact that Wilhelmina gripped my hand harder and harder. I was not sure if I could feel her trembling or if it was me. I wracked my brain for what I had on me that might be used as a weapon, I had my car keys in my pocket, nothing else. I remembered the speed with which the druid at the nightclub had moved. If this druid came for us, I doubted we would even have time to react before our throats were slit. My eyes began to water. In all honesty I can not tell you if that was because I was holding them wide open without blinking in the freezing cold, or that I was so scared I was starting to cry.

Then he moved. He turned and followed his comrades back up the valley, moving just faster than a walk, he disappeared into the dark.

I let my head drop to the ground, if it was not for Wilhelmina tugging on my arm I would have stayed there.

‘We have to follow them?’ she whispered.

I did not say anything, but I think the look of horror in my eyes spoke volumes.

‘Selkie might be with them.’

My fierce bravado, from earlier in the evening when I had climbed into my car all ready to ride into certain death to save this girl, had all gone. I could, I thought then, still

give up and go home. This was still not my fight. I felt no courage, all I felt was fear, but the thought that Selkie was with them scared me even more. I nodded.

Wilhelmina led the way, we retraced our steps slowly and quietly and carefully, not allowing ourselves to slip in the mud. It was too dark to possibly hope to see the Black Goat ahead of us, and they were moving too quietly to hear, so we simply followed the rough path they were headed in and hoped they did not turn from it. My fingers were numb from the cold and already my tread was finding a slight crunch on the ground as the sodden mud was freezing over.

We had not gone far when I heard a sound. I stopped to listen but it had gone. I did not know if Wilhelmina had heard it but she kept going regardless. I started moving more quickly in order to catch up with her but almost immediately heard it again. Again I stopped and listened but heard nothing more. It had sounded like a cry for help. I looked back and cupped my hand to my ear, trying to pick it out. Nothing.

I looked forwards again and Wilhelmina had disappeared. I dared not call to her, not even a whisper, and I was not sure if I could risk running forward to catch her up, I would certainly slip on the treacherous ground and, even if I did not call out, risked making yet more noise. Even if I could have managed to up my pace enough to catch her up without slipping, I was far less sure of my location than she was and might easily head off in the wrong direction and lose her completely. The path we had followed was not a straight one.

I heard the sound again, it was unmistakably a cry for help and sounded familiar. It was Selkie.

That made the decision easy. I looked one last time to see if I could see Wilhelmina but there was not a hope, and then I turned and headed in the direction of the call. It was hard to tell in such absolute darkness but I think a fog was already beginning to form. I could still see my hand in front

of my face, but not much else.

Moving back down the valley again, away from the druids, I risked walking a little faster. I slipped often, and blundered frequently into pools of rainwater so that soon my feet and lower legs were soaked and I was shivering constantly. I heard Selkie call sporadically but, even though I was certain I was heading in the right direction, she never seemed to get any louder. The cries were little more than yelps of distress, I only ever made out one actual word, it was 'help.'

On hearing this I redoubled my efforts. I dashed forwards at a half jog and immediately lost my footing, slipped over, and ended up sliding down a nearly sheer drop. I have been back since, and believe that the slope I fell down was at least thirty feet high, but at the time it could have been ten times that. I slipped, skidded, and slid in the mud, tumbling down into the dark. I felt myself cut my hands. I shouted out in surprise and sudden panic. For what seemed like minutes I fell until I finally landed, with a loud splash, in waste deep, freezing cold water.

I panicked for a moment - thinking that I was drowning - before managing to find my feet and stand up. A sharp pain shot through my right ankle and I immediately collapsed back down. I tried again, putting weight on it gingerly, it hurt like hell but I could stand on it. I did not have a lot of choice. It was walk or wait there till morning. I groped about blindly in the darkness but found nothing. I remembered that the moon had been behind me when I fell. The drop had obviously taken me further down into the fog and the moon was not clear, but I could still make out its aura and I moved towards that, swiftly coming to the steep incline that I had fallen down. I tried to pull myself up and out of the water but it was too steep and too slippery and I could not. There was no climbing back up.

I leant against the mud, trying to get my breath back and ignore the cold. I reasoned that, as I had been heading

towards cliffs anyway, if I was going to stumble about in the dark it would probably be wiser to do it on the valley floor, flood or no flood.

I heard Selkie call again, much louder and clearer this time. I started off wading through the water towards the call, keeping close to the edge in case it became possible to climb out. I could feel the cold begin to weaken me now, the soft mud at the bottom of the water sucked hard at my feet and my teeth were chattering constantly and noisily. Despite sticking to the edge of the lake the slope got steeper and at one point it became too steep to stand on and I had to swim, coughing and spluttering and swallowing water for about twenty feet before I could stand again. My progress was agonisingly slow, it was taking me hours just to go about half a mile.

I started talking to myself, I recited every Pink Floyd album in order, I named the people who worked in my office, out loud I listed the recipe for a few favourite cocktails and then described to the darkness how to make the perfect lasagne in great detail, right down to how much nutmeg to put in the cheese sauce. I heard Selkie again and tried to shout back but my voice croaked and died. I was loosing it fast and I knew it.

‘Hypothermia,’ I told myself in the manner of a lecturer, ‘kills more shipwreck victims than drowning. Even in warm waters like the Mediterranean. What happens is that you panic, your heart rate goes up, and you literally pump all the heat out of your body. But,’ I said, raising my voice and punctuating it with a sweeping gesture of my hands to make sure that the water and the fog understood this very important point, ‘there have been cases of people surviving for hours in water barely above freezing. A fisherman had his boat sink off the coast of Norway and with nothing but his oilskins and a life jacket, he spent six hours in the water and swam to the shore. The only reason he survived,’ I paused for effect, ‘he did not panic.’

I waded forwards into a wall, a rising rampart of earth at

right angles to my path. I stopped and addressed it. ‘Funny thing was,’ I said, ‘nobody believed him and he actually volunteered to spend another six hours in a tank of ice-water to prove he could do it.’ The earth did not laugh.

Selkie called again, from directly behind the wall. I had to go over it, I had no idea how far it would stretch, how long a detour it would take me on if I followed it around. Come what may I had to go over. I groped about, the fact it formed a corner with the rising valley side to my right meant I could just about get enough grip to climb up, I barely had enough strength left but I dug my hands deep into the mud, gripping clumps of it, and slowly, and silently but for some heavy breathing, I slithered out of the water and up the bank. I hit the top and collapsed flat on my stomach. I was coated head to foot in mud, I was soaked to the skin, I was bleeding from several small cuts and grazes, and I was more tired than I think I had ever been before.

I lay for a moment and listened, I heard a rushing sound, a watery crash, I heard waves, I heard the sea. I felt myself begin to fall asleep and, groaning at the effort, stood up.

The fog was thick but seemed to have a faint luminescent quality to it, so instead of absolute darkness I now stood in a white blur. I decided this was a good sign.

‘All movement,’ I told myself out loud, ‘is movement forwards.’ I walked. The earth rampart became gravel that crunched as I walked on it, and then I tumbled forwards and fell down a loose shingle slope. There was no doubt, I had climbed over the sea wall and was now on the beach. I stopped and listened but heard nothing. I tried shouting but my voice croaked. I punched myself in the chest. ‘Come on you bastard,’ I said, and tried again, this time forcing out a shout of ‘Selkie.’

She answered ‘help.’

‘Selkie,’ I shouted again.

‘I’m in the water.’

I stumbled forwards. Hitting the edge of the water

where the gravel turned to slimy pot-holed rocks, I caught my foot and immediately fell, cutting my hand badly this time and banging my shin hard. I went forwards over the difficult rocks on my hands and knees. The waves were not high but I could not see them coming and the large ones hit me full in the face, giving me a mouth and eyes full of salt water each time.

‘Marco,’ I shouted.

‘Polo,’ Selkie answered.

‘Marco.’

‘Polo.’

‘Marco.’

‘Oof.’

I had put my hand down directly on her belly. I found her face and leant down close so that we could finally see each other.

‘Hello,’ I said.

‘Hello,’ she answered.

‘Imagine meeting you here?’

‘They tied me down,’ she said, ‘and the tide’s coming in.’ As if to make her point a wave washed over her, submerging her head completely. She coughed and spat out the water.

I fumbled and groped under the water and found one rope tying her down at the neck and another tying her hands behind her back. My fingers by now were numb and it was all I could do to find the knot, let alone untie it. I tried but I could not get a grip on it and my skin, soft from the water, slipped against the rope.

Another wave washed over her. ‘Any time you’re ready,’ she said through the coughs.

‘I don’t suppose,’ I said, ‘that you would have a penknife on you.’

‘Unfortunately,’ she said, ‘I seem to have mislaid my



handbag.’

Another wave washed over her. ‘Oh god Mitchell,’ she said, ‘hurry.’

‘My keys,’ I said, ‘and, struggling with my numb fingers, pulled my car keys out of my pocket. I took the largest one and tried to saw at the rope with it, but it did no good at all. Selkie was shivering so hard her whole body was shaking. ‘Don’t panic,’ I said, ‘if you panic you might die.’

‘Is that so,’ she said.

I tried wedging the key into the knot but it was done up too tight.

‘I really am beginning to dislike your old friends,’ I said.

‘Me too,’ she said.

‘Can you not just, you know, magic yourself free?’

‘No.’

I tried to think of something. Another wave washed over her. She looked up at me and her eyes pleaded with me to save her but I did not know how. In desperation I just grabbed the rock she was tied to and tried lifting it. It moved, not very much, but it moved. I felt around the edge of it, it was about four foot long and she was tied roughly to the middle of it, it tapered slightly above her head.

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to wedge one end of this rock up and then we’re going to slide the rope over the top of it.’

‘Okay,’ she said.

Frantically I groped around for another free rock. I found one, lifted the top end of the big rock up, and propped my free rock underneath it. I groped my hands under and found the rope.

‘Ready?’ I said.

‘Do it,’ said Selkie.

I pulled hard on the rope, effectively dragging her up by

the chin. She screamed in pain and I stopped. 'Do it,' she shouted and I pulled again, hard, shredding my fingers against the rock. Selkie writhed and tried to wriggle backwards. The rope struggled and twisted towards me. I stopped to let Selkie breath.

'I don't want to strangle you,' I explained.

'Just do it,' she spluttered, coughing.

I pulled again. I heard Selkie fight for breath. And then suddenly the rope came loose as the rock it was tied around tapered. Quickly I pulled it back and off then end. Selkie slumped backwards and I held her by the shoulders and shuffled forwards so that I propped her up on my knees.

