

THE SIGNS OF A MYSTERY

PART FOUR

THE RAVEN'S FLIGHT

NIKOLAI NAWRI

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by

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Deep peace of the running wave.

Deep peace of the flowing air.

Deep peace of the quiet earth.

Deep peace of the shining stars.

Deep peace to you.

– A Celtic blessing, adapted from *The Dominion of Dreams:*
Under the Dark Star by William Sharp

PROLOGUE

The air came rushing by faster now with the steepening descent, rustling and hissing as, safely enveloped within that familiar sound, the raven plunged into the invisible stream that gave it the freedom of flight.

Instinctively, with the slightest adjustments in the angle of its wings, and in the spread of its feathers, it reacted to every gust of wind that attempted to buffet it off its chosen course towards the jagged silhouette of the distant chain of islands that rose abruptly from the sea.

Stretched out before that horizon, still far below, the precarious expanse of the open ocean glided past, with only a hint of its murky depth visible from above. The water's surface, for the most part, was dull, except for the occasional glare of reflected sunlight that flashed up from gently undulating waves.

Nearer the water, a few other birds serenely sailed along solitary paths, their white and grey outlines standing in clear contrast to the dark green of the sea, accompanied only by their mirror images on the waves. They seemed entirely preoccupied with looking out for prey that might briefly be glimpsed flitting about just beneath the water's surface.

But as the archipelago got closer, there was a change in the character of the scene below. The placid routine of the lone hunters out at sea gradually gave way to an expectant tension among the birds nearer the land, their number increasing, their

movements becoming more coordinated and deliberate, as they oriented themselves towards a particular stretch of the rugged shoreline.

Something unusual had to be happening down there, something important, something that lent the other birds' behaviour a sense of urgency. But details of the shoreline remained masked by the intervening distance through the hazy atmosphere that, despite the clear sky above, still lingered over the cool water.

With greater determination, the raven steepened its descent a little further, as it dived ever faster into the blustery air that came streaming over the bleak summits of the mountainous islands ahead.

Much closer now beneath it, where the water got shallower nearer the coast, the waves became choppier, and the other birds' reflections on the agitated surface became more distorted. This seemed to mirror their increasingly excited mood, as the growing swarm descended towards some frenzied activity on the shore, where a bulky object could now clearly be seen lying among the rocks.

A congregation of birds already bustled around it, splashing in the waves of the receding tide, flapping their wings as they jostled for space, while others circled above, screeching. More birds were perched on nearby boulders, squawking and croaking at each other. But none were quite daring yet to attack the human body that had been returned from the dark depths.

The largest waves still washed over it as they ran up the shore, then swirled around it on their downward swing, attempting to lift it off the rocks and to pull it back. But the waves were not

strong enough anymore to reclaim it for the sea.

And as the body moved with the waves, through the flutter and whirl of wings, slightly muted compared with the bright reflections of sunlight on the surrounding water, a warm glow periodically flared up from its chest.

CHAPTER ONE

OUT OF THE BLUE

The thin line of the guide rope meandered in the unsteady current, as the tide began to turn back into the wide inlet from the sea. In the beam of the electric torch, Neil's vague silhouette could be seen, just a few yards ahead. He let the rope run smoothly through his left hand, not to lose sight of it, while the diffuse natural light from above gradually faded away and visibility got poorer.

The only sound she could hear was the gurgling of water streaming past her diving mask, together with the increasingly frequent rush of air through her regulator, as exhaustion set in and her breathing became faster and more laboured. Glancing up, she could see ever larger clouds of bubbles ascending towards the surface.

Above the placid waves, the remaining warm glow of the sun had now been joined by the regularly flashing beam of the lighthouse, while the first real summer's day of the year serenely came to an end.

Gradually, the harbour wall materialised in the murky green ahead, as the rocky seabed noticeably began to slope upwards. In a few moments, that barrier at the end of the breakwater would become their pathway back into the ordinary world.

Just then, a second beam of light, lower than the beam from the lighthouse, swept over the water from the upper edge of

the wall. But rather than flashing or roving, it remained steady, pointing straight out to sea – until, suddenly, it got brighter.

Apparently, a car had pulled up. And, instead of shutting down the engine, someone had switched the headlights to high beam, deliberately shining them over the water, as if looking out for something.

Neil's movements indicated that he too had noticed the added shine from above, as he continued to follow the guide rope towards the ladder that was set into the harbour wall.

Then, just as abruptly as it had appeared, the steady beam of the headlights vanished – too quickly for the car to have driven away. Instead, the lights had likely been switched off, together with the engine, and the car was still parked up there.

But who else would come all the way out to the very end of the long breakwater, in the dying moments of the day? It was already past nine o'clock. None of the recreational boaters would be going out now. And the fishing vessels that had departed with the retreating high tide in the afternoon would only now be turning back at slack low water. They could not be expected to arrive until the early morning hours. Had then, perhaps, the flashing headlights been a signal to a vessel out at sea?

Neil had now reached the terminal wall of the breakwater. He switched off his torch and pushed it into a pocket of his stabiliser jacket. Then, he took off his fins and attached them to his weight belt. With a brief thumbs-up, he slowly began climbing the ladder towards the ominous gloom above the water, which was again intersected only by the regular flashes from the light-house.

When she reached the wall, she too extinguished her torch and took off her fins, to follow Neil up to the surface. With all artificial light now gone, the seabed had vanished from sight, leaving her suspended precariously over a dark void.

The metal rungs of the ladder were slippery, overgrown with algae as they were, and it was difficult to get a good hold with the rubber gloves. But, gradually, she gained distance from the unsettling darkness beneath her. Glancing up, she saw Neil break through and vanish beyond the water's surface. Behind him, the waves gently closed again, shimmering placidly in the remaining sunlight, as they continued to run up smoothly against the old stones of the harbour wall.

A few rungs further up, the surface finally came within her own reach. Then, she too broke through that thin barrier, back into the air above. The first thing she felt was a cool touch on the wet skin of her cheeks. And with the diving mask removed, she became aware again of an earthy smell carrying on a soft breeze.

Attempting to haul herself fully out of the weightless state within the water, she experienced an irresistible pull backwards, as gravity took hold of her once more. She briefly lost her grip and slipped down a few rungs, until she managed to cling on again. It felt as if the sea were reluctant to let her go.

Immediately, a familiar wave of panic rushed through her, returning a terrifying vision to her mind that she had believed to have overcome, of a cold abyss opening beneath her, accompanied by a sensation of falling backwards, endlessly, into a state in which she would be lost from time forever.

That was how it had all started the previous winter, when a

tragic event that should normally have remained a remote element of the daily news cycle had instead become a dominant part of her own life. Then too, gradually at first, the earliest indications of danger had presented themselves as nothing more than vague fears, when her intuitive perception had picked up the subtle warning signs in her surroundings that had still been unrecognised by her rational mind. There had been nothing definitive, no obvious threats, only the premonition of a growing darkness that had inexorably settled over her, as her nightmares had slowly taken over her reality.

And so it was now. All around her, along the coast that she knew so well, everything seemed perfectly normal: the soft glow of the setting sun visible just above the upper edge of the harbour wall, the waves of the rising tide still holding her in a firm embrace, and the familiar cacophony of the seabirds about to settle down for the night.

Despite that, she could not suppress the feeling that the peaceful normality above water was deceptive. But she could not stay submerged forever. Eventually, she had to drag herself back onto the land, to face whatever awaited her there. And with the tide near its lowest point, there were still several rungs left to climb to the top of the wall.

With three determined pulls up the ladder, she finally got herself clear of the water. But, again, as the support of the water was removed, the muscles in her arms and legs became jittery, struggling to hold on against the weight of the diving cylinder and the rest of her gear. She could feel her heart racing, and her breathing had become desperate, fast and shallow.

She strained her ears under the rubber hood to detect what was happening on top of the breakwater. Distantly, she could hear the clanking of Neil's diving cylinder as he moved it about on the concrete surface. Then, she heard him talk to someone, another man. Although she was unable to make out the spoken words, the tone of their conversation was serious. This certainly was no casual banter with one of the fishermen.

She pulled herself up the last few rungs and over the top edge of the wall. With the diving cylinder now pressing down on her, this effort was enough to squeeze the remaining air out of her lungs, such that she had to gather her strength for a while before she managed to push herself off the ground and to sit up.

A police patrol car was parked along one edge of the breakwater, not far from their Land Rover. Standing by the cars, a uniformed officer was talking to Neil. As soon as he saw her slump onto the harbour wall, he excused himself and came walking towards her.

He gave her a reassuring smile, but he had to have come out there for a good reason. Once again, her seemingly irrational feeling of unease had been justified. Something really was wrong.

Awkwardly, the elderly police officer squatted down beside her. 'Miss Dannreuther?'

'Yes?'

'I'm Sergeant Walker, with the Northern Constabulary in Tain. I don't want to alarm you, but it would be good if I could talk to you. I know the hour is getting late now, it's just that ... I was contacted by the Criminal Investigation Department in In-

verness, you see. There have been some developments that may be related to the disappearance of your friend, Miss Alison Jane Conway.'

'Alison? Why, what happened?'

'Well, don't you want to change before we talk?'

'No, it's fine. Just let me take off my diving cylinder. I'm quite warm under the dry suit. You could at least quickly tell me what has occurred. It's obviously important, and I've been waiting for months to get any news about the investigation.'

Having deposited his gear, Neil joined them, looking worried. 'Are you all right, Siobhán?'

'Apparently, there has been some development concerning Alison.'

'So I heard. But I mean, you look completely winded. If you're going round the bends ...'

'It was only a brief spell. I was doing all right in the water, but then I got a bit dizzy when I pulled myself up the ladder. Just let me sit here leaning against the parapet for a few minutes, and I'll be fine.'

'But you don't need me to tell you what that means.'

'Yes, all right, I know. It was too soon to go out again, and I pushed myself too hard for the first time. Now get out of here. Perhaps Sergeant Walker can give me a lift back to the field station later on? It's the old cottage, up by the lighthouse, where the keeper used to stay.'

The police officer looked amused. 'No problem, miss. More strangely clad people have sat in the back of this vehicle.'

'I'll see you later then.' With a nod to the sergeant, Neil col-

lected Siobhán's diving cylinder and walked back to the Land Rover.

While Siobhán peeled her head and shoulders out of the dry suit, Sergeant Walker gazed across the water. 'The view from here is very nice, especially right now, with the last sunlight twinkling on the waves – very peaceful on a calm day like this. I understand you're researching the fish here in the firth?'

'Uhh . . . the dolphins, yes, and the whales, if they are around. We record and analyse the sounds they make for echolocation and communication.'

'Is it not dangerous to go out diving this late in the evening? It must be completely dark down there already.'

'It would be more dangerous during the day, with the frequent boat traffic in and out of the harbour. We also try and go out at slack water, to avoid the tidal currents. Just now, that happens to be shortly before sunset.'

'Yes, I see, of course. You're doing this regularly then, as part of your work?'

'I personally haven't for a while, but my colleagues have gone out quite regularly, yes. We have set up and are now testing a new array of hydrophones. Today, we had to replace the batteries for some of the acoustic devices and the transmitter. We could use our boat, of course, but it's too much of a hassle to get it down to the harbour and into the water. Out by the monitoring site, we would still have to dive down to the seabed where the hydrophones are anchored. That yellow buoy out there only holds the antennas. We would then need three people on each trip, with one person staying in the boat. So, overall, we find it

less complicated to swim out from here, even in the dark. We've got our underwater torches, and we simply follow the guide rope that we fastened along the ground.'

'Impressive.' Sergeant Walker nodded thoughtfully and then looked back out to sea. 'It's nice having them around, isn't it, the dolphins. I like to watch them when I'm out here on the peninsula. There seem to be more of them now than there were during the spring, and they seem to be more excited somehow. I've often seen them jump, recently.'

'They are mating.'

The sergeant laughed. 'Is that what they are doing? Well, no wonder they look so happy. But I must get to the point, and I'll make it brief. From the exchange you had with your colleague just now, I gathered that you're not feeling too well at the moment?'

'It's nothing serious. I'm just ... For the past half-year, I haven't kept up with training as well as I should have. And until recently, I was struggling with several broken and re-broken ribs that didn't heal as quickly as I had hoped. It was emphasised to me by every doctor I saw that I was in no fit condition to go scuba diving until I was completely recovered. Yesterday, I was finally given the green light. But I realise now that I shouldn't have gone out straight away on such an extensive dive. On our return, I began noticing that I ran the oxygen tank far too close to empty because I wasn't moving efficiently, and I wasn't breathing properly. It's just that my life has been a bit erratic since the winter. First, with a research project on Antarctica, and then, well ...'

‘Norway?’

‘You heard?’

‘Just now, but I didn’t have much time to familiarise myself with the case. This is what I know. Back in March this year, five men apparently disappeared from a small island in the Lofoten, all in one night. In the statement you gave at the time, you indicated that, during that night, you were attacked by one of these men, by the name of Behring, near the shore. When another man intervened to protect you, both were killed during the altercation, and their bodies were swept away by the sea. This altercation resulted from the escalation of an unresolved conflict that goes back to the Second World War. You were then afraid that there were three other and more dangerous individuals on the island who, you suspected, had followed you from England to Germany, but had then arrived in the Lofoten a few days before you. As you were unable to leave the island, you decided to hide in the mountains until the next day, when you would be able to take the ferry back to the mainland. You realised that your suspicions had been justified when you saw that the three individuals had indeed followed you up into the mountains. But before they could attack you, they were caught in an avalanche and were swept out to sea. Is that broadly what happened?’

‘It was ... Yes, broadly, that is what happened.’

‘Very good. Unfortunately, until recently, there had been no evidence that could have corroborated the details of your statement. All victims and all perpetrators were gone, by your own account, and you were left as the only remaining witness. Nonetheless, an abandoned motorboat was found in the harbour of that

island, and the Norwegian police established that the three individuals who had rented it had used false identities.

‘When the Norwegians contacted their German counterparts about Behring’s disappearance and likely death, they were told that his son had died only about a week prior to his father’s disappearance in a fire that had been determined to be a case of arson. This happened in a clinic where the son was in long-term care, following a heart attack. The Norwegian police had obtained descriptions of the three men who had rented the motorboat and passed them on to the Germans, who confirmed that these descriptions were consistent with those of three men who had visited Behring’s son the day before the fire. Apparently, he had been very nervous after that visit. That, in addition to the use of false identities, at least indirectly supported your statement.’

‘Yes. But what I couldn’t prove was that a link exists between the events in Germany and Norway on the one hand, and Alison’s disappearance in England on the other. Based on what I experienced myself and what I was told, I’m certain of that connection, although I accept that, as you said, there is no material evidence or corroborating witness statement. But now you’re saying that there have been some developments about Alison’s disappearance?’

‘There have been, indeed. I only had a few hours to familiarise myself with this case, and my impression is that, at this point, the circumstances are not entirely clear. However, there could be serious ramifications for you, which is why I was contacted by CID in Inverness and asked if I could talk to you at the earliest opportunity. I phoned the research station and spoke

with one of your colleagues. She told me you had just left to go scuba diving – outwith the harbour walls, she said – and she wasn't sure when you would be back. But I wanted to talk to you in person anyway. I thought it would be better under the circumstances. I therefore drove up here and, as I came through the village, I noticed the vehicle with your university logo parked out on the breakwater. I then decided to wait for you here.

