

STAR GAZER

Book One

Unabridged

THE GATEKEEPER AND THE GUARDIAN

The First Tales in the Chronicles of

Jack Barleycorn

by

JOHN MORRIS

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Dorset, England

Also by John Morris

Fractured Series

Inner Sanctum
Conspiracy Theory

Star Gazer First Trilogy

The Gatekeeper and the Guardian
The Twelve Tribes
The Wrath of Gaia

Star Gazer Second Trilogy

The Centaureans

Billie Steadman Investigates:

The Man in the River

Stand Alone Novels

Islamic State: England
Domicile

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Dedicated to my Mother, Dorothea Morris

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CHAPTER 35 ~ A LETTER TO DAWN ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

Main Characters

- Jack Barleycorn. The Guardian. Marries Empress Jien Noi, he chose not to become Emperor.

The Second

- Jien Noi. The Gatekeeper and Empress. She is the ultimate power. The Second are a matriarchal society. Jack calls her Jinnie.
- The Shaman, an enlightened and possibly elemental being.
- n'Gnung. First Warrior of the Second, and Jack's closest friend.
- n'Gue. Prime Messenger of the Second, n'Gnung's elder brother.
- Gung Loi. Second Warrior, leader of the Second's special forces.
- Barph. General of the Second's army.

The Seventh, Ddwyrth, or Dwarves

- King Owain a'y Brenin.
- Llwydd the Bold, First Warrior of the Ddwyrth.
- Aroweena (female), Second Warrior of the Ddwyrth. Known as the Keeper of Hearts and not because of her beauty.

The Eleventh or Elves

- Ælthrelntheine, High Queen of the Eleventh, High Lord Protector of Gaia, mother of Kay.
- Kay (Ælkræleinnoire), High Lord of Destiny, Queen of the Eleventh Elect.

The Tenth or Ogres

- The Great Ogre – arch villain.

Notable characters

The Last

- Dawn, Jack's oldest friend
- Horovitz. Sergeant, ex-mercenary who changes sides.

The Second

- The Seer, Won Long.
- Weid Noi, Won Long's daughter and trainee Seer.
- Lo Si, Keeper of Ancient Knowledge, Druid, husband of the Seer, father of Weid Noi and Sun Kist.
- Ju Lo, Lo Si's understudy.
- Da Phai Nai, mother of Sun Kist, forbidden to marry Lo Si by a previous Empress.
- Sun Kist, daughter of Da Phai Nai and Lo Si.

- Jack's larger team includes: Xi Xah, Xi Sai (the girls), To Mo and To Ma (the twins), who are always nearby and working in the background, but seldom mentioned by name in later books.

Alberic, king of the elves

What does Aubrey mean? From the Germanic name Alberic, king of the elves in German mythology. It later became common as a Norman first name. When used for girls, it's also a variation of the name Audrey.

In Germanic mythology, Alberic was the sorcerer king of the elves, known also by the early pet form Auberon. A variant of the name, Oberon, later appeared in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1594-1596). The name was brought to England by the Normans and the Anglo Saxons.

The Prophecy

The Prophecy

Lo Si

"Many know of the children's version of the Prophecy as thus.

At a time in the far distant future, a man will come amongst you from the East.

He will not be as you are.

He will be tall and white skinned, with long white hair and blue eyes.

He will live several of your lifetimes.

He will be carrying the Signature of The Guardian.

This man, for a man is what he is, will forever change your lives and return the long-forgotten old ways.

He will show this people a great world outside the one they know.

In return, you will lead him to the threshold of the path between the worlds.

This is the destiny of your Tribe, and with it comes the supreme responsibility:

For you are the last remaining Gatekeepers of our most revered Ancestors.

However, there is a longer version known but to a few. They are supposed to mean the same, but the veiled knowledge is hard to perceive.

At darkest time in distant future, when required true boon for nurture,

Man from East comes seeking succour, an ally you must never neuter.

Not of your kind, with bluest eye, long hair and skin of white, and high,

Signature of Guardian is his pry, his lifetime longer as you die.

Future's herald mortal danger, both of Earthly n' cosmic nature.

The die is cast O' Great Deranger, 'cept for those of greater stature.

Twelve Tribes must stand as one, or prophesy will be undone.

The First a boon in times to come, if only to increase the sum.

This man, for man is what he is, resolves passed and future's salient quiz.

Olden ways of ancient yore, become the future's bright new lore.

His way be barred by yoke and harrow, true key released will be his arrow.

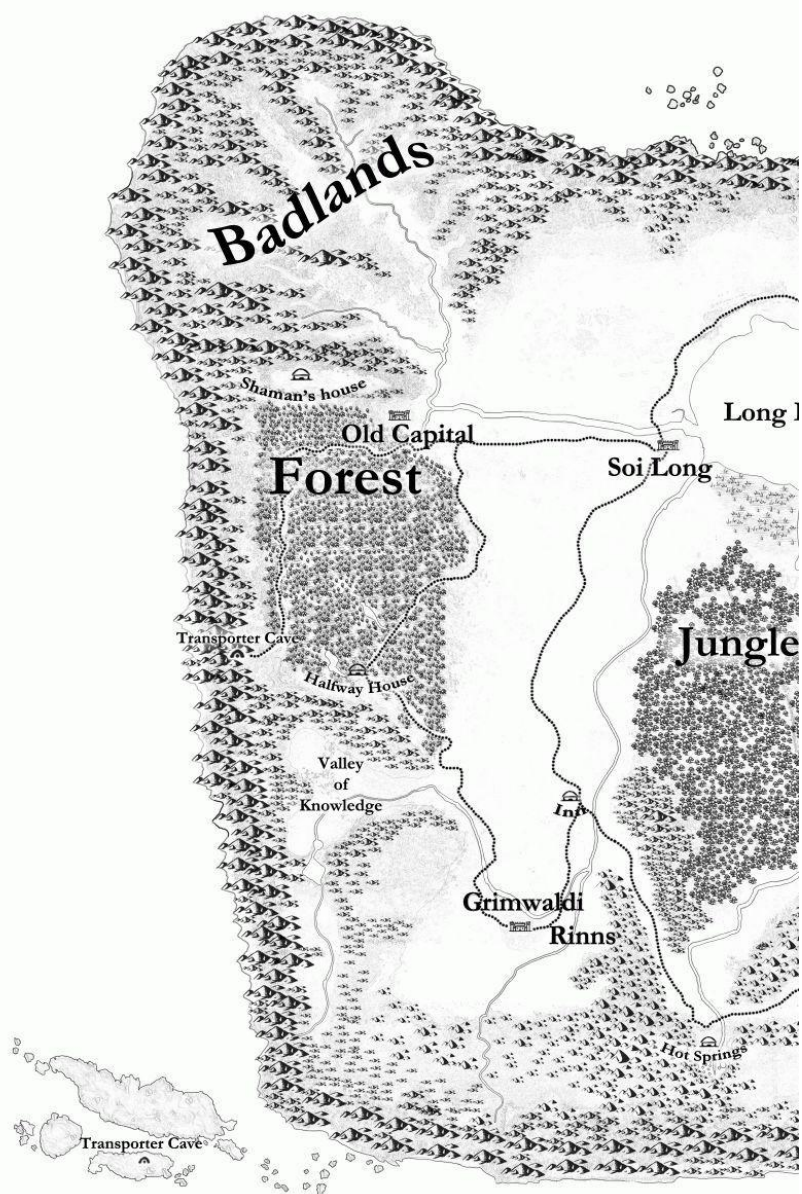
Show him must the key, the furrow, greater world revealed than one'st thee know.

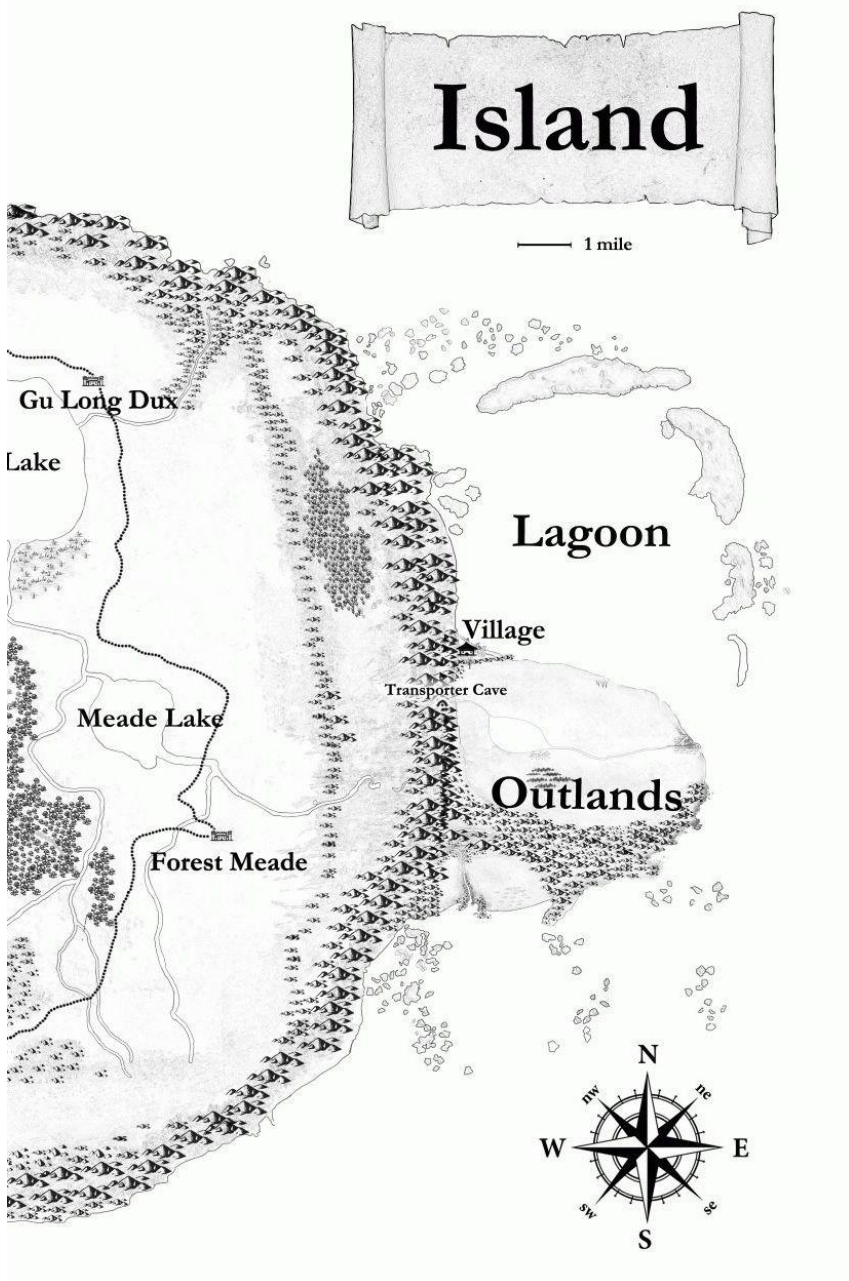
Destiny approaches yonder, your Tribe to lead into the wonder.
Between the stars destiny await, your duty to unlock the gate.
Gatekeepers of Ancestral' future, pay heed your duty; never falter.
World's turning will empower once more, but only if the truth be core.

The Ancestor gave us the simple version, to explain this one to the common people, although my understanding remains sorely stretched, even amongst the most wise and true.

My problem with this version, as Ju Lo is well aware, is that the Ancestor translated this into the simple passage we use today. There is no record of the Ancestor creating the passage, and it is not in the style all his other musings are presented in. It troubles me to admit, this was not given to us by the Ancestors. But if not, then by whom?"

Map





Foreword

This unabridged, second edition of Book One, adds substantially to the first edition, and includes new, enticing, and entertaining initial chapters, replacing back-stories on the website. It introduces Jack and several important characters. The castaway scenes, once précised, are restored to fuller length, thus laying all the background for the reader to easily become lost within this most fascinating tale.

Introduction

This first trilogy of *Star Gazer* follows the life of Jack Barleycorn, as told to his grandchildren. It is set in the contemporary world of today, circa 2010. Jack is confident, self-assured, but speaks his mind, and loses yet another job. This is the point at which we pick up the saga of his life.

An accomplished yachtsman, Jack leaves his known life behind and creates a new future as an international consultant based in the Orient. On a journey, disaster strikes and he is left floating at the mercy of savage seas. Hallucinating, but guided by a voice, he shambles ashore more dead than alive, upon an uncharted South Pacific island.

It is inhabited by people, but not by *homo sapiens*.

The islanders have a Stone Age culture, yet use extremely advanced technology to shield the island from discovery; a legacy left behind by an alien race called The Ancestors. Later, Jack discovers other branches of the human line also survive, although we know of these through myth and legend as Elves, Dwarves, and Ogres.

A series of discoveries irrevocably alter Jack's life, as the trilogy leads us to discover the real reason why we exist. Catastrophe Theory, Darwinism, and religious dogma are dismissed, and a new truth offers an alternative explanation to our human evolution.

As the extraordinary tale unwinds, we are led to examine our most basic assumptions about humanity: who we are, where we came from, and perhaps more importantly, where we are headed.

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The *Star Gazer* website: <http://www.star-gazer.co.uk>

Offers a vast resource of additional information, including:

- Pages dedicated to images and details of all main and minor characters, including The Ancestors and their technology.
- High definition maps in colour, plus black and white.
- A great deal of additional information about the island, and everything associated with the characters and project as a whole.

Chapter 1 ~ A Walk in the Woods

Jack

Slowly, silently we edged closer to the clearing, our prey unaware and grazing the lush, spring grass. The Gwydir Forest bracken was thinning and our chances of being exposed increased with every careful step. At her slight signal I froze, Dawn kneeling to steady her aim before taking several rapid shots. "Got them at last," she whispered.

"Beautiful aren't they," I exhaled sotto voce.

We watched for another few minutes before circling around downwind of the herd. Dawn continued to take photographs as the whim or fancy took her, while the sun rose and burned off the early morning mist. In time, we backed away leaving the deer in peace.

Retracing our path through the trees, we returned to where we left our backpacks, and she changed the lens of her professional 35 mm camera. Once done, we ambled towards a nearby stream; "What's for breakfast?" Dawn asked, "I'm starving,"

"I could murder a fry-up right now and a hot cup of tea," I said.

"It's a shame we can't build a fire, these spring mornings are still a bit chilly. Just as well I brought a flask of hot tea."

"Great! You be mother while I sort out some plates and food."

"A fire?" Dawn nodded towards the stream. "I bet we could if we're careful. That rock over there would do nicely as a grate. We'd have to wash away all sign afterwards or the wardens will be after us."

"I'll go gather some kindling, set some traps, and see what I catch."

I smirked as I donned my rucksack, and Dawn's suppressed chuckle turned into a hearty laugh. "You, good sir, are incorrigible. Let me help, Jackie. You take the woods and I'll go fishing downriver."