'Thank you,' she said, looking up at me.

'Come on,' I said. Dragging her to her feet and holding her whilst she still had her hands tied behind her back. 'Lets get out of here.' We stumbled out of the water and onto the beach where we both collapsed on to the shingle and I picked at the knot tying her hands until it finally came loose.

'With an name like Selkie,' I said, 'you should have just swum away.'

'I need my skin,' she said.

## The Lost And Found

We were not out of the woods yet. For a moment it was nice, just to lay there together, and to rest, but we were both shivering violently and we needed to warm up.

‘Don’t fall asleep,’ she said.

‘What,’ I answered groggily, falling asleep was exactly what I felt like doing.

‘Don’t fall asleep,’ she said, ‘get up.’

We dragged ourselves upwards and stood, leaning on each other, staring out at the blank wall of fog. ‘It’s flooded all across the valley,’ I said, ‘and I don’t know the way.’

‘I might,’ she said. We were both slurring our speech like drunks.

‘And I think I lost my car keys,’ I added.

She thought for a moment and said ‘this way,’ and, still propping each other up, we turned left and tramped down the beach.

‘Stay awake Mitchell,’ she commanded as I started to weave about.

‘It’s been a long day,’ I said. My speech was slow and slurred.

‘Did I ever tell you,’ she said, ‘that my great grandmother

on my father's side was a selkie.'

'Really?'

'Really. I'm one sixteenth seal. I even have two webbed toes. And, get this,' she said, 'I really like fish.'

'That's amazing.'

'Isn't it? You know we love our men of the land, us selkies, but if we ever find our skin we always return to the sea.'

I did not say anything and she slapped me in the face. 'Keep talking Mitchell,' she commanded, 'we've both got to keep talking.'

I could feel my mind swim, at moments her voice would seem there and close, but then quiet and distant, almost slipping past the point of hearing. The fog swirled around me making it impossible to focus on anything, it seemed I could see it whether or not my eyes were shut and I began to think that maybe it was not real, maybe I had cataracts and I was in hospital waiting for them to be operated on, hallucinating from the anesthetic, and I only felt cold because there was a draft blowing up the back of my hospital gown.

Selkie slapped me much harder than before. 'Talk to me,' she shouted, 'you're always full of questions, ask me something, ask me about magic.'

'Where are we going?' I asked.

'The coast-guard cottage,' she said, 'on top of the cliff.'

'That'll be fun,' I said, 'I feel just like a nice climb.'

'And on the other side of the river.'

'Oh.'

'So stay awake,' she said, 'ask me something.'

'When did you first do magic?' I asked.

'I don't remember, I've always done it.'

'Did your mother teach you?'

'Yes, her and dad.'

‘There are things I have to tell you.’

‘They can wait.’

‘Corner is okay.’

‘He is, thank god.’

‘He got hurt pretty bad, but he’ll live.’

‘Did he kill the druid?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

We stumbled on, feet sliding on the shingle, holding each other up. I put my foot straight into cold water and cried out in surprise. Selkie leaned down and looked. ‘It’s the river,’ she said.

‘Do we have to wade across it?’

‘Not here, further out.’

‘Further out?’

‘There’s a steep bank at the other side we need to wade out around.’

‘Have you done this before?’

‘No, but I know this place well.’

‘I’m worried it might be a bit deeper and faster flowing than you remember it.’

‘That is a possibility, yes.’

‘But you still think we should do it?’

‘How strong a swimmer are you?’

‘Ordinarily, pretty strong, but right now I’m feeling a bit out of sorts.’

‘Well I’m a bloody half-seal,’ she said, and waded in dragging me with her.

For a while the water only came up to our ankles, but the cold of it bit with a ferocity I had never known before. My feet went completely numb so that balancing on the shingle was a continual battle and as the fast moving water started to rise up to my knees it tugged at my legs, making it even

harder to remain upright.

Selkie led us into and down the river, the water gradually rose above the level of our knees, and then nearly up to our wastes, we were both gasping with cold and clinging tightly to each other with both hands. 'I didn't think,' she said, panting for air with each word, 'that it was going to be quite this deep.'

As if in answer the bottom suddenly dropped away, one of us slipped, falling backwards into the water dragging the other with them, and together we were sluiced down the river and out towards the sea, fetching up, I have no idea how much further downstream, on a shallow shingle ridge. We crawled forwards on our hands and knees, so cold I struggled to do anything but shiver, until the water was only about two feet deep again.

'Perhaps we should have crossed here,' I said.

Selkie did not respond, she had crawled with me the short distance but her eyes were shut and her breath was coming fitfully.

'Hey,' I shouted, 'wake up.'

She made no response. Without even thinking about it I slapped her hard across the cheek. Her eyes flickered open.

'Stand up,' I shouted, unsure whether I could even do it myself. Somehow, together, we managed to get up.

'Come on,' I shouted right into her face, 'tell me where to go.'

She tried to say something that I could not make out. I started to drag her against the current back in towards the shore. She walked when I pulled, but weakly, if she gave in I had no chance of even holding her up, let alone pulling her with me. 'Come on,' I shouted at her again, 'you're a bloody witch, do something. Do some fucking magic when it would actually be useful for once, do something to warm us up.'

Her eyes suddenly caught mine and she kissed me on the lips. It was only a peck but it worked. It was like the tiniest

ember, the weakest candle flame, but it was something where previously there had been nothing and suddenly the cold and the fatigue seemed just a touch distant. I felt her grip at me more tightly, and take her own weight again. We walked on, dragging each other.

‘We can do this,’ I said, ‘repeat after me, we can do this.’

‘We can do this,’ she said in a weak whisper.

‘We can do this.’

‘We can do this.’ A touch louder. We walked on, repeating the words like a mantra. We were walking on dry land before either of us realised, and then up a steep shingle slope, stumbling and scrambling, more on all fours than standing up. Eventually we rose up above the pall of fog that covered the land and began to be able to see again. There above us, not even that far, were two cottages. They were unlit and shut up for the night but to me they looked like a palace. We started to make out the cliffs at the far side of the valley, although the valley floor remained hidden beneath a thick veil of fog.

‘My god,’ I said, ‘I think the sun’s coming up.’ And there, beyond the other side of the valley, in the east, the first of the sunlight was boiling up through distant clouds.

‘It looks like fire on the horizon,’ said Selkie.

We reached the cottage and I let Selkie slump to the floor whilst I leant on the doorbell until it was answered.

‘There’s something coming,’ she said.

I do not remember anyone answering the door. I do not remember their initial anger, or their concern when they saw the state of us. I do not remember being stripped of my wet clothes, being towelled vigourously, being placed in front of a fire and fed brandy and hot chocolate. I do not remember anything more of that night.

I remember waking in unfamiliar pyjamas, in an unfamiliar room, in an unfamiliar bed, under so many

blankets it nearly felt as if someone were sitting on my chest. I remember my arm being numb and sore and looking across and finding it trapped under Selkie. I tried to retrieve it without waking her but failed. Her eyes opened slowly and calmly took in me, and the room, and everything else.

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Hello,’ I said, ‘where are we?’

She had to think about it. ‘Coast-guard cottage,’ she said at length.

‘Oh yes.’ I remembered that had been where we were heading, even if I did not remember anything about the place.

‘They must have thought we were a couple,’ she said, and then smiled and yawned and curled herself up.

Wearily, I sat up on the edge of the bed, and was immediately hit by a violent coughing fit. When it was over I pulled the topmost of the many blankets off the bed, wrapped it around myself, and padded out of the room and downstairs, coughing weakly.

I found them both in the kitchen, the moment they saw me they sat me down on a chair and bustled around me at a rate I could not keep up with. Soon I had a hot coffee in front of me with about eight spoonfuls of sugar and good heavy slug of brandy dissolved in it, a block of dark chocolate, and eggs and bacon being cooked. He, introduced as John, went back upstairs and came back down with a heavy sweater, a dressing gown, and a pair of slippers that were too big for me. She, introduced as Jenny, quizzed me endlessly despite John’s protests that I should be left alone. I croaked answers as best I could.

‘You’ll have caught your death of a cold,’ said John, ‘I’ll go get something from the medical cabinet.’

‘Ooh do you think you should?’ said Jenny.

‘I should think so, look at the state of him, the lad needs a lemsip.’



‘Shouldn’t we wait for the doctor?’

‘Oh I don’t think we need to bother.’

‘I think we should wait.’

‘I’m fine,’ I croaked, obviously a long way from fine.

‘We called the doctor,’ said Jenny, ‘he’ll be here later.’

‘What time is it?’ I asked.

‘Lunchtime,’ said John.

They were a sturdily built couple in their mid fifties or maybe well preserved sixties. They had the look of a life spent outdoors, he was ruggedly handsome with skin hard as leather that creased in thick folds when he smiled, she had a healthy windswept tan and strong hands. I wondered about the lack of children, they seemed like people who had children. Grown up and left I supposed.

A mound of bacon, eggs, and bread was placed in front of me and they both sat down to watch me eat. I did not realise, till the first mouthful, how incredibly hungry I was. I ate like a man possessed, answering their questions with my mouth full.

‘What happened to you?’ asked Jenny.

‘We got lost,’ I said, ‘turned around in the fog.’

‘What were you doing out there in the first place.’

I shrugged. ‘We wanted to go for a walk.’

They shook their heads and looked at each other, townies, they must have thought. ‘But how did you end up so wet?’

‘Crossing the river. It was pitch black and we couldn’t get up past the flood.’

‘Was that your car,’ asked John, ‘outside the car park.’

‘Probably was,’ I said, ‘I think I lost the keys.’

‘I thought so, they called us this morning to see if we knew who’s it might be. They’ve towed it into the car park and you can expect a fine through the post.’

I groaned, another one.

‘What about the rope?’ asked Jenny.

‘What rope?’

‘Your err, friend, had a rope around her neck.’

‘Oh that,’ I said shovelling a forkful of egg in to my mouth to give me time to think, ‘that’s just a piece of rope we found.’

I could not finish the meal; before I was halfway through a great swell of tiredness hit me and I had to apologise and give up before I collapsed face first into the plate. I struggled weakly back up the stairs, refusing help, and climbed back into the bed. Selkie groaned but did not wake. I curled up, and went to sleep looking at the back of her head.