'Now, the situation is as follows. This past Saturday, the Metropolitan Police in London were contacted by our Norwegian counterparts about the body of a man that had been found washed up on a shore in the Lofoten, on one of the islands to the north of where the five men had gone missing in March. It had taken the Norwegians a few days to make that connection. But when they did, and when they realised that you had been involved, they informed London immediately. The Metropolitan Police then tried to contact you at the address they had on file for you in Aberdeen, but weren't able to reach you.'

'I've been working from the field station here since May.'

'Indeed, yes. On Monday, the colleagues from London contacted the administration office of your university in Aberdeen. They were informed that you would be conducting research from Tarbat Rocks until the end of September, is that correct?'

'Yes, the plan is to stay here for the main part of the mating season.'

'I see, very good. That was when Northern Constabulary got involved. Yesterday, the colleagues in London received copies of the documents related to the case that had been sent over from Norway. They got them translated and forwarded them to our

Area Command in Inverness. I received copies of the relevant documents this afternoon. These also include the coroner's report. It is very detailed. Although there were no obvious signs of violence, the Norwegians obviously treated the death as suspicious and conducted a full post-mortem. The cause of death was a cervical fracture, most likely due to a fall. The man was probably already dead when he entered the water. The stretch of the coast where his body was found is quite lonely, but with all the birds around, he could not have been lying there for more than a day. The report concludes that, under the Arctic conditions, the state of decomposition at the time of the discovery was consistent with the body having been in the water for about three months. In the cold temperatures, it could have been submerged for several weeks before it rose back to the surface and was carried north by the ocean currents. So far, the Norwegian colleagues have not been able to make a positive identification. Given the state of the body, the exact age is difficult to determine. But based on the teeth, it appears that the man was no more than of early middle age, which would exclude the two elderly Germans who went missing from Fareøya. Also, from your account, it would seem as if they both should have shown gunshot wounds, possibly fatal ones.'

'Yes, they would have, undoubtedly. I'm relieved it isn't Peter – Peter Janssen, my grandfather's friend. You will have read about him in my statement. The thought of his body lying washed up on a shore, being preyed on by birds, and now lying alone in a mortuary cabinet ...

'I've been wondering when this would come back to haunt

me – in real life, you know, not just in my nightmares. And I've been wondering whether those three would ever be traced. I knew that none of them had been found on Fareøya, although the whole mountainside had been searched the next day. As a matter of fact, I would probably have seen them myself when I returned from the summit. After the avalanche, there was very little snow left on the entire slope. The last thing I heard before I left Norway was that the identities they had given to rent the motorboat were false, and no official records of them could be found anywhere. Since then, my impression was that there had been no new developments in the investigation.'

'I think you're right, Miss Dannreuther. It seems that the case had stalled. But then, of course, the recovery of the body changed everything, especially if it can be shown that it belonged to one of the men who rented the motorboat. This is partly what I have come to talk to you about. Included among the documents I received today is a set of images – copies of photographs taken at the location where the body was found. I'm afraid you will not be able to identify the man. His facial features are completely obliterated after the time in the water. There is really no point for you to see that, in my opinion, but perhaps you recognise the clothing.'

'I doubt it. It was almost completely dark, and I only saw them for a few moments before they were caught in the avalanche. But I'll have a look.'

'Very good, sometime tomorrow morning, perhaps.' He gazed thoughtfully across the calm water. Outwardly, he appeared relaxed, but there was clearly something else he wanted to discuss.

‘Sergeant Walker, I don’t quite understand this sudden concern about an unidentified body washed up on a shore somewhere in the Lofoten. By itself, that should be good news, shouldn’t it? If it gets the various investigations going again. But you said the ramifications of the discovery of the body could be serious. I take it then that there is more?’

He nodded gravely. ‘I’m afraid so, yes. The reason why I came out here tonight, rather than talk to you on the phone, is that I wanted to see for myself that you are all right, and that the situation here on the peninsula is safe for you. This is a lovely area, but it is also quite lonely, as you know – which can be very nice in its own right, of course, if all goes well. But if it doesn’t, if someone were to come after you, for example, someone with criminal intentions ...

‘The potentially complicating factor is that the man whose body was found in the Lofoten was wearing a necklace with a rather unusual pendant. It has an emblem of sorts at its centre, and a runic inscription in a circle around it. The overall look of the pendant suggests that it has some kind of occult meaning, an amulet perhaps, and is possibly linked to this secret organisation that you mentioned in your statements to both the Norwegian police and our English colleagues.’

‘The Order of the New Atlanteans.’

‘Indeed, Miss Dannreuther. Judging by the documents that I saw, no one seems to know anything about these New Atlanteans. There are several exclusive organisations that keep certain elements of their activities secret, but at least the existence of these organisations is widely known. I suspect that, in many

cases, the worst you could accuse their members of is cronyism. But you do have to wonder what it is these New Atlanteans get up to if they felt compelled to keep their Order, as they call it, a complete secret for so long. And that makes it very difficult to investigate.

‘With the finding of this unusual necklace, there is now some physical evidence that might help to expose this covert organisation, especially if the dead body can be identified. This could be a major breakthrough in all these stalled investigations. Perhaps now, we are finally able to uncover who these people are, which activities they are involved in, and what their ultimate motives are. However, we need to be aware that the discovery of that dead body, with that necklace, might trigger reactions that are impossible to predict. If such a secret organisation really exists, its key personnel are likely to be well-connected and powerful people – high-profile members of society, who will be keen to protect both their public image and their privacy.’

‘I see. And if there is a danger that these clandestine activities get drawn out from their decades-long obscurity, that is when the problem starts for me.’

‘Potentially, yes. You’re the only person left who knows exactly, from first-hand experience, what happened in the Lofoten that night. It is impossible to tell at this point how much these New Atlanteans know about you, how much of a threat they think you are to them. But when they realise that you are a potential witness against them then, yes, you might be in danger.

‘Without your statements to the police, it’s likely that no one outside the Order would know of its existence. There would only

be some unexplained disappearances, which would seem to be connected since they happened on the same small island during the same night, but there would be no visible connection to any secret organisation. Since there was a major avalanche during that night, all five disappearances would probably be put down as a tragic accident, without any suggestion of criminality.

‘But, as it is, there are many important questions that will have to be answered. Why were these three unknown individuals on the island? Was it really that they were trying to recover this precious artefact that they believed had got lost, or had deliberately been hidden during the Second World War? The fact that they used false identities clearly shows that they had criminal intentions, but what exactly were these? It is quite possible that they were responsible for the fire that broke out in the German clinic. They might even be involved in your friend’s disappearance, as you suspect, in addition to the murder of the other young woman last December, Kathleen Reed – and what a horrible case that was. If this is true, these three individuals left a trail of very serious offences in their wake, every one of which will be carefully investigated now by police forces in three different countries – all because of the discovery of a dead body with an unusual necklace, and your earlier account of the five disappearances. Each of these investigations has the potential to uncover all sorts of other subversive activities that this secret organisation might still be involved in.’

‘But with the prospect of multiple police investigations hanging over their heads, why haven’t the New Atlanteans come after me yet? Surely, they must have realised by now that three of their

associates have vanished, or at least haven't been in contact with them for the past three months. I find it hard to believe that those three had no connection to the Order.'

'I agree with you, Miss Dannreuther. They must have had some affiliation with that secret organisation to hear about the lost artefact. But how much did the rest of the New Atlanteans know about their plans? Did the other members have any involvement in these criminal activities? Or did the three act on their own? Did the others know that those three had gone all the way up to the Lofoten, and why? Do they know that you were on the island during that eventful night?'

'If they do, it would have been easy enough for them to find out that I didn't disappear myself and have since returned to Britain. You know, Sergeant Walker, I have relived, over and over again, the final confrontation with those three, up on that lonely mountain, seeing only their dark outlines in the wavering glow of the aurora, until they were carried away by the avalanche. I have been wondering whether someone else was still out there who would want to come after me, constantly looking over my shoulder to see if anyone was following me. Although I know perfectly well that, if someone were to come after me, I would probably not notice them any sooner than I did the first time around. Shadows closing in on her – that is how Alison described it to me, a few days before she was taken away.

'And knowing what must have happened to her, I got into an obsessive routine every morning before I left home to go to the lab – earlier this year, while I was still in Aberdeen. I would remember exactly where I kept things. I would even place certain

objects strategically at specific spots to be able to tell immediately if someone had entered the flat while I was out. It wasn't really until we came here for the field work that I began to feel safer. And now the whole nightmare is likely to start again – the same fears and uncertainty, until the tension escalates into open hostility and violence. I just don't think I can cope with that again.'

The sergeant nodded compassionately. 'As I drove out here, I asked myself the same questions as you do, Miss Dannreuther. Why is it that the New Atlanteans have seemingly failed to act yet? As you were saying, there would have been plenty of time since the disappearance of three of their associates to become suspicious and start investigating. And most importantly, how much of a threat will the Order consider you to be?'

'Our English colleagues have been following the Norwegian news, and they have warned us that, the day before yesterday, the first reports were released in print and on television. They mention the dead body washed-up in the Lofoten, and also make a connection to the five disappearances in March. If the New Atlanteans were sufficiently concerned about their associates' disappearance – in addition to the disappearance of the other two men – they will undoubtedly have been monitoring the situation in Norway as well and will now be aware of these recent news reports.

'I believe the next few days will be critical. They will show how much of a problem all of this is for the New Atlanteans, and what they are prepared to do about it. That is why I came here to warn you, as soon as I heard about the case, to give you the

opportunity to be vigilant from now on. Especially while you are up here, in a small community like this, any stranger will be instantly noticed. If you observe anything out of the ordinary, no matter how apparently harmless it may seem, contact me immediately. Who knows, something good may yet come out of this if the New Atlanteans get drawn into the open. After all, an invisible enemy is always the most dangerous.'

He made an effort to appear optimistic. 'Tomorrow morning, it would be good if you could come to the police station in Tain to take a look at the photographs that were sent over from Norway, in case you do recognise the clothing. I could pick you up at the lighthouse, whatever is most convenient for you.'

'Actually, if you don't mind working late, I'd rather do it tonight – if I could just quickly change into my normal clothes at the field station?'

'Of course, Miss Dannreuther. I'm sure you're right. Under the circumstances, it's probably best to proceed without any delays – if you feel you have quite recovered.'

Siobhán pushed herself up from the parapet against which she had been leaning and took a few seconds to let the renewed dizziness subside.

'Yes, I'm ready.'

CHAPTER TWO

LIGHT OF DAY

Calmly stretched out below lay Moray Firth, with the morning sunlight glinting on small ripples of the water's surface. An assembly of fulmars and kittiwakes ceaselessly circled the tall red-and-white tower of the lighthouse, which rose above the roof terrace of the former keeper's cottage into a perfectly clear blue sky.

'Top o' the mornin', Shivy. You look tired.'

'Thanks, Vicky.'

She was still sitting by the breakfast table, with her chair leaning back against the low wall that ran along the edge of the roof, enjoying the early warmth of what promised to be another long and serene summer's day.

It was easy enough for her. She could not hear the howling of the wind, the sound of the grey breakers rushing up on a rocky shore, or the churning of the rising flood inside the cave. She did not know how devastating it had been to finally emerge from that cave, only to realise that everything had been lost, that there was nothing left to fight for. She could not imagine how it felt to be left with only one desire, to ascend away from the abyss, to keep on climbing while there was still any strength left, higher and higher, as close to the sky as possible, to finally shake off the phantoms of the past, to be able to embark alone on that final journey through the luminous gateway above – only to be

sent back at the very last moment, forced to return to life, and struggling ever since to integrate back into society; always feeling like an outsider, as if one had been infected, as if one now carried the darkness inside oneself. Because this darkness was never going to leave. It was always going to be there. And anyone else who got too close would only get drawn into danger themselves, exactly as it had happened before.

Victoria could not see the dead body the waves had brought back from the depth of the sea. She was not haunted by this ghostly figure with its waxen featureless face. She did not have to worry about the reactions its return might trigger, about how tragedy would strike this time. She did not have to wonder where the other two were and when they would reappear. Would it be the next time during scuba diving? Would they all suddenly be there, pale shapes emerging from the murky water below? Having waited patiently for their opportunity to take revenge, to finally drag their deadly enemy down into their abyss?

No, this bright sunlight brought neither clarity nor reassurance. It was obscuring and deceptive. And the blinding glare only served to hide a disturbing reality that was always threatening to break through into the ordinary world.

Victoria allowed her chair to drop back to the table and poured a second cup of coffee from the thermos flask. 'Here, Shivy, to celebrate the nice weather, while it lasts, why don't you behave out of character for a change? Sit yourself down and just relax for a little while. It is possible, you know, to eat and drink without pacing up and down like a caged animal. I've even cleaned your favourite cup for you – look, the one from the research

base on Antarctica. Aren't you happy that summer has finally arrived?'

She pushed the cup across the table.

'Cheers. I'm just ... Did Neil tell you about the dive yesterday?'

'He said it went well. And I could tell from up here when we started receiving again. Since then, we've been getting uninterrupted transmissions from the entire array. Once we've worked out how to properly synchronise the different recordings, we should be able to determine where the different sounds originate.'

Hearing this, Siobhán did feel a faint sense of optimism creeping back into her mind. If only she could do as Victoria had suggested and simply relax over a cup of coffee, or two, and enjoy the morning sun and the unparalleled view over the sparkling inlet from the sea. She took off the jumper that, only a few minutes ago, she had felt compelled to put on inside the thick granite walls of the old building, as they still retained the cold of the previous days.

Victoria smiled at this non-verbal homage to the fine morning. Then, she pushed her sunglasses up onto the top of her head and studied Siobhán's décolleté with undisguised interest. 'Nice. I don't think I've seen that on you before.'

'Sorry?'

The necklace, of course. It had got pulled out from underneath her shirt when she had taken off her jumper.

Victoria leaned forward. 'The pendant ... it's a raven, isn't it?'

‘It is, yes.’

‘And this shiny black material?’

‘It’s jet. A friend gave it to me for my birthday. She had it made specially.’

‘Is that the friend you said was coming up from St Andrews over the weekend?’

‘She is, yes – and that reminds me, I need to phone her later on.’

At that moment, Neil appeared in the door from the lighthouse tower and stepped out onto the roof terrace, squinting against the bright light.

‘Morning, you two. I just checked the reels from last night. It was interesting listened in on the morning chatter as Moray Firth gradually woke up. There is plenty of background noise from ship traffic, which is going to be the main limit to the distance over which we’ll be able to pick up useable sound. At some point, quite faintly and only for about ten seconds, I heard something that might have been the clicks of pilot whales, although I couldn’t be sure. They seemed to be pretty far out. But I still thought that most of the energy was in a lower frequency range than it would be for the smaller odontocetes. I jotted down the reel number and timing in the daily log, so that you can listen to that passage later on. I would be curious to hear what you make of it.