She gathered her backpack and gave me an overly innocent smile, before turning abruptly, chortling, and heading off. I knew a game was afoot and intending to best her, I turned away into the forest.

I returned some minutes later to find Dawn had already laid a fire of sorts, and was rubbing two twigs together in an effort to light it. I watched for a moment, and said, "I set three traps down the trail. You know, to make fire I'm sure one stick needs to be harder wood, and the other soft. They must be large and dry to generate enough friction."

"And you'd know all about generating friction," she giggled. Before I could reply she handed me a tin and said, "Anyway, I caught us some fish, so while you prepare it and get the fire going, I'll check your traps."

I gawped at the can and said, "I didn't think salmon came up small Welsh streams, and these have canned themselves. How odd?"

"You'd be amazed; the local fire water is really strong. They must have imbibed," she threw me a backward glance as she sashayed to the animal trail I had used. I watched her go before smirking at my own

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duplicity, already setting the 'kill' in the traps I had laid. Remaking the small fire, I selected two appropriate bits of wood and started rubbing one on the other. It was both tiresome and useless, but I had to keep face.

Shortly Dawn returned and said, "Your traps of string and platted grass are astonishing, look what we caught." She held out a packet of sliced ham, "How on earth did this get here?"

"That'll be the fabled Welsh wild boar. Well done," I snickered.

"And this mature Stilton cheese round?"

I shrugged, "It looks pretty ronky, maybe it just got here on its own."

"Hmm ... and the, the chocolate bars?"

"Ah." I stifled a laugh and muttered, "I better get this fire going."

Dawn sat on a rock nearby and watched me as she rolled a cigarette. Finishing several and stowing them for later, she held out her tin of rolling tobacco and paraphernalia to me, "Want one?"

"No thanks, you know I'm useless at rolling. Plus they stink. I'll have one of my own after I get the fire going. This is really hard work."

"Get the flask then and I'll have another go at it."

My back was only turned for a moment, in which time Dawn had miraculously lit the fire and was about to light her cigarette with her trusty Zippo. She took a long draw and exhaled a plume of smoke.

Looking her dead in the eye I said, "You cheated."

"Did not."

"Yes you did," I advanced towards her.

She chuckled, "Women are just better at some things than men."

"Not always." I closed the distance between us and tried to tickle the truth out of her. We ended up in a heap on the ground rolling towards the stream, before ending up in an embrace. My libido roused and my lips closed on hers, before I realised and turned my head away.

"No," she said, if nicely.

I jerked away, "Sorry, I got carried away within the moment."

"Me too. Maybe another time..."

She left the sentence to hang, but smiled. My forehead lined and my eyes screwed up as I spoke from insight, "You're seeing someone?"

"Yes."

"Is he...?"

"The one? No, I doubt it. He's a gentleman and treats me well, very well. He says he loves me, but you know how I am. I'm fine until things turn serious. I don't want kids, and so far, I haven't found anyone I could stand to be with long enough to share my home. Same as with you, or have you found her yet? You were getting serious with ... whatshername. You mentioned getting engaged when I saw you last."

"Who, Jo? No, I found out she owed a load of money and needed a blank cheque. I subsequently told her I had made a bad deal and was broke; I even asked her for a loan. Believe. She dumped me straight

away, so I'm not even looking any more. Women are always after something; money, power, status, health spas, or a fling on the side. All I want is a true heart, a woman who wants me because I'm me; kids maybe. Instead, all I get is this 'What can you do for me' attitude."

"Yeah, tell me about it. We'll probably die old and remain single Jackie, but I guarantee we'll have some fun along the way. Let's eat. Just imagine we're living off the land with what we caught just now."

It was hard to keep a straight face once she said that, but we enjoyed the ruse of it all, and Welsh cakes with a slice of stilton on top. We swilled it down with tepid tea from her flask and cleared up leaving no litter or sign of fire. It was hard to tell we had lingered there a while.

Dawn bent to the stream to wash her hands, then looked closely at the riverbed and reached for a red stone. Holding it up to the light she said, I think this is a carnelian. I'll have this identified and polished up."

As we settled to depart, I laid out our route planner. "Here," I said pointing at the map, and then towards some hills. "That ridge over there should give us a good view down the Conwy Valley."

"OK, let's get there pronto. I want shots of those red kites. My research says they'll use the weak morning thermals to hunt their prey."

We moved quickly and quietly, covering a lot of ground with our purposeful strides. I focused on the trail and navigation, while Dawn kept eagle eyes in search our quarry. "There," she called.

It was by then some hours later, as we skirted the ridge heights northwards. I came to her and followed her finger, then her eyes. "They have a nest down there. One of those trees, but I can't tell which one."

"What, maybe a mile north of the picnic area?"

"Yes, nearer perhaps. They are in breeding season and looking for easy food. Let's get down there before it gets too late in the morning."

We set off in a new direction and Dawn added, "They eat carrion, or whatever they can get a hold of. Sometimes they'll take a live rabbit, or vermin, but mostly dead things or prepared food, picnic food."

In time, we reached the picnic area and skirted north, using our deer-stalking skills. We kept a low profile using the forest for cover, and located the nest proximity. The gigantic birds were aware, but saw us as no threat. We watched amazed as they gathered finishing's for their new home. Their nesting was much like that of a magpie, if larger.

We angled around for the clearest view, getting as close as we thought permissible. Dawn attached a telephoto lens and zoomed in. After taking several reels of film she said, "I'll need to come back next month to capture the fledglings. Are you free?"

I shrugged and said, "Probably, I seem to be between assignments at the moment."

"What? Don't tell me you got sacked again!"

"No, we just decided it was best to part company."

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"Why? Did you say something?"

"Well, I may have made some suggestions to my boss."

"Tell me?"

"I, erm, told him what I thought."

I turned away and busied myself, but to no avail, "Out with it!"

I looked back and admitted, "I told him what was wrong with the way the company were doing things, and offered better solutions. The discussion eroded from that point on, and then the owner joined us."

"I was on a roll, so I told him as well. He thanked me for my contribution to his company, put an arm on my shoulder, and turned me to face the admin department. 'Your cards will be ready as soon as you have cleared your desk.'

"Dipshit! Then he said, 'Put your money where your mouth is and run your own company if you want things done your own way. I have, and you were my employee. Goodbye.'

"What a plonker. So that's why I was free to come here this weekend." I smiled tentatively.

Taking a deep breath Dawn laid her hand on my arm; "I love you, you know that Jackie. But you are your own worst enemy. You are a great person to spend time with, but employment wise you need to work on your soft skills, things like interpersonal and emotional intelligence skills."

"There's nothing wrong with my people skills, I just won't tolerate jumped up jacks in office and their lackey imbeciles spouting the latest office doctrine or politically correct gobbledegook."

"As in your last boss, and the one before, and the one before that."

"The main problem is their work ethos. It's all targets, projections of turnover, meetings and memoranda, plus marketing scams. The only things they need to get right are the product, quality control and price. They all seem to think that making money for the bosses is nirvana, while their pay rises are frozen and bonuses cut. The needs of customer appears to be an irrelevant, irksome irritation. I seriously don't need it."

"So, why don't you start your own company?"

"It's not that easy. Money, or lack thereof for one, something to put my ingenuity into for another. I'm brilliant at improving the existing, but as for creating something from scratch, I don't have a clue."

"What about the family farm, couldn't you start something there?"

"No, my father is content the way things are, and anyway, it's a smallholding off the beaten track in the middle of nowhere. It could work as a small business or tapping into the organic market, farmers market and shop perhaps, or horses, beef maybe. But in reality, it is too big to be small, and too small to be big. I did offer..."

"So, you told your dad how to run his livelihood and he pissed you off. He told you to go your own way. Is that about right?"

"No ... not quite. Well, yes I suppose. But that gave me my freedom to do what I want."

"And you're out of a job again. You have no career profile or plan, Jackie. You improve and improvise on what there is already, or try to, and you do your best, I know. But, people don't like being told that, even if you are usually right. Oh, what am I to do with you?"

We were silent for a while, preoccupied by our own thoughts. Dawn snapped pictures as we meandered onwards, and later sat down at one of the few picnic tables. I was taking a large gulp of cola when she hit me with words, "What do you want to be, Jackie?"

"You want to be your own boss, yet be a part of something bigger."

I nodded my head, and added, "Franchising is a scam for the wealthy, so I'm not going there."

"You enjoy sailing."

"Yes, but that's not a career."

Her eyes fixed mine so forcefully I could not look away. Her body seemed to imperceptibly stiffen, like a snake muscling its coils before a strike. She offered a waved arm in my direction. "Jackie, you have no home, no wife, or regular girlfriend even, and no real money. You appear to be unemployable, because you are too smart for your own good. You know better than everyone else, of course, and you are usually correct. But when are you ever the leader?"

"Jackie, when do you really feel free?"

Dawn remained quiet as I offered plausible, yet ultimately incongruous answers. Following several bizarre postulations, she cut me short. "So you need to be the boss of something you don't own. Am I right? — I am, aren't I?"

I shrugged in the affirmative, but had no words worth reply left my lips. She began a new tactic, "You are good at squash, so why not become a coach? Ball sports, your beloved cricket for that matter."

Again, I shrugged her idea off. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I was past thirty, but I only knew what I did not want to do. In time, we left the issue unresolved and headed towards our destination. We were due to meet the rest of 'the gang'; our friends would be arriving at a chalet complex later that day.

We walked and talked, laughed, and shared in the moment. She was the super-sales person for her company, selling luxury cars to the rich. "I'll make Director in three years," she admitted, "Five more years and I could retire before I'm forty. Not bad eh. What about you?"

"I'm thinking of taking off somewhere. I need the space to work out what the reason for my life is. I need to go somewhere, but I don't know where, but the when should be soon, unless I get a job."

"Oh, what are you thinking of doing?"

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"As in my name, I'm the proverbial Jack of all trades, master of none. I would like to change that, find some stability in my life."

"Don't! Do not put yourself down, I won't hear of it. You have ways of thinking and insight that most do not. You are a clever man that I highly regard, and I am not easily impressed. You lack a true purpose in life and that is your only fault. So what're you going to do about it, huh?"

"I'm going sailing. You mentioning it earlier today brought it to the forefront of my mind. Last time I was down south, a Captain asked me to help crew a sailboat to the Caribbean. I was with Jo then, working, but I'm sorely tempted to leave all this shit here behind me and go."

"You'll be the captain?"

"No, but yes. I'd be First Mate, but otherwise running the whole shebang. I don't have the sea miles yet for my Yachtmaster Offshore certification, and I'd need the full Yachtmaster Ocean to be a Captain for hire, it's all to do with liability insurance, not seamanship. Seems like the break I need right now though, with no one telling me what to do."

"That doesn't make any sense, Jackie. Surely the captain would be in charge of the boat."

"Hah!" I grunted. "Usually Captain's are fonts of all knowledge, but on these delivery trips they often save money by hiring in retirees who gained their qualifications way back in the Stone Age. Imagine being stuck on a fifty-foot sailing boat covering for the man in charge. That said, something similar would give me the sea miles, I'm seriously considering doing it."

"Hmmm. So, looking farther ahead, if you had your Yachtmaster certification to full Ocean level, you would be the skipper. You would be solely in charge of another person's boat, get well paid for it, and you could do everything your own way. Is that about right?"

"Yes, but – you may have a valid point there. You remember my friend Neal; we met him down in London last Christmas?"

"Oh yes, tall, handsome, and unforgivably devoted to his girlfriend."

"Fiancée nowadays, but yes, he's as good as married already. The thing is, last time we spoke he mentioned something about a marina project, and was trying to interest me in sourcing and delivering boats for the Chinese to disassemble and copy. I better call him when we return to civilization, and maybe make some new plans."

"Good man! I always knew you were. Remember me if you ever need to do sea trails, I've had requests for some maritime shots."

"Seriously? You are on Sunshine. Does that mean you are finally going to open a photography shop?"

"No, although I might consider investing in one if it had a working studio with adjoining apartment, somewhere I could lock myself away with all things photographic. It's neither a whim nor fancy, just a wish."

"You should do more with your art than just enter competitions."

"We'll see. I enjoy what I do at the moment, but it may become a very early retirement plan. Anyway, enough about that, what about meeting the others and our surprise party tonight, I thought we could do fancy dress and play charades..."

The sun shone in its full morning glory. It was dazzling and brightness was all around. It was too much for my eyes as I became aware, and turned away towards darker shade within the room. The bed was strange and hampered my desire for slothful slumber.

A noise, followed by a hand on my shoulder fully wakened me, "Breakfast in five minutes sleepy head, see you in the kitchen."

It amazed me how some people, especially Dawn, could be so alert at this ungodly hour – she was a morning person, born at first light of the day, I at night. What time was it anyway? I peered at the clock and realised it was mid morning. 'Oh well, time to get up', I mused.

I went downstairs and was greeted by Dawn plating full English breakfast, with grilled bananas. I took coffee and set about the plateful set in front of me with a voracious appetite. Even the banana was fine.

We chuckled over highlights of our short break, reminiscing on the antics of our mutual friends, but in passing. Dawn brought us into the present, "Remember I'm at work today; will you still be staying here?"

I looked at her and knew what she was really asking. We were in her cottage in Bethesda, North Wales, and she worked in the heart of Birmingham. This was a parting of the ways, for now at least.

"I'll get my act together as soon as breakfast is done, wash up, and then fix that leaky tap in the bathroom. I'll use your office if I may, to make some calls and see if anyone needs crew to take a boat to the Caribbean. I should be gone before midday all being well, why?"

"Good, you're going out on your own. You won't regret it. I've got jobs to do here before I leave, and it's such a boring drive. Race you!"

Dawn and I set off around midday, and we played convoy and racing down the ancient Roman Watling Street. Her Mercedes convertible was quick, but my Morgan had the edge, I thought. We both had the top down and traded places to pass the monotony, before pulling alongside one another and waving goodbye near the M6. She headed south to work, and I north to my home, to confirm tentative plans, and pack.

Before leaving Wales, I had sat at a Dawn's desk, opened my notepad, clicked my trusty ballpoint, and made a list of things to do. I had called several companies I knew offered working passage, but the man I most needed to speak to, Captain Roberts, was away, due for mooring late that evening. I changed tack and called an old friend.

I knew Neal from previous work down in London. We worked in the same building, but for different employers and often shared a pint

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after work, and over time, we became good friends. He was a diplomat, and in his spare time, a local politician in Leek, but wanted to settle down with Jacqui, a nurse. They planned to raise a family and he had been offered a job near his home in investment banking.

"Neal, how's tricks?"

"Hey up mate, I'm fair to middling, you?"

"I'm travelling down to Portsmouth, taking a break from the daily grind, and thought to pop in to see you on the way."

"Great, see you this evening then, early doors at my local in Leek. We can eat when Jacqui joins us after work. I was intending to call you today as I have a proposition for you to consider, but more on that later."

Chapter 2 ~ Heading West

"Jackie, great to see you again! So what's new in your world?"