I woke later to find the room full, Jenny and John standing close to the door, Selkie sitting up on the bed, and a doctor peering down the back of her throat. ‘Say ah,’ he said.

When he was done with Selkie he turned his attention to me, listening to me breathing, peering and prodding at me. ‘How long were you out there?’ he asked.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know,’ I said, ‘it was late when we arrived, a few hours maybe.’

‘And you were wet the whole time?’

‘A lot of it, we kept falling in the water.’

‘They were soaked through,’ said Jenny.

‘It’s a bit of a blur really,’ said Selkie, ‘it was all so dark.’

‘Well you’ve both caught a rotten cold,’ said the doctor, ‘and by the sound of it you are lucky to get away with that. If I were you I’d dose yourself up on paracetamol and go home to bed.’

‘Are they well enough to drive?’ asked Jenny, anxiously.

‘That’s up to them,’ said the doctor, ‘but if you take my advice, you’ll get someone to give you a lift.’

'I think I've lost my keys anyway.'

'I'll give you a lift,' said John, 'where are you from?'

'London,' said Selkie before I had a chance to answer.

John nodded. 'Very well,' said the doctor, 'look after yourselves.'

Jenny dashed off and reappeared with a handful of medicines and the doctor chose one. She ran downstairs and up again and we were force fed two yellow pills each with a glass of water. Jenny apparently very keen that we should take them in the doctor's presence. 'Are you sure you're well enough to travel?' she asked anxiously.

'You've been wonderful,' said Selkie, 'but we should get out of your hair.'

She ran clumping down the stairs again and brought up our clothes all freshly laundered and dried. 'There you go,' she said, and gingerly closed the door.

Selkie, like myself, was still sitting where the doctor had left her, looking dazed by all the activity. She stood up slowly and picked out her own clothes. 'Can you, err ...' she said.

'I'll face the other way.' I said, and got up and looked out the window. It was already dark again outside, but the window faced out to sea and I could see the lights of ships moving back and forth. It occurred to me that I should have phoned work and told them I was sick. Too late for that now. 'I've got a lot to tell you,' I said.

'Me too.'

'Your mother went off after the Black Goat.'

'My mother was down here?'

'Yes, I drove her down. We were following them but then I heard you call and we got split up before I could say anything.'

'Mother can look after herself,' said Selkie, not sounding all that sure of it.

'Where were they going?'

‘I don’t know.’

‘They said you might go back into the fold.’

‘I might have,’ she said, ‘but something kept me back. They knew it before I did. Okay I’m done.’

I turned around and she stood before me in the same clothes she had been wearing for the past three days, they were torn, and ripped, but clean.

‘I’ll wait downstairs,’ she said, and she left the room so I could change.

John drove us home. ‘We’ll go to my place,’ said Selkie as soon as we climbed in the car, so that was what we did.

## Back In The Fold

As we walked through the door Selkie said ‘we’re going to need chocolate, and an inexhaustible supply of tea.’

We padded about the kitchen together, both slightly feverish and entirely out of sorts, it was a two person job to make tea and find a packet of biscuits. Selkie disappeared upstairs and returned with a mountain of blankets which she took in to the lounge. I followed after like a lost puppy, carrying the tea. There were two sofas facing each other, neither of them were leather and both of them looked extremely comfortable.

‘We need to talk,’ said Selkie, laying herself down and drawing half the blanket supply around her.

‘You first,’ I said, and similarly set up shop of the second couch.

She nodded, drank her tea, reached out to take a biscuit from the packet, and began.

She had not been certain in her own mind if she had wanted me along or not. Sometimes your subconscious acts for you, sometimes you alter the world around you without realising it. Magic works in an undercurrent of human interactions with their surroundings, it is the subliminal

suggestion, the unconscious communication, it acts mainly on other people, but also on the physical world. Sometimes, because it is so interlinked with the inner workings of the mind, even the most experienced practitioner will do magic without realising. Selkie could not be sure if it was her that had caused me to be arrested whilst she made her escape, did she make the white van appear at that precise moment, did she have us run at the exact right time, did she draw the policeman's attention to me just after she had disappeared around the corner but while I was still in view. These coincidences could be just that, coincidences, or they could be something more, she simply did not know. It was more than she could feasibly have accomplished if she had set about to arrange it, but that proved nothing.

What was certain, was that she let me go easily. It had troubled her the entire drive down, could we both have gotten away together if she had not been in such a hurry to get away alone. Her motives were not clear. Even to herself.

The Black Goat, once you had been a part of it, became a part of you. The Black Goat was the source of all modern magic, before she had gone there Selkie had been little more than an ordinary girl who knew a few tricks and harmless charms, it was the Black Goat that had taught her the underlying mechanisms, that had given her the knowledge she needed to understand what she could do, and extend her own abilities. They would forever possess part of her, there was no way around that.

She had thought over all of this on the drive down. For a while she had shared the front seat of the van with the lead singer of the band and the bass player, but it was not a big van and after they were safely out of town she offered to move to the back. There she wedged herself in with the guitarist, the drummer, and the girl who played keyboards. They were all good kids, and tried their best to make her comfortable, and for a while she had tried to be sociable, but her mind was on other things.

She recognised the return of a mindset, being part of

the Black Goat is like being a giant among men. She could, she realised, terrify these poor kids if she wanted, she could have them crawling the walls with just a few well chosen words, in an enclosed environment like the back of that van she could make them do pretty much anything she wanted. The thought scared her, it came with an inherent contempt for people, their feelings, and ultimately, their lives. She was no more powerful than she had been the previous day, all that she could do, she had been able to do for years, but her proximity to the Black Goat was causing her to think about her abilities in a different way. As she grew nearer, she was not sure how much she could trust her own judgement.

She withdrew from the kids in the back of the van, scared by the way they made her feel. She pretended to sleep, hoping that she would actually sleep, but she could not.

Memories of her time in Scotland returned, things she had long forgotten, the near monastic silence, all needs and communication simply understood, the nights curled up together like foxes in a den, the sense that she was becoming wild, and with that transition life was becoming closer, the taste of the air sharper, the smell of the earth stronger. Civilisation was a wall that kept you from the world and they were breaking it down. Behind the wall it was dark, there were forces that scared her, but there was understanding, and understanding was the heady thrill of power. Civilisation was order and light, beyond the light there was chaos and darkness, but the darkness was stronger than the light, and one day the darkness would conquer and chaos would reign again. She remembered the sharp tang of hot blood. She remembered the thrill of the kill. She remembered the ecstasy of surrendering herself to higher powers.

In the end there had been a part of her that could not surrender, a part that was too strongly linked to her old life, something that always held her back. It had not been the attitude of the Black Goat which had really scared her, that

ambivalence to life and death, so much as it had been the dawning of the same attitude in herself. She was too strongly attached to a civilised notion of morality. But, riding back towards her old companions, she could not say which was correct. Was she really only attached to the warmth and comfort and safety of modern life, was the contract of society an illusion, was the law of the jungle the only real law and everything man had built on top of it a crumbling, unsteady, impossible edifice that must surely collapse. She hoped not, but struggling with her conscience in the back of that van, she did not know for sure.

The drive took nearly four hours. Despite her protestations that she would be fine the band would not let Selkie out onto the empty streets of Newhaven with nowhere to go in the middle of the night. In the end the girl who played keyboards took her in, commanded to be very quiet in case they woke the girl's parents, she was put up on the couch and given a suspiciously smelling sleeping bag which she only laid on top of her like a blanket.

There was enough of the Black Goat in her by then that she would not have minded sleeping rough, but still enough of Selkie left, that she took the option of a roof over her head when it was presented.

She let herself out early the following morning before anyone else was up. In the cold streets of Newhaven, still raining then, she navigated by gut instinct and trial and error to the town centre and eventually to a bus station. From there she got a bus out to somewhere near Seven Sisters, near as made no difference to the middle of nowhere.

What to do? She had no idea where the druids were, if they were even still in the South Downs, or what she was going to do if she found them. The bus had dropped her off roughly halfway along the ridge of seven cliffs, running towards Eastbourne in the east and the mouth of the Cuckmere in the west. It was morning, and despite the clouds and the rain she could not look east without being



slightly dazzled, for that reason only she headed west.

The path wound its way across the top of the cliffs, the view out to sea all but obscured by the rain. She walked for miles, meeting only one well wrapped up couple coming in the other direction. The couple were walking a large Alsatian, Selkie had no such excuse to be out in the wet.

After an hour or so she saw them. They were gathered at the bottom of the cliff by the sea. A less observant person, glancing quickly through the rain, would not even have recognised them as people, so much did they blend in to the environment. They were grey against the rock, green against the sea, brown against the mud, white against the surf, and black against the drying, dying kelp.

If Selkie had seen them there was every chance that they had seen Selkie, and if they had, no chance they had not recognised her. They ignored her though, perhaps more sure of her intentions than she was herself.

She walked on, and at the first opportunity took a slippery path down to the shore. As she retraced her steps beneath the cliffs and past rocky bluffs that jutted out towards the sea, she noticed she was frequently venturing well below the high water mark, and once the tide came in, there would be no way back.

She heard them before she saw them, a low chanting that echoed back and forth among the rocks. She did not recognise the chant, and could not guess why it needed to be chanted in that place. She walked forwards with a confident step, keeping herself in obvious view; there was not a hope of sneaking up on the druids, it was better to act like she had nothing to hide.

Eventually she rounded a monolithic outcrop of sheer rock and saw them gathered about in a semicircle at the edge of the water. There were about two dozen in total, they were all astonishingly bedraggled, long haired and dirty, wearing torn scraps of loose animal skin clothing, kneeling and standing, oblivious to the driving rain, the freezing surf, or Selkie looking on. She had seen them before of course,

and their appearance was no surprise to her, but to see them looking so wild so close to towns, bus stops, couples walking their dogs, was still such an incongruous sight Selkie stopped for a moment to just look. What would, to her, have looked quite natural in the highlands of Scotland, seemed weird and threatening on the south coast.

She walked forwards slowly and reverently, not wanting to interrupt a ritual she did not understand. She looked for a druid she recognised among the dirt covered faces, but even with the memory of her time with them rushing back it was hard to recall individuals, the Black Goat were not about individuals, they were about the sect as a whole, about the good of the pack. Nevertheless, a few names started to come to her, there was Tai, who she saw kneeling with her hands in the water, Mainchenn, who stood in the middle of the circle and seemed to be leading the chant, and Figol, crouching just half a step back from the rest and growling the chant low, and always near him, Dalgn. Selkie stopped a respectful distance from the circle, she crouched down herself and watched them, she tried to decipher the chant but it was in no language she recognised, let alone understood.