‘The nearest and noisiest are the dolphins and the porpoises, of course. I fed some of their vocalisations through the oscilloscope just now, and we are picking up some recurring frequency-modulated signals, similar to those that you recorded for your

dissertation, Siobhán. A lot of them are the unique signature whistles of our long-term residents of the firth. But there are also whistles that appear to be shared by different animals. I'm saying this because, with the entire array broadcasting now, we seem to be picking up similar whistles from different directions and only seconds apart. And some of these are quite sophisticated. I should think that they are part of communication, rather than navigation.'

Siobhán nodded. 'If, as you say, we can now accurately enough triangulate the origins of different sounds, the shared whistles might be associated with unique situations or activities, especially if they are more sophisticated than the generic broadband clicks that are most likely only used for echolocation. We'll need to check ...'

'Now, now, Shivy, relax. I can already see that familiar manic gleam build up in your eyes again. Just enjoy the fine morning. The day is only beginning. And Neil, can you please not talk about work when I finally managed to get her to sit down?'

'Yes, all right, Vicky. It's important for me to get back into work, to distract myself from all the other stuff that's going on. But that aside, we've already got loads to do. And I don't think you two appreciate how time-consuming it will be to process all these parallel recordings, and how much data we'll accumulate if the entire array continues broadcasting for the next two or three months. Then, we need to go over each recording systematically and try and sort out which signals are used for navigation, and which are used for communication. Once we've done that, we can track how signals change under different circumstances

– which roles frequency and amplitude modulation play, for example, in different scenarios.’

‘We’ll sort it all out, Shivy, don’t worry – at least you will. And when you do, Neil and I shall watch in speechless admiration and copy everything you say straight into our theses.’

Victoria’s attempt at flattering humour faded away into an embarrassed giggle. ‘Look, Shivy, the summer is really just getting started.’

‘The mating season isn’t.’

‘Then, perhaps, it’s best not to approach the dolphins too closely right now. We focus on keeping the audio recordings going and continue the regular visual observations from up here. In a few weeks, we’ll take the boat out again for a closer look, take photographs of dorsal fins, link specific animals to their unique signature whistles, and correlate shared signals with particular types of activities.’

Victoria was right, of course. Siobhán was working with two very capable and highly motivated students. Things were going exceptionally well with the project, and she could easily afford to step back from supervising operations as closely as she had in the past weeks. As far as the research was concerned, there really was nothing to worry about.

Neil looked at her with a sudden recollection. ‘Sorry, Siobhán, I should have asked: how did it go at the police? Victoria and I were in the radio room when we heard you return from the harbour. But we could see that the police car was waiting outside, so we assumed that you would only change into your normal clothes and then leave again to go to the police station.’

You must have got back in the very early morning hours. Did the police have any new information for you about your friend's disappearance?'

'Not really, no, although ... they may have found something of significance in Norway. At this point, it's just a confirmation of what I'd already known and had told the police about. But it isn't clear how this new discovery will affect the investigation. There is the possibility ... Actually, I'm glad you brought up the subject, Neil, because there is the possibility that the discovery in Norway is going to have an impact on the situation here, and then I may have to cut my stay at the lighthouse short and deal with it. But this shouldn't trouble you. Your work here could go on as planned, and I'm sure you would do a splendid job by yourselves. Notwithstanding my little rant just now, I do know that I can trust you two.'

* * *

There was no answer, even to the fourth ring, although she should normally be up by now.

Then, the fifth ring went unanswered. Perhaps, she had gone out already.

'Hello?'

'Claire, it's me. Did I wake you?'

'Wawny! What a coincidence, if coincidence you can call it. I was just thinking of you, about phoning you, in fact. So, no, you didn't wake me. I was already up and under the shower – still dripping slightly, but that's all right.' Her voice became muffled as she appeared to dry her hair with a towel. 'But why did you

ring so early? Aren't you working? Or did you miss me?"

'Claire, it's about the weekend. Something's come up, I'm afraid.'

The rustling of fabric on the other end of the phone line stopped.

'You remember, after I'd got back from Norway, when I said that I may not have seen the end of the *U-112* affair? Well, it's happened now.'

There was a moment of silent trepidation. 'How?'

'A week ago, they found a dead body washed up on one of the islands to the north of Fareøya, an adult male, as yet unidentified. I was informed about it only yesterday evening. The police showed me some photographs that had been sent over from Norway. You know, Claire, after years of working in biology, I don't think I'm too squeamish anymore, especially when it comes to things that have decayed in the water. But those images ... The police thought I might be able to identify the body, but there was nothing human left in the face; just this ghostly greenish pale skin, bloated and wrinkled; and the empty eye sockets, soulless and impersonal. Ironically, the dead body looked eerily similar to how I'd always seen the phantoms in my nightmares, when I felt them surrounding me, unseen in a waking state, but always there and inexorably closing in on me.

'The clothing, too. I couldn't possibly be sure if what they showed me in the photographs was what one of them had been wearing on the mountain. When I saw them, just before the end, they were nothing but dark shapes on the slope below me. And in the green light of the aurora, all colours would have looked different anyway. Most importantly, by that point, I was in such

a strange frame of mind that, looking back, I find it very difficult to clearly remember anything; to say with any amount of certainty what actually happened during that night, and what I only experienced in my mind, as I slowly ... You know, when I got cold and tired, even before the avalanche, and certainly afterwards.

‘So, as far as identification is concerned, I had to disappoint the police. But there cannot be any reasonable doubt that the man whose body was found was one of the three whom I encountered first in Germany, and then again in the Lofoten. There also cannot be any reasonable doubt that those three, in some way, were connected to the Order of the New Atlanteans. The question now is what the consequences will be of all this. It’s highly likely that the New Atlanteans have by now found out about the disappearance of three of their associates. In that context, they would likely also have found out about the disappearance of two other men with more distant affiliations with their organisation. If now they hear that an unidentified dead body was found on a shore of any of the Lofoten islands, they are bound to suspect a connection. Then, the question is whether there are any other members left who are interested in recovering this Secret, as they call it – this lost artefact of great value or power, which was such an essential element of their founding ideology. Even if the rest of the Order have moved on from this belief, continued secrecy of their activities is clearly still important to them. And if they feel threatened enough by the discovery of the dead body, there is the possibility that they will come after me again.

‘But, Claire, I promise we’ll have another weekend together

– soon. Just give me a week or two to deal with this, and when it's all sorted out, I'll be in touch. Then, there will be no more distractions. It'll be fine, trust me.'

'Oh, but of course, Siobhán. Last time you told me that you had things to sort out, and that you'd be in touch, that all would be fine, and to trust you – do you remember? That was after your gran's funeral. And you know what happened next. In my eternal naiveté, I thought that all you wanted to do was to take care of your grandmother's possessions and other affairs, and that you needed some time to get over the loss and to settle back into your normal life. But then, next thing I know, you're rescuing people out of a burning clinic in East Germany – and how did I find out about that? Yes, that's right, through the tabloids – again. And that was only the beginning.' She was becoming seriously agitated now. 'So, no, Siobhán. I'm coming, tomorrow afternoon, as planned. I've been looking forward to this for far too long. If I'm getting on your nerves, you can be nasty to me, if you like. But I'm not going to sit here waiting for you to phone, constantly afraid of opening a newspaper, or to turn on the telly, because there is a very real chance that I could be confronted with some fresh horror story involving you.'

'I can see how the longer holiday that we tentatively considered for the last two weeks before the start of the new semester may not be possible. You may still need to work with the police at that point, or you may need to catch up on your research after all the distractions now. But there is really no need to cancel my weekend visit if you're staying at the lighthouse anyway. We can still go out in the boat and see the dolphins. We can still go

swimming and snorkelling and hiking and all the other things we talked about. I've been teaching throughout the entire academic year. I've just finished grading stacks of assignments and exams. And next week . . .

'Si, that's why I wanted to phone you. On Monday, I got the confirmation that my request for promotion to Senior Lecturer was accepted. So, when the new semester starts, that will mean more money and more responsibility. But it also means that, sometime next week, I should start preparing for an entirely new set of lectures. Before I do that, however, I need to get away from here for a few days. Finally, it's the summer break for me as well. I've already packed and unpacked my bag a countless number of times, trying to be prepared for all types of weather and other eventualities, as you said I should. I've had sore muscles from running and swimming for weeks – swimming, Si. Do you know what a challenge that was for me, at first, to go into the deep water again, even in the pool? But I did it because I want to be able to keep up with you. And so, with all this exercise, I'm hungry all the time, and I'm eating like crazy – heavier things too than my usual diet of fruits and vegetables. As a matter of fact, I am starting to think that perhaps I was a bit harsh on you sometimes, you know, especially when you got back late from training. And guess what, I'm actually gaining weight now – and in all the right places too, I'm happy to report.

'By the way, I'm following Wimbledon now, if you can believe that – me, watching tennis. I started it as motivational tool for my own modest athletic endeavours, but I'm pretty much hooked now. Too bad they had to postpone matches all the time

because of the rain, but the weather finally seems to be getting better, doesn't it? You know, I wish I was as fit as these women. I especially like the Argentine player – she's a strapping lass, that one. And she's doing ever so well. She'll be playing in the semifinal later today. Anyway, for the first time in my life, I'm feeling really good about myself. So, I will come to see you, I will show off the brand-new Claire you never knew, and if anyone dares to threaten you again, they will have me to reckon with as well.'

She chuckled, despite herself.

'Claire, I was looking forward to the weekend with you as well. But now ... What if they have found out where I am at the moment? What if they are already watching me? If you come to visit over the weekend, they will realise that you are not one of the scientists who work here, and they will know that we're friends. I cannot put you in that position. You remember what happened to Alison.'

'I do, Siobhán, but the situation is completely different now. It's yourself you should be worried about. The only reason they went for Alison was that you were unreachable, safe and sound on Antarctica – if we can call it that, considering what ended up happening down there. But now, it's just you, and you cannot isolate yourself from other people. If they really are watching and planning to attack you, that would only be playing into their hands.

'I understand that something may come up, potentially already this weekend, and then you have to go and talk to the police again. So, when I'm coming to see you tomorrow, it's

not because I'm expecting a carefree time. I do appreciate that circumstances are different now. But we haven't seen each other for weeks, not since your birthday, in fact. And I miss you. And I don't want you to be alone with your thoughts anymore. That just isn't healthy for you. Instead, I want you to talk to me for a change. And if you do need to work with the police again, I'll find something else to do – I don't know, pester your colleagues, press them for all the latest gossip about you.'

'That won't take long. But what if I have to get away for a while, from here and from home, until the police have made sure that I'm not in any kind of danger? Knowing what happened first to Kathleen and then to Alison, they were already mentioning the possibility of some kind of witness protection scheme, whatever that might entail – going into hiding, presumably.'

'Even better. Then we go on a holiday together after all, somewhere far away, somewhere warm and sunny – a Caribbean island, for example, with white beaches and palm trees. We go snorkelling there, and you can explain all the tropical fish to me.'

'Tropical fish are boring.'

'Well, that may be, scientifically speaking. But they are still very pretty.'

A holiday abroad, would that be a solution? Or would running away only postpone the inevitable confrontation?

'Si, please don't exclude me every time you're in trouble.'

But she could not draw Claire into this kind of danger, not while there was a realistic chance that, at an unexpected moment, and in an unexpected manner, the situation could escalate.

'Siobhán?'

‘Sorry, Claire, I’m just thinking.’

Her loyalty was heartbreaking, but she could not possibly know how it was to be pursued by an invisible enemy that could never be shaken off in this world.

‘Siobhán, please, talk to me.’

‘I’m worried, you know, about you. And ...’

‘Siobhán, don’t.’

‘No, listen, of course I’d love to spend some time with you, rather than dealing with all this morbid stuff. But this could get very ugly, and I don’t want you ...’

‘Siobhán, that’s it. I’ll hang up now, and I won’t answer the phone before I leave tomorrow morning. I should get into Tain at around three. If you’re at the railway station, I’ll meet you there. Otherwise, I’ll meet you at the lighthouse. Either way, I’m looking forward to seeing you again after all this time.’

‘Same here, Claire. And I ...’

‘I know. Bye, Vawny.’

‘... miss you too.’

* * *

With her feet up on the paled dashboard of the old Land Rover, Claire settled into the bumpy passenger seat, in happy anticipation of the weekend ahead, outwardly without any concerns, only enjoying the time away from work and the flawless summer weather.

‘Before I forget, Si, I was asked to say hello to you by Professor Harris. He came to my promotion party in the department on Tuesday. It was only a small affair, and very spontaneous.

I knew you would be busy up here, and since I was going to visit you a few days later, I didn't mention it before. But Harris was there, of course, and he never misses an opportunity to enquire about you. I'm not surprised, really, given everything that has been happening to and around you. He officially retired at the end of last Candlemas Semester. He was a bit like ... I don't know, a mentor, obviously. But generally, he was very good to me, especially when things didn't go so well. Work will be different without him. I'll be taking over the courses he has taught for many years, so there will be big shoes to fill. After his retirement, he won't be coming regularly into the department anymore. Except for special occasions, I guess I won't see him much from now on.'

Claire gazed thoughtfully ahead for a few moments, as they slowly drove through narrow streets that were lined by the grey facades of one-storey cottages. Then, she turned to Siobhán, smiling over her shoulder. 'I hoped you might look better than on your birthday, and you do a bit, but you're still not quite there, are you?'

'Until the day before yesterday, I did think that I was doing better, and so did the doctor. Which is why I decided to go out scuba diving again. We had to do some work on the hydrophone array. But after almost an hour in the water, I realised that it had been too long, too soon. It seems that my ribs have finally healed now, but I need to get my fitness back – swimming, hiking, the things you mentioned on the phone yesterday. If you're concerned about keeping up with me, I suspect the real worry should be the other way around. But it's difficult if you can't

sleep properly. Until I heard about the discovery in the Lofoten, I had started to do better, with a few nights recently that I'd slept through. That's when I realised what a huge difference it makes for the rest of the day – not only physically, but also mentally – being able to focus properly on your work. The last time we saw each other, when you stayed over at my place, you noticed how bad it was. That night, I kept you awake too with my restlessness. All the doctor could do was to prescribe stronger and stronger sleeping pills, just when I'd finally stopped taking those painkillers that I'd been prescribed after my return from Norway. The sleeping pills didn't seem to make any difference at all, and I stopped taking them now. I have almost a full bottle left of the last stuff I got. Because the pills . . . You see, chemically, there is nothing wrong with me. It's just that ultimately I don't think I really want to fall asleep, no matter how tired I am; not if I know exactly where I'll be going once I do fall asleep, and what I'll encounter there, night after night.'

Claire looked concerned and waited for her friend to continue. But how could Siobhán begin to explain, during that short drive out to the field station, how it was to be trapped inside a nightmare, when these gloomy visions stood in such stark contrast to their current surroundings? As they left the sleepy town behind them, the neat granite buildings were replaced by open fields, still lush from the recent days of rain, but now drenched in bright sunlight, with only a hint of the distant mountains to the north visible in the midday haze.