"Neal, I've decided to take time out, maybe change careers, and get my Yachtmaster Offshore, the whole caboodle, you?"

"Irons hot in the fire my friend. You remember I have interests in a language training school in Foshan, near Hong Kong on the China Mainland. Well, I've just returned from there. It seems a developer my Chinese partner knows, has approached us looking for full English. He's wants schooling from kindergarten through to University, translator training, and all staff. Jackie, it's a massive proposal! A small city all self-contained and we get to run the entirety of all English teaching inside."

"That sounds like a great opportunity, I wish you good luck."

"Thanks, we'll need it. Let me show you the details on my laptop..."

"...So you see this area over here, they are planning a large marina complex, but here, just south, they are proposing three hundred executive houses, all with waterway access to the South Pearl River."

"It looks great, but what's the angle?"

"Commuting, Jackie. Shunda, meaning Daliang City, along with Foshan and Shenzhen, are in an exports battle with Guangzhou, Panyu, Nanhai, and Dongguan. These are the gateways into China, and have been for centuries, millennia if you know your history. The golden egg in the recipe is Hong Kong. They want a Mainland partnership, and whoever comes up with the best-laid plan owns the commuter belt into China's top export region for the next ten years. You realise that area accounts for over one third of total Chinese export GDP."

That was when Neal threw me a verbal curved ball. "What do you know about floating offices, Jackie?"

"Erm, nothing. You mean like a boat with an office inside, communication systems, and maybe hydrofoils to make it go quicker?"

"Exactly! I know you're a rag top sailor, but you're connected, and these people want top spec floating offices and pleasure powerboats. What you don't know you should find out about soonest."

After reaching into his briefcase, he stood to excuse himself, "Jackie, I need a moment somewhere quiet to make a few phone calls and firm plans with the rich and powerful of the orient."

"Let's move to the beer garden, it's too noisy and lacks privacy here."

"Hah! So you can smoke you mean, you don't fool me, I know you too well Jackie," he said, as he downed his pint and bought a new round.

Once outside, he dropped a thick file on the table, and added, "They would want you to get the best boats delivered to China, to copy Jack. You'd have free rein within their parameters. Just come up with the boats and figures and we'll work out the rest. Have a read through this while I'm busy, I shouldn't be too long."

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Neal walked to one side and I was left to look through a thick folder of plans for the maritime town in China, which included a floating market attractive to all. It was a fully-fledged international proposition with local and regional Chinese government backing. It was new and very different from what I had been doing before. I could see a role for me, and if I were in charge, it would be a perfect opportunity.

I sat and considered what my life could become. The day darkened as I watched the first bright stars become visible in the evening sky. It felt like a new beginning, one I sought after, let's be clear. I would also need to put my life in UK on hold, secure my assets at least.

My attention returned to the folder and saw the need for the purchase of a small fleet of vessels, bespoke boats from all over the world, the best that were available. Once bought, I would need to deliver them to Hong Kong initially and later the Mainland of China.

I hemmed and hawed, deep in thought. I looked over Neal's plans and saw the flaw, it was in the numbers the Chinese would take, the fewer boats, the greater their profit. Dismantling them plank by plank to copy them was stupid, and a waste of good vessels. What we needed to do was provide the boatyard with plans and expertise to build the boats.

I was draining my pint when Neal returned with two fresh ones, "Cheers! They are interested in having you to run the sourcing, delivery, and spoke of a position as international consultant."

"I like the sound of that, Neal. You have any more details, this file is huge, but a bit vague regards my role in the project."

"I just spoke to the investor who owns the boatyards, and he wants you on board, but you'll need full Yachtmaster certification to take it on. They are sending me some files through, which I'll print out when we get to my home. I'll forward them to your email as they arrive."

We talked with increasing enthusiasm about the project, as the day darkened; nighttime had descended when Jacqui joined us. We chatted over the evening meal, coming to an understanding. As we lingered over Gaelic coffee, Neal concluded, "So what do you think, Jackie?"

"I'm in, this is a fantastic opportunity. But, we need to be clever about the copy and reproduction of these boats I'm going to get for you. I'll also look at getting a freighter to deliver, as these are river boats."

"You read my mind regards the copying, but I missed the delivery angle; it would be cheaper too. You will take that on as well?"

"Yes, I'd love to, but I need to explore floating offices? It grieves me to say this, being a sailor and all, but what you need here is not some motor boat for crossing to Hong Kong or Macao as quickly as possible. What you need to offer is a business package with on board secretaries, computers, full digital connectivity; we take this the whole nine yards."

"A fully furnished and staffed, floating office? Just like being in the home office, I like that, Jackie. I like it a lot. Can you do that, make it so?"

"Yes, I see no reason why not. And the boatyard, I'd like to see it?"

"I'll incorporate our proposals into the deal I am finalising. That only leaves one thing adrift, Jackie; you. Can you get your Yachtmaster Ocean in the next few weeks; it does include powerboats, doesn't it?"

"If you mean a few months, then yes. I'll need to pass several exams and gather a lot of sea miles. The Yachtmaster sail is a lot more advanced than simple power, so there's nothing to worry about on that score. If I qualify for sail I automatically become passed for power, but it does not work the other way around. Why the rush?"

"I have already sold it to the Chinese. Sorry, I didn't know there were degrees of Yachtmaster, and well, we're stuck with it now. Plus, you do want your qualifications regardless, so here's your chance."

"In only a couple of months? Yeah, I can do that for you. I just need do the sea miles, knots to you. Let me make some calls when I get home."

I spent the night on their sofa, mumbled to Neal when he left for work, and slumbered until my phone rang. "Hello?"

"Jackie, it's Dan Roberts from Far and Away. Sorry I missed your call yesterday, but busy times are here. I need crew, a Captain in all but name, destination Florida, the day after tomorrow, how you fixed?"

"I need the sea miles for my Offshore. When do I depart?"

"Morning tide is five a.m. I'll need to embark you tomorrow evening, say eight p.m. at the marina. OK? Good, see you there."

The line went dead. I stared at the mobile phone and realised I had a lot to do and little time to do it in. From my peripheral vision I saw Jacqui come into view, "Coffee, sleepyhead?"

"You are a peach Jax, thank you."

"You're welcome. Breakfast in five, we're out of here in ten. Some of us have to work you know."

"No fried bananas on mine, thanks."

"What? Staffordshire oatcakes and fried bananas, I may try that, it sounds wonderfully nutritious, but not today. You better get moving."

I asked myself a question, 'What is it with girls and fried bananas for breakfast? Ladies also ruin good pizza my putting pineapple on it'. As usual regards the wiles of women, I had no answer.

Fortunately, there were no bananas, and a short time later I was nearing home. I'd called my solicitor on the way, asking to meet that day to oversee the contracts for renting my apartment. "Yes of course Mister Barleycorn, my pleasure. Sailing you say, international waters. You should think of health insurance, and make a will..."

My first stop was my home, to shower and shave. Home huh. The box apartment was a space I used; it could never be a home. Settling in a comfortable chair, I took stock. Neal was an old friend I trusted. He Mastered International Business in Canton, and was influential in the

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right places, especially in southern China. He spoke of partners there. However, he was not a wheeler-dealer, more a diplomat wishing to make international détente and business work. I admired his vision.

I checked the portfolio Neal had given me, which included print outs of the latest information. I would take digital copies with me, and buy a small laptop or tablet for the coming trip. I made a shopping list of other essentials as I threw things on the bed, and placed a naval style duffel bag nearby, packing as I went. Time slipped by and I realised I would not get everything done.

To wrest control of the situation, I called several estate agents, explaining that I was leaving the country for several months and needed everything of my life handling that day. I asked about renting out and managing my apartment. My third enquiry caused a pause and some muffled talking; I was soon speaking with the owner's daughter, "Are you are seeking full emergency evacuation service, Mister Barleycorn?"

"Jackie please, and I guess I am. I have to be out of here tomorrow, and I've no idea of when, or if I'll be coming back. Can you help me?"

"I'll be there at two o'clock. Label anything you want to keep as all the rest will either stay or go into storage. Does that seem reasonable?"

"Yes, but I have a busy day. Can you make it later, say five p.m.?"

"Yes, that will be fine, but it will cost you extra, see you then."

Again, I was left staring at my phone that had just gone dead. Why was everyone in such a hurry? I knew I was, but not enough to neglect common courtesy, surely.

I began to multitask, not something I was ever good at, but needs must. I went into my bank and sorted out my finances regards me being away for the foreseeable future. Norman Cheetham, I always chuckled at my solicitor's name, sorted out my rental agreement, set up Power of Attorney, addressed other matters, and he wrote my first ever Will.

My day was busy; I shopped, did laundry, packed, both for my trip and for storage, and was thinking about what I wanted to keep when the doorbell rang. Ms Estate Agent's daughter, Mari, no 'e', was haughty, overwhelming, and overdosed on sexual innuendo. But she was efficient and arranged everything I needed, including letting, storage, and helped me place blue stickers on personal stuff I wanted to keep. Apart from entertainment, computers, work files, and my acoustic guitar, there was surprisingly little else. Mari was professional, but became overly familiar and that was off-putting. We parted company at my door; I being assured things would be taken care of in my absence.

I was packing and thinking about dinner when my phone rang. "Jackie, Dan Roberts here. Change of plans, and nothing to do with us. I need you down here for four a.m. departure, can you make it?"

"Erm, yes I think so."

"Great, see you when you get here, and the sooner the better."

I finished packing, ate, and kept remembering little things I needed to do before I left. I labelled boxes to go to storage, to Neal, to Dawn, and set rubbish aside for the council tip. I took naval watch type power naps, as there was no time for a good sleep.

And so the first day of the rest of my life began on a moonless midnight, with a long, dark, and boring drive. Events thereafter were to take on a life of their own, of which I had no inkling at the time.

I arrived in Pompey [Portsmouth] at three a.m., and Dan Roberts introduced me to the crew. I stowed my duffle bag in my bunk, before meeting the voyage Captain, Brian Bellamy, and we set to getting ready to sail. We had an ocean of time ahead of us to chatter.

Brian took me to one side as soon as Dan left to return to his bed. "Well met me young laddie. Jack is it. Call me Brin. I'm here as a favour to Dan, but I'm too old for this malarkey thee knowst. Be that as it may, you come well recommended, so we will go with the flow." Brin chuckled at his own joke, and it took me a heartbeat to grasp his homonym and join in with his laughter.

He used his walking stick to turn to face me, and I looked down at his leg. "An old shark wound, laddie, so I will'ne be much use up top. You run this voyage, just keep the ship, the crew, and me sen safe. We'll be set fair to sail on your mark, but you better check that we are fully stocked before we weigh anchor. Be that as soon as ye can, no point in us loitering hereabouts."

It was the first time I had taken charge of a vessel at sea, well, for more than a fleeting enlightenment, and it suited me well. Regardless, the crew and I knew what to do, and we cast off just before four o'clock.

Once set fair I spoke with the two crewmen and we arranged a watch rotation of six hours, rather than the usual four about. Two of us would always be awake at any given time. Once set, I went below to confer with Brin. I found him blowing up an inflatable globe.

"Want me to have a puff?"

"Aye, thank ye laddie. Seems I no longer have the breath I used to."

I started to blow into the open end of the football sized globe, but capped it to ask, "I've never seen one of these before. What's it for?"

"Your first long haul?"

I nodded and he continued, "Ye been taught all the wisdom of the schools, but always remember there are other ways around. Like aeroplanes, I often follow them great circles about the globe. They are shorter routes, although the charts we sailors use may show otherwise.

"The kids really love this toy, but it gives us ideas of options. You'll need one; it is light, and packs away to nothing. Once you're done, put this rubber band around it, and discover our transatlantic course."

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Once the rubber band settled I noticed it passed through Paris, around and off the North American coast, and down through Miami. The route was strange when compared to the charts I was used to using. "Brin, I see the logic of this, insightful, yes. It's great, but sets us against the powerful Gulf Stream current and winds for the duration."

"That it does laddie, and I was testing you; teaching you also. The northern passage is the fastest all being well, but it won't be; we are in hurricane season, and that's the real reason we left when we did."

"Conventional wisdom dictates; go north and be fast, go south and take your time, or go centre and languish in the Doldrums'. Study the charts me'laddie, the weather patterns, and make your call before we pass Land's End. Remember, we're being paid to reach Fort Lauderdale as soon as practicably possible."

I studied the charts and gathered all the weather information I could. Hurricane central was where we were bound. I could have gone south, or southwest and cost us days, weeks even. I made the call, "We go North. Hoist the spinnaker and let's get moving."

Brin nodded his assent, but said nothing, so we did. The yacht was no slacker and we were making twelve knots through the water most of the time, meaning harbour in around twenty-five days. That is very, very fast in sailing terms, no engines allowed except for emergency.

Only once did we hit the roller-coaster of waves large enough to dwarf, then submerge us. We were running no sail aloft, set side-on to the current, and being buffeted by increasing winds. The radio informed us we were in a hurricane force three, and rising.

Little by little, we crabbed south of the great wind's grasp; so slowly it mattered not by our heartbeat's counts of either death or survival. We strapped Brin on deck to help hold the rudder true. We all wore life jackets and harnesses with lines clipped on to safety rails. Even wearing full wet weather gear, we were drenched by, and often within the ocean, the sea spray, and the ceaseless rain. The sky was dark as night as we held true together, if only because there was naught else to do.

Khaos, the ancient god of the winds and Biblical waters below the Firmament held power over us. Brin named him, and offered prayer for our safe passage. The crew laughed, but I wasn't so sure. I moved to stand beside him, not participating, but neither mocking either.

Finishing he stood tall and said, "I thank ye for standing by me. Never forget the real powers of this world, of Gaia, our Mother Earth."

"Named after the Greek Earth goddess, the Gaia theory has both scientific and philosophical components. She is theorized to be a living entity that is greater than the sum of all the living and non-living aspects of the Earth. Jackie, you should read James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, who sought to explain the many complex natural mechanisms that the Earth has for regulating things such as climate and biological diversity."

"The theory views the Earth is a sentient being that regulates the natural environment by balancing various aspects of it, making modifications to itself as necessary. Specific organisms such as humans, or entire ecosystems such as the oceans are included. Gaia represents complex and delicate balances that keep the oceans and atmosphere, the lakes and forests, and other things functioning properly in intricate and orderly ways, as if a living being controls it all, and Gaia certainly acts like one. I doubt Gaia is a sentient being, but the theory serves as a device for explaining the very complex functioning of nature in a way we humans can relate to the world we inhabit."

Talk continued for hours, and until the storm eased. Brin turned to leave for below, but grabbed my arm and added, "Take us home, son, this will be my last adventure. I'm getting too old for this nonsense."

Later, sipping seaman's rum up on deck, Brin told tall tales of olden times, especially about his younger days, and his adventures upon the salty main and ports of landing. He pointed out the stars he knew, and related their history, mythology, and significance, the way lifelong sailors might. His stories told of tales within tales and hidden truths. All one had to do was gaze at the stars, 'star-gazing' he called it; "Look, watch, see, and all will be revealed, eventually."