The chant lasted another twenty minutes, long enough for Selkie to start to feel herself hypnotised by the rhythm. Her mind wandered with the words, over the water, flying like a seagull low across the waves. She felt the inkling of something out beyond the horizon, something waiting, something dangerous, something stirring now for the first time in centuries. The chant ended just as she was on the verge of seeing it, whatever it was.

Mainchenn walked over to her, stepping lightly across the jagged rocks. 'Selkie,' he said in a soft velvet voice, drawing the sound out like a song, or a cat's purr, 'you've come back to us.'

Selkie bowed her head once, 'Mainchenn,' she said.

'It has been a long time,' said the druid, 'many here you will not know.'

'There is much that I do not know,' she answered.

Mainchenn laughed, 'remember,' he said, 'that is what you said to me the first time we met.'

Selkie forced a thin smile. 'I remember,' she said.

'But now, you refer to different things, a different kind of knowledge.'

She nodded.

'We shall see,' said the druid, 'what you truly learned last time you were with us, and what you will learn this time.' He turned and walked back to the others, Selkie followed.

'Tai,' she said to the first druid she recognised, 'it is good to see you.'

The druid called Tai looked her up and down, she was a woman Selkie had known from both before and during the Black Goat. They were about the same age, but after a decade spent living wild Tai could easily have been twice as old. Selkie was taken aback by how much she had changed, her skin was craggy and hard, frequently scarred, and her eyes had grown small and suspicious, they darted like minnows in a pool, never settling long on any one thing.

'Selkie,' she said, 'have you come back?'

'Ay,' said another druid, stepping forwards, 'have you returned to us?' It was Figol, with Dalgn and others Selkie did not recognise lurking behind.

The question was dangerous, a yes might imply a commitment she was not ready to make and did not understand, a no might be seen as hostile, a maybe might be seen as a no.

'It has been a long time,' she said, 'since you have come south.'

'There had been no cause till now,' said Figol.

'What cause is there now?' she asked.

Figol looked at her and laughed. 'You have dulled in your comfort,' he said, 'have you not heard the wind cry their name, have you not heard the rain whisper that they are

approaching, have you not seen the writing on the stones at your feet.'

Selkie looked down to see nothing more than rocks, Figol and the other burst out laughing.

'My hearing is not so keen as it was,' she admitted, 'I have heard nothing in the rain.'

'Yet you come and seek us out.'

'The rain does not speak to me any more,' she said, 'but I can still tell when it something to say.' She held out her hand with the palm flat so that the rain collected in it, and tilted her face upwards so that the rain hit it and ran down over her eyes. She listened, there was whispering, there was meaning there she could not decipher, a language she had once understood. 'It talks of you,' she said.

Figol smiled. 'It does,' he said.

Selkie listened on, the sense of how to do this coming slowly back to her. The sensation was intoxicating, the rain was ancient beyond memory, wise beyond the comprehension of man. She understood fragments of what it told, slivers of information that seemed to creep, unbidden, into her mind. She shivered, not with the cold but with excitement. She parted her lips, tasting the rain and allowing the rain to taste her. She wondered how she could have left this, how much more she could do, how much more she understood, merely through being in the presence of other druids. There was no doubt in her mind, she was one of them, her entire life since leaving them, eight years of it, had been a sham. She was a druid, she was part of the Black Goat.

She looked back down, at Figol, Tai, Dalgán and the others, many she did not know the names of, but knew, they were all her brothers and sisters. Figol smiled broadly, he knew what she was thinking. 'It says something is coming,' she said, 'but it does not say what.' Selkie lowered her head and dropped her arm back to her side. She stood differently than before, she no longer cowered from the

rain, she stood comfortably and still, letting the rain wash over her, run down her lank hair, over her face, under the seams of her clothes.

'You are right,' said Figol, 'but there is more.'

'Tell me,' she said.

'Have you come back to us?'

'Yes,' she said, and she meant it.

The druid smiled, they could not be lied to, they knew better than she did that she had returned. Tai reached out and stroked her cheek, Selkie responded in kind. The other druids gathered around and touched her, just resting hands on her shoulders, stroking her arms. The touches were brief and light, not sensuous, or even friendly, but comfortable, the comfort of feeling the warmth of another human being. They were taking as much as they were giving, the solace of other life, it was communication of the oldest kind, saying no more than that we too, are. Wordlessly, she was accepted back in to the fold.



## The Offering

The druids curled close together under the cliff, they curled up together, sharing their warmth, looking out to sea. None of them slept, they all watched with expectant, unblinking, eyes.

'They are waking,' explained Mainchenn to Selkie, 'we must wait till the time is right.'

Selkie looked out to sea, she felt half blind, half death, slow and stupid. She was aware that there were things to be seen, things that were evident to those who understood, but she could still not see them, could still not understand. The sensation was agony, to be on the verge of something yet unable to make the final leap. In some ways ignorance is preferable to a little knowledge, but the little knowledge was thrilling, she felt separate from the human race, raised above them. She had an invisible power surging through her, she looked the same but she was no longer an ordinary person, she was something else, something more primitive, something stronger, something closer to the real workings of the universe. She was a druid.

'Why are you doing this?' she asked Mainchenn, curled up together, her arm resting over his leg.

'Long ago,' he said, 'before you were even born, we made a bargain for land of our own.'

'The Black Goat made a bargain with other men?' she said.

'Black Goat is just a name, it and anything it embodies mean nothing. All that matters is those of us here now, and all that mattered then was those there then. We needed a place of our own, wild land to carry out our research, somewhere we would not be disturbed, somewhere a long way from civilisation.'

'So you made a deal?'

'Yes.'

'And what did you offer?'

'We were asked to make this country great again, to restore it to its former glory.'

'You could do this?'

'Not then, no, but we have learned much since and now we are ready to fulfil our side of the bargain.'

'What will you do?'

'We will wake the dragon.'

'The dragon lives beyond the sea?'

'No, the dragon sleeps beneath the earth, beneath the land he will inherit. He does not stir, and only that which we have summoned will wake him.'

'What have you summoned?'

'An enemy he will recognise.'

Selkie stretched and yawned, she was no longer curious, all would be revealed in time. The druids lay there for hours, they watched the tide roll slowly in, trapping them briefly in their enclave but never reaching them. As it retreated some stirred and picked seaweed, limpets and small crabs from the rocks to eat. Selkie did not move, despite not having eaten for hours she was not hungry.

Mainchenn stirred sleepily, stretched and stood up, he looked at the sea slowly retreating, and over in the west the sun setting somewhere behind the ever present rain clouds.



He went down to the sea and knelt in the surf, letting the water wash over his hands, a couple of the druids went with him. Selkie followed.

'They are not coming,' he said. The druids nodded and turned back. 'They do not wake,' Mainchenn called to the others underneath the cliff. The druids lazily disentangled themselves from each other and filed down to the water's edge where they all seemed to come to the same conclusion, they looked wistfully out to sea or knelt down in the surf trying to ask it what was wrong.

Figol waded out in to the water till it came up to his waste. He stalked back and forth, up and down the beach, and then seemed to find a spot suitable for his purpose where he waited, as still and as unyielding to the waves as any of the rocks he stood amongst. The other druids watched him, waiting, and after a couple of minutes, with one quick movement he disappeared under the water. He emerged a moment later holding a wriggling fish.

He waded back to the shore, held the fish over a roughly flat rock, dug his thumbs into its belly and split it open spilling blood and entrails over the rock. Figol discarded the fish and spread the entrails about on the rock with the flat of his hand, and then examined them, picking through them and sniffing at them.

'They require an offering,' he said, and wiped the blood and gore off his hands onto his soaking clothes. The rain fell hard on the rock and swilled the blood away. Another of the druids picked up the discarded, still writhing remains of the fish, and began to pick it apart and eat it.

'Then,' said Mainchenn, 'we shall give them one.'

In single file the druids walked along the shore underneath the towering cliffs, Selkie fell into step, walking silently near the back. She barely even noticed at the time, but she was walking over the same ground with far greater ease than she had that morning, she stepped now with a fluid grace, hopping nimbly from rock to rock, never slipping on the wet stone.

Eventually they reached the end of the cliffs, and the valley from which the flooded Cuckmere emptied itself into the sea. The sun had set, and the valley was shrouded in absolute darkness, but to the druids this meant little, the river sang to them, the flooded plains called to them, the stones on the shore spoke with every footfall. They could not see in the dark, but the dark saw for them.

Across the valley, they could see the light of the coast-guard cottage floating in the darkness. Mainchenn pointed at it, 'there,' he said.

The druids gathered around. 'I'll go,' said Figal. Dalgan stepped up behind him, not saying anything but obviously ready to accompany Figal.

'No,' said Mainchenn, 'they may be armed.'

'Then we all go,' said Figal.

Mainchenn thought for a moment, and then said 'I have a better idea.' He turned and looked at Selkie, 'you'd still pass,' he said, 'draw them out.'

'I do not understand,' said Selkie.

'You still look enough like one of them that they would trust you, go to the house, knock on the door, find out who is there, and get them all to come outside.'

'How?'

The druid laughed, 'are you so far gone you need to ask,' he said. He was right, it would be child's play for Selkie to lure the occupants out of the house. A little suggestion, or simply a made up story that required their help with perhaps a few tears for good measure.

'What then?' she asked.

'They will be offered.'

'To whom?'

'To the sea.'

'You will drown them?'

'We will leave them to the tide, the sea will do what it

will.'

Once, when Selkie was first a part of the Black Goat, there was a time when she had been close to the point at which it would mean nothing to kill, at which life and death became just a small part of the larger workings of the universe. But now, just back with them for one day, she was nowhere near that point. There was never a doubt, she knew it and the druids knew it, from the moment they asked the question. Selkie said nothing, but looked behind her to see Dalgn and Tai and others waiting, a broad grin spread across Mainchenn's face, Figal took a step towards her.

'So,' said Mainchenn, 'you are not returned to us after all.'

For a moment she considered running but it would not have done any good. She felt hands take hold of her from behind. One set of steely strong fingers clamped over her mouth preventing her screaming. In eerie silence she was lifted off her feet and carried down towards the sea.