'I don't ever want to go back there, back into that cave, with the last daylight fading away and the cold water rising, until there

is nothing left but complete darkness and the relentless maelstrom that tries to pull you down into an abyss from which there is no return. And the only way out of this horrifying underworld, you hope, is that dark tunnel, often no more than a narrow crack that you can barely squeeze through, that seems to go on forever, because you can't see anything, not even a hint of light anywhere. And you don't know if the mountain, the ancient rock that surrounds you, is your friend or your foe; whether it will allow you to pass through and to escape back into the open air, or if it will trap and slowly crush you. And ever behind you is the image of Peter, slumped against the rough cave wall by the main entrance, wounded and alone, with the sea rising up to take him away.'

The lonely country road, bordered by stunted gorse bushes, steadily flowed past beneath them, while the land on either side of it narrowed, as they continued on their way towards the tip of the peninsula. Ahead of them, the tower of the lighthouse had now become visible, its straight edges softened and unsteady in the wavering air.

'On my birthday, I was additionally stressed out because of the final preparations for our extended stay here at the field station. That was only two days before we departed. But then, when we got here, I immediately felt at home again, more so possibly than in Aberdeen, because this is a place where I've only had happy experiences – until recently, anyway. The work gave me a focal point that was removed from all the tragic events in the winter, and I genuinely seemed to be doing all right. As a matter of fact, the week started off brilliantly. On Monday, quite

unexpectedly, I received a phone call from the British Institute for Polar Research, down in Cambridge, officially inviting me to return to Aurora for the next austral summer. Then, on Tuesday, after my last medical, I was finally cleared to go scuba diving again. On Wednesday, I was buzzing all day, looking forward to get into the water again. Yes, I overdid it a little for the first time back after such a long break, but I wasn't troubled by it. Then, I got out of the water, and there was that police officer waiting for me on the harbour wall. And, in an instant, it all came flooding back, the foreboding and the nightmares – if I do manage to fall asleep, eventually.

'Last night, in my dream, I'm lying in bed in my room in the field station. I can feel there is a storm raging outside. I look out the window. Moray Firth has turned into a vast turbulent sea. Its waters have risen, and waves are already washing over the cliffs and swirling around the lighthouse. I run out of the room and, suddenly, I find myself on the roof terrace of the old keeper's cottage. There are storm clouds above. I'm caught in a howling wind, and the first waves are about to break over the roof. I hasten back into the tower, climbing higher and higher. But the churning water rises after me, no matter how fast and how high I climb, until I'm at the very top of the tower and I've got nowhere left to go.

'Then, I wake up, heart racing, as if I really had run up the tower. But, in every other aspect, my nightmare could not have been any more removed from my waking reality. In the real world, I can already tell from the early morning sky that it will be a peaceful summer's day. But I know that this eerie calm

that surrounds me is only trying to lure me into a false sense of security.

‘And when I lie there, awake, unable to fall asleep again, that’s when it gets really bad. That’s when I see Gran and Peter again, hear their voices just before they die, both essentially telling me the same thing: that they are confident that I can succeed where they themselves have failed; that I can resolve the conflict that has haunted them for most of their lives, once and for all.

‘For a while, I thought that this task had actually been accomplished. But just as I finally began to return to the ordinary life that I had left behind, that illusion was shattered, and it became clear that the old enemy is still out there, that they will never leave me alone, and that the conflict is bound to go on and on.

‘But this weekend, I shall try and put all that to one side and give you my full attention, I promise. I’m glad you came, despite what I said yesterday on the phone. I honestly don’t think that there will be any new developments over the weekend. At least, I wouldn’t expect any updates from the police.

‘Anyway, you can see the cottage now – that low building attached to the lighthouse tower. The light was automated a few years ago, and there is no keeper staying at the cottage anymore. Most of it has been converted into our field station, and we’ve got permission to go up to the gallery of the tower and use it as a platform to spy on the dolphins – and the whales on rarer occasions. But most of our land-based visual observations are carried out from the roof of the cottage. We’re trying to get a better understanding of how many dolphins there are, in how many distinct groups they organise themselves, how many young

ones they have each year, and how they move about within the firth for feeding and other types of activities.’

* * *

The moment Siobhán stepped out of the tower, carrying the two cups of tea, she felt in the grip once more of the early afternoon heat. The air was even calmer than it had been in the morning. It was quieter too, as the seabirds had retreated away from the headland and were now resting on the cool water.

From the roof terrace, she had an unobstructed view of the vast dome of the light blue sky, without a single cloud above the horizon. As it had done in the morning, the surface of Moray Firth lay calmly stretched out below, now glistening even more brightly under a higher sun. Hidden beneath that reflecting surface began the world of dolphins. But for all the mysteries that this still held for her, at that moment, her own terrestrial world was the more uncertain of the two, no matter how transparent it seemed.

Even from that elevated vantage point, nothing unusual could be seen in any direction. And yet, she felt a crackling tension in the stagnant air, very faint, existing somewhere among the whirring and buzzing of insects, like the static hissing of a transmission from another realm; a message trying to warn her of an impending danger, which had got lost over the intervening distance – unless she was incapable of receiving it with her conscious mind.

Claire was reclining in her chair, her feet up on the parapet, facing the sun with her eyes closed, and apparently happy to

spend the rest of the afternoon without engaging in any strenuous activities. Although she knew almost as much as Siobhán did about the gruesome discovery in Norway, she was entirely at ease, seemingly untroubled by the dangers that might already be encircling them.

But would her attitude change when she found out the rest? Was it fair to withhold information from her if that prevented her from assessing accurately the seriousness of the situation? Conversely, was it fair to draw her even deeper into the situation by sharing that critical information with her?

Claire languidly opened her eyes as she heard Siobhán approach. Then, she sat up and manoeuvred her chair back to the table.

‘There you go, Claire. While the water for the tea was heating, I checked on the others. They are currently completely immersed in analysing the new recordings, and I don’t want to distract them while they are gainfully employed that way. But we can go and chat with them later, to see what they have discovered so far.’

‘Yes, that would be interesting.’ Claire took a slow sip of her tea.

As they fell silent, the various sounds of insects came to the fore again, filling the otherwise unnatural stillness inside the warm air. Siobhán continued to be undecided about whether to consult Claire or not, knowing that, if she did, there would be no way back. Claire, meanwhile, gazed across the wide inlet, occasionally glancing over to her friend with a faint smile, as if sensing her preoccupation.

Eventually, she gave Siobhán a searching look. ‘What’s up?’

‘I was just thinking ... Yesterday, on the phone, you know, when I told you about my visit to the police station, there was one thing I didn’t mention. It’s the reason why I, as well as the police, are convinced that it was one of the three phantoms, as I still see them in my mind, whose dead body has now returned from the sea.

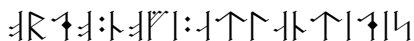
‘Of course, accidents at sea happen all the time. People go overboard and drown. Occasionally, they are found washed up on a shore, possibly weeks later, and many miles away. As I said on the phone, I wasn’t able to visually identify the dead body. What I didn’t mention was that it had a necklace still fastened around its neck, with a rather striking-looking pendant, which could well be an amulet. And it’s that pendant that draws the connection between the dead body and the three phantoms, even without a positive identification. It’s also that pendant, more than the dead body itself, that could be the source of danger for me.

‘When I was at the police station, they showed me a photograph of the necklace. It had been in the sea for about three months, and for that, it looked remarkably well preserved. I was surprised how shiny it still was. I suspect it’s gold with a high degree of purity – clearly a very precious object, regardless of any other significance that someone might attach to it. The pendant is a perfectly round disc – at least three or four millimetres thick, I should think – and the Norwegians measured it to be just over five centimetres in diameter.

‘It appears to have some occult significance. At its centre is an engraving – an emblem, of sorts. It consists of an inverted V

with a horizontal wavy line through its middle, and an asterisk above. Together, the inverted V and the wavy line look like a simple sketch of an island, but could also be seen as a stylised A. If the interpretation as an island is correct, the asterisk has to represent a solitary star. And on the Northern Hemisphere, there is really only one star that stands out like that. Without too much imagination, what we've got therefore is an island, its name beginning with an A, which is located beneath the Pole Star. You remember what Professor Harris told me about Atlantis and Ultima Thule? That, originally, the two concepts did not belong together and were only much later conflated into one hybrid mythology? Even so, if we assume that those who designed the pendant believed that Plato's story about Atlantis was inspired by a real lost world in the Far North, the meaning of that emblem would seem to be clear. But while I'm waiting for any new developments, I'm wondering whether there might not be a more direct way of connecting the necklace, and therefore the dead body, to the New Atlanteans. And this is where the inscription along the edge of the pendant could come in.'

With that, Siobhán picked up the notebook that she used to record dolphin sightings. From between its pages, she pulled a folded sheet of paper and straightened it out on the hot surface of the wooden table.



'Here is a sketch that I made at the police station. On the pendant, the inscription is circular, of course. Reading left to right, as I wrote it, it runs clockwise approximately from the seven o'clock to the five o'clock position. The symbols are evenly

spaced, the first ten along the left half, the second ten along the right. It looks runic to me, but which language it is, I don't know. Somehow it seems unlikely that it would be written in Old Norse, even if the symbols originate with that language. Yesterday, as I was sitting here, between looking out for the dolphins at regular intervals, I tried to read the inscription as a simple replacement cipher, substituting for each symbol a letter of the Latin alphabet, and hoping that they might spell out some English words.

'Obviously, with so few letters, it's difficult. First of all, I needed to get some structure into this. I therefore assumed that the two colons do not represent letters, but rather indicate divisions between words. Somehow, to me, they stand out from the other symbols by being so much simpler. Accepting this, we now have three words with four, four, and ten letters, respectively. I tried to make the last word into "Atlanteans," and it's tantalisingly close – in fact, the first six letters would fit perfectly, but the rest doesn't. And "Atlantis" is too short, by two letters.

'I don't know how many different types of runes there are. Considering the ideology of the New Atlanteans, I wouldn't be surprised if these turned out to be from Central Europe or Scandinavia. But if they are similar to the – I don't know – the Celtic system, let's say, that was used here in Britain, perhaps you can make something of the inscription.'

'Hmm . . . The Ogham script that was used by the Celtic peoples in Scotland and Ireland looks quite different. Runes like these were introduced into Britain by Germanic and Norse invaders after the end of the Roman period. But I see what you're saying. You mean that perhaps these symbols are not meant to

be a replacement cipher after all? That they are instead an established alphabet with a generally recognised phonetic value for each symbol? And if you know which alphabet this is, you can assemble the correct compound sound for each word? Yes, I suppose that's possible. Then, you only have to understand the language that uses these particular sounds to represent certain things.'

Claire studied the writing carefully for several seconds, squinting in concentration as much as against the glare of the sun. Unconsciously, she began twirling a strand of her wavy hair around the fingers of her left hand.

'When you transcribed these symbols from the photograph the police showed you, how clear were they? I mean, are you sure that the last word really has ten letters?'

'Quite sure, yes. There was a clear separation between all the symbols as I've drawn them.'

Claire nodded slowly. She picked up the pencil that lay next to Siobhán's notebook and began writing Latin letters underneath the line of symbols.

'Some of these do look like the Anglo-Saxon runes that were used in Britain before the Norman Conquest, but some don't. I suspect they belong to a later medieval system. If so, they would indeed have been in use across Scandinavia, as you suggested.

'If we assume that those symbols that I recognise had the same phonetic values in that later system as they had with the Anglo-Saxons, this is what I get.'

.R.. (N)..I .TL.(N)TI.IS

‘I’m not sure about the N. The symbol that you’ve drawn could potentially be a variant of the *næd* rune in the Anglo-Saxon system, but maybe it’s just wishful thinking. If we accept the N, I don’t see how one could complete what we believe to be the third word in any other way than by substituting A for the symbol at the first and fourth position. No other vowel makes sense in any language, I should think, and consonants are completely out of the question. Then again, as you said, the end of the word doesn’t fit, if we wanted to transcribe it as “Atlanteans.” And if the interpretation using Anglo-Saxon runes is not correct, it could just be a coincidence. We need to remind ourselves that we’re biased by our expectations, by what we want to find. When it comes to deciphering old inscriptions, especially if you don’t know which language they were written in, that is bound to lead to misinterpretations.’

‘You’re probably right, Claire, especially as the first two words don’t seem to fit anything we might expect. I even considered the possibility that the first colon was deliberately misplaced to make the inscription more difficult to decipher – which would, of course, imply that the symbols really are part of a code. In that case, with the letter that looks like an R at the second position, it’s tempting to regroup the symbols by five and three, and to try and make them into “Order New.” But with a simple replacement cipher that doesn’t fit. I remember the German word for new is *neu*, which doesn’t help us either, because it’s too similar to English.’

Claire shook her head. ‘No, there is definitely no one-to-one correspondence with what we’re expecting to find.’

She looked intently at the row of symbols again. ‘I don’t know what it is, but I have a feeling that this is a genuine runic inscription, not a code. I think it is the whole object of the necklace, or at least that of the pendant, that is meant to be secret. I agree with you that it does look like an amulet. In that case, the inscription would be considered too sacred to hide, or to disguise, or to corrupt in any way. Since we have failed, so far, to transcribe it into what we believe to be the name of this secret organisation, it could be something like their motto.’

‘You’re right, Claire. I hadn’t considered that. But now I wonder ...’

‘Ultima Thule?’

‘Yes, let’s see ... No. For a moment there, I got excited again. I thought that, if we accepted the two T, as you have transcribed them, but ignored the other Latin letters, we might be able to fit “Ultima Thule” into the latter part of the inscription. But, for one thing, the symbols that look like I, and that you say were indeed I in the Anglo-Saxon script, simply don’t fit the required pattern.’

‘No. However we look at it – whether we try to transcribe this based on an established alphabet, or as a replacement cipher – the sequence of symbols in the inscription is all wrong for what we want it to mean.’

‘So, we’re back at square one, aren’t we? It’s the same old story as during the winter, when nothing ever was conclusive. That is what worries me so much, this terrible feeling that I’ve been here before – not in every detail, of course, more like a distorted echo, but similar enough to be an ominous reminder.

Like something that happened in a previous life. As if I went through death and only came back to relive the same nightmare over and over again. And I'm wondering who it is going to be this time who will die for me, without returning to life to repeat the next cycle with me.'

'Siobhán, please.'

'Yes, all right. Perhaps I'm being morbid and paranoid. But don't you remember, in February, when I came to see you over those few handwritten words in the library book? Don't you think that what we have here is just like that?'

Siobhán looked closely at Claire, but she could see no confirmation of her own fears in her friend's worried expression.

'No, of course not. I'm sorry, Claire. I don't know myself what I'm talking about. The writing and the overall situation are completely different. Even I can see that if I take a moment to reflect on it.'

Resignedly, she pushed the sheet of paper back between the pages of her notebook.

'Come on, then. Let's go up to the top of the tower. Perhaps we can see the dolphins from there. I haven't spotted them at all today, although I did look out for them in the morning. I was hoping you would get to meet them on your first day already. But they seem to be pretty far out.'

* * *

A soft breeze streamed around the glass dome of the lighthouse, providing a welcome change from the stagnant heat on the roof terrace, which now lay far beneath them.

Siobhán turned back at the low hatch door. ‘Watch your step out here, Claire. Some of these old boards are a bit loose. And it’s easy to get distracted by the view.’

Claire followed her out onto the gallery, breathing less heavily than Siobhán did after the long climb up the winding stairs.