I became enrapt within his tales, but scoffed at the idea of mythical gods dictating our fate. But I learned a lot, and when sailing, I often relied upon the stars to guide me, so perhaps, more the fool were I.

At other times, he shared with me privately, like a father sharing the wisdom of ages with his favoured son. We became more than friends.

Due to our hasty departure and speed upon the waves, we made record time, dodging hurricanes before they became more than a squall. Brin chuckled, "Next time out we'll pay for our good fortune. The ocean can be a cruel mistress. She is a fickle friend, but she is a good provider."

Fort Lauderdale was essentially a suburb of Miami, and at first I liked the place, and then I did not. It all seemed a bit false to me. We handed over the yacht and said goodbye to the crew, they would find their own ways, as I would, later. Brin signed me off on sea mileage, and after formalities completed, he asked me to join him one week hence for dinner. He impressed upon me it could be important.

I was also ware of Neal's brief, so during the interim I asked around the local boat makers, large and small, especially bespoke. I made contacts and travelled throughout Florida. I came to loath the place, especially the heat, the cursed humidity, and all things wild, willing, and seeking any opportunity to eat me.

A company based in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, contacted me and we held a video conference. As a result, I went up to spend a day with them. I left late that evening suitably impressed, and knew we would be doing business. I realised during the flight back, that although

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the UK and Europe had a long history of building excellent small boats, the Americans were skilled in floating office design, and in many ways set the benchmark for the type of boats I needed. I followed other leads, visiting Mobile in Alabama, and heard the name Heesen Yachts spoken with reverence; based in The Netherlands, I planned to visit them.

My evening with Brin was a welcome release. As the meal came to a close he ordered Brandy, and when delivered, looked me in the eye.

"I have no way home, Jackie. These are facts of the sea, and the life you espouse. I can get us a delivery package to the Med, but I can't do it alone, so I need you to cover for me. Please take me home, Jackie."

I agreed, and some days later we set sail once more. Brin did not need a molly coddle, and on reflection, I'm sure he set me up. After the crossing east, we sailed boats out of, and towards Greece, Italy many times, France, Spain, and countless islands. This ensured I had more than enough coastal water miles logged in preparation for the Offshore examinations to come.

He relived old times and I gained some new memories. Brin and I took passage north to Holland to sail a Tall Ship, after which we took a charter to Denmark, then some days later, another.

I paid a visit to Heesen Yachts and was most impressed, but they were not interested in doing business with the Chinese, just for them to copy and use their decades of experience. I tried to interest them in some form of partnership and we parted as friends.

Days later, Brin and I accepted a charter from Amsterdam, which brought us home to the Solent. It was good to be back in Blighty and I was soon busy taking the Offshore examinations previously arranged through Dan. We celebrated my success the same evening, and during a quiet moment Dan told me of the delivery of a bespoke yacht out to Australia, "Are you interested?"

"Wow! Yes I am."

Dan promised to contact me to confirm details.

Brin was standing nearby and said, "That will get you your Ocean me laddie. Run me home and I'll tell ye a tale."

I saw him safely to his rear veranda and deck, where he told tall tales of the constellations as his gaze drifted within the night sky.

Grasping me, he pointed up with his free hand said, "That one, Jackie, see it low down in the sky; the Dog Star. Go there, if just for me. Follow her to the Centaur. Be the first one of us to sail the seas above."

I promised I would, although I had never been certain of what he actually meant; I presumed it was the drink talking and thought to look it up sometime. I never did. I promised to keep in touch, and I did.

Chapter 3 ~ Talisman

While Brin's life settled and stalled, mine had moved on. Although pleased with the prospect and adventures sure to come, I sometimes reflected that there must be more to life than being stuck for weeks, months sometimes, on a small boat at mercy of the sea. Making landfall and new friends in foreign ports brought balance and open-mindedness.

It was already summer when I returned to my old stomping ground, to set my affairs in order and prepare for the future. I had kept in touch with happenings in my old life by any means available, but it was good to see and spend time with old friends once again.

My first stop was at the family farm, where I told of adventures bold and brave. I'm sure my father thought me nuts, but my mother was more circumspect. Her Irish brogue was strong at times, "Son, I am so proud of you, and that you are seeking your fortune in foreign parts. This has always been the way of the Orr's and McGregor's.

"Jackie, you were always your own man, even as a spring lamb. I remember one school visit when your form tutor told us you were never one to follow the crowd. He said you would always consider a proposal, and then make up your own mind about it, even if you were the only one to reach that decision. The thing is you were often the only one who was correct. Not always mind, so be careful."

"Thanks Mum, I think it's to do with my Gaelic heritage."

"Ach, to be sure it is. You will stay here with us until you leave; I have your old room ready, and no buts. Now tell me all..."

I found it a little strange to be living at the farm again, but it was good for all of us. I was able to do odd jobs around the place, and talked to both of my parents as an adult. That's not to say I was there all the time, because I spent many days away. But it was time spent waiting.

The call came late one afternoon, Dan was brisk and businesslike, "Jackie, I have a new build sloop for delivery down under. It's a great opportunity, and it'll get you your full Ocean as a part of the deal. It won't leave for another month, but I need your commitment now."

"Yes, I'm in, what are the full details?"

"Great! You won't regret this. Oh, and I'll need you for sea trials and commissioning, Sarah has the details. Good, bye."

'Always in a hurry, unlike my folks', I mused. I called Sarah, Dan's Girl Friday, and between us, we arrived at firmed plans, details to be emailed to me before the end of work that day, which they were.

At last, I had a job and a timeframe, the two things that had been lacking from planning the rest of my life. The next element to put in place was Neal's plans for the Orient. I called him, and after catching up and briefing, we arranged to meet soon. I made similar plans with the estate agents, and regards other things I wanted to do. I would be busy.

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I spent time with friends nearby and far away, most notably with Dawn exploring Cannock Chase and Snowdonia, climbing mountains she insisted were only hills. Despite the exertion, we shared good times and most weekends.

Neal was busy. He had tendered his resignation in London and would soon leave the Diplomatic Corps. Preparing to move back home to Leek, he had been offered the nomination to become the local Parliamentarian, something I knew he wanted badly. He was planning, enacting his family future, and I envied him that.

He called me on the Tuesday of my first week back, "Jackie, I've full details of our Hong Kong boat business for you; you are still on board?"

"I am mate, but I need a timescale. I also need to go out there for a day and see what they are up to, get my feet on the ground."

The line went quiet for a moment, Neal considering his options no doubt. "I need to make some calls, how soon can you leave?"

"I can go at anytime to suit and the sooner the better."

The upshot was that Neal took emergency leave, he was not the type to throw a 'sick day'. We spent a long weekend in Hong Kong and after their help with visa issues, visited the proposed new maritime city on the Mainland. We met with local and regional government, both in Hong Kong and in Guangdong [Canton], and with the bosses of the new development.

Late on Saturday evening I was approached by a local Cantonese man, King Leurng was his anglicised name, but he deferred to Leurng San. "Barleycorn san, what you think of all this?"

"It looks like a fantastic opportunity."

"Hmmm," he chuckled. "These people play games and feast. I am a man of business. My business is building boats. You are free tomorrow, for lunch, yes?"

I shrugged my shoulders, looked around for a moment and felt out of place. "Yes."

The result was I learned a lot about Cantonese hospitality and work ethic. His factories were building modern catamarans and high-rise floating hamlets, military vessels also. He said, "I will be building what you acquire for us. But I know nothing about building a floating office, except what I would want myself. We have common ground, yes?"

"That means you will take my boats apart, plank by plank, and learn how to copy them. I understand that, but is there a better way? I may know of foreign investors with the necessary experience and designs. I may also be able to arrange for that technology and expertise in the field to come here and work alongside us, is that possible?"

He smiled and said, "Probable. Anything else?"

"Yes. Can I have a look inside that big catamaran; she's what, seventy foot long?"

"Sixty-eight feet actually. Yes by all means, come with me, but why?"

I did not reply until we were inside the large saloon that spanned the width of the boat. "I know this is a private contract, but what if you made this into an office?"

He stuttered, gawped at me, and then the large space before us. His eyes came alive as he spoke, "This is larger than my main office."

"Then make it so. Put a fully functional office here, storage, and bunks, heads down in the twin keels, then add a luxury deck above for entertaining business associates and relaxation. I'd also add a mast in the centre to support sail, thus saving fuel. With your local bridges I doubt you could do that in practice, but this is prime office space if you ensure the access channels and moorings."

"Brilliant, Barleycorn San, I will see to it. We can build many of our floating offices right here, we just need to redesign. You have great ideas, you think outside of the box, yes. You will come and work for me?"

"Thank you, but no, and please call me Jackie. I'll work alongside you but for myself. And in my case, there is no box, I think without it."

"Come Jackie, let us talk details of our joint venture..."

That did not conclude our first exchange, because he liked to drink long. It paved the way for us to form direct channels of communication, and later, an alliance. To achieve the greater objective, we needed a foreign business partner willing to share their boatbuilding expertise and enter into a partnership with us. It would be my job to make those arrangements, as we still required single hull, state of the art, floating offices to copy, plus the latest technology to make them effective.

On our return flight, Neal was buoyed by our success and had signed contracts to ensure his language school would be a big player. I had my own reasons to look towards the future, and shared with him regards my time spent with King Leurng. We would keep in touch.

The reality of our daily lives hit as soon as our overnight plane's wheels touched UK tarmac. No sooner had we arrived, than I was booking a flight to Portsmouth. I heard Neal in the background making similar, if different arrangements; we hardly had a moment to say 'fare-thee-well', but our exchanges during the flight had confirmed our mutual commitment. All that was left to do was make it happen.

Hours later, jet-lagged and tired to the core, I was aboard a brand new vessel readying for sea trials. I had never done this before, but I had done my research. The aim was to demonstrate proper operation of the main and auxiliary machinery, including monitoring, alarm, and safety systems, under realistic conditions.

I would deliver this boat down under, Australia, so I wanted her right. She was a lovely boat, for coastal waters. She had sea-going pedigree that I assessed under trail. She would be good enough once final fixes were completed and fully fitted out for our delivery voyage.

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It was days later, late on Friday afternoon by the time we had signed off on the sea trials. My intention had been to head north that night and spend the interim before the long voyage, back home with family and seeing friends, but driving was no restful way to enjoy my last few days ashore. However, Dan had called a celebration that night at a local pub with a live band. I was tempted, booked my usual hotel that was nearby, and I decided to join them.

It turned out to be a fun night, but late the following morning I sat on the hotel bed, all packed up, and shopped out for the trip. I was ready to go, check out, and head west to Plymouth, and new adventures afloat. But I was ready four, perhaps five days early. What was I to do?

Fate, a Lady fair, chose that moment to first step into my life. My phone rang, "Dawn, great to hear from you, what can I do for you?"

"Hi Jackie, ah yes. I need a favour, that is if you're not about to sail off into the blue yonder for a day or so."

"Actually, I'm sitting here wondering how to occupy myself for the next few days, and spending them touring the local bars, either here or in Plymouth is the best I've come up with. You have needs, options?"

"Splendid! Do I ever. I have my first paying commission, photography. I need a boat and someone to drive it so I can shoot seals, whales, and all things fun in and about the sea."

"Here is better. How about Cowes, the Needles, a great backdrop."

"Perfect. You are a love. Remind me to marry you some time...But just not now, I am busy, busy. I'm waiting for the Heathrow connection for Ali's flight. You remember my brother from Persia, Iran nowadays, sorry. Well, he's flying in, due any minute, and we're planning to catch up on family stuff. You get on well with him don't you?"

"Hah! Very well, I still remember the last time we nipped out for a swift pint. Gone half the day we were, and you never knew."

"I did, actually, but thought your boys' time to be important to you."

"Ah."

"Doesn't matter Jackie, you had fun, and so did I. See you around two o'clock tomorrow in Pompey. Book us separate rooms at your hotel, The Regal, yes? Bye for now."

I started to reply, but heard the dial tone instead. "Why is everyone so busy and caught up in their own world?" I wondered aloud.

I shrugged the thought aside and made a call to a very old friend, the man who first taught me to sail. "Tony, how are you..."

"Fascinating, look I need a really big favour, a boat for tomorrow early evening, Isle of Wight and maybe overnight afloat. What you got?"

"Hmmm. The old Saddler 32 you first trained on is laying idle, but due a small service as she's hired out from Friday evening."

"Today is Saturday, so I'll have her back no later than late on Wednesday. Thanks Tony. Sunset OK?"

We did the deal, we did the sail, Dawn got her photographs, then had to leave for home to process them and send them off. I got wrecked with Ali on Monday evening. We ate a stout breakfast, one without fried bananas. I received several phone calls, the upshot being I had to be in Plymouth early on Thursday for victualling the voyage, departure as soon as we were ready to sail, most likely Friday before the sun rose.

Later, Ali surprised me with a going away party, again at the local pub. I remember little of it, except it was great fun at the time.

I was still hung-over, napping when Dawn rapped upon my door, "Thank you so much, you are a marvel." She took a good look at me and said, "Oh dear, good night was it? Did you two put the world to rights?"

"Erm, quieter, please."

"No, not a chance. Get dressed for lunch, and I'll tell you a story. Afterwards I will give you a present, and send you off. Sound good?"

I mumbled, but woke up and followed her advice. It was quieter than any other option. I met her in a nearby restaurant, and we chatted.

"Jackie, I had the strangest thing happen to me, just after I spoke to you, and before meeting Ali. There was this dithering old woman who wouldn't leave me alone. I eventually realised that she was lost in London and needed help to get back to her hotel.

"I got her a cab, and as I settled her in the back, she gripped me urgently and with more strength than I gave her credit for. She said the weirdest thing. Her words were most odd, olde worldly,

"This lucky charm not yours to keep,

Amulet meant for those who seek.

Yours is not its power to hold,

But for another who ventures bold'.

"Before I knew it the taxi was gone. She was gone, and I was left holding this pendant. I hadn't really thought much about it since. The style is not something I would ever wear. Anyway, it's a man's talisman, too big for a wee slip of a girl like me.

"However, I got the impression, or was it something she said? that this ward was a keep-safe of the high seas. And so here it is, for you to wear; it will suit you well. Bend down so I can put it over your head."

I bowed my head, just because it was easier than thinking.

"Jackie, take this and remember me. Wear it close to your heart. It is jade, and look, carved in one piece. See how the white background supports the golden yellow of the dragon relief. I am told it is Chinese, and will bring you luck and fair weather to a foreigner who travels afar."

The pendant felt right, settled easily, and I felt obliged to respond, inadvertently using my rare, larger than life persona. "Wow! This is awesome, are you sure?"

"Yes. You are the only person who I know of who is 'venturing bold'. Idiot that you are, but I love you for not being like all the others.

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"Never change Jackie, promise me that. Anyway, this pendant is your problem now, so wear it for that crazy old woman.