Tai talked to her as they walked. 'You could have come back Selkie,' she said, 'we would have taken you in. You were always the strongest of us, stronger than Mainchenn and Mog Ruith at times, far stronger than me. But you could never let go entirely and that always held you back. Perhaps,' she mused, 'it was the civilisation in you that made you strong, perhaps you remained tapped in to some vein that the rest of us left behind.' She held Selkie's hand, not the way the others held her, as a piece of meat to be carried, not even as she had earlier, taking comfort in the warmth of another's flesh, but as a friend, a real civilised friend. 'It is a shame,' she said, 'but it has to be, if you cannot surrender yourself totally you will never attain your full potential, you will remain part person, part druid, part pampered child. You are no use to us like that.'

'But,' said Figol, who held his hand over Selkie's mouth, 'you make a fine offering.'

'Better even,' said Mainchenn, 'because you are ours to give, and though you have no use to us, you have potential. And giving away potential is like giving away a child.'

Selkie only half listened to them talk. She panicked, briefly, the speed of her transition away from the Black Goat and back to her old self shocked her a bit. She said later, it was a bit like waking from a dream of flying and realising it was only a dream. She regained her composure soon, she had never been one to worry about things that she had no power over, and now it was certain she was to be offered to the sea, she put her mind to the task of working out how she might survive. She had one cause for hope, the words 'we will leave them to the tide.'

She told me, not then, but much later, that she thought of me first. There were ways of summoning people, but, like all magic, they required ritual, ritual she had no way of performing. But magic was not ritual at heart, it was people, and if she was strong enough, ritual was not necessary.

The strength of the Black Goat still ran within her, if she could summon it, she could do away with the ritual. Everything the Black Goat were, the source of their power, was their connection with the earth, their very primitiveness. She had to let go, to survive she had to give up her twenty-first century morality, she had to accept that life was nothing more than survival, that it lasted till death, that there was nothing beyond it except for other lives, and other deaths, that it did not matter, it had no purpose, it had no reason, and it had no value. To accept this was power. If she had done it earlier, she would have lured Jenny and John from the coastguard cottage to their murder, instead she had to accept her own death, in order to save her own life she had to realise it had no value.

So it was, that though they gave her no chance to demonstrate it, the Black Goat sect carried her willingly to her sacrifice. They tied her to a rock well below the tide mark and began chanting. Immediately the rain stopped. They chanted for hours, until the tide was nearly upon her.

Unaware that their victim had, in their hands, become more powerful than they imagined. Without ritual, without a word, without a single outward sign, Selkie summoned me to her rescue.



# The Cure for the Common Cold

We talked long into the night, and then slept on our respective sofas, and woke and talked some more. Selkie told me her story and I told her about Mog Ruith, and Johannes in the cells, and Mister Cholderton and Mister Bauer, about John Weatherby and Lord Angus Lepusstrom and the whole office of the Witch Finder General, and about her mother and our night time exploits on the South Downs, I even told her about the flat-mate reinventing the spork.

We spent most of our time wrapped up warm under our respective blankets, both coughing like twenty-a-day smokers, and the following morning streaming with snot and horrible. When we needed a meal, or more often, tea, we both went together and padded about slightly dazed, only able to perform any action more complicated than boiling a kettle as a team. In retrospect, and only in retrospect, it was very pleasant. At the time it was rotten.

At some point I phoned work and called in sick, explaining that I had been caught out at night on the South Downs after getting lost on a walking trip and had been in no state to call on Monday and I was very sorry. Selkie laughed, and told me that a bigger lie would have been

simpler, and I explained that I was not really comfortable with lying and it was easier for me to get in as much truth as possible.

Later, near lunchtime, we reached the point where we had explained everything to each other up till the moment where I had found her tied to the rock, and Selkie had explained that, as soon as the druids had left her to her fate, and she had felt the first touch of the cold water, her ambivalence to her own death had vanished. Of course, by then it had served its purpose.

'So,' I said, 'do we have any idea what they were up to, what they were summoning, and what or who the dragon is.'

'What did my mother say?' asked Selkie.

'She was evasive on the subject.'

Selkie thought for a moment. 'Did she say she knew?' she asked.

'She said maybe.'

'Which means yes.'

'I figured it probably did, either yes but I'm not certain, or yes but I don't want to tell you.'

'Probably both.'

I nodded, and took another sip from the latest cup of strong sweet tea. 'So,' I said, 'what does it mean?'

'The dragon,' said Selkie, 'is almost certainly King Arthur.'

'Really?'

'Arthur Pendragon, son of Uther Pendragon. Sleeps beneath the earth and will return to make England great again.'

'Of course,' I said, 'but what about the thing coming, the enemy he will recognise.'

'I don't know,' she said, 'his enemies in the stories were Mordred and Morgan the Fey and the green giant, things



like that.'

'Wasn't there a bore with spines, or a giant hedgehog or something.'

'I'm don't really know the legend that well,' she said.

'I read it as a kid,' I said.

We lay back for a bit, both trying to remember what we could. We sniffed, and sneezed, and coughed, and generally felt rubbish.

'The operative word,' I said, 'is legend. If it was based on truth then all well and good, but if it was just a story it surely cannot be summoned from over the horizon.' I looked at her for confirmation.

'Okay,' she said, unsure, 'but once you accept King Arthur was real, what else do you accept.'

'Well,' I said, 'if Sir Gawain had really found the holy grail there would have been no need to write the DaVinci code.'

'And some would say that was reason enough to quest for it.'

I laughed, and then burst out in a fit of coughing, which set Selkie laughing, and then coughing herself, which made me laugh more. When we had both recovered, I asked if it was lunchtime yet.

'Could be,' she said, 'what do you fancy?'

'What have you got?'

'She shrugged. 'Soup,' she suggested.

'Soup is good.'

Together we emptied a tin of tomato soup into a pan and set it on the stove. Selkie stirred it while I made yet more tea.

'What about your mother?' I asked, 'shouldn't she have got in touch by now?'

'Ah,' said Selkie, 'about that.'

'Yes.'

'Well considering how close I came to going back to the sect, Mother has almost certainly gone back.'

'She was one too?'

'I told you,' she said, 'the Black Goat is the source of all modern magic. Anyone who knows anything either is or was a member.'

'And this fact was conveniently avoided earlier.'

'Well, it's a bit different with mother.'

'Different how?'

'She didn't leave of her own accord.'

'Oh,' I said.

'This was all a long time ago,' said Selkie, 'but mum was rescued from the Black Goat by my father.'

The kettle boiled and I went about the business of making two mugs of tea.

'There's another thing,' she said sheepishly.

'What's that?'

'My father, is Angus Lepusstrom.'

'You kept that quiet.'

'Yeah, it's sort of awkward.'

'Awkward how?'

'It's a long story.'

I took two bowls from the cupboard and placed them on the table where Selkie filled them each with soup. I placed two spoons and two mugs of tea next to them. We sat down across from each other and ate.

'Mum and dad first met through the hippy druid stone circle scene,' she said, 'around about the same time she met Stokes.' She paused at Stokes' name. 'I still can't quite believe he's gone,' she said.

I put a hand on her shoulder and said 'I know.' She patted my hand and pushed it away.

'Anyway,' she continued, 'a lot of this you heard, the

Black Goat turned up and did not make themselves very popular but did make themselves very interesting to certain people, people who were serious about magic, which mum and dad both were. At that time it was actually a lot clearer that the Black Goat were bad news, because they were around, doing stuff, instead of hiding up in Scotland. Which meant that a lot of people would never even consider having anything to do with them. Including mum and dad. Apparently they were mostly made up of nutty Germans and Swedes at the time. The Black Goat I mean, not mum and dad.'

I smiled and blew on a spoonful of hot soup. 'Your mother said that Angus Lepusstrom started working for the government,' I said.

'Yes,' she said, 'he had contacts in that area and was basically poached for the civil service. He didn't tell anybody he was working for the witch finder general. They all just thought he had sold out to be a suit.'

'So the office of the witch finder general, what did they do?'

'At the time it was run by another man who's name I don't know. They had noticed the emergence of the Black Goat and were probably more worried about it than anyone else, because of course, when they saw people attempting magic they knew from their records that it was potentially dangerous.'

'So they hired your father, Lord Lepusstrom?'

'Just Angus Lepusstrom at the time, yes. Someone knew someone who knew someone who knew dad, I don't know how they persuaded him, but knowing dad I doubt it took much more than a decent pay cheque and a chance to be someone important in the corridors of power, dad loves all that stuff.'

'So were he and your mother together at this time?'

'I don't know. I get the impression it was a bit on again off again, they don't tell me the gory details.'

'For obvious reasons.'

'Like I'd run a mile, yes. It's possible it was a bit free love and that, it was the sixties.'

'That's not the sort of thing anyone needs to know about their parents.'

'Quite. Anyway dad became a sort of a paranormal spy or whatever it was he did, and mum remained a hippy and they lost touch for a few years, until dad needed someone to go undercover in the Black Goat and find out what they were up to.'

'So he asked your mother.'

'Exactly. I don't know how he persuaded her, it's possible she didn't take much persuading, I gather the Black Goat operated on the periphery of what everyone else was doing anyway, there was a lot more cross over back then, so it's possible mum was a sort of part time member already.'

'She hasn't told you.'

'She keeps it vague, which is something she is very good at doing.'

'I noticed.'

'I bet. Anyway she joins the Black Goat, and for a while she reports back to my father everything they do, and then she stops.'

'What happened?'

'She went native, for want of a better phrase, she decided that she owed her loyalty to the Black Goat more than anything or anyone else.'

'But she left at some point, like you did.'

'No. Not like me at all. Actually there are not that many people who leave the Black Goat voluntarily, they have a habit of chucking people out who can't hack it, and once they're out they tend to see the error of their ways, but I'm one of the few who upped and left of their own accord.'

I wanted to say something like I was proud of her, but I could not find a way of saying it that did not sound

unctuous and cringe-worthy. Instead I said 'I'm glad you did.'

Selkie gave me a tiny smile and continued. 'Mum was in for quite a few years,' she said, 'but like I said, they weren't isolated at the time and all her old friends still ran into her a lot. Eventually Stokes got worried about her, Stokes always had a bit of a thing for her, and he found dad and told him in no uncertain terms that he should get her out. Dad had a bit of a thing for her too of course, so that's what he did.'

'Get her out how?'

'He basically had her abducted and taken to some secret MI5 deprogramming facility, because as far as the government was concerned she was essentially a spy who turned. And then shortly after that they were married. Mum says he brainwashed her and she was weak and clung to him because he was the only friendly face there, dad, when he actually talks about it, says it was love.'