‘I see what you mean, Si. It’s beautiful up here.’ Sure-footed and careless, she walked up to the circular railing. ‘And look: if you lean over far enough until you can’t see the tower below you anymore, and with the wind in your face, it’s almost as if you’re flying.’

‘Well yes, Claire, but you can’t. So, please don’t do this again.’

She allowed herself to be pulled back, and gently leaned against Siobhán with an apologetic look. ‘Sorry, Si. I didn’t mean to frighten you.’

‘Yes, I know. It’s me. It’s my nerves. I just had this sudden vision of you falling, and ... I don’t want to lose you as well, you know.’

Claire smiled with a reassuring nod. Then, she stepped up to the railing again, more carefully this time, and looked out over Moray Firth. ‘So, the dolphins are out there somewhere?’

‘Yes, some distance that way, I imagine, closer to the open sea. But they’ll be back. They always come into the inlet in summer, following the salmon and sea trout. That’s probably what they are doing now, hunting. After all, they need to keep up their strength for mating – exhausting business, this, especially if you conduct it with their kind of acrobatics. Yesterday, you could see them for hours on end, mingling and jumping about,

just over there, a little higher up the firth towards Inverness. They seem to like the shingle beaches along that coast. It's not quite clear why, but the steeply sloping seabed allows them to get very close to the shore.

'We're still trying to work out how many of them there really are. All we can say is that, now in summer, there are well over a hundred, split into several distinct groups. But it's difficult to be sure without a positive identification of individuals, and we can only do that based on the dorsal fins, recording their unique shapes, colourings, and injuries. To see that kind of detail, we really need to be out on the water. But we have a good observation platform here on the lighthouse. With the overview we get from the tower, or even from the roof terrace, we know when to get the boat ready and where to go. Just looking around now, it doesn't seem as if we'll be in luck today. But I'd be very surprised if we didn't get to see any of them over the weekend.'

'No worries, Si. It's nice just to be here. The sea looks so very mysterious from up here, doesn't it, with the sunlight twinkling on the surface. No wonder people tell stories about aquatic monsters around here – and who knows, they may even be true, to some extent. It's easy to imagine that there are secrets down there that we will never know about.'

'Secrets kept by the sea? If only, Claire. If only the Norwegian Sea had kept its secrets we wouldn't be in this new set of troubles now.'

'A sea of troubles . . . But maybe it's better like this, don't you think? Perhaps something needed to happen to stir things up, to give the police something concrete to go on, some kind of lead

they can follow up, from the dead body found in the Lofoten, via Germany, all the way back to Britain; some link that connects all these terrible crimes across different countries and across time.'

'I honestly don't know how far we can expect the police investigation to progress. As they hadn't previously managed to associate the owners of the manor house with the wartime crimes, they won't be able to do so now, not without some significant new piece of evidence that provides an explicit link to the New Atlanteans. I'm afraid the dead body, even in combination with the necklace, won't be enough. We only know of two individuals who, at some time, belonged to the Order, but they are both gone now.

'And what about Alison? To me, it is clear that she was brought to the manor house, and that she died there. But I do not believe that she'll ever be found, although there cannot be any doubt, broadly speaking, about where she is. The lake is simply too big and too deep, and its bed is bound to be as craggy as the mountain slopes above the water, which will effectively hide anything that sinks to the bottom.'

'Consider what we actually know about the New Atlanteans. We know the name of their secret organisation, but who really are they? All we can say with certainty is that they started as a splinter group that broke away from the mainstream Nazi movement because they deemed that ideology to be too violent and too crude, and not sufficiently invested in the more romantic notions of old Germanic and Norse mysticism. The trigger for that separation was the murder of Rosemarie Janssen, which at least some of them witnessed personally at the manor house, having unsuc-

cessfully tried to protect the little girl, for which they severely blamed themselves for years afterwards. Believe me, I'm not saying this to defend them in any way. Before their split from the Nazis, during the first year of the war, they were obviously traitors who did everything in their power to put our entire nation into very serious danger. Had they been caught at the time, they would undoubtedly have been executed. But later, as the Order of the New Atlanteans, we are not aware of any crimes that the original members might have committed.

'We can be certain that, in some form and for some purpose, they are still active. We know this for two reasons. One is that Ralf Behring must have contacted some of the older members only a few years ago, and they apparently did not tell him that the Order had been disbanded. The other is the necklace that was worn by one of the phantoms. They would have been given these necklaces when they joined the New Atlanteans. And when they came after me, they must have seen themselves as still belonging to that secret organisation.

'Ralf Behring clearly didn't know about those three because he believed – amongst many other foolish things – that they and I worked together, with varying imaginary alliances, but definitely outside the Order. From what he told me I could gather that, when he contacted the New Atlanteans shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, they hadn't been interested in taking up the search again for that elusive Secret, which had once been so central to their founding myth, after they had given up on it decades ago. And if he hadn't been able to motivate them, the three phantoms probably acted on their own as well. It's

therefore quite possible that the last four true believers in the old mythology perished that night on Fareøya. Whatever is going to happen now won't be about the Secret anymore. It'll be about the secrecy of an organisation that has existed for half a century without anyone ever finding out anything about it.

'This gives us an indication of how determined they are to cover up their activities. If they want to be secret – I mean genuinely secret, not just secretive – there have got to be good reasons for that. But what exactly is it they have to hide? Many of their founding members may still be alive. We certainly know that the couple who own the manor house are. We also know that, during the war, they were directly involved with espionage on behalf of our enemy. And although they ultimately opposed these crimes, they were also connected to the people who were responsible for the abduction and murder of little Rosemarie and her mother, Ingrid. Their descendants will have the reputation of their families to worry about, their businesses, their political careers – who knows what kind of people we're talking about. And until we do, we have no way of telling how dangerous they really are.

'The police assured me that, should any charges ever be brought against anyone over any of the crimes that were committed in the recent pursuit of the Secret, and should I be required to testify as one of the key witnesses, they would protect me. But protect me how? And for how long? I can't live with police officers following me around all the time. The only way I could be protected for any extended period of time would be for me to enter a full witness protection scheme, change my whole identity, move to

another city. Effectively, that would mean that I would have to get myself another job because you can only do the work I do, and the work I want to do, in a very few places – and this, right here, is exactly where I want to be at this point in my life. But, at least, there is one positive aspect in all of this: I don't have to worry about other family members anymore.'

'Vawny ...'

'And getting a new identity ... The funny thing is that it already feels as if I were a different person anyway. Ever since my return from Antarctica I have struggled to reconnect with the life I had before, and to remember who I used to be. But aside from all that, what would be the point in criminal prosecutions? I'm convinced that those who were directly responsible for the recent crimes are all dead now. And by the time crimes have been committed by current members of the Order, chances are that I won't be around anymore to testify against anyone.'

Saying this, for the first time, Siobhán became fully aware of the seriousness of the situation. She was not overreacting or being paranoid. This was exactly what Claire had attempted to tell her when they had spoken on the phone the previous day. Claire had got frustrated with Siobhán's anxiety about getting others into danger again, by association with her, because Claire had understood immediately where the danger really lay this time. And Claire had been even more determined to be with her because of it.

There was, of course, still a chance that nothing would happen. But if it did, an attack would come suddenly, without any warning, and it would be decisive. There was no more informa-

tion about a lost treasure that anyone would want from her, no need to issue threats against her, or to abduct anyone she cared for. This time, it would be to eradicate, once and for all, all remaining outside knowledge of the Order of the New Atlanteans.

Siobhán looked at Claire as she stood by the railing, gazing across the seemingly peaceful world, flooded from above by bright sunlight, and with the glare from the calm water's surface far below. Even as the sun retreated westwards with the ageing of the afternoon, they were still surrounded by an intense radiance. And yet, Siobhán could see that Claire too sensed the encroaching darkness, that she struggled to find anything comforting to say that would not be in denial of the facts they both knew to be true.

'I can't do this again, Claire. I couldn't have done it the first time around if, at any stage of the journey, I'd had even the slightest inkling of where I was heading. But I didn't. I was completely clueless. You remember when I came to see you, asking you about Ultima Thule. I was afraid of what this could mean for Alison's disappearance, but I could never have imagined that it was connected to a tragedy that had occurred decades earlier. It wasn't until I went up to that old manor house in the Highlands where Kathleen had been found, murdered, that I heard of the rumours about suspicious wartime activities at that place. But even when I went out to that little chapel by the coast and found what had to be the confirmation of the darkest of these rumours, I still didn't make that connection.

'Then, Gran died, which gave me a new direction to pursue. And straight away, after I'd visited the submarine archive in Ger-

many, I was essentially in possession of all the relevant facts, but I was unable to interpret them correctly. Otherwise, I would have been far too terrified to take a single step further. As it happened, at no point along the way did I ever have to make a brave decision, knowing that my own life was in any danger. When I finally realised that and started to see how bad the situation really was, it was already too late. By then, I was tired and worn out, and I didn't care about anything anymore. I just wanted it to end, one way or the other.'

'I think you're underestimating yourself, Siobhán. Because, when you did find out the truth – after you'd heard from Peter his side of the story, which was not officially recorded anywhere – and when it was only you who were left, just you against those shadowy figures who had committed all these terrible crimes, you did go and put an end to the danger as it existed at that time, exactly as your grandmother and Peter knew you could.'

'I was desperate, Claire, and very angry. I was trapped on that island, with nowhere to go except up into the mountains. And now it's all starting again. I'm once again surrounded by an invisible enemy. I know they are out there. I know that no matter how hard I look in any direction – as far as possible, even from up here – I will never see them until it's too late.

'It was Monday, four days ago, that the incident in the Lofoten was first reported by the Norwegian media. There has been plenty of time for the New Atlanteans to find out about it and to set things in motion to protect themselves. Even if they had lost contact with Ralf Behring, or didn't care much about him, they must have been concerned about the disappearance of three of

their current associates. When the New Atlanteans found out that the three were planning to go searching for the old Secret again, there had to have been some of the other members who were worried about that, and they would have tried to keep an eye on the three. It's quite possible that the last time the others would have heard from them was when they were on their way to the Lofoten. In that case, the New Atlanteans must have kept a close watch on Norwegian news reporting after they hadn't had any contact with the three for longer than normally. The moment they found out about the discovery of an unidentified dead body in the Lofoten, they would have realised how this could jeopardise the secrecy of their entire organisation. Now, it's really just a question of how much they know about me.

‘So far, there have been no tangible indications that someone is closing in on me. It's just an unnerving feeling that I have. At this point, I would almost prefer if there was some outsider in the village who behaved in a way you wouldn't expect from an ordinary tourist; someone looking shifty as I walk past them, or as I turn around and see them walking behind me. But nothing like that has happened, nothing unusual at all. Yesterday afternoon, I walked over to the village to find out if recently someone had asked about the field station. But during a casual conversation in the only café there, nothing was mentioned to me, although I asked directly if, during the past few days, anyone had shown any interest in our work. It's not widely advertised, but some tourists do come out here specifically to see the dolphins, especially at this time of the year, and they will usually have heard about the research we're doing. So, the fact that there haven't

been any enquiries made about us in the village at all, somehow, is more unsettling to me than someone displaying some odd behaviour – which you can always get, even from entirely harmless people.

‘Just look around you, Claire. All you see is this idyllic landscape, lying peacefully under a clear blue sky – a perfectly tranquil and bright summer’s day. We’re surrounded by this lazy relaxed atmosphere. Everyone else is in a holiday mood, and to everyone else the silence is relaxing. But to me, it’s as if I had some kind of psychological tinnitus, this piercing hissing all the time, that no one else can hear because it doesn’t really exist outside of my own head. All I can feel is a menacing oppressive quiet, a deceptive calm that can be shattered at any moment. I can’t get rid of the feeling that something dark and powerful is closing in on me. It’s already crept back into my mind. Even as I’m awake, I keep reliving everything that happened during the winter. But the old nightmares have returned too, and they are becoming increasingly real. I feel disconnected from everything, like an outsider. I inhabit the same surroundings as everyone else I interact with, but I experience them in an inverted manner, as if I didn’t belong to this world anymore.

‘You know, Claire, I’ve frequently been thinking about the sea recently – not just for my research. Every time I go scuba diving, I’m struck by the change that occurs when you cross over that infinitesimally thin division between air and water, how fundamentally different the terrestrial and aquatic worlds are. Now, I’m wondering whether this is how dying is like, to pass through an ethereal interface between two different but connected worlds.

And for all the nightmares I've had in the past half year or so, usually involving water in some way or other, I do still like the sea, and I want to go back there – forever, you know, in the end. Sometimes I wish that, instead of these horrid nightmares, a friendly sea would enter my dreams and gently carry me away over that final threshold.'

'Siobhán, you mustn't think like that.'

'I'm serious, Claire. I mean it. I don't want to be buried or kept in a jar somewhere. I want to return to where we all came from – just like Peter did, I suppose. I want to be cremated without any great ceremony, somewhere near the coast. And then, in the evening, when the wind turns out to sea, just before sunset, from the very tip of a headland, I want my ashes to be cast into the air and carried away, back to the sea.'

'Hmm ... Many decades from now.' Claire turned towards the distant western horizon and squinted against the sun. 'Shore-lines are magical places where, at the right moment, all four elements can come together. I always thought about that when we went to the Isle of Lewis, where we used to celebrate the summer solstice at the Callanish Standing Stones. Viewed from the headland on which the monument stands, the many other islands, often very small ones, gradually blend into the sea and the sky, as they get farther and farther away from you. And if you're standing in a place like that, looking towards either a sunrise or a sunset, you can see, at the boundary where land, water, and air meet, the fire that supports all life on our planet cross over from night to day, or from day to night. Yes, I'd like that as a starting point for the return to a spiritual existence. But I'd like it even

better if, cast into the air, I could stay up there, forever.’

‘You know, Claire, if anyone can do it, I’m sure you will – many decades from now.’

She smiled, with a sad expression in her eyes. ‘There were times when I was unwell – years ago, before we met – when I wished I could turn into a bird and simply fly away, leave the misery of my human existence behind, far below. Especially a raven is what I wanted to be. I was reading a lot in grimoires in those days – often not very authentic ones, to be honest – about spells and rituals for animal transformations. I knew, of course, that none of them worked, but I still liked the idea. Even now I’m very fond of ravens, as you know. I think they are fascinating – hugely intelligent, obviously. But beyond that, I do believe that, in their own ways, they are magical, just not necessarily how the old spell books imagine them to be. Often, as I watch them, I wish that I could see the world through their eyes, that I could listen in on their thoughts. Exactly what you’re doing with your research on the dolphins, I suppose, isn’t it?’

‘It is, you’re right, Claire. What we are both trying to do is to learn a language capable of describing alternative points of view of familiar elements of our world, or of expressing concepts that are altogether outside of human experience. In a very basic manner, this is also what I’m trying to do with the situation now. The number of times I’ve lain awake at night and wished that I could take a different point of view of all the tragic events that occurred last winter, either to find a different meaning in established facts, or to discover new facts that would allow me to look beyond the known horizon and see the motivations and actions

of the perpetrators. But I'm stuck with the same mental images, expressed by the same words. And I don't think that any new information about what exactly happened will ever be found. Nor will we be able to take up a legitimate alternative point of view that would allow a fundamentally different interpretation of the known facts.