"Now, you remember I found a rough carnelian in that Welsh stream? Well, I had it polished up and mounted in white gold. Fingers please ... Perfect fit. This is from me to you. Look at it and remember me. Bon voyage Jackie, I'll have a fish and chips supper waiting for your return from Down Under. Just come back to me one day, that's all."

"I promise to return for our fish supper as soon as I am able."

"Good man. Dawn stood, hugged me, kissed me briefly on the lips, and left with nary a backward glance. I watched her leave and muttered to myself, "Too independent, we both are. Shame, but I will return."

With departure due anytime soon, I visited my old friend, Brin. He was in good spirits and was soon telling tales of the sea.

My phone rang. It was Dan; "You leave Plymouth tomorrow, morning tide. You'll get your Ocean from this, so look sharp. See me at the office before you head out, an hour's time would be good."

He was gone, the phone dead, again. Busy people, I shrugged, they had no time for anything or anyone, except themselves. In a hurry, I said farewell to Brin and wished him well. As I departed, he repeated, "Follow the dog to the Centaur, Jackie, be the first and all will be well."

I presumed him delusional with age, or was it wishful drinking? He made little sense, but I knew I would follow his wish as far as I was able.

I met briefly with Dan a short time later. He was busier than a bee on steroids. He handed me a folder of instructions, and a contract to sign. "You'll be taking the scenic route because of Somali pirates. That's around the Horn of Africa and across the Indian Ocean to Melbourne, Australia. I have good contacts there and all is in place for when you debark. They build boats as well, so I may have something for you to bring back as Captain in your own right. Call me when you are settled..."

He was going to say more, but diverted to answer the ringing telephone on his desk, and let out a stream of expletives. I stopped by my hotel to check out and firmed up plans for leaving Blighty. I called my parents, Dawn, Neal, and other friends, and made sure I was well prepared for a long voyage, farther than I had ever sailed before.

"The Horn of Africa," I mused aloud. "This is sure to be a bitch."

Inherently, sailors fear making only three voyages: Roald Amundsen's Northwest Passage, Cape Horn around the tip of South America, and where I was headed, the Cape of Good Hope. It is rightly called the Cape of Storms, because of, well, the big storms that happen there. Storms that would make my last encounter near the Bahamas seem like a punt in the park.

I was prepared, but no one can ever be ready for such a trip, there were too many variables, apart from the weather.

Chapter 4 ~ Heading East

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?"

I had met the captain Phillip 'Philly' Greg during sea trials and we got along well.

"Jackie, I'm glad to see you, come on up."

He showed me to my bunk and then took me aside, "This trip is for your Ocean, right, and you already know the boat, so I'll sit back and let you do the work. You need the sea miles as acting captain, and I've already done this too many times to need the hassle. We have a deal?"

"That suits me fine Captain."

"Philly it is, except for official of course. The name always reminds me of the States and home. Anyway, we have a young and willing crew, but only me and Jake have been round the Cape before; your first time?"

"Yes, I hear it can be a bitch."

"The mother hound of all bitches, but we'll be fine. We'll get to planning and preparation for passage after you stow your gear. Regards your Ocean, we need to show that you have made the navigational plan, checked the material condition of the yacht and her equipment, and the storage of spare gear, fuel, water, and victuals. Let's do that now so we are ready to cast off in around three hours' time."

As tasks were completed and logged off, I got a good feeling about the crew; they were experienced and knew what to do, and when. We cast off on schedule and made good headway west, and then south, skirting the Bay of Biscay towards the Canary Islands.

We stopped in Gran Canaria for victualling, refuelling both fresh water and diesel, and discharging of black water [Effluent]. Philly said, "At every stop we top up everything, take on fresh victuals, and get rid of the waste. Remember that Jackie, it can be vital on a long voyage. I'm giving the crew ten hours ashore, you want to join them?"

"No, I'm fine. I am tempted, but I'm not on holiday, this is my prospective livelihood and need to learn this stuff. I'll stray by a local taverna later to get some real food and coffee, otherwise I'm good."

"You surprise me, nicely. Come on then, lets heave-to, get this tub sorted, and then I'll treat you when we're done. I know this lovely bar..."

We prepared to cast off the following day, the last of the crew made it back aboard just as the tide was coming high. We departed, and the voyage south was fair. We made an unscheduled stop in Praia, Cape Verde Islands, due to a small technical problem with the radio.

I was surprised to be given the Captaincy just before we cast off; "She's all yours Captain Barleycorn, take us out."

It was not a big thing, but then again, it was. Trust was given and expected, and I did my duty. We made good time to Cape Town, but had an absolute bitch of a leg out into the deeper waters around the

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Horn of Africa. None of the crew had ever experienced such hostile seas. We endured, survived, but lost more than one day in the process.

The crew were ragged, but as temporary Captain, I said to Philly, "It is my intention to call an unscheduled stop in Port Elizabeth. The crew are strung out and need twenty-four hours shore leave. I would also make repairs to several sails, and have the engines serviced, if only because that was the most horrific experience I have ever endured."

Gregg looked at me and smiled, "That will put us two days behind schedule, and we may face a financial penalty for late delivery."

"I don't really care about that, the crew are my first concern, Sir. My second concern is delivering this boat in pristine condition, which obviously it is not. With your permission, we will take a thirty-two hour layover in Port Elizabeth; the tides will be a close call, but it is possible.

"We will take a southern Great Circle route to Australia, allowing us to catch the big current, and deploy the largest spinnaker, which should gain us many knots over several days. I think we can pull one day back if the weather is fair to good. I also propose to gain another day by not stopping in Bunbury to discharge Black Water and re-supply. Therefore, in Port Elizabeth we take on extra provisions. This should bring us in on schedule."

Philly smiled and nodded his head, "Impressive. You get the Black Water situation sorted, and you got the Captaincy straight into Melbourne, and your Ocean Certificate in the bag. Get it right."

Given the nod, I embraced the role, but due to vagaries of wind and current, we spent forty-two hours in Port Elizabeth. However, the extra time was not wasted as there was work to do, of course. People continued working on the boat, restoring her fully ship-shape.

Any trans-oceanic crossing exacts a heavy toll on almost every system on a sailing vessel. Rigging was inspected, the sails examined and re-installed on their furlers. Engine oil was drawn and analyzed, the shaft stuffing box repacked. The water-makers membranes were flushed, the propane lines checked, and tanks refilled. The main water tanks had to be emptied, flushed, emptied and refreshed until the lines ran clear. Diesel tanks were emptied, the contents spun through a series of filters to remove any algae, then the tanks polished and refilled. All through-hull fittings were checked and rechecked...the list was almost endless and, even with professional help, it took days to complete.

I sent a boy up the mast in a Bosun's chair; his mission, undo all electronic fittings and spray with Boe-Shield, let dry and re-attach. Then spray all shrouds and stays with WD-40, then more Boe-Shield. Other men donned a wetsuits and grabbed tanks out of a locker, then slipped under the water to replace all the anodes, finishing off the underwater work with a light scrub-down of the anti-fouling paint, clearing the ship's bottom of speed-robbing plant-life.

We cast off virtually three days behind schedule, and once at sea and set fair, I called a meeting of all crew. "Listen up, we are three-days behind schedule. We will use the Southern Great Circle route and West Wind Drift, hoist as much sail as often as possible, and head directly for Melbourne. We will have a problem with Black Water, as normally we would be pissing over the side before we reach Bunbury on Australia's western coast. Let's begin that way. Hoist the spinnaker."

I dismissed the crew, and made a point of relieving myself on the leeward side of the boat. The message was very clear to all aboard. I noticed Gregg chuckling to himself as he came beside me to relieve himself. Afterwards he patted me on the back, but did not say a word.

My first time in the Indian Ocean was a breeze, in more ways than one. The wind was right, and we soon gained one day back. We were closing on two days, when I was called to the Captain's station below. "We just lost all electronic aides Jackie." Philly switched off the main computer that ran Sat-Nav, and all sundry systems. I almost panicked. He grinned like a Cheshire cat – we were running blind!

I looked him in the eyes, "You cannot be serious!"

A rueful smile appeared on his face, "Oh, but I am. This is my mettle detector, so show me what you got."

"OK, it's part of the Ocean qualification, and I'm up for the challenge, Captain. Hmmm. I've not handled a sextant for many years, although I was always good with my Breton Plotter."

I still had all the information I needed, but it was mechanical and analogue, not instantly computed via digital display. First, I dove to the charts and fixed our last known position. This I checked, but I would need the night sky and stars to be sure; there was no hint of land in sight.

I updated our position hourly using the Sun's traverse by day, and the more accurate star charts at night. I continually corrected course as we continued towards Australia. Gregg kept a watching brief, switching power back on to check progress, but I was given no hint or information.

Meanwhile, the crew hoisted as much sail as often as possible, and the Black Water tank remained remarkably empty; it appeared the crew had been doing the bulk of their personal business over the side.

The boat passed due south of Windy Harbour at the Southeastern tip of Australia, before Philly called everyone to attention. "Jack Barleycorn, you failed. You are one degree out on your calculations – over 4,000 sea miles. I have never before known anyone get within two degrees of error over such a great distance, and that person was me. You took a calculated risk using the currents and winds of the 'Roaring Forties', but it worked. Bosun, break out our best Rum!"

My heart was pounding; it was moments before I realised I got it right using medieval equipment. I turned in astonishment, as Philly

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chinked his glass, "Well done Captain Barleycorn. Bottoms-up. Miraculously the electronic aides are now back online."

I shared a tippie with the crew, but I continued to act as Captain without a word from Philly. We brought the yacht safely to mooring, twelve hours early, and in great shape. We had time to discharge, provision, and clean before the official handover to the new owner, who was mightily impressed.

A couple of days later, Philly inveigled me to drift up to Sydney with him; on offer was my long sought after Yachtmaster Ocean. Philly gave the examiner a full report of my captaincy, and the subsequent examination turned out to be a discussion of my recent experiences afloat, and one of the easiest exams of my life.

Later I met with Philly and his great seafaring pals, Gary and Shirl, marine biologists who wandered the seas and treated us to a night out. They met with many friends, and I was introduced to Jeff, who owned several sailing companies, including a shipyard building small to medium sized boats; we got on at once.

By the end of the week, I was Captain in my own right, delivering a luxury boat to Tian Jin, somewhere approximate to Beijing. They had a great sailing community, but not much else. Initially I was disappointed with China because everything was all so new and without substance.

I went home alone, despite offers of delightful female company, and I always slept alone. Perversely, my own biological clock was ticking to its own rhythm, and I sometimes felt the need to settle down and have children. It was becoming a desire, so when Leurng San asked me to join him to discuss buying boats for his shipyards to copy, I set about escaping my personal desires and embraced the larger world once more.

Leurng San paid for, and joined me on jollies to The States and Europe. We got some great deals all around the world, but no partner to work with us in China. However, I already had a plan and left to see Jeff in Australia. We had previously discussed matters via email and I already knew his company would buy in as partners, trading expertise for a slice of the cake. None were disappointed with the outcome.

Once details were arranged, I caught up with Gary and Shirl who were due to leave on a new commission a few days later. We were becoming great friends as we chilled, Gary told me of a floating office going for a song, but it was moored in Fiji. The wife of the deceased owner wanted rid of it, and the estate settled as quickly as possible.

We departed early in the morning and on arrival, I found the Fijians were very friendly. I was treated exceptionally well and was formally introduced to the recent widow, whom left me with her male assistant. The price was very fair; cheap if the boat with only delivery mileage was as good as was stated. Remnants of the regular crew were recalled, and I set foot aboard later that afternoon.

It was sixty-seven feet long, wider than most, and with the aid of hydrofoils, could exceed forty knots. It was a floating office, with saloon and galley. Aft was an executive apartment, if on the small scale, and the focsle was for staff and crew quarters. Most stowage was below, set in the hull. It was better than anything I had seen, or purchased, and I wanted to complete the deal as quickly as possible. We hastily arranged a short sea trial, and all was well. I signed a commitment to purchase and called Jeff, he agreeing to arrange payment, delivery details, and use the boat as a template for our activities in Canton.

I completed my business and sat back content. The Fijians loved to party and I was enveloped within the atmosphere and celebrations of a great day's work well done.

Somewhere within the mix of friendships new and alcohol, I became distracted by a most unusual and beautiful young woman. She seemed perfect, yet unworldly. I remember she spoke in odd ways, almost like poetry, and late in the night, I remember agreeing to visit the Cook Islands with her.

Shortly afterwards I was airborne and en route. The pilot was old and had seemed hesitant. I kept an eye on him until the girl distracted my attention, and rose to refresh our drinks. I never saw her again.

Abruptly, the pilot slumped forwards, becoming deathly pale; a heart attack. The plane started to dive, as I hastily donned a life jacket while scrambling forwards to help, but to no avail. No sooner had I sat in the co-pilots seat, desperately trying to buckle the unfamiliar harness, than we hit water, somersaulted, and came broadside onto the rocks. The port wing ripped away as the light plane rent apart. It lurched as rocks dismembered the airframe, then shook mortally injured, and took on a rush of water. The plane capsized, and I was catapulted through the broken windshield, and flung into the night to meet my fate.

§

I was tumbling.

Within the night came the rending sound, of wood and metal.

The water was cold and salty. I thrust out my arms protectively. Pain erupted as sharp rocks tore into flesh and bone. My joints bent impossibly as head and stone collided in union of death. Floundering wildly as hurt and crashing waves engulfed me, the panic of unforeseen death enveloped me in the undertow, before smashing my body once more unto the rocks.

Later, sallow, raddled otiose, cadaverous within a vast nothingness I ceased to exist. There was nothing — nothing but the relentless swell of grey water and the ceaseless taste of brine.

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Moon, and sun, and moon once more completed their daily survey upon the greatness of waters below. Despite my life jacket, I felt my life draining away. Salt water enveloped me. It was gorging upon me, and I willingly become its fodder.

My feet scraped rock and sand that I barely registered. From deep within, I sensed the spark of life returning.

The incessant roar of raging sea competed within the cacophony of sounds that ricochet around my salt-addled brain. There was the regular thud of something weary, something heavy, my blood whispering tales of nightmares and enlightenment that remained just out of reach.

Unexpectedly, a quiet calm embraced me. A soft, empathetic female voice entered my disparate thoughts and beguiled me,

“Move now my wayward waif, soon you will be safe.”

I clamoured for a moment of sanity. My perception cleared with the feel of soft sand beneath my hands, and the wash of brine over them, salt gouging on new and bloody wounds. I tried to stand, unsteady, and half rose before crashing into the foaming strand once more.

The pull of the strangely familiar voice was far stronger than my weak will to reside. It empowered me, crawling like a tentative toddler, half-aware. I thought to open my eyes, and found they were already working to try to decipher the strange and almost surreal world I had become a part of.