'It didn't last long I take it.'

'About long enough to have me and then that was it.'

I tipped up the soup bowl in order to get the last of it on my spoon. 'And then,' I said, 'at some point your father makes a bargain with the Black Goat and gifts them their own land in Scotland.'

'Yes,' said Selkie, 'I didn't know about that.'

'I think perhaps now would be a good time to call and ask him about it.'

She nodded her head reluctantly. 'Brilliant, not only do I have a cold but I have to explain to my dad that I went back to the Black Goat.'

'I think he already knows that.'

'That just makes it worse, besides he doesn't know mum went back.' She looked sullenly into her empty soup bowl. 'I suppose we could try and do something about the cold,' she said.

'Like what?'

'Like a ritual.'

'Hold on, we've been laying about all day feeling terrible and you can just cure a cold by magic.'

'Not magic,' she said, 'and not a cure. But a good placebo might help.'

'A good placebo?'

'Yeah, you know, like a sugar pill or something.'

'I know what a placebo is, I'm just surprised at the concept of a good one.'

'Oh some placebos are better than others,' she said, 'placebos work much better when they are administered by injection for instance.'

'But isn't the whole point of a placebo that you don't know it's a placebo.'

'Absolutely nothing to do with it,' she said, 'it's a whole different part of the mind we are trying to fool.' She stood up, animated and excited at the prospect, and filled the kettle. 'We'll make an infusion,' she said, 'you go to the spice rack and pick out anything you think might help cure a cold.'

'Chilli,' I said, standing up with a lot less enthusiasm, 'chilli cures pretty much anything.'

'That's the idea,' she said, 'I've got some of the real stuff in my room.' She disappeared and I picked out various jars of herbs and spices. She returned moments later sporting a girlish grin and an armful of glass jars. 'Coltsfoot,' she said, placing them on the table, 'Bladderwrack, Hyssop, Lady's Mantle, Dog Rose, and Mugwort.' She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small glass medicine bottle.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Olbas oil,' she said.

The kettle boiled and Selkie, apparently largely cured at the prospect of making the cure, poured the water into a large glass bowl and then started adding a pinch of all the spices I had chosen. I examined her own bottles. 'Where do

you get this stuff?' I asked.

'Health food shops,' she said, 'some of it I collect myself.'

'Does it actually work.'

'Nah,' she said, 'it's just window dressing, all flour and hats, but it's fun you know, I like having them, some girls collect fluffy toys.'

She added a few drops of the Olbas oil and then started going through her own herbs, reverently measuring out a little of each. 'This is cool,' she said, 'sometimes I really wish I had a cauldron.'

'I'll get you one for Christmas.'

'You bloody dare.'

'There,' she said, and then 'no ... wait,' and she pulled a bottle of brandy from a cupboard and added a healthy slug. She stirred the concoction with a metal spoon and announced proudly that it was done.

'Now what?' I said.

'We do what Clinton did not,' she said, 'we inhale.' She picked the bowl up with both hands and carried it to the table, then she found a tea towel, stuck her head under it over the bowl and breathed in deeply. 'Oh yeah,' she said. She passed me the tea towel. I took it cautiously, as if it might explode, and looked at her to see if she was really serious about this. She giggled.

I took a deep breath of the foul smelling mixture. I'll say this for it. It sure as hell cleared my sinuses.

Selkie took it back and took another few breaths. 'It works,' she announced proudly, 'I feel much better.'

'You know what that means,' I said.

'What?'

'You have to ring your dad now.'





## The Wolf

Less than an hour after the phone call a car arrived to take us to Whitehall. Selkie had managed to find some clean socks that fit me, god knows where from, but other than that I was still wearing the clothes I had all but ruined mucking about on the south coast. Apparently, after just sitting around for hours before calling anyone, there was no time for me to go home and change. I did have to grudgingly admit though, as we climbed into the back of the car, that I felt a lot better after Selkie's infusion.

We were taken to the same underground car park I remembered, and then up the same lift to the same office. The same man, John Weatherby, sat at the same desk. On the sofa by the door sat a different man, he was older, and immaculately turned out in a suit and bow tie, there was no need to ask who he was, the moment Selkie saw him she cried 'daddy' and leapt into his arms.

Affectionate family greetings completed Lord Angus Lepusstrom shook my hand in a vice like grip. 'And you,' he said, 'must be the Mitchell Wallingford I've heard so much about.'

'Must I?' I said.

'I understand I owe you a debt of thanks for saving my daughter's life.'

'To hear Selkie tell it,' I said, 'I was nothing but a pawn in her own master plan to save herself.'

Selkie punched me playfully in the arm. Her father put a hand protectively on her shoulder and she snuggled backwards into him.

'So,' he said, 'I suppose you are worried about your mother.'

'A bit,' said Selkie.

'Well we have her under observation,' he said, 'she seems to be part of the Black Goat once more, and they seem to be heading towards the east coast.'

'How?' I asked.

'They stole a bus.'

'They stole a what?' I said.

'A bus, luckily they didn't hurt anybody in the process but it was rather an amateurish move for them. I've had to intervene to keep the police at bay. We're tracking them by helicopter right now.'

'I figured they just walked everywhere.'

'Not if they're in a hurry.'

'What's on the east coast?' I asked.

'Who knows,' he said, and then steered Selkie down on to the sofa with him. I sat down at the chair in front of the desk, nodding to Weatherby as I did.

'Bauer and Cholderton?' I asked.

'In the helicopter,' Weatherby confirmed.

'So,' I said to Lord Lepusstrom, 'I gather this is all your mess.'

'Yes,' he said wearily, 'in my defence it was a very long time ago that I made the deal, and I only asked them to make Britain great again, I certainly did not expect them to raise any dead kings.'

'What did you expect?'

'Well it was the seventies,' he said, 'so I did think they had fulfilled their part when Maggie got elected.'

I looked at him, but no words came to mind to adequately express what I was thinking.

'Joke,' he said holding his hands up defensively, 'I suppose you're another Guardian reading liberal like my daughter.'

'Hey,' said Selkie, 'I read the Telegraph.'

'Only to annoy your mother.'

She shrugged and said 'true.'

'Actually,' I said, 'I buy the Independent more often than anything else.'

'Worse,' said Lord Lepusstrom, 'a tabloid.'

'So,' I said, 'what do we do?'

'We wait,' he answered.

And so we waited, and talked. Lord Lepusstrom, or Angus as he insisted I call him, was good company. I got the impression of a professional conversationalist, a man who made his living putting other people at their ease. It turned out the OWFG, as he called it, took up very little of his time, mostly he worked for a Lords committee on European trade or some such thing. 'I'm supposedly retired,' he said, 'but somehow I actually seem to work more.'

'I gather you and Weatherby had a run in with the great Mog Ruith,' he said at one point.

'Yes,' I said, trying to convey through a look just how much fun the encounter had not been.

'His real name was Neil Peacock,' said Angus, 'before becoming a druid he used to sell women's underwear.'

'You're kidding?'

'No, worked as a salesman.'

'That's hard to imagine.'

'He has changed a bit, but not as much as you might

think. I gather you did pretty well with him.'

'I was a mess,' I said. 'I couldn't remember a thing about it.'

'Yes, he was always good at that. Poor old John here was in a right state.'

'Your wife, sorry your ex-wife had to cure me.'

'Actually we're still married.'

'You are.'

'We never got around to the formalities,' he said.

I looked at Selkie, who seemed bored by the whole conversation. 'I thought the authorities didn't know his real name,' I said, 'Mog Ruith I mean.'

'Officially,' said Angus, 'we don't.'

At that moment the telephone rang. Weatherby picked it up, said a few quick words, and then put it down. 'They've stopped near Woodbridge,' he said.

'Woodbridge,' said Angus, 'what the hell's near Woodbridge.'

Weatherby and I shrugged. 'Sutton Hoo,' said Selkie.

Angus looked at her. 'Is Sutton Hoo important?' he asked.

'It might be,' she said, 'if you're trying to raise an Anglo Saxon king from the dead.'

'Good point,' he said, 'there's a helicopter standing by on the roof, we should be there in an hour or so. Give them a bell Weatherby, tell them to warm it up.' He held the door open and led the rest of us out. 'This is exciting,' he said, 'terribly James Bond.'

In the helicopter I said 'it can't be that bad can it, King Arthur waking I mean, isn't that supposed to be a good thing.'

'That all rather depends,' said Angus. 'There seems to be a good chance they will reanimate an unstoppable zombie Anglo Saxon war leader, in which case we can only hope

that he finds the country to his liking and goes back to sleep, because I'm not quite sure what we'd be able to do about it if he did not.'

I looked out of the window and thought about that. Selkie reached across and tapped me on the shoulder. 'Hey,' she said, 'you flew all the way to Scotland in one of these?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Cool.'

It was dark again by the time we arrived, next to an identical helicopter on a remote deserted airfield. A thick fog swirled around in the down-draught from the rotors.

'Is it magical?' Shouted Angus to his daughter over the sound of the helicopter slowly winding down.

'Is what magical?'

'The fog.'

'What's the difference?'

'Was it created by magical means?'

'It's fog,' she said, 'I don't know how it's normally created.'

'Water condenses when air cools,' I said. They both looked at me as if I was mad. Then Selkie shot me an amused smile.

I recognised Bauer waiting by a car holding the door open, and said hello. 'Blimey,' he replied, 'it's all four of you.'

'Did you know,' I said, 'that they were father and daughter?'

'On general principle Mister Wallingford,' he replied, 'I'm not allowed to tell you anything, and just to make sure I don't, they don't tell me anything.'

Lord Lepusstrom got in the front passenger seat and the rest of us climbed in the back. 'You must have known,' I said to Weatherby.

'I'm afraid I swore him to secrecy,' said Angus, 'and besides, you were an unknown quantity at the time and that was definitely not the sort of information we could afford to tell anyone.'

We drove slowly through narrow country lanes, the car's headlights picking up little but a swirling corridor of dense fog. 'They've disappeared into a forest by the river,' explained Bauer, 'Choderton's there with some special forces guys we brought in, they're under instructions to watch the forest but not to go in.'

'What's coming is already coming,' said Selkie, 'they're probably just here to greet it.'

'Do we have any idea what this thing is?' asked Angus.

I shook my head. 'Something from the sea,' said Selkie, 'something that's been waiting.'

'How near to Sutton Hoo are they?' asked Angus.