'I appreciate the concerns the police have for my safety, now that the dead body with that amulet necklace has been found; just as I appreciate their optimism that maybe now the investigation into the various disappearances will finally yield results. I wish that this were true. I wish that I was given some kind of decisive information, some kind of hard evidence, that would allow me to go after the New Atlanteans. I wish they really did know who I am. I wish they really were afraid of me. I wish I really were in a position to take revenge on them for all the crimes they committed. Sometimes, in angrier moments, I wish that my vague fears were true, and the New Atlanteans were closing in on me. But I suspect that, in reality, I mean nothing to them, either because they don't know me at all, or because they realise that I'm no danger to them whatsoever. And I don't think that this recent discovery of the dead body is going to make even the slightest difference.'

* * *

Through the open window of Siobhán's bedroom entered the excited calls of seabirds who had become active again at this late stage of the afternoon.

She sank onto her narrow bed and leaned against the wall.

She felt dispirited. A heavy lethargy had come over her that was separate from the ordinary tiredness that afflicted her after two sleepless nights.

Prior to being informed about the discovery in the Lofoten, she had genuinely been looking forward to Claire's visit. She had hoped to rekindle her own enthusiasm for her research by explaining it to someone who was completely new to it. She had hoped to build up her health and fitness again by engaging in a variety of relaxed outdoor pursuits. And now that Claire had arrived, all she wanted to do was to lie down on her bed and turn over in her mind the same old questions for which there were likely never going to be any definite answers.

It was unfair to Claire, of course. She needed and deserved a pleasant holiday even more than Siobhán did. She should not get caught between recurring conflicts of the past and a dark foreboding of approaching hostility. And yet, fully aware of the potential dangers, there she was with her determined cheerfulness and her valiant optimism.

She took a careful look around the bedroom, seemingly taking in every detail, as if trying to infer from this personal space her friend's true state of mind, beyond what Siobhán herself had confided to her. For a moment, her eyes rested on the bottle of sleeping pills on the bedside cabinet, and a worried expression came over her face.

Then, she noticed the magazine lying among the scientific journals on the desk. She sat down and picked it up. 'Hey, Si, you hadn't told me that this has come out now. It's that magazine published by the German submarine archive, isn't it, for which

you wrote the article, back in April? Then you did get your name on the front cover of a magazine after all – Dr Siobhán Dannreuther – look at you. Much more high-brow than *Brigid*, I’m sure. It looks very classy, anyway, that dramatic painting of the submarine in a stormy sea, with the Arctic islands in the background, and the northern lights above.’

‘Mr Karsten did that himself. Apparently, the original painting now hangs in the reading room of the submarine archive.’

‘Impressive . . . But I’d still like to have “your” *Brigid* edition in my collection, now that you’ll be going back to that research station on Antarctica.’

‘Or rather what’s left of it. Staying there now will be even more basic than it was before. No doubt we’ll have to improvise, set up temporary shelters, and make use of every available space, including the outlying buildings that previously only housed laboratories.’

‘Knowing you, I’m sure you’ll love it even more for the added sense of adventure. So you see, there is something to look forward to, something positive to think about.’

‘Yes. If I survive until then, Antarctica will just be a relaxing stroll in the park.’

Claire glanced at Siobhán with a faint smile. Then, she tried to decipher the title of the magazine. ‘*Das ver-lo-re-ne . . .*’

‘It means “The Lost Submarine – The Story of *U-112*.”’

Claire chuckled. ‘*Danke, Fräulein Dannreuther.*’

‘I was going to say “The Legend” in the title, rather than “The Story,” and also write about the consequences of what happened during the war – the tragic aftermath, the origins of the conspir-

acy theories around the disappearance of *U-112*, and the founding of the Order of the New Atlanteans. But Mr Karsten felt it would be too tenuous. I didn't get the impression that he himself had any problems believing it. Certainly everything that Peter had told me about the encounter with the British soldiers he never questioned at all. It fits easily enough into the gaps in the official records that Mr Karsten had obtained previously. And it does answer many open questions he had in a fairly straightforward manner, without the need for assuming the existence of unlikely treacherous alliances and defections. But he felt that everything about the aftermath would come across as being too sensationalist. He never said that he would refuse to publish it. He always said he wanted this to be an accurate account of Peter's experiences while serving on *U-112*. He just advised very strongly against writing anything about the New Atlanteans and their origin without more evidence to back it up. Initially, as angry as I still was at the time, I was a bit disappointed. But when I thought about it, even back then, I realised that he was probably right. Now, of course, I'm glad I followed his advice. Imagine how much worse the situation would be if the article had been published with all that madness in it.'

Claire nodded with a slight shudder and began leafing through the magazine.

'You know what, Si, all of this looks very professionally produced. There, opening with a whole double page on you – nice portrait shot by the way. Not sure if it's the studio lighting or the formal shirt that makes you look older – in a good way, you know, very distinguished. And there are lots of other pho-

tographs as well to illustrate what happened, far more than I would have expected to exist from back then.’

‘Those with the submarine are mostly from the archive. They were essentially used as propaganda material. But there are a few private ones as well, which were sent in by families of crew members. Some of these are quite touching: husbands and fathers saying goodbye to their loved ones, or being reunited with them. Mr Karsten launched a major campaign to gather information. Because much of the German records concerning *U-112* and its crew had either been destroyed or falsified after the sinking, he asked anyone with any connection to the German submarine fleet during the Second World War if they could remember anything about *U-112*. We know that, with Peter and Ralf Behring gone, there is no one left alive of the crew. But eventually, Mr Karsten was able to track down several surviving widows and their descendants. He mentioned he would like to organise a meeting between the relatives of the *U-112* crew and the British commando unit. Ideally, you would do that on the day of the sinking, which would be 19th December. But that’s a bit too close to Christmas. I therefore suspect he will try and get everyone together the previous weekend.’

‘But that would be nice, wouldn’t it? For the surviving relatives of the two groups to finally find out what really happened during the war. They might find some late closure, and perhaps even some reconciliation, when they finally meet those who were affected by the same tragic events, but on the other side.’

Claire turned over a page and studied one of the photographs more carefully. ‘Here they are, the whole crew lined up on the

deck of the submarine. I didn't realise how small these boats were – or rather, how many men had to live inside them.

'And there is their commander, standing in the middle. I don't know, Si, I think he looks rather dashing, the way he smiles, very confident – outwardly at least, although he must have been worried. Imagine being responsible for all these men, especially during wartime.

'And then you think about that part of the scene that we can't see, the scene the men were looking at when this picture was taken: their women and children, standing there on the quay among all the other people, getting smaller and smaller, as the submarine started to move away.'

Claire looked over to Siobhán. 'He must have been nice, your granddad, mustn't he, if your gran loved him? If only he'd been wearing a different uniform.'

'Such as?'

'I don't know – a firefighter's.'

'On a submarine?'

'No, silly. You can look dashing on a fire engine.'

Siobhán stretched out on her bed. 'You're an eternal romantic, Claire.'

'Yes, well, the world needs more romance – you need more romance, Siobhán Dannreuther.'

Claire furrowed her brow, trying to read the German caption of the photograph. 'It says here 3rd April 1940. That must have been ...'

'It was the day they left their base in Kiel, heading towards Norway for the invasion.'

‘Blimey, that was big, wasn’t it? The beginning of the war for us, if I remember correctly from my school years. At uni, of course, I didn’t read anything more recent than the Norman Conquest. Ultimately, we pulled out of Norway, didn’t we, because of Dunkirk?’

‘And here they are coming back, on the 24th June 1940. Look at the difference compared with their departure: their faces tired and unshaven, but relieved, you can see that. And the submarine – all dirty, or rusty, I suppose; hard to tell on those old black-and-white pictures.’

Claire turned over another page. ‘Here they are on their wedding day, your grandparents. Look how young they were, in their early twenties I should guess – younger than we are now.’

‘That picture of the wedding, and the one of my mother as a newborn with Gran, those were from one of Peter’s photo albums. He insisted that I should keep them. Then, he went up to the attic to get down his old trunk with the pistol, which he also wanted to give to me. I refused to take it, but I’m glad I accepted the photographs.’

Claire smiled. ‘Your gran really was lovely, and you do look a bit like her.’

‘No need to be generous. But, apparently, I did pick up some of her mannerisms.’

Claire looked over. Although Siobhán had turned towards the wall, the change in the tone of her voice had not escaped Claire. She put the magazine back onto the desk and quickly stepped over to the bed. She sat down on the edge and gently put a hand on Siobhán’s shoulder.

‘Come on, Si, let’s get out of here. It’s such a beautiful evening. And it won’t be as hot as it was earlier. Let’s go for a walk along the shore, and perhaps we’ll get to see the dolphins after all.’

CHAPTER THREE

THE LAST STAND

It would not be long now. The nervous wait and the uncertainty were almost over. The magical alignment was almost complete.

Already, the atmosphere had changed from what it had been only an hour ago. The sense of clarity that had prevailed during the day had waned with the onset of twilight. And with it, the serene quiet that had lain over the sun-drenched landscape had given way to an eerie lack of any distinct sound. The last human visitors to the historic site had withdrawn, and even the birds had fallen silent. There was now only a vague feeling of the presence of diffuse noises at an indeterminate distance, obscure hints at some kind of disturbance in the surroundings.

Scattered clouds had begun to cover the sky, and the warmth that the land had acquired during the day had evaporated. A light fog had risen up from the water in the south, creeping ghostlike onto the barren headland.

Looking westwards, Loch Roag wound its way towards the open sea but was eventually lost from sight amongst the many islands – with land, sea, and sky blending at the horizon. Still a short distance above that conjunction, the sun was creating an intense glow of orange and red around the dark outlines of the clouds. The last of the four elements was about to move into place.

The already tall standing stones appeared to grow even fur-

ther, as they cast longer and longer shadows across the headland. Under the low-angle lighting, the ancient monument's nature of a sundial became more apparent than it had been during the afternoon, with its regular circle of stones, the dominant monolith near its centre, and the straight rows of stones leading away from the circle towards each cardinal direction.

Seen from the centre of the circle, the western row was now pointing at the setting sun, and Siobhán was determined not to miss the right moment. But in her tense anticipation, as she watched the progression in the sky towards the critical intersection, time inside the giant clock seemed to slow, coupled as it was to the movement of the sun, until it eventually seemed to come to a complete standstill.

She realised then that, even in the space outside the circle, several minutes were still to pass after all. She therefore leaned back against the monolith, trying to suppress her nervousness and forcing herself to breathe regularly, while still gazing intently towards the western horizon. When the juncture finally arrived, would there be anything tangible that happened? And would she be perceptive enough to notice it?

It was too much to expect that the stones would come to live. But would the spirits of the generations of people who built the monument become visible? Or would their former life forces manifest themselves in some other ways? Their dedication to the construction of the monument alone, the energy that had flowed into these stones during their assembly into the ageless and universal geometric shapes of circle and cross, that energy had to be conserved somehow. Given the available tools at the time, more

than four millennia ago, it was hard to imagine how this could have been accomplished without the aid of supernatural powers – powers that had since been forgotten, and yet were still there, all around, only unperceived by most modern visitors.

But would the special circumstances of the elemental alignment make a difference? Moreover, would her own presence – standing as she was at the right spot, and soon at the right moment – be sufficient to draw the spirits of more recently departed to this sacred place? Did they still linger close enough to this world to reveal themselves to those who were left behind, grieving and desperately hoping for closure? One spirit in particular, who had departed this world from a place not far away? Was the moment about to arrive in which, finally, she would meet Alison again?

The first wisps of fog were now swirling around some of the outlying stones, gradually closing in on the circle at the heart of the monument. Would the spectral forms reveal themselves in that fashion, by shaping the naturally occurring vapours around themselves?

The sun, with its diffuse edge, had just touched the summits of the distant mountains, and its warm red glow spread across the horizon, lighting up the calm surface of the water. There was a tension in the air. She could feel it. It was about to begin.

But while her attention was focussed on the setting sun, Siobhán thought she saw, out of the corner of her eye, a movement in the thickening fog near the end of the southern row of stones. She turned towards it. At first, she could discern nothing but an indistinct shape approaching in the twilight. Then, gradually, a

figure emerged – the figure of a slender woman with long dark hair.

Before she got close enough for Siobhán to see her clearly, the woman halted. For several long moments, she stood perfectly still, looking towards the circle of stones. Was she able to see Siobhán standing within the shadows amongst them? Did she still need her eyes to be aware of Siobhán's presence?

Involuntarily, Siobhán held her breath. Shaking with nervous tension, her heart racing, she pushed herself away from the monolith and uncertainly walked towards the edge of the circle.

Immediately, the woman resumed walking, following the row of stones up from the coast, as she moved across the regular pattern of shadows and light.

Then, suddenly, with an overwhelming combination of both disappointment and relief, Siobhán recognised her.

A few yards away from Siobhán, Claire slowed and, after a few more steps, stood still again. Although her face was hidden in shadows, her own relief, mixed with exasperation, was clearly shown in her demeanour.

‘Siobhán, please don’t do things like that.’

She took the last steps towards Siobhán and impulsively seized her arms. ‘You know how worried I get when you run off by yourself, when I don’t know where you are and what you’re doing.’

‘I’m sorry, Claire. If I’d planned to be away from the field station for more than just a couple of days, I would have told you. But I didn’t really plan this at all. Anyway, how did you find me?’

Claire released Siobhán's arms but continued to stand close by her. 'At breakfast this morning, I thought that, since we hadn't spoken for a few days, I could give you a ring and see how things are going at the lighthouse. Victoria said that yesterday you had taken the train to Inverness, with the intention of hiring a car there and driving to Clach toll Bay to visit the little chapel where you had discovered the memorial for Rosemarie. I was quite sure that you'd be staying with Anne at her B&B. From when we were there in April, I still had her phone number. She confirmed that you had in fact stayed there overnight but had just left to take the ferry over to Lewis, to see the Callanish Stones. That's when I got worried: you, alone, on a remote island, under circumstances of which we still don't know how dangerous they are. I therefore left home immediately and managed, by bus, to get to Ullapool just in time for the evening ferry to Stornoway. I didn't know where to look for you in the town. But, eventually, I found a taxi driver who was willing to drive me out here, despite it being so close to sunset. He obviously thought I was mad. I told him he didn't have to wait. If I hadn't met you, I would have walked over to the village and asked someone if I could use their telephone. But based on what Victoria said . . .'

'Yes, it's all right. I've got the car parked up at the beginning of the village. Before I came here, I arranged to stay one night in a B&B in Stornoway. Tomorrow morning, I was going to take the first ferry back to the mainland and return to the field station. Believe me, Claire, I would have called you in the evening and told you all about the little trip.'

'But why did you decide to come out here all by yourself?'

‘It was while I was standing on the beach in Clachtoll Bay. That’s when I remembered what you had told me about travelling to Lewis to celebrate the summer solstice – you know what we talked about when you visited me at the field station. From the time we lived together, I also remembered what you had said about the possible motivations that the ancient people might have had for building such a gigantic monument; that it could have been used as a calendar, or a clock, or a celestial observatory, or all of these things. But you also said that there could have been more spiritual reasons as well; that through the tall figures of the standing stones they had built lasting representations of their ancestors. Although I do remember you saying at the time that this was likely to be too fanciful, it was that latter possibility that suddenly seemed very attractive to me.