I comprehended mere snapshots: beach, bushes, rocks picked out of the senselessness nightscape before me. My mind began to wander, but was pulled back by the calming feminine influence one last time. Her silvery and almost feathery tongue entreating me,

“A little farther unto the rocky lot, then rest in peace my child besot.”

Galvanized by her words, like an automaton, I placed one hand before the other, crawling. Somehow, my knees kept in step, lucidity beyond me. I reached a rocky outcrop, floundering up, and higher still, as her irresistible will commanded. I fell into a sheltered crevice and descended once more into my living nightmare hell.

My dreams lay scattered like briars and nettles around a sepulchre, as life ebbed and flowed from within my deepest being.

Ebbed, flowed, and flowered.

Ebbed, flowed, and flowered once more – each time a little stronger than the last. I began to heal, cocooned within the womb-like bower between the unforgiving rocks, as with daybreak, my body dried and warmed beneath the saturnine sun. In due course, my mind became less scattered, my consciousness persevered, and my sanity prevailed.

My ordeal was over.

My ordeal was just beginning.

Chapter 5 ~ Castaway

I awoke battered and bruised, my limbs sprained but not broken, both my mind and body somehow intact. Cast adrift, weary with worry and desperate to survive, I recall little of those first few days as castaway. I did what I needed to do to survive.

Weakened by duress and ravaged by hunger, I ate raw fish and prawns from rock pools, and gulped fresh water from a stream. In time, I made fire, shelter, a signal beacon, and endured to stay alive. At best, it was harsh; I daren't recall the worst of it for fear of losing my sanity.

Of my meagre possessions, which survived in the pockets of my jeans, the most valuable were my two butane lighters. I would need to learn how to make fire, but had time to experiment. I was destined to quit smoking, sometimes using the surviving cigarettes as tinder to start my fire. Otherwise, I had my wallet with pen and useless cash, and the jewellery I was wearing: A fire diamond signet ring, a jade Buddha pendant from China, plus a curious jade dragon pendant and carnelian ring my friend Dawn had given me before I left England.

My new home was a headland that abutted massive volcanic walls impossible to climb. They curved around, away from me, their inner secrets to withhold. Because of this, I named the peninsula The Outlands, and made permanent camp across the seven-mile headland from where I came ashore. The Village, as I named it, was not directly exposed to the great South Pacific Ocean and was sheltered from the prevailing wind. It was bisected by a stream, and open to sheltered waters, evidenced by a ridge of peaks some miles distant, the caldera of a long dormant volcano becoming a lagoon, my larder. Crabs and lobsters were plentiful, as were tubers. One was a starchy potato like root I knew from China as *wu tao*; it was healthy and very filling.

Those first few days were brutal, made worse by my weakened state. My survival hung in the balance, my death one misstep away. I invented tools, and from those made better ones. I made fire from two pieces of wood, eventually perfecting a bow drill. I also made spears, later adding stone tips for fishing. I needed little protection, as the headland seemed devoid of mammals. There were no snakes, mice, or seemingly anything at all. Neither flies nor mosquitoes, but there were several bee colonies. It was most unusual, as if selected.

I made string from twisting long, weeping strands of sturdy grass, and later bark rope from tree trunks. I crafted carryalls and fishing nets, and always carried an agate knife and long coil of string with me.

I scoured the entire headland, finding raw materials to improve my shelters and perfected my construction techniques. Older huts I kept for storage of materials and firewood, as my new settlement expanded, becoming my home.

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I built a new hut near the lagoon, dedicating it as a kitchen and food hall, adapting a small outcrop of rock for use as a versatile cooker. Later, farther away, I found a gully to act as my latrine, it draining away from the village. Nearby, I created a kitchen garden and transplanted herbs and other plants to ease my daily search for food. I found several deep rock pools above the normal waterline that became places to store crabs, lobsters, and a few fish. I discovered salmon, one of my favourite foods, but made sure not to overfish.

Over the course of time my life settled. I was no longer living from day to day. I had food in store, firewood also. My focus subtly shifted from merely staying alive, to planning improvements and expanding my realm. That is not to say I became comfortable, there was still too much new and unknown to explore.

At night my gaze swept up into the stars above, so clear and close I felt I could reach out and touch them. I felt humbled, feeble, small, and inconspicuous when admiring their steadfast might.

All too often, my thoughts turned to home – what I had lost – was I cast away forever, to die alone? A compulsive need began to gnaw at my wellbeing; I needed to mark the passage of my life. To the interior was a wide passage between two rocky outcrops. There I daily marked the passage of time, four vertical lines, and a slash, repeat.

Days turned into weeks, becoming months, as all thought of rescue ebbed away, long gone, the girl, the pilot, presumed dead. At times, I felt imprisoned, cast away for the duration, beleaguered without hope.

At other times, I was at ease with my situation and functioning as a primitive man might have done, thousands of years before. As the prospect of rescue diminished with the passing days, my thoughts turned to escape. I collected long branches, stout tree trunks, and manhandled them to the shore. I planned to make a raft using cross members and my toughest string to make it sturdy, but what to use for a sail or paddle. When completed I had faith it would cross the lagoon, but how would it fare in the ocean nearby; and where was I anyway?

As I settled into a comfortable existence, work on my raft slowed, as the worry of not finding land and dying of thirst at sea increased. Was the risk worth it; I was becoming less and less certain it was. However, I started to collect bottle gourds and once the contents were consumed, dried them and made stoppers. They would hold water and could act as buoyancy aides. I worked to make them watertight, as good as airtight to my mind and limited resources, and the passing days blurred into the repetitive routines of staying alive.

The sentry rock of the beach near the village prevailed as an imposing column against the might of ocean. It was marked with strange symbols, almost like runes. I climbed it from time to time and looked out over my kingdom, at night gazing up at the stars above.

I made regular trips into the interior of the peninsula, often stopping to refresh or bathe at the large egg-shaped lake that occupied the centre. I had fashioned a large carryall backpack, and set off early one morning to replenish supplies of things that grew elsewhere: seed heads for tinder, and razor shells. I also needed to mark the passage of growing seasons for my inland larder: fruits and tubers aplenty.

I collected lumps of agate from which to fashion blades, and added pumice to my load. I stopped to rest by a southerly stream. The area reminded me of happy times in Snowdonia, Wales; Dawn and I as we pretended to be living wild off the land. I smiled wryly in retrospect at our playful pretence, now I was doing so for real.

I turned my mind abruptly to the present, before maudlin thoughts of times past could grip me, and spied a red pebble in the stream. I reached for it. It looked like a Carnelian, but needed polishing. I pocketed it, and picked up my pack. I took the direct route back, crossing the deep and steep-sided divide that separated the southerly shore from the more sheltered area where I lived. I kept close to the volcano walls, where a rim ran around the caldera of the headland home like an unmade track.

The route was one I rarely travelled, as the divide could be treacherous underfoot and difficult to climb. The adjoining track offered little of worth but rock and scrubby brush. I had almost reached the stream that fed the egg-shaped lake, when I saw paired standing stones less than two feet high. I looked closely, and could make out ancient symbols, probably of runic derivation. I did not stop long, because the day was passing, my pack heavy, and the sun was setting quickly.

Then I saw it, a shimmer of darkness in my peripheral vision. I looked and there was nothing. I retraced my steps, and it came again.

Fixing where I knew the aberration to be, I dropped my pack and headed directly for it, passing between the two standing stones on my way. Despite knowing whereabouts it was, the anomaly was hard to find. In time, I found it and crouched low into a porch concealed within a cleft of rock, and crawled inside.

This led to an alcove, and set into the volcanic walls adjacent, was a black chamber. Despite the thought of ravening beasts waiting below, I plucked up my courage, and swung my legs inside. By feel of foot, I found steps leading down into a cavern made entirely of unnaturally smooth rock. As my eyes adjusted to the low level light, I noticed the black rock seemed to trap glittering stars within. One side of the cavern was covered by a rock fall. The other was divided into shallow, panel sections marked by slender columns that by finger-feel, bore runes.

I could make no sense of what I saw and felt. The glyphs obviously meant something, but to whom? Worried by the quickly approaching dusk, I took one last look back from the steps before leaving. The room

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was perfectly formed, just like the upper half of a three dimensional heart. I left at once, and made it back to camp in the evening half-light.

That evening I was restless, but could not understand why. I stared down from the lagoon edge of the village at the beach some twelve feet below, and looked over to the volcano walls. Still unsettled, I headed towards the causeway of a ramp that gave easy access to the sand and surf below. I wandered aimlessly, before I took myself up to the top of the sentry rock, and stared out across the infinity of time and space. A calming peace enveloped me, and I fell asleep.

I woke with a start as daylight broke the horizon. That was not what bothered me. I was clutching bone, the remains of a hand. In my sleep, it seemed I had dislodged a clump of hardy grass within the rocky top, and was left staring at aged bones, and a strange black stone they held.

It reminded me of the hidden cavern, and I examined it carefully. It was identical; star like flashes entrapped within the two-inch diameter round that was concave on both sides. It was most odd. I pocketed it, and made my way down for breakfast.

The day passed in normal fashion, although I did manufacture a new knife from the agate, and planted some herbs I had found in my kitchen garden. I was tired from my recent exertions, and slept early and soundly that night. I woke early, before dawn, which was my usual, and stretched. My hand touched something near my head.

I froze knowing nothing should be there, before leaping out of bed and drawing my knife.

I strained for comprehension, staring at a small parcel wrapped in banana leaves, and neatly tied with a wrap of grass-like string. Grabbing my spear in total alarm, I poked the parcel; it was dead. Worried about interlopers, I searched my home, and the village for any sign of intruders. There were none. The beach was devoid of tracks, as was the only other approach to my camp from the heartland. I doused my head with cold water from the stream and drank deeply.

Stealthily, I crept over to my home, and poked by head inside. The package remained, taunting me. With my knife in one hand, my spear in the other, I cautiously approached. The package remained unmoved. I probed it with my spear, before flicking it over and slashing it with the knife. The inanimate object of my consternation was dead. The innards revealed a wisp of whiteness, reminiscent of cooked rice. I squatted down, seeing before me what appeared to be a common rice parcel, familiar to me from my days in Canton. Why was it there?

I reached forward tentatively with my left and weaker hand, and briefly probed the inside before jumping backwards. The rice package remained where it was, unmoved. Needing an end to the nonsense, I stepped boldly forwards, and grabbed it, breaking it in two. It revealed a sticky rice wrap containing fruit. I tried a morsel, which tasted good. I

took a bite, very good. I ate it all, reasoning that if somebody had wanted to kill me in my sleep, they would already have done so.

The rice packages continued to arrive each morning, before the hint of light. I could only conclude I was not paranoid, someone, somewhere was looking out for me. But whom, and why. Where were they? I tried to avoid thinking about how the parcels arrived; my sanity of lonesome exile was already stretched too far.

By then, summer was upon me. I harvested and experimented with preservation. Like Canton, it was hot. The difference between length of day and night being about two hours. I was in the Southern hemisphere, within the Tropic of Capricorn, and marooned somewhere within Earth's largest ocean. That was the nearest I could pinpoint my location.

One day I worked unusually hard, hauling large timbers with which I planned to make a new and superior dwelling. I became exhausted and it was all I could do to eat cold food before falling into a deep sleep. I woke well before my usual time and discovered rice package was not there. I hid my open eyes with an arm, and watched the spot. Ten minutes later the air shimmered with white sparks of light, and the rice package appeared. I stared at it. That was impossible, yet I had just witnessed it. Teleportation! All I could utter in total astonishment was, "Wow! Beam me up Scotty."

My mind lurched. I stared at the spot dumfounded. I was close to the edge of lunacy. Instead of falling into the abyss, I whirled around and without thought, climbed the sentry rock. I stared out into the nothingness for a long, long time, before diving into the ocean. The security of nature washed away my wounds, both physical and mental. Renewed in acceptance, I returned to my home, and got on with my life. Any other resolution embraced madness. I untied the rice parcel, eating with gusto. During the days that followed, the normal metre of my life resumed, with the accepted inclusion of teleported rice packages.

The questions of how and why were never far from my conscious mind, but I refused to try to answer them. My sanity remained intact.

Late one day I was chopping dry wood for my fire, using a new axe I had fashioned from agate, when I was struck by a revelation. It was so obvious I could not believe I had missed it. How could rocks fall from a perfectly intact ceiling?

My mind replayed my inspection of the cavern of black stone, and there was no doubt in my mind. The roof above the rock fall was perfect. The rocks did not fall, somebody put them there, what were they hiding?

I departed at the cusp of the coming dawn, and made directly for the cavern. After my eyes acclimatised to the low-level light, that seemed brighter than before, all was revealed. The ceiling was intact. I spent the entire day hauling rock out of the cavern; there were tons of it. The largest I rolled or levered away, and before exhaustion overtook me,

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I had revealed nearly all of a large circle made of the same star-lit black stone. The light grew dimmer outside, and I had to call it a day.

The next morning my muscles were aching. I stretched my limbs against the hurt, which numbed as I began my day. I packed more than previously, including extra food and the ubiquitous rice package. I had a mission to complete, and knew this would be a day of discoveries.

After several hours, I had cleared the cavern, and was facing a circle about seven feet in diameter. It stood proud of the floor, the encircling lip being nine inches high and slightly rounded at the top. The surface of the inner round was slightly concave, beset with stars that radiated out from a dark centre, like concentric spirals. It was most odd. Nearby stood a counter with cupboard-like box beneath, it reminded me of a rostrum, a workspace.

I took a short break to clear my mind and ease my sore muscles, before returning to examine everything with fresh eyes. The cavern looked exactly as I would expect a transit point to be. The circle would be for doing something and the area to one side for goods or waiting.

I hoped to glean some knowledge from the strange stand, which was again seamless, but the more I probed, the less I understood. There was nothing on the top or sides, and no cupboard underneath. The rear appeared to be part of the cavern walls.

Disheartened, I turned to scrutinize the circle itself, I could not find the slightest hint of a join and was forced to assume it had been manufactured as one whole.

I shook my head and wondered. It was almost lunchtime, so I took a break at the nearby stream, eating half a lobster and a Wu Tao. I needed time for thinking, but with no resolution, I headed back, throwing my carryall down within the circle. I spent several hours trying to understand what the cavern was, but to no avail.

Feeling overawed and deflated, I perched my backside on the circle rim, abstractly reaching for the remains of the slightly oily lobster. I was not hungry; I just needed something physically distracting.

Upon a whim, I took out the stone discovered atop the sentry rock, and examined it closely. It matched the circle, the console, the entire room perfectly. I leaned over to compare it with the nearby rock, but my lubricious fingers lost their grip, and it slipped from my grasp. I reached to retrieve it, but stopped, shocked, amazed. The stone rolled around the surface of the circle, following a path between two spirals. I stared transfixed, as it closed on the centre, spun, and settled dead centre.

I went over to pick it up, but it was locked in place. Impossibility surrounded all my senses. I stood and tried to prise it away with my knife, but to no avail. I hit it in frustration. Absurdity undermined my thin grasp of reality when the stone depressed into the centre.