'Who-what?' said Bauer.

'Sutton Hoo, the ancient burial mounds.'

'History was never really my thing,' said Bauer, 'where is it?'

Angus turned around to look at his daughter, who just shrugged. 'Somewhere near here,' he said, 'have you got a map.'

Bauer handed Angus a road atlas who handed it straight to Weatherby. 'Where are the Black Goat?' asked Angus.

'East bank of the Deben,' said Bauer, 'about ten miles down from Woodbridge.'

'There's nothing there,' said Weatherby.

'But is it near Sutton Hoo?' asked Angus.

'Within a few miles,' said Weatherby, 'they're both on the eastern side of the river.'

'Good enough,' said Angus, 'take us there Mister Bauer.'

'Yes sir,' said Bauer and drove on, soon he spotted a brown national trust sign for Sutton Hoo bearing the stylised

design of the carved dragon head of an Anglo Saxon long boat. 'Oh I know the place,' said Bauer, 'it's that Viking burial mound.'

'No,' said Angus, 'it's not a Viking ...' then he stopped talking.

'What enemy,' said Selkie slowly, 'would an Anglo Saxon king recognise.'

The car turned into the Sutton Hoo National Trust site and pulled up before the locked gate to the car park. We left the car and climbed over the gate in a sort of collective daze, walking a little way in to the site. Our long shadows cast by the bone white glow of the car headlights moved like ancient ghosts over the burial mounds as the fog curled soft fingers around us.

'Selkie,' said Angus, 'how many dead Vikings do you suppose there are underneath the sea.'

'Quite a lot,' said Selkie.

'You know,' I said, 'looking at the grass covered hemisphere of earth in front of me, 'if the occupant of one of these graves is going to rise, I'd rather not be around to see it.'

'Selkie,' said Angus again, 'do we know any way to stop that happening.'

'A binding maybe,' she said, 'I'd rather try stopping the Vikings. We don't even know for sure that this is where he's buried - could be coincidence.'

We looked out towards where fog concealed the dark river that slopped lazily at the mud banks, oozing towards the sea fat with the previous weeks rainfall.

Angus said 'do we even understand how they called them here?'

'We have one really good clue,' said Selkie, 'they required an offering, but not a sacrifice.'

'How do you mean?'

'I was offered,' she said, 'but was not killed. Yet they are

still coming.'

'That's true,' he said, 'you got away. Maybe they are not coming.'

'They are coming,' said Selkie, 'they are very close.'

'Oh,' he said.

'I don't understand,' I said, 'what does that tell us?'

'Mainchenn thought they were offering me to the sea in order to release the Vikings,' she said, 'but the sea did not take me. In fact they were offering me to the Vikings. They required a bribe to come, they are at peace now, they have no argument with Britain, no reason to leave Valhalla.'

'So?'

'We give them me, if I go willingly then they leave without a fight and nobody wakes anybody. We need to avoid them setting foot on English soil.'

I think both Angus and I reacted at the exact same time, we both said 'no way.'

'It might be the only way,' said Selkie.

'Might,' I said, 'being the operative word.'

'There's no way,' said Angus, 'that I am going to let you do that.' Angus, Selkie, and I stood on top of one of the smaller barrows in a neat triangle, both Angus and I looking at Selkie. Beneath us, Weatherby and Buaer looked on.

'I think there is something we may be missing,' said Bauer.

We turned and looked at him. 'These are Vikings right,' he said, 'as in horned helmets and broadswords.'

'Actually,' said Angus, 'I do not think they really wore horned helmets.'

'No?' asked Selkie.

'I am pretty sure not.'

'That's kind of disappointing,' she said.

'Anyway,' said Bauer, 'the point is that warfare has



advanced a little in the intervening two thousand years.'

'Actually,' said Angus again, sounding slightly apologetic, 'it's closer to one thousand.'

'However bloody long it's been,' snapped Bauer, 'we do have twenty armed SAS encamped around the forest. Can they not deal with any hairy iron age warrior that comes down the river.'

'Actually ...' Angus started, and then thought better of saying anything.

'How many ghosts have the SAS dealt with in the past?' asked Selkie simply.

Bauer looked from Weatherby to Angus, Weatherby looked at Angus. 'One,' said Angus, 'arguably.' And then seeing that everyone was expecting him to elaborate added 'they had to call in a priest.'

'As I understand it,' said Weatherby, 'there is a general rule that if they can harm you, you can harm them.'

'Actually it works better the other way round,' said Angus, 'if they can not harm you, you can not harm them.'

'And if they can harm you?' I asked.

'You may or may not be able to harm them.'

'That doesn't really help,' I said.

'No,' he agreed.

'So the problem,' said Bauer, 'is that ghost Vikings are going to land and do what?'

'I imagine,' said Angus, 'that they will do what they did when they were alive, rape and pillage.'

'And then,' said Bauer, 'as if this wasn't bad enough, if they do land they will wake a ghost king.'

'Yes,' said Angus, 'what he will do is completely unknown, but there is a good chance that he will be a lot more dangerous than the Vikings.'

'So better that we stop the Vikings,' said Bauer.

'Yes.'

'Then shall we at least try the SAS?'

'For that matter,' said Weatherby, 'we could call in the navy.'

'We may have another problem,' said Bauer, and he pointed to the space where Selkie had been standing. She was not there any more.

'The little ...' said Angus.

I looked all around, the fog was so thick I could not see a thing beyond a few metres from where the car's headlights were shining.

'Where would she go?' said Bauer.

'Towards the sea,' I said.

'That's past the SAS squad,' he said, 'I'll radio them to look out for her.'

'They won't be able to see her,' said Angus.

'They've got night vision equipment.'

'It won't make any difference. Remember how easily she eluded you on the train.'

'What about us?' I said.

Angus looked at me. 'Good point,' he said, 'you really are a smart lad aren't you.'

'What do you mean?' asked Bauer.

'The spell won't work on Mitchell and I,' said Angus.

'Because you're close to her?' said Weatherby.

Angus looked at him with disdain, shook his head and said 'because she's close to us.' I took the opportunity to shake my head at him. When I had said 'what about us' I had only meant to ask what we should do, but was happy to act like I knew all about magic. In fact, so warm was the look Angus gave me that I felt I could never really have fooled him and I must actually be a smart lad.

'However it works,' said Bauer, 'if it works we can use it. There are two spots downstream from here we can get the car to before she will be able to make it. Ramsholt, near

where the squad is, and Felixstowe Ferry.'

'Right then,' said Angus, 'Weatherby and I will go to Ramsholt and rendezvous with Cholderton and the squad, Mitchell and Bauer will continue down to Felixstowe Ferry and wait there. Bauer I take it you are armed.'

'Yes sir.'

'Good man,' he said, 'do not shoot my daughter.'

'One more thing sir?' said Bauer, 'bearing in mind we have no other way of preventing the Vikings landing, are we certain we want to stop her.'

'Yes,' said both Angus and I together.

In the car Angus steered me into the back seat with him while Weatherby sat in the front next to Bauer. Bauer drove with frightening speed down the narrow and fog wreathed country lanes, squealing tires around each turn. I saw Weatherby's knuckles whiten as he gripped the dashboard.

'Don't worry,' said Bauer, 'I'm a professional.' I did my seat-belt up.

'Listen lad,' said Angus quietly, taking hold of my arm, 'it's obvious Selkie likes you. If you can't persuade her not to do this. Give her this.' He rolled up his sleeve and, with some difficulty, removed a thin leather strap from his wrist. He pressed it into my hand and closed my fingers around it.

'What is it?' I said. It was like leather, but silky smooth.

'A family heirloom,' he said, 'it might do her some good.'

I put it in my pocket.



## The Blood Eagle

We dropped Weatherby and Lord Lepusstrom off at a pub called the Ramsholt arms where Cholderton, radioed earlier by Bauer, was waiting looking longingly at the warm yellow light of the pub windows. Barely were they out of the car than Bauer wheel spun around and away with me still in the back. 'Do you really think Lord Lepusstrom will be able to see her?' he shouted back to me.

'I don't know,' I said, leaning forward.

'This girl is slippery, I know from the train, and I don't think she's as close to her father as he thinks she is.'

'You don't?'

'Let's just say that if she was, he wouldn't have needed to send Cholderton and I after her.'

'It's a point,' I said.

'What about you?'

'What about me?'

'How close is she to you?'

I sat back again. 'I'm not sure,' I said.

We drove on in silence for a bit, apart from the roar of the engine and the screaming of the tires as Bauer punished the car for some previous misdeed.

'You don't strike me,' he shouted back, 'and I don't mean anything by it, as the type who's ever sure. With women I mean.'

'I, err ...' I stuttered.

'I'm not saying you're gay or anything,' he said, 'just that, you know, you're not sure if they like you or not.'

'That's probably fair,' I said.

'She likes you,' he said.

We sped on through the night, finally screeching to a halt just inches before plunging off a quayside into the river. We got out of the car. There was, at first glance, nothing there, then I noticed a few houses off to our left, upstream. That was it.

'Where is this place?' I asked.

Bauer reached into the car and killed the engine and the lights. It instantly went very dark and very quiet. The night subsumed the houses off to our left. The rattle of the idling car engine died away so suddenly that I thought I could still hear it echoing around me. Gradually even this illusion left me and all I could hear was the gentle gurgle of the river going past and the occasional tick of the car cooling down.

Bauer pointed across the river, 'other there,' he said, 'though we can't see it through the fog, is the village of Felixstowe Ferry. This,' he stamped on the quayside, 'is where the Ferry lands.'

We stood there looking out into the fog girdled river, stamping our feet and blowing into our hands and waiting for we knew not what.

'How long will it take her to get here on foot?' I asked.

'A couple of hours if she's quick.'

I pulled up my collar, stuck my hands as far as they would go into my pockets, and exhaled a billowing cloud of steam that merged and amalgamated with the fog.

'You want to wait in the car?' said Bauer. I nodded.

We sat side by side in the front and did not speak, outside the fog shifted into dark shapes that moved ethereally towards us and then vanished just as they were about to become solid. I saw huge ships, with vast, storm tattered sails billowing loosely in a wind that was not there, bearing straight down upon us. I saw snake necked dragons rise up from the river and slop giant wet flippers onto the quayside. I saw dancers, moving to rhythms I could not hear, pirouette and leap on and off the water. I saw, countless times, a single dark haired girl move silently past the car.