‘But, of course, my desire to get away from Tarbat Rocks for a while started before then. For weeks now, I’ve been feeling restless and claustrophobic. You know how I was when you saw me earlier this month. That was only two days after I’d heard about the discovery of the dead body in the Lofoten. And already then, I was getting nervous about enemies closing in on me, wondering when and how they might strike.

‘Now, it’s been three weeks, and still nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Constantly, I’m waiting for ... I don’t even know what. But all we get, day after day, is this seemingly peaceful aura of bright sunshine and clear blue skies. Everyone else is obviously enjoying the calm summer weather, but I can’t because I know it’s deceptive.

‘And so, day after day, I get more nervous, more suspicious,

more paranoid about even the most normal occurrences. If I go down to the village, for example – you know the café we went to – I’ve been there a countless number of times over the years, and I always enjoyed the friendly atmosphere. But now, even there, I find myself looking over my shoulder, expecting to be watched by someone with malicious intent.

‘And, you know, Claire, being here clarifies so many things you used to tell me about, when we lived together, that I couldn’t understand back then because I never took the time to properly listen to you. Everything you said about spiritual spaces, that there is more than the one world that we experience through our ordinary senses, that the different worlds are not separated by impenetrable boundaries, and that, with the right mindset, it is possible to transition between them.’

Even in the red and purple glow of the setting sun, Claire looked pale. She shivered, as the fog had now reached the circle of stones, bringing with it a lifeless chill.

‘Siobhán, I’m worried about you. You really shouldn’t have come here all by yourself.’

‘No, I suppose not. But I panicked, you know. I think that’s what it was. I lost my nerves. It happened yesterday morning when I went food shopping in Tain. The other two were engrossed in their work, so I went alone. I took the Land Rover because it’s the only vehicle we’ve got. It’s very noticeable, of course, with all these logos on it – of the university, the institute, and our research group. If we show up anywhere in that, it’s completely normal that we’re being approached by people who are interested in the dolphins. For that reason, I would have

preferred to go in a less conspicuous conveyance, but I couldn't.

'I was no more than a mile outside of Tarbat Rocks when I noticed a car driving behind me. I had seen it a few times before, parked up by the harbour. As I'd been on the lookout for any outsiders, it had caught my attention. It looked too expensive and not functional enough to belong to any of the locals. Admittedly, it didn't look any more suspicious than other cars driven by tourists, with the same type of summer holiday paraphernalia inside it. I'd just noticed it more frequently than others.

'The car stayed behind me all the way to Tain, always at a discrete distance of perhaps a hundred yards, or so. And after I'd parked in front of the supermarket, it pulled into the spot right next to me. A woman got out and addressed me, very politely, saying that they – she and her husband, presumably – were staying in Tarbat Rocks for their holidays and would often watch the dolphins from the shore. They had read about the field station and were interested in our work. By coincidence, she was driving behind me out of the village and noticed the logos on the Land Rover. She guessed that I would be driving to Tain, as she was, and when she saw me park by the supermarket, she wanted to take the opportunity to ask me about our research, what kind of information we're gathering, and how it is to live and work in the lighthouse.

'On the surface, it was the same harmless banter that I've engaged in many times before. I used to see these interactions with interested members of the public as something positive, and I was always happy to show around anyone who was keen enough to visit us at the lighthouse. This kind of outreach is essential for

the continuation of our research. In addition to our regular funding, we are dependent on private donations, especially since we expanded our programme with that new array of hydrophones.

‘But now, I can’t be sure anymore about their intentions when someone approaches me and engages me in conversation. And it’s no good saying that this or that person looks perfectly harmless because I know that, if someone from the New Atlanteans comes after me, they will definitely look perfectly harmless, right up to the moment when they decide to strike, and then it’s too late.

‘I don’t know what it was about this particular encounter that spooked me – whether it was seeing that car in the rearview mirror for several minutes, following me along a lonely country road – but I decided there and then that I had to get away from the field station for a few days. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to focus on the research anyway, and I would only make the others nervous as well. They can get along without me now. It’s true that Victoria can sometimes come across as being a bit flippant, whereas Neil is perhaps taking everything a bit too seriously. But between the two of them, they do make a good team.

‘Therefore, as soon as I’d got back to the lighthouse and had stowed away the shopping, I hastily packed up a few things and asked Victoria if she could drive me to the railway station. She looked a bit worried, but I told her about wanting to visit the chapel in Clachtoll Bay, and she seemed to understand that. Neil and she, of course, know broadly what this is about, although I still haven’t told them about the necklace and what that could mean for me.

‘I agree with you that coming here all by myself would be careless if the New Atlanteans have already tracked me down at the field station. But I’ve seen no indication that anyone followed me here. And even that encounter with the woman in the carpark . . . Now that I begin to think about it rationally, I ask myself why the New Atlanteans would approach me like that. I can’t imagine that they would have to verify who I am. If they managed to find out about me, they would know about my affiliation with the University of Aberdeen. All they would have to do would be to walk into the Zoology Building, as so many people do for the museum or the botanic garden, and casually stroll along the corridors. On one of the noticeboards, they would eventually see my name and photograph among the others of the teaching staff.

‘But even if they know that I’m affiliated with the University of Aberdeen, I’m now wondering how they could find out about me working from the field station this summer. The police discovered that by phoning the university administration and explaining the situation to them. If now anyone else asked about me, I would hope that they wouldn’t pass on my home address, or where I’m staying at the moment, and contact me or the police instead.

‘Of course, the New Atlanteans could potentially dig up some material that I published, in which I discuss the work at the field station, but . . . I don’t know what to think, Claire. As ever, I’m going back and forth. For every argument that points one way, there is another equally valid argument that points in the opposite direction.’

‘Siobhán, I completely understand your frustration. I also un-

derstand that you were desperate to get away from Tarbat Rocks for a while. But you really shouldn't travel alone.'

'I know. When I left, it simply didn't feel right to put you under pressure, to make you abandon everything you were doing at short notice. But I regretted not having asked you the moment I got to Clachtoll Bay and visited the chapel with Anne. It's changed so much since we were there in April. Anne finally managed to have it scheduled for conservation. That allowed them to remove the memorial stone, leaving only the carved inscription on the wall just beneath the ceiling, and the rose engraving on one of the flagstones in a corner by the door. Both are already weathering away and will eventually also disappear. It's remarkable how much this has altered the chapel's interior. Previously, as you remember, it had been such a grim and ominous place. From the outside, it's always looked dependable and strong, in a dignified and serene kind of way, standing there alone within that wild landscape.

'Anne has had this wonderful idea to have burnet roses planted over the headland around the chapel, and it seems they have taken hold very well. They are in full bloom right now, looking really lovely – all these pretty little flowers with their white blossoms. And I'm sure that Peter would have liked them too. I mean, if we're compelled by tragedy to establish a memorial for a little girl, let it be that.'

Still standing close by Siobhán in the gathering darkness, Claire nodded quietly.

'Anne mentioned that before the memorial stone was removed, its former position inside the chapel was documented by the po-

lice, and they are keeping it somewhere as potential evidence. But I honestly don't think it will ever help us to bring anyone to justice. By itself, it doesn't identify either the victim or the perpetrators. It doesn't even give an indication as to who arranged for the memorial to be established inside the chapel.

'But it got me thinking about commemorative places, particularly about the role of stones in leaving lasting tributes. And then I remembered you telling me about this place. Anne knew it, of course, and she told me how to get here. You know what, Claire, I finally understand it now, everything you always tried to tell me about powers in nature that we don't understand. It's all here. Generations of people put a lot of effort into moving these giant stones from where they were quarried and arranging them in this striking constellation. However they managed to do this, whichever powers they were able to tap into, they did it so that for generations afterwards people could still find inspiration and solace in the dedication and wisdom of their ancestors. They preserved it all in these eternal figures, so that, when their world got dark, and they found themselves up against evil powers, they could come here to find the strength to endure.'

Claire looked troubled. 'But Siobhán, these things ... What I said about powers that are outside of recognised scientific concepts, you have to understand that they are not as utilitarian as physical forces, not as easily manipulated to work in your favour. They are far more mysterious and unpredictable.'

'Exactly, just like their ideologies about supernatural powers.'

'They? You mean the New Atlanteans?' Claire brushed a strand of damp hair out of her face. 'Siobhán, these people

have real power and influence, unlimited resources, money and weapons. Whereas this is just ...’ She broke off, looking desperately around her, clearly conflicted.

‘Just a collection of old stones? Come on, Claire, you can’t get yourself to say that. This is exactly what you’ve always tried to tell me about looking through the physical barriers in our surroundings and seeing the spiritual essence of things. These stones are proof that, for thousands of years, humans here have lived together, worked together, supported each other through harsh times, defied death and annihilation, allied themselves with nature if possible, fought against it if necessary, and steadily carved out and defended their little niche in this competitive ecosystem. Whatever other powers were granted them to accomplish this epic task, their own spirit of survival is proved undeniably by the existence of this monument, and it lives on through it, I can feel it.’

Despite her worries, Claire managed a warm smile. ‘Siobhán, everything you’re feeling right now, your renewed confidence that you will get through this difficult period, it didn’t come out of the stones as some form of energy. The stones only reminded you of your own strength. It was already there inside you, in your mind and in your heart. You brought it here with you. You don’t need the stones anymore.’

‘No, Claire, when I came here, I felt empty and tired – tired of everything. But then, when the last tourists had finally left, and it got darker, I began to sense that I wasn’t really alone. That feeling became stronger and stronger the closer to sunset it got. And now, as the daylight fades away, can’t you see the

stones come to life? Look, coming towards us out of the fog from all four directions, up from the water in the south, down from the land in the north, from sunrise in the east, from sunset in the west – a solemn procession. And although their origins are different, their destination is the same. Here, in this circle, around this central monolith, they will all be united, these eternal witnesses of the enduring spirit of those who came and passed away before us. That’s what these stones represent. The last stand of our people in the ceaseless battle against our ultimate enemy; the battle that, as individuals, we are bound to lose, and that collectively we can only win if we come together and stand as united as these stones.

‘How often did you try and explain to me the concept of “thin places,” of locations where the separation between the physical and spiritual world dissolves? Don’t you feel, standing inside this circle, as darkness settles around us, a strange pull from the surrounding stones? Don’t you feel how easy it would be to give in to that attraction, to fade away from our mortal world, and to enter the eternal world into which those we’ve lost have preceded us?’

Claire stood motionless among the dark figures that formed the ancient monument. ‘Siobhán, I don’t care what you say. I am staying with you until you are back at the field station with the others, and that is final.’

Illuminated by the last remaining purple glow from the western horizon, she looked miserable in her thin summer coat, her hair wet from exposure to the cold sea of fog. She was tired from the long journey and worn-out from anxiety.

‘You’re right, Claire. We shouldn’t stay here any longer. I’ve seen what I wanted to see. I’m glad I came. But this is not the way out of the situation. Nor can I hide here – not here, not anywhere.’

CHAPTER FOUR

A HOLIDAY ESCAPE

The air appeared to be vibrating with more than the sound of the repeated ringing. After the unsettling phone call Siobhán had received that same morning, there was now an added nervous tension and an urgency about it. She could not be sure how long the phone had been ringing, but by the time she had raced down the winding stairs of the tower and into the office, it had been at least five or six times since she had first noticed it. The call had to be important.

‘Lighthouse Field Station, Dr Dannreuther speaking.’

‘Wawny! It’s good to hear your voice, but remember what the police said about answering the phone with your own name? Anyway, I’m glad you’re there. I began to think that you were all out – on the water, perhaps, visiting the dolphins.’

‘The others aren’t here at the moment. They are having our two outboard motors checked. I was up on the roof terrace for the routine visual observations. It probably took me a while to hear the ringing through the open window on the floor below, especially against the clamour of the kittiwakes. I think they are getting restless after the breeding season and are assembling for their migration back out to sea.’

‘That’s lovely. I miss the lighthouse. I wish I could have spent more time there with you, after we got back from Lewis. But at least I’ve got all the administrative stuff sorted out now for my

teaching duties next term. The course description is published in the catalogue, with schedule and required reading list, and the rooms are reserved.

‘But that’s not why I’m calling. There is something important I need to talk to you about. You know, I was finally able to show Professor Harris your sketch of these runic symbols on the pendant. He had been away on holidays, and I hadn’t seen him at the university since my promotion party early last month. But as he’d asked us to keep him in the loop about any further developments related to this mysterious Order of the New Atlanteans, I tried to ring him at home a few times. This morning, I finally managed to get him on the phone. I could tell he was keen on getting an update, so we met in the faculty club for lunch. As soon as we had ordered, I showed him the copy I had made of your sketch. He only had to glance at the symbols and read them straight away. They spell out *Ordo Novi Atlantidis*.

‘I have rarely seen him as excited as this. I knew he was worried already when we met him after the Easter holidays, when you’d just got back from Norway and told him about everything that had happened since your first meeting in February. He must have feared then, as you did, that this wasn’t the end of the affair, although he made a good effort to appear unperturbed. Generally, when interacting with people that he has reasons to be concerned about, he has cultivated this nonchalant persona as a way of projecting confidence and reassuring the other person. You probably remember how he was, when we met him: “Indeed, Miss Dannreuther, you were chased by three murderous lunatics all the way to the Lofoten? Do tell me all about it.” You may

have felt that perhaps he was being a bit too casual, but that's just how he deals with situations like this. Today was no exception. He tried not to show it, but I've known him for years and, after he'd read the inscription, I could tell that he was genuinely troubled.

'The runes along the outer edge of the emblem belong to a medieval system. Some of them are the same as the Anglo-Saxon ones that I'm familiar with, but some are either modified from or added to the older system. These medieval runes were very popular among the various occultist groups in Germany around the turn of the century, and one in particular. They called themselves *Ordo Novi Templi*, the Order of the New Templars. They were crucially involved in developing this Aryan-Atlantean pseudo-mythology that Harris told you about. Leading up to the Second World War, they were closely aligned with the Nazi movement. As a matter of fact, they were the ones who introduced the swastika as the symbol for their new ideology. But later, during the war, together with the other occultist and esoteric groups that were then active in Germany, they were banned by the Nazis. At that time, if your ideology was too similar to the state ideology, you were a competitor, and you were banned. If your ideology deviated from the state ideology, you were a heretic, and you were also banned. Either way, if you were an occultist outside the Nazi movement, you were banned. And so, as a result, the New Templars went underground.

'It seems that, after the disappearance of *U-112*, and all the tragic events that this triggered, when some of the Nazi sympathisers here in Britain ran into conflict with their former col-

laborators and decided to found their own order, they modelled themselves after the earlier group of the New Templars who, in turn, had modelled themselves after the medieval military order of the Knights Templar. And, of course, through the original Templars, it was easy enough to draw a connection with the legendary Knights of the Round Table and their search for the Holy Grail, which would have particularly appealed to the New Atlanteans.