Shocked, I was faced with twelve glowing runes that waxed and waned, in red light, encircling the black centre. Some looked strangely familiar, as if astrological signs. This was a puzzle and I had but one clue. By deduction, I made out all twelve signs of the zodiac, although their configuration was a little odd. After studying the possibilities, I became reckless and punched the runes of my star-date: Aries, my sun sign, Scorpio, my rising sign, and Pisces, my mid heaven.

The runes locked as I pressed them, glowing red. I could not change them, or make them go away, they were set. If this was a lock, I needed the key. With growing frustration I hit the centre, my stone, and became sucked into it, being drawn inexorably forwards, downwards, into it.

My being was engulfed within white light. My heart quailed as if I were cast adrift in the Pacific once more. But then it encompassed me and I became conscious of a vast nothingness, fractured into a billion particles of light. Time stopped. I was aware that I was aware. There was nothing else. Before the reasoned clutches of Descartes could envelop me, I expanded back to the known world. I felt great, refreshed, healed, enlightened, and most confused. I shook my head in denial and wonder, checking my body as I breathed aloud, "Was that real?"

I leapt off the circle, warily inspecting it. The natural rhythms of time and space reappeared, resettled, and cautiously I retrieved my black stone; it came free, and was easy to pick up. As soon as it was within my grasp, the light in the room heightened considerably. I put the stone down, and the light receded slightly, remaining far stronger than before. Strange. I picked it up again and pocketed it. The light increased and remained heightened.

"One mystery revealed," I said to myself, "Now to unlock the next."

The enhanced light helped greatly and I made straight for the rostrum. It had changed shape slightly, and there was a divot the size of my stone set dead centre, nearest me. I put the stone in it, and a console came to life. The light increased dramatically as all was revealed.

I watched amazed as the solid rock structure transformed. A typical computer-like flat monitor screen extruded above groupings of glowing runes, indicating function unknown. I removed my rock to see what effect that would have: nothing. Like an automotive key, I presumed it was only needed to activate the device, so pocketed it. I began pressing the runes in abstract order, like I would a remote control in Chinese characters, randomly extrapolating expectantly for revelation of purpose.

I began pressing buttons in order, then I tried a new group, and the panel locked out. There did not appear to be an "undo," so whatever I had done was perhaps activated. I tried other groupings, one revealing a scene that was very similar to the Outlands, yet different. I witnessed a vast caldera. I presumed this lay on the other side of the volcanic walls.

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Experimenting with the touch-sensitive controls, I isolated a cardinal control grouping that allowed me to pan and zoom the view on screen. I brought it down to one end to begin a grid search. Needing to understand what I was seeing, I turned to fetch my notepad, intending to make diagrams for reference. I stepped onto the circle to get my pack, and instantly disintegrated into one billion impulses of light.

I materialised somewhere I almost familiar. Gone was the cavern, replaced by verdant vegetation, and the familiar volcano walls to my back. They curved around to enclose me. This time I was inside them. I was standing at the focal point of the screen I had just focused on.

I didn't freak out because I was feeling groggy, similar to seasickness when one is first afloat. What had happened to me was logical, given transportation existed, and because of the rice parcels, I already believed it did.

Everything I had placed within the circle had been apparated with me. This was now my new reality. Once more, I had little of nothing, castaway in the hinterland, and a new life to begin all over again. I wondered aloud as my eyes scanned in search of this foreign land, "Will this life include people?"

Chapter 6 ~ Caldera

I stood rooted to the spot looking intently for signs of danger, signs of human habitation, but there were none. Until that moment, I had not realised just how isolated, how very lonely I felt. Finding other people would drastically change my existence. Instinctively my thoughts turned away to threat assessment and survival; I got busy at once.

I had arrived on a high plateau at the eastern edge of a vast caldera, maybe thirty miles in diameter. I spent my first days in endurance mode, establishing my local means of survival. I searched in vain for another transporter cavern, before venturing farther afield.

In quiet moments my thoughts turned to my transportation, and the rice packages. Their discomforting comfiture reappeared on my second morning in this new world. I knew there were no people on the Outlands, but suspected there might be within the caldera, I just had to find them.

I also wanted to find the other transporter cavern, there had to be a second, my logic could not deny its presence. When I found it, I could use it to escape. That motivation empowered my determination.

As soon as my new base was secure, I headed west. I had no intention of returning. I was on the trail of discovery: people? I made good progress, zigzagging for miles, until late afternoon when I faced a seemingly impenetrable wall of rock. I was no climber, and what confronted me would require expert mountaineers to scale. I searched for a way through, surely there had to be one. Too soon, the day was almost done, and I started looking for a place to rest for the night.

I froze, something was not right.

I heard the thud of heavy hoof, my eyes darting around to assess the danger, and for a safe place to hide. The undergrowth parted to reveal the largest pig I had ever seen. The Suidæ King appeared unimpressed with my presence, and stared unblinking at me with malevolent intent. He sported lethal tusks, and was the size of a rhinoceros. I ran for my life.

He charged with his head close to the ground, his tusks seeking prey. I was running away from him, and towards the rock that blocked me from the hinterland. I saw a chance, and leapt with bounding momentum up the rock face, hauling myself up by my arms with tenuous grasp of fingers, and pulled myself up and out of reach.

Climbing higher still until I was sure the brute could not follow, I turned and looked down at this most dangerous beast. He in turn looked back at me; his piggy eyes an icy menacing stare.

Time passed, and it became apparent he was waiting me out. I needed to break the spell. I took out one of my few remaining cigarettes, and lit it. I thought that a most calming and unknown thing to do. The

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monster below soon caught the strange repugnant scent. Watching me intently, he caught a whiff as I blew smoke towards him. He grunted deeply in disgust, dug his hoof into the earth with obvious revulsion, and mooched off northwards.

Relief came as laughter. I considered I might be the only person alive whose life was saved because they smoked a cigarette.

More than tired, drained after the unwholesome confrontation, I ate a crab, followed by the day's rice parcel. I drank water from my gourd bottle, and settled down to sleep. It was restful slumber, if intermittent. I responded to the slightest forest sound; there were many of little note.

I woke early. Something had changed, but what? I lay still, unmoving, listening for signs of danger, and dreading Boss Hog had returned.

I heard a slight scuffle nearby and I drew my knife. I heard a rock fall, followed by a whispered curse in an alien tongue. Someone was breathing close by my head. I gripped my knife in one hand, and used the other as foil to cover my open eyes. I waited.

The head of a teenage girl appeared. Her hand reached out to place a rice parcel near my head. I dropped the knife and captured her arms.

She screamed.

I was transfixed by two pools of darkness, black orbs I stared into. They stared back at me. The faint light revealed that she was 'sort of' Chinese looking, but way too yellow. Her overly large black eyes were set in an oval face, and under heavy brows that rose for an inch, before raking backwards sharply. She was beautiful, but not quite human.

I gently released my grip and held up both my hands, fingers spread skywards and palms outwards, hoping to display I was no threat. I meant her no harm. Her eyes held me spellbound with an other-worldly splendour. Upon release she bolted for safety, although I was sure she remained close by.

I heard a giggle sometime later, and followed the sound southward, overjoyed to have found people at last — who or whatever they were. I sat on a rock and ate the rice parcel with obvious and exaggerated relish, and drank fresh stream water from my beaker.

Replete, I felt her presence wane to leave; it was uncanny. I know she went south, but how, I do not know. I hurried to gather my things before following her, the best chance I had of any future. I also wanted away from the pig that was more than gruesome.

I saw a sign recently scratched into the earth, and followed west. I found a trail that led to a defile, an opening lay before me. I gazed over fertile farmed land, a town of conical huts visible in the distance. A girl was running along a track beside irrigated fields. In awe of redemption, I crashed down hard on my knees. My walled mind cracked within that fractal moment with an outpouring of fortuitous, emotional release.

I cried.

§

I was wrung-out; emotions stretched too far. Then in an instant, I was swept away with joyous abandon. There were people here and I desperately needed company.

I scrambled down to the lowlands, and hurried along the track to the town. I did not see a soul, but knew I was being watched. The town gate comprised of two rune encrusted standing stones, through which lay fifty or more large wigwams covered in grass bundles. Curious townspeople gathered behind, as four fearsome warriors appeared to bar my path. From their belts hung knives and tomahawks, they wore flowers in their long black, but obviously hennaed hair that hung like dreadlocks. Their spears did not point at me, but were props used to perform a welcoming haka dance. I had stepped into a different world.

I noticed they wore simple grass waistcoats and pants, that clothed deep yellow bodies about five feet tall. I felt no threat. When their performance ended, I bowed in Chinese style. They smiled and spoke unintelligibly. I smiled back and waited, unknowing. One warrior stepped forward and gestured with a sweep of his arm for me to proceed. With that, I was ushered forward where a carnival atmosphere quickly developed. Musicians and dancing girls, children, and a stray chicken joined us as we paraded into the heart of their culture. A man of powerful stature greeted me, who I surmised was their King. Later his wife joined us, who appeared to give him orders.

That night I was guest of honour at a banquet, but noticed none of the food was cooked, and later, there were no torches.

I concluded, these people had not invented fire.

I got along very well with the younger of two warrior brothers, the one that first spoke to me, and the King. The leading dance girl sat beside me, and later, I exchanged their fearsome liquor for beer. The ale was odd, but quantifiably and quantitatively quaffable. By pointing and repeat, I learned the warriors name was n'Gnung. In the days that followed, he became my regular companion, as did the girl, Xi Xah.

I was shown around their neighbourhood, they weighing my intentions and threat, as I was theirs. However, we got along very well, and in time began to exchange simple understandings of language, as one might with a toddler. n'Gnung was a quick learner of English, and I tried hard with their own guttural tongue, making reasonable progress.

They were curious about my possessions, so I showed them. They examined my leather belt, trainers, and pendants, but only the black disc held enduring fascination.

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I witnessed an essentially stone-age society, although one that did support a basic industrial area. Wood and reeds were worked into tables and beds. Grass was twisted, warp and weft, into clothing, and carryalls much better than my own attempts.

One building was dedicated to stone working, where I met a strange old man. He appeared to be a smith and insisted on seeing my stones. I showed him my two Chinese jade pendants, and the red Carnelian. He kept pressing until I revealed the strange black stone. Awed, the old man held it to his bosom, before taking great interest in it.

The King was called, and only n'Gnung, his brother n'Gue, and Xi Xah were present. They wondered at the rock, and talked quietly as n'Gue stood guard at the door. The black stone was given back to me, but the old man wrapped his hand around my own, grasping it closed. From his piercing eyes and stout actions, I was given the impassioned impression it must remain secret. I was one with them, I already knew it was a key.

Before we left, the old man gave me an ancient stone knife, one I doubted my modern world could emulate. It was exceedingly sharp and perfectly formed. Before passing it over, a strange scene developed. The smith tried to stab me with it, winking beforehand to show his intent in play. n'Gnung immediately stood in the way, the intention was clear. n'Gnung would give his life to protect my own. Once I understood, n'Gnung looked at me with his winsome smile, cocked one eyebrow, and nodded his head. I repeated likewise back.

I had been keeping a watch for the girl who I first saw, but she was nowhere to be seen. I could not shake off the memory of her bewitching eyes. I was thinking about her again one night at dinner, when a messenger arrived. He was of the same race, but dressed differently.

The Queen asked me to produce my rocks, n'Gnung interpreting. I showed the three, but not the black stone, and the messenger departed.

Before she departed, she issued a string of commands and people began running hither and thither to do... whatever she commanded.

In short order the queen departed, as did most others, and time segued until only four of us remained in the unlit hall: the King, n'Gnung, Xi Xah, and I. We talked, laughed, and put the world to rights, although a common language had little part to play.

The King saw me to the door, bidding me goodnight. n'Gnung saw me to the reed bed latrine, and later Xi Xah saw me to the door of my bunk in a common round house nearby. She wanted to stay, but I bid her goodnight. I awoke with her spooned against me. Such was my life.

Chapter 7 ~ Imprisoned

Assembling in the predawn light, we left the town of Forest Meade early the next morning. We accompanied the royal party, the queen being the only person to not carry her own luggage. Soon cultivated land was left behind as we followed a trail that was similar to a bridle way, but bore no sign of cartwheels. It followed the contours of the land, occasionally cutting across forested or bushy parts directly to the other side. The land we passed through was rural, wild, and pleasant.

We stopped for a drink at a stream after walking for about two hours, and after a short break, resumed our journey. Cresting a small rise, n'Gnung took me higher off the trail onto a small bluff, where he pointed out features of the distant lands: a lake nearby, a larger lake to the northwest, and our destination due west.

Meanwhile, others began to hurry ahead, towards a few conical huts. Reaching them, they veered off to the south and were lost from view. Soon we hurried after, following our fellows up a well-worn trail.

Three huts were obvious from their rooves as we approached our immediate destination. We dropped our baggage by the largest hut and made for the nearest of a series of large pools, steam rising from some. Soon our party was enjoying play in the hot springs, or some relaxing in the shallows. This was an unexpected, welcome, and therapeutic treat.

We gambolled in the water before tiring, but not before I realised these people could not swim. They could splash about haphazardly to cross small distances, but it was not sustainable. After enjoying the hot water, I meandered towards a larger, cooler pool nearby. I was a good swimmer, wanted to test my theory. I dove into the water and made strokes beneath, before surfacing and swimming across to the other side. A commotion of consternation erupted and I had to laugh, such a foreign emotion in my recent life.

The break lasted several hours, in which time I taught n'Gnung and the king the rudiments of swimming. Others were clamouring for instruction, but a meal was being served, so we ate instead.

We stayed for several hours, and until the sun approached its zenith, when people gathered their belongings to depart. The king made it clear he and others would return with me to continue swimming lessons.

The way ahead was long, two-fifths of our journey complete, but the trail remained true and easy to pass. We entered a section of jungle where obvious signs of road maintenance were evidenced by the occasional worker's hut and tools for clearing the way.

We walked all day, and arrived at the capital city, Grimwaldi Rinns, late in the afternoon. The name conjured melody as intrigue, yet suited perfectly. I was greeted as guest of honour, but there was neither the open friendship nor intimacy of the King's table. Neither was there fire.

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I sat next to the king, opposite the imperial party, and was ignored by most. The king was a chatty and ordered beer for us, which I preferred to their lethal spirit, and wine. The vacant seat next to the presumed Emperor held an air of foreboding.

n'Gnung was sitting nearby, and later, I noticed he was given a basket of fruit by a young girl. With great approval, the Imperial party devoured the strange fruit, a type of gourd I had never seen before.

As the nobility enthused over the offering, n'Gnung beckoned me with a flick of his eyes to go with him.

Once outside we headed for the latrine, and I noticed guards mustering as we left the great hall. That seemed curious, but n'Gnung hurriedly ushered me to the far side of the reed bed. He said, "Give girl black rock," flicking the pocket where he knew I kept my treasures. He urged me to keep walking, miming a knife stabbing my heart. I followed a faint trail into a hidden ravine.