The radio squawked once, after about an hour, and Bauer picked it up and answered it. The voice on the other end was obviously Cholderton, but what he said did not make a whole lot of sense.

'Woodwose calling Flagstone,' said Cholderton, 'this is Woodwose calling Flagstone over.'

'This is Flagstone over,' said Bauer.

'The Bees are still in the hive over.'

'Copy Woodwose,' said Bauer, 'any news of Sabrina over.'

'Sabrina has not been sighted over.'

'Copy, Flagstone out.'

'Woodwose out.'

Bauer put the radio down and stared back out the window. I cleared my throat. 'Oh,' he said, 'the druids have not moved and they haven't seen Miss Pfinnenwicken.'

I nodded and went back to staring out the window.

'Are you a religious man?' he asked.

'No,' I said.

'Me neither, I mean officially I'm C of E but I never go.'

'I don't think I'm officially anything.'

'It makes you wonder sometimes,' he said, 'this job.'

'I suppose it must.'

'I mean, I haven't been doing it for long, haven't actually seen that much.'

'No?'

'Apart from what your friend did, and what that druid did.'

'I know,' I said.

'But some of the cases I've read about. Things the department has dealt with in the past.'

'Like what?' I asked.

'I can't tell you,' he said, 'and you don't want me to.'

'No,' I said.

'Makes you wonder though.'

'I bet.'

He took a cloth from the pocket in the door and wiped off some condensation that had formed on the windscreen. When he was done he handed me the cloth to do my side. I wiped away the grey haze inside in order to better see the grey haze outside.

'Have you ever heard of the Blood Eagle,' he said.

'No.'

'It's something the Vikings did. I went to that viking centre place in York once on a school trip. What they did was, they cut away your ribs from the back, and then draped your lungs over your shoulders so that you looked like an eagle.'

I creased my face in disgust and made a noise, and then, after a moment, said 'would that even look much like a eagle.'

He thought about it. 'I don't know,' he said, 'but I'd rather not find out.'

We did not talk any more after that. I think at some point I nodded off, because the next thing I knew was Bauer elbowing me sharply in the ribs. I sat up with a jolt and was about to ask what was going on when he mimed



me not to speak with a finger to his lips. 'Listen,' he said very quietly.

At first I could not hear anything, then I heard a splash, which I did not think was what he could have meant, but then there was another splash, and then another, very slowly, but regularly, something was disturbing the water.

I looked at Bauer, it was obvious he was thinking exactly what I was thinking, but I said it anyway. 'Oars.'

He nodded his head, and then, very slowly, opened the car door without a click. Before he climbed out he took his gun from his holster. I took the door latch on my side and firmly but slowly pulled it back till I heard the clunk of the mechanism releasing. I pushed the door silently open and stepped out of the car, keeping low behind the car, and staring blindly out into the impenetrable dark.

Bauer crept round the rear of the car to my side and, never taking his eyes from the river, whispered 'what should we do?'

'I don't know,' I said. There was only one thing for certain, in what was otherwise a moment of complete helpless ignorance, the splashing was getting closer.

Bauer ducked down besides me and aimed his gun over the lip of the car bonnet. I noticed he was trembling slightly.

Very slowly, almost imperceptibly, the fog hardened into a shape. First just the sense of a shadow, a darkness on the water, and then the water itself was the only definite thing, a slight gurgling wake that ran ahead of the prow of the boat, dancing and leaping from its path, and then, rising over the glassy surface of the river, the carved effigy of a dragons head, slick black rotten wood bedecked in dangling seaweed and alive with tiny crabs that scuttled between its sodden craggy features, from empty eye socket to flaring nostril, from nostril to scowling mouth.

Both Bauer and myself were struck dumb with terror,

unable to move, Bauer never even aimed his gun. We watched the horror grow ever more real as the fog itself seemed to rush inwards and accumulate and solidify to form the ship. Above our heads the spindly arm of a mast cleared the roof of the fog, and from it hung loose the tattered remains of sail and rope. The broken, jagged skeleton of the vessel's flank came in to view, half decayed, more mud than wood, the ancient ship dredged up from forgotten depths slid silently along. A row of oars pawed lightly and with spider slowness at the river, reaching out on long handles, barely brushing the black water, only one, fractured and hanging loose like a broken limb, dropped regularly on each stroke to break the surface.

We looked on, and as the ship finally drifted past by us, we saw rows of figures standing as still as tombstones in the belly of the boat, they gleamed slick and wet, decomposing putrescent slimy things from beneath the north sea silt. I recognised the rusty remains of a sword here, a shield there, the paper thin peak of a crumbling helmet and beneath that, a skull turning slowly to face us. In its empty sockets, two bright blue flames flared up with unmistakable hatred.

Bauer, I think, lost his grip on what little reason there was left to cling to, and started shooting. In a rapid series of percussive blasts he emptied his entire gun into the ship, the bullets penetrating and exploding in chunks of rotten wood and seaweed and metal and bone. In seconds he was clicking frantically at the trigger and I was cowering to his side, hands over my ringing ears.

I looked up, and saw more movement on the boat, on one side the oars shuddered into the water and halted its progress, on the other they were working with renewed vigour, churning at the river till it looked like their thin, brittle, centuries old poles would snap.

I grabbed Bauer by the shoulders and turned him to face me. He was fumbling with another magazine for his gun but unable to work the mechanism with his trembling

fingers. His lips moved but I could not hear a word. I reached in to the car, thinking first of the radio before realising that I did not know how to work it, and seemed to have gone deaf anyway, I turned on the headlights. Through the windscreen I saw the prow of the ancient warship heading straight for us, both rows of oars now pulling at the water with all speed.

And then, and I do not know how this was possible because I could not hear anything else, I heard a splash, and saw something else in the water off to the side of the ship. I made out the shape of an arm and then the clear gleam of wet black hair, it was Selkie swimming towards the ship.

The oars halted, and were raised up vertical, and the ship glided slowly to a halt and started to drift sideways in the stream. I looked and saw the fearsome things in the ship gather at the side and look down at Selkie swimming towards them.

Without thinking I ran out of the car and dived straight into the water. The cold nearly stunned me as I went under but I kicked and pulled and once I reached the surface and was moving I felt released and beyond its clawing grip. I pulled furiously at the water, kicking off my shoes and swimming with all my strength towards Selkie and the Viking ship, already I saw bony arms reach down to her, she turned and shouted something but I did not hear a word. Slimy, barnacle encrusted, skeletal fingers closed about her and pulled her up out of the water and on to the ship. They were taking her away, I knew it though I did not know how, they were taking her back with them to their silent graves. She would drown.

I cried her name I think, or maybe just put my head down and swam, I do not remember. I reached the side of the ship just as the oars were being lowered and it started to turn away, heading back to the sea. Rows of flaming blue eyes stared malevolently down at me, and in amongst them, the face of Selkie, unbearably sad. Without knowing why, I pulled the leather strap her father had given me and held it

up. She pulled herself from their grip, reached down and took it from me, our fingertips touching just for a second. And then the oars pulled and the boat slipped away.

I fancy, though can not be sure, that I saw an animal leap from the side of the boat just before it disappeared into the fog.

## A Selkie's Skin

The story goes, that a young fisherman, walking home one night, chanced across a group of beautiful girls dancing naked on the beach near a pile of seal skins. When they saw the fisherman the girls screamed and ran for the skins, each transforming back into a seal when they put the skin on and fleeing into the sea, but the fisherman was too quick for one of the girls and he got to the last skin before her. The girl pleaded with the young man for her skin but he refused, instead he walked home with the skin and the girl followed.

At his home the man gave the girl some clothes to wear, and fed her some dinner, and while she ate it he hid the skin. Though the girl pleaded with man, he would not give her skin back, but he treated her well, and in time the girl came to love the fisherman, and the soon they were married.

It was a happy marriage, and over the years the girl bore the fisherman several children, and she was mostly very content, except for when the height of summer came round and she would look longingly out to sea and, whenever her husband was out, search the house high and low for her skin.

Then, one year, her youngest daughter found the skin and told her where it was. The selkie gathered her children

together, told them she loved them, and left for the sea. That evening, as the fisherman was rowing his boat ashore, a seal poked its head up out of the water and looked at him long and hard with eyes that seemed to communicate a world of regret, and then was gone forever.

I woke up in hospital late the following day. Apparently I was pulled from the water by some of the SAS men. Bauer came to his senses in time to radio them and let them know what was happening. Nobody else saw the Viking longboat. Of Selkie, there was no sign.

The police, backed up by the SAS, arrested the Black Goat when they tried to leave the forest and head back north. Over half of them were shot resisting arrest and there is an enquiry about that ongoing to which I was called to give evidence but only about the incident at the nightclub in Bedford. The rest of my involvement with the affair, the rest of the affair it seems, was hushed up.

The surviving druids were charged with public order offences and I understand most of them were sectioned and are now held at various secure units. Wilhelmina Pffinnenwicken was never charged and has returned to her home in Whitton. I have not seen her since.

I occasionally still see Lord Lepusstrom. He retired properly shortly after and bought a property on the Suffolk coast near the mouth of the Deben, and now occupies most of his time walking up and down the sea-front. I visit him less than he asks me to, his is a sad house, and he spends too long looking wistfully out to sea and talking of his daughter. He told me Weatherby is now the Witch Finder General and Cholderton is his full time deputy. Bauer ended his secondment early and went back to MI5.

Me, I still have the same job, the same flat, the same flat-mate. He got a really good position doing something for the County Council shortly afterwards but then quit six months later saying he could not hack the pressure. I'm back to lending him the rent this month.

Corner came round once, I don't know how he got my address. He arrived on a trike at the head of a dozen roaring motorbikes that quite frightened the neighbours. I was worried that maybe that he might blame me for Selkie's loss, but they just wanted to take me down the pub. Corner was showing his age a bit more, and though he still has it, he doubts he will ever get back on the motorcycle. He proudly displayed half a dozen deep and very ugly scars across his belly and said it was a miracle none of his vital organs were cut, at which point one of the other bikers pointed out that he only had one spleen now, to which Corner just laughed and I never gathered if it was true or not.

These days I do not worry too much about being lonely, I've stopped staring wistfully out of train windows and daydreaming romantically about girls sitting across from me in the carriages. I have not quite reached the stage of talking to them yet, but I do live life a bit more in the moment than I used to.

A few weeks ago there was a report of a seal seen in Richmond lock. Most weekends now I go down and walk by the river, sometimes with a fresh fish in a bag to feed it, but I have not seen it yet.