She was waiting for me. The first of her kind I had ever seen, the one I had been looking for ever since. Her eyes were alluring, lake-like orbs, paired pools of longing, as engaging as the first time I had glimpsed them. They radiated compassion and intrigue. Her shape was almost hidden by the dead of night, but she revealed her presence to me.

I was almost sure by family likeness, she was the Empress' eldest daughter. She was the one missing from the banquet. But why? I knew she alone had looked out for me when I survived, marooned and castaway on the shores of the Outlands.

I bowed and knelt before her. She reached out her arm to me, bidding me stand. Taking her hand, I surprised her by turning her wrist and lightly brushing the back with my lips. A muffled giggle came from her delighted face. I stood tall and looked down at her diminutive form. She wore a small crown of leaves, as did all other nobility, but was otherwise dressed in plaited grass weaves, just like the common people.

She held out her hands, palms upraised, beseeching me with her eyes, to give her my treasures. There was an authority to her demanding look, but also a humbleness, a pleading compassion. I knew instinctively she was trying to protect me. My only true friend, n'Gnung, had intimated as much moments before.

A gust of wind tugged at my clothing, whispering to my mind as I dithered. I was about to give everything I held dear and of value, to a girl I hardly knew. Another draught of cool air urged me into action. As if answering the call of destiny, I handed over all my possessions, everything that had no right in their culture. I worried most about my cigarette lighters, as the people did not possess fire. She gasped audibly when I handed over the last item, a small black stone bespeckled with minute stars. We heard shouts of the Imperial Guard approaching. n'Gnung threw a stone near my feet and flicked his head in urgency.

I turned to leave, but looked back into eyes that beguiled me, our gaze not breaking contact for a hint of blink. Moments later the sounds of guards grew closer and I hurriedly rejoined n'Gnung. I guessed what was coming, and shooed him away, our collusion to conceal.

I was arrested and marched to a cell, my clothes and possessions were taken from me. I was thrown rough, woven grass vest and pants. Donning them, I was shackled to rings chipped out of the stone wall behind, by coarse, thick twine. The wooden door was slammed shut, and barred from the outside. The surrounding wooden structure that enclosed me appeared solid, if jerry-built.

Morosely I looked around at the confines of the primitive cell. I could easily break my bonds and escape, but where was there to go?

I was already imprisoned within the caldera, surrounded by unscalable volcanic walls. There appeared to be only one culture. The indigenous people were not the forefathers of homo sapiens, but they were as close as kissing cousins.

My thoughts drifted to the enigmatic girl and our initial contact. The exact same type of food parcel became my prison fodder. I knew, that she knew how to operate a similar device, one secreted somewhere within the caldera. I tried to dismiss her intriguing eyes, and reasoned: find the girl, find the transporter, escape.

Instead of action, I rotted in the cell, as good as forgotten about for two nights, and most of the next day. My second afternoon of confinement was drawing towards dusk when I was shaken back to reality by voices without approaching hurriedly. I heard shouting, and the unmistakable sounds of a man and woman arguing. Shortly my cell door burst open, and my mysterious girl exploded into the room. On seeing me, she stopped midstride, her face clouded by concern. She instantly repaired her mask, and turning, continued to berate the Emperor, his protest cut-off with a word.

A maid bustled in carrying all my belongings. The old knife the smith had given me placed on top. The Princess called the guards to unbind my hands. I was free. With that accomplished, she barged past the Emperor, scolding him, and they were gone.

I checked my rucksack, to find it badly in disarray. I ran a quick inventory, concluding that barring the pendants and red stone, everything had been returned to me. I dressed quickly, donning my familiar clothes, and sat to contemplate.

The elder Princess appeared to be at great pains to avoid letting anyone know we had met before. Her momentary look of genuine concern only served to reinforce that point. I considered her demeanour, and whilst I could accept a daughter arguing with her father over an unimportant issue, the manner of her bearing was such that it just did not fit. The Empress had retained my three semi-precious stones, but

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did not have the black one. I had done the right thing just before I was imprisoned, probably.

The cell door was open, but that did not mean freedom. I knew the Princess was key, but how to speak to her? My thoughts were stymied when a girl entered. "Tai La," she pointed at herself. She pointed at me, "Zhak," before extending her hand to escort me back inside the Imperial fold. Seemingly, she had replaced Xi Xah as my nominated escort.

The banquet hall was full. My companion guided me to the top table. There were two seats vacant next to the King and opposite the Emperor. He introduced the elder Princess. My mystery girl had now taken her rightful place at table next to him.

I bowed to her and smiled happily, but continued our pretence of disassociation. Tai La guided me to sit beside the King of Forest Meade, who clasped me like a brother. Calling for ale, he raised his goblet in greeting, the Emperor joining our toast. I smiled and played along with their games.

Everybody was behaving as if absolutely nothing had happened these last couple of days. I had been guest of honour for a few hours, held prisoner for a few days, and was now back at table as honoured guest. The mood at table was much lighter and more welcoming than during my initial meal, so it was simple to conclude that whatever had been wrong, was now put right. The Empress was in top form, charming to the point of welcoming me. To her left arm sat a small, malignant being of unscrupulous worth, whose name I gathered was Sar Tan. I felt her eyes upon me. For whatever abstract reason, I disliked the woman immediately and intensely.

We ate and drank our fill as the meal progressed. I watched the show, which included primitive acrobatics, bard's tales, a short play, and slapstick comedy. Apart from the King and my new companion, I had not been involved much with the others at table.

That changed when the elder Princess leaned forward and spoke to the King. He appeared confused, before summoning n'Gnung. Arriving behind me, he placed his large paw on my neck, holding me down so I did not greet him as I normally would. The Princess spoke to n'Gnung, and he deliberated for a moment before he said, "Hello, how do you do?"

Caught off-guard, as all eyes turned expectantly to me, I said unthinkingly; "Roses are red, violets are blue."

He beamed in delight, squeezed my shoulder and paused for effect, before replying to those listening in their own language. The elder Princess asked something else, and again he stopped to think for a moment before asking me "Knife, sun, water, girl, boy, food, beer, black, white, rock, wood, hello."

These were about the only words of English he knew, and I was amazed he had remembered them at all. I realised he had been called

forth to translate and was clearly making a sham of it. I could not help but offer a magnanimous smile before replying with something equally short and stupid. He nodded in approval, and spoke for several sentences. With practically no common language, this was where fullest level of trust resides between two people.

While he was talking, I had the perfect opportunity to look openly at the eldest Princess. I could tell she was beautiful, and different in some intellectually unfathomable way from all the others. I glanced around those present, including her parents, her brother the Prince, and younger sister. There was deepness to her eyes and a bearing that none of the others possessed. She smiled as if listening to the reply, but I was aware that she knew I was watching her intently. Everybody smiled and nodded appreciatively, as n'Gnung finished his ersatz translation, followed by the whole table rising to drink to our health. n'Gnung was summarily dismissed, and the meal continued well into the dark.

A little later, my new companion, Tai La, escorted me to a bed within one of the Emperor's dormitory huts. She tried to stay with me, but I politely bid her farewell. I woke next morning to find her asleep at my side. I had another shadow to get used to.

In the days that followed, Tai La showed me around the city during the day, and accompanied me for the evening meal, and to bed. I was given my own table near that of the Imperial party, which filled with an assortment of people, but the genuine warmth of true companionship I enjoyed with the King of Forest Meade, n'Gnung and Xi Xah, was entirely missing. They, and others I knew, approached on the fifth evening after my release, and it was clear our shared drinks in toast were to be those of parting.

The next day was the first I felt truly alone, even though thousands of people surrounded me. My friends had returned to Forest Meade, and I saw little of the elder Princess, who appeared to spend a lot of time away from court. I grew more concerned about my possessions left in her care and wondered if she was avoiding me completely. I sometimes wondered if I had been tricked, but that answer always felt wrong. But still, I needed confirmation.

Over time as familiarity grew, the Emperor and Empress became more open and friendly towards me. They invited me to some of their private functions, and appeared to have put the initial misunderstanding behind us. I had not.

I noticed the Empress' hands shook from time to time, as if with an alcoholic's involuntary rhythm, but she seldom drank. I also noticed Sar Tan had the Empress' ear, acting more like an advisor than a Lady in Waiting. I wondered if it was upon her advice that I had been imprisoned.

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I was not given any work to do, and idled away my days by exploring the city, and making new acquaintances along the way. The Imperial Mount was isolated from all, but a river that lay behind. At the front, wide steps led down to a rocky ledge, the platform where my arrival had been publicly declared. From this, two flights of stairs led down to the square itself, one to either side of the platform, where a row of eleven enclosed gazebos attended to functions of state and administration. The population did not have money, and barter appeared little. Each did their allotted task, and rested when the work was done. For most, their lifestyle was relaxed to the point of indolence.

The square was the public face and point of interaction with the populace, and served to provide official quarters and offices, as well as offering produce and equipment. The city radiated out from the main road at the entrance to the square, the route west leading to housing, and a peasant area to the southwest. From the outskirts, it looked like a shantytown ghetto, narrow winding streets inhabited by furtively inclusive residents. I kept well away because of Tai La's warning.

Otherwise, I walked every road and alley, often spending time near the industrial quarter, which lay east of the square and the road I had entered the city by. North lay several farming communities featuring large huts for storing annual crops. One section nearest the Palace specialised in alcohol, and I was welcomed to try their products. I noted they harnessed the heat of volcanic vents, augmented by suntraps, for a series of boiling vessels necessary to produce beer and distilled liquor. They used volcanic vents were for primitive cooking, as in Forest Meade.

After several days, Tai La found my wanderlust boring, so had taken to letting me explore on my own, although I was not so presumptuous as to think that I was not under surveillance. A face I recognised appeared whenever I stopped to rest or greet the workers. I called him 'Boing', because, just like Zebedee of Roundabout magic, he had a large, rounded nose, and always appeared at the end of the day.

Another I called Dylan. I would find him chilling, apparently asleep nearby my favourite haunts. He only stayed as long as I did. Neither was I sure just how far I could trust Tai La.

The great benefit of being on my own was that I finally had time to think. Too often, my thoughts focused on times passed and people out of reach, and my old life that I missed. I moved away, both physically and mentally.

I took to sitting under a large oak, with clear views across the heartland plain. There was a monolith nearby with almost indecipherable, runic symbols, and the place was conducive of contemplation. I began by examining my current situation.

I reasoned there had to be another transporter somewhere, which would offer me a true means of escape, if only to the Outlands. The

elder Princess must know of it, and surely how to use it properly. Given I had my black stone, and access to the device, I could escape, and that became my plan.

One day I was idling in the industrial sector. The work was similar to that of Forest Meade, but on a far grander and more diversified scale. I watched people working basic clay, which was sun-dried into beakers and other vessels, or fired in volcanic vents.

Labourers returned from the wilds, their backs weighed down under the burden of reeds and grasses, bags of grain for use during winter. I knew the work would be far easier if they used a barrow or cart. It hit me—these people had not invented the wheel.

I had long since decided my Overriding Principle was not to interfere, unless perhaps it was a skill they had somehow lost, or something life threatening on an apocalyptic scale. So I watched with amusement, knowing the heavy work could easily be transformed.

Having become familiar with my new surroundings, I was made welcome, and people tried to speak to me, but I knew virtually nothing of their tongue. I was no language student, but could speak Cantonese quite well. I also knew some Mandarin and Spanish. I resolved to begin rectifying the situation the next day.

After breakfast, I tasked Tai La with teaching me basic words. I had been making slow, if steady progress, when one mid-morning the Empress invaded our dormitory unannounced. She barked questions at Tai La in a most intimidating fashion. Tai La fell to the floor, prostrate before the woman, as Her Majesty turned to give me a penetrating stare.

I rose to greet her and said “Good day Your Highness,” in their language. The Empress replied in kind, and looked at me with astonishment, as if her sanity were wavering.

She started asking me questions. I had absolutely no idea what she was saying, so instead uttered the rudimentary words meaning “I small simple speaking.” I pointed at random objects saying their names. Immediately her worry evaporated, and she clasped her hands in delight. She spoke quickly with Tai La, before a happy Empress departed. I had never met anyone whose moods changed so rapidly. I sincerely considered she might have a serious mental problem.

After that meeting, I was taken to the Imperial enclosure each morning, and took up lessons with the Imperial teacher. His name was Ju Lo, a man in his twenties. I appeared to be his only student. He began by trying to teach me the correct and complicated court niceties, but quickly switched to treating me like a kindergarten pupil, an approach that worked much better for both of us. I made good progress, as days turned into weeks.

I became more confident in my linguistic abilities, and we became firm friends. From time to time, members of the Imperial household

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dropped by to check on my progress, and even engage me in simplistic conversation. After one such exchange, the Empress looked quite pleased and talked to the teacher at length.

I spent the next few weeks attending lessons both morning and afternoon, and improved quickly. I practised what I had learnt with Tai La and other friends out of school, and as my level of comprehension greatly increased, so they were able to teach me other things, some of which the Empress might not have been so happy about. It seemed her volatile and unpredictable mood swings were a recent phenomena.

One evening at dinner, a messenger heralded another change in my life. The Empress considered the request irrelevant, instructing her husband to deal with it. He was enthusiastic, and called me to attend him. The Emperor declared, "After breakfast you will go with the Prince to the hot springs, meet with some of the King of Forest Mead's people, and teach them how to swim. The Princess and I will join you for swimming lessons in a few days' time.

The arrangements changed as the Prince complained he was preparing for the Trials of Passage, and could not spare the time. Contrarily, the younger Princess was eager to go, and threw a tantrum for effect. The Prince and Princess' exchanges deteriorated into an amicable squabble, as others sniggered at their impetuous perspicacity of youth.

At first acquiescent, the Empress abruptly grew tense and sat ominously to attention. Noticing the sudden change in her mother's demeanour, the elder Princess instantly placed a quieting hand on her mother's arm, and spoke clearly so even I understood, "The ideal person to go should be Ju Lo. He has no other duties, and could continue to teach the Outlander our language."

"Daughter, you are flexing powers that do not belong to you."

"No Mother, trust my advice. Once fluent, the Outlander can teach us lost skills. Imagine what could become of it."

"Silence! Your child's-sense does not see the danger to us all."

Sar Tan whispered, the Empress adjudged, "Befitting. Yes, they can go. Sar Tan prepare my medication, we need to talk."

The elder daughter watched them leave. She appeared deeply troubled. As I departed, I caught the briefest look from her, whose warm eyes demurely closed to prevent others noticing our secret communication. I returned to my table, conspiring with Ju Lo in hushed tones. We planned to leave before dawn.

Star Gazer

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The official Star Gazer website: <http://www.star-gazer.co.uk>

Offers a vast amount of additional information, full character descriptions and images, large-scale maps, Jack's backstory, and other interesting details. Sections explain the Ancestral science, while others provide full references, timeline, and much more of interest.