‘So, this is as definite as it gets. Now we know for sure that those three that came after you last winter wore necklaces that belonged to the Order of the New Atlanteans. Even if we ignore your personal interaction with Ralf Behring, for which there is no supporting evidence beyond your own account, there is no point denying that in some form or other this group is still active, and at least some of its members were, and others possibly still are, extremely dangerous.

‘We can now also appreciate how much of a problem having one of these necklaces out in the open is to the New Atlanteans, especially if it is so clearly linked to the disappearances in the Lofoten and, worse, to a trail of crimes reaching back, through Germany, all the way to Britain. We cannot afford to hope that they haven’t heard about the discovery of the dead body, or that they didn’t immediately make the connection to the disappearance of three of their associates, who were likely wearing their necklaces when they set out on their mission. They must be aware of all of this, and they must realise that these runic symbols on the pendant are no effective code because they were never meant to be one.’

Through her matter-of-fact summary of this new information, Claire evidently attempted to appear unconcerned. But the tone of her voice gave away how worried she was about the rapid developments. There could be no doubt that her assessment of the situation was realistic. And, suddenly, the unseen danger seemed far more imminent.

‘Claire, would you like to go away with me, on a holiday?’

It was an impulsive question, carried on a surge of emotions, which Siobhán regretted instantly.

‘Of course I would – I’d love to. Where are we going?’

‘You know, I haven’t really thought about that. I just had this sudden ... Or, perhaps, it wasn’t sudden. After all, at the beginning of summer, we had been talking about going away on a holiday before the start of the next term. And then this news, coming after the phone call I received earlier today, brought the idea back to my mind.

‘The thing is, a detective with CID in Inverness contacted me this morning to give me an update on the investigation. The Norwegian and German police forces have been collaborating and were able to trace back the route of the phantoms from Bodø to Frankfurt, by air via Oslo, using the false identities they had given to rent a motorboat to travel around the Lofoten. In Frankfurt, the police lost the trail, possibly because those three had used different identities while they were travelling in Germany. But at that stage, they were still shadowing me, at least until our encounter in that underground bunker. I suspect therefore that they had also travelled by train and ferry as far as Kiel. And when I rented a car there, they likely did the same. If that is the

case, it should be virtually impossible to trace back their steps any further, especially if they regularly changed their identities.

‘But being able to place those three in Germany, until the day after the fire in the clinic in Stralsund, goes a long way to prove officially what I’ve known to be true all along: that those three who vanished in the Lofoten were the same who, in reverse chronological order, set fire in the clinic – killing Oliver Behring, flooded the bunker – almost killing me, terrified my grandmother to death, and abducted and murdered Alison and Kathleen.

‘Now that the police have found more supporting evidence for my account of what happened, they are getting increasingly concerned for my safety. What happens if that sequence of very serious offences that the police have uncovered is picked up by the media? What happens if, through news reporting, the New Atlanteans find out exactly how dangerous three of their associates really were, if they don’t know that already? The thought that the police could be in possession of one of their necklaces would become significantly more worrying to the New Atlanteans if there is even the smallest chance that, through it, they could be connected with any one of these crimes.

‘The detective didn’t say anything about me entering a witness protection scheme, but this has come up before, and I have a feeling that the police are more seriously thinking in that direction now, just to be on the safe side. After what happened last winter, they probably don’t want to take any chances. As I said, I really don’t see myself doing that. I know I joked about it, but somehow I’ll just have to make it through until the winter, when I’ll be heading south to Antarctica again.’

‘But Si, that won’t be for several months. A lot can happen until then. You said yourself that the research at the lighthouse doesn’t necessarily require your involvement at the moment. Why not take the opportunity to go on holidays now. With the fieldwork all summer, you haven’t really taken any time off.’

‘Claire, I’m starting to wonder whether us going away together would really be any safer than if I stayed here – even if we only consider the situation for myself. Although the New Atlanteans should not have any difficulties discovering my regular address, there is at least a small chance that they won’t find me at the field station. It would therefore be a terrible irony if I went home to pack for the holidays, only to run straight into a trap. So, if we really want to do this, we need to be quick about it. We cannot linger anywhere we might be expected to be, especially not together. I could take a train to Aberdeen tomorrow morning, throw a few things together that I’m likely to need on a holiday, and catch the southbound sleeper that same night. You can then board the train at Leuchars. If everything goes according to schedule, we’ll get into Euston at about half past eight o’clock the next morning. Once we’ve made it to London unobserved, we should be in the clear. Then, we have time to decide where to go next.’

‘Si, this is so exciting. It’s really quite romantic, isn’t it? Are you going to be in disguise – with a false beard, or something – and I’ll only be able to recognise you when you whistle “Ten Green Bottles,” or when you ask me if I’ve got a light?’

‘Claire . . .’

‘Yes?’

How could she help Claire understand the desperate feeling of being pursued by a deadly enemy? How could she get her to appreciate the potentially fatal consequences of being seen together, even just once? Although Claire now knew as much as Siobhán did about the troubling circumstances, the situation was likely to become more dangerous than she could possibly imagine. Unlike Siobhán, she had never been in a position in which her life had been threatened by unknown and mostly unseen antagonists, without having the ability to defend herself. Claire's determination to stand by her despite the known dangers was a testament to her friend's dedication. But asking Claire to spend any more time with her than she already had, let alone to join her on a holiday, had been reckless and unforgivable. She could not possibly drag Claire any deeper into this affair.

'Siobhán?'

'Sorry, Claire. I know I'm going back and forth about this, but I've been thinking. It really was a rash suggestion, us running off together overnight. It was just that, after the phone call with the police this morning, I already felt a bit unsettled. And when you told me about the meaning of the inscription on the pendant, I simply overreacted. You remember what I said the first time you visited me at the field station. Ever since I heard about the discovery of the dead body in the Lofoten, I've had this ominous feeling of living through the same nightmare that I've experienced once before. I keep telling myself that I'm being paranoid, but I simply cannot shake the premonition that disaster is about to strike in a terrible *déjà vu*. Until now, I would hope that you have been safe. We only saw each other twice for a few

days since that discovery. But the more time we spend together, the more likely it gets that they find out that we know each other – and, moreover, that we’re friends. Then, it would be the same situation as with Alison, or with Kathleen before her.’

‘No, please, Siobhán. I know exactly what you’re planning to do. You want to disappear on your own again, but don’t do it. Please, promise me that. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have joked about you putting on a disguise. That was silly. I was only trying to cheer you up. But I know how serious this is, I really do.’

‘Claire, too many people have already died because of my involvement in this, and I’m not ...’

‘Precisely, Siobhán. People died around you because it is you who are in danger. To me, all that demonstrates is that you cannot possibly get through this on your own.’

‘Please ... Without the experience of the first encounter with the New Atlanteans, I would probably be less worried about this situation myself. But, believe me, this is no time for heroics.’

‘Siobhán, don’t patronise me. Since last winter, you may know how it feels to be in danger of losing your life – I grant you that. I also remember how you told me that now, in the aftermath of these traumatic events, you feel disconnected from everything, as if you weren’t part of this world anymore. I completely understand that. As a matter of fact, I know exactly how you’re feeling right now. But have you ever been beyond that point? Have you ever been so miserable that you actually wished you were dead? That you start to think seriously about the different ways in which you could end it all? And then, do you know how it feels to hate yourself for being too weak to really

go through with it? Day after miserable day? Do you know how it feels when your body and soul are already torn apart, but your heart simply refuses to stop beating? Until one day, by pure chance, you meet someone who you know is going to pull you out of your misery for good and set you on a new path? That, you do not. So don't you talk to me about death, Siobhán Dannerreuther. Talk to me about life, about holidays – about holidays in France, specifically. Have you ever been?'

'Sorry, what? To France? No, I haven't.'

'Neither have I, despite the fact that I grew up no more than a stone's throw away from that country, and only because my boring parents refused to go there. So, I think it's about time we went. I mean, who knows, in a few years we may have families of our own, and then what? As you said, the important thing is to get ourselves as quickly as possible to a place where no one would expect us to be. From then on, we can take our time.'

'Siobhán, please don't panic about me being too silly to accompany you on that potentially perilous journey. It's just that I've been looking forward to going on a holiday with you for so long. After that discovery in the Lofoten, I thought we may not get the opportunity anymore this year. And now, in the wake of these sudden developments, it's all a bit overwhelming. But I promise that, by tomorrow, I will have calmed down, and I'll be completely sensible. Although ... don't you feel that going away on a sleeper train is fantastically romantic? Think about it, a clandestine meeting late at night in a railway station, and then speeding through the darkness, away from imminent danger, towards a new dawn far away.'

‘From London, it’s only a short hop to Dover; and from there, we’re almost in France. We could take the regular ferry, of course, but I always wanted to go on the hovercraft – flying over the water, you know, rather than swimming. And once we’re in Calais, it should only be a few more hours to Paris – Paris, Si, imagine that. It’s not even the famous landmarks I’m particularly interested in. It’s the atmosphere of the city. And yes, again, the romance of it all – of the place, obviously, but also of the situation. It’s about you not allowing yourself to be forced into isolation. It’s about the two of us still being together – united, rather than divided – defying a menacing uncertainty, the invisible presence of a dangerous opposition. It’s like a classic drama film, isn’t it? You want to visualise it playing out under artful lighting, in black and white, with – I heard that, Siobhán. You were laughing just now, admit it.’

‘Yes, all right, I was.’

‘So?’

‘I don’t know. At this time of the year . . . It’s still going to be brutally hot down there.’

‘We’ll be fine. It’ll be a wonderful opportunity to wear your summer clothes for more than a few days each year. And you can’t really afford to do that up here, can you?’

‘Well . . . But do you know any French?’

‘Some. I took it in school, didn’t you?’

‘No, just German.’

‘I’ll do the talking then. Please, Si, if you take me to France, I’ll love you for the rest of my life.’

‘Claire . . .’

‘Don’t you want that?’

‘Now that is blackmail, and you know it.’

There was no response, only the sound of socked feet skipping on the familiarly creaking floorboards of Siobhán’s old bedroom. Claire knew that she had won.

And, after all, why not? How much more dangerous could it really be for Claire? She had already visited the lighthouse twice since the first Norwegian news reports about the discovery of the dead body in the Lofoten had come out. Six weeks had passed since her first visit, and nothing even remotely suspicious had happened in the meantime. So, why not take the chance and get out of the country, to a place where no one would be able to find them? France would still be teeming with English tourists at this time of the year, and it would be easy to blend in. She could phone the police on a regular basis, to keep them informed about where she was, and to get updates on any developments back in Britain. If there was anything urgent, she could be back home in a day or two. The longer she thought about it, going away to France was as good an idea as any.

‘All right, Claire, let’s . . .’

‘Yes! Si, it’ll be so great. We start in Paris, stay there for a couple of days, and then casually drift down to the Riviera. And Si, if it’s too crowded for you, or too hot, I promise we’ll leave straight away and go up into the Pyrenees, or anywhere you want. I just want to see the blue Mediterranean once.’

‘It’s going to be one of those pilgrimages, is it: see the Mediterranean and die?’

‘Come on, Si, it won’t be that bad.’

‘No, you’re right. I’m sure it’ll be quite lovely, once we’re there. But we definitely shouldn’t meet anywhere outside the train. Straight after this, I’ll make a reservation for two berths. If all compartments are already booked, we’ll have to make do in the seated coach. I’ll phone you tomorrow, when I’ve arrived at my flat in Aberdeen, to let you know which coach and compartment we’re in. Then, I’ll phone you again when I’ve arrived at the railway station, which should be at close to ten. If you don’t hear from me at any point tomorrow, you know the New Atlanteans were waiting for me. In that case, do not go to the railway station yourself. As a matter of fact, do not leave your home at all. Just phone the headquarters of Northern Constabulary in Inverness. They are the police force I dealt with recently. I’ll inform them of our plans. Then, if anything goes wrong and you contact them, they will know immediately what this is about. They can pass it on to the right authorities and advise you what to do. Obviously, if I notice anything suspicious, I’ll warn you if I can, and we postpone the trip. Otherwise, if all seems well, and I phone you from the railway station in Aberdeen, you still have plenty of time. I don’t think the sleeper gets into Leuchars before midnight. On previous journeys south, the train was always very quiet by then. But just to make sure, I’ll check the corridor regularly to see if anyone is loitering within view of our compartment. If I see anyone acting strangely in any way, I’ll be standing in the corridor, casually looking out of the window, when you board the train. In that case, pretend not to know me. Just go into our compartment and I’ll join you after ten minutes, or so. Hopefully, whoever is watching me will think we booked

the two berths independently. Then, we can discuss how to proceed. Carry on until London, I suppose, exit the train with a show of the kind of familiarity that can be expected from two people who have shared a sleeper compartment, and then we can separately make our way back to Scotland.’

CHAPTER FIVE

DÉJÀ VU

The train slowly gathered speed as it moved out of the station. Judging by the clock above the platform, they were still perfectly on time. Again, there had been nothing unusual about this stop. None of the new passengers at Dundee had boarded the coach. And none of the passengers who had boarded previously had taken advantage of the opportunity to walk through the train, pretending to look for their compartment. All of the neighbouring compartments appeared to be occupied now and had gone quiet, as everyone else had settled in for the night. Nonetheless, Siobhán could not afford to let her guard down yet. This segment of the journey would be the decisive one.

It occurred to her that, so far, the only person who had displayed any suspicious behaviour on the train had been she, regularly prowling her own and the neighbouring coaches. On none of these patrols had she ever noticed anything of concern, and she had encountered progressively fewer people moving about outside their compartments as the night progressed. But she had found herself far too nervous and restless to stretch out on one of the two bunkbeds, even between stations. She knew she was not going to get any rest until Claire had joined her at the next stop. Since the train had left Aberdeen, she had therefore been standing in the corridor outside her own compartment. From there, she was able to keep an eye on the activity inside the coach.

The noise and lights of the railway station quickly fell away behind them now. Soon, the only sound left was the steady droning of the engine and the regular rattling of the wheels on their tracks. Even with the poor illumination inside the corridor, it became difficult to discern the scenery that passed by outside the window. They appeared to be rolling through an outlying section of the port city, when the sound of the wheels became more hollow, leaving more intensely vibrating echoes in their wake.

Then, in a smooth transition, the train was flung off the solid land towards the left, following the graceful curve of Tay Bridge out over the wide river, seemingly flying across the water. Dotted inside the darkness below them, slow-moving cargo ships could be seen as little islands of light, casting their glinting reflections into the empty space around them.

So far, everything had gone exactly according to plan. But ever since her return from Norway, there had never been anything reassuring about the absence of any discernible peril. In her experience, the enemy had never been a visible presence, until it was too late.

She regretted even more now than she had the previous day her impulsive suggestion to Claire to go away together. Why had she done that? It should have been obvious that Claire would never have allowed such a suggestion to be retracted. It had not been her restlessness, or even her growing sense of fear, that had triggered that uncharacteristic reaction. There had been more to it than that. It had been a sudden urge to see Claire again, to spend more time with her. It had been the calm confident manner in which Claire had presented the solution to the riddle that had

haunted both of them for weeks, even as she had discussed the potential implications.

But at the very moment at which Siobhán herself had received confirmation of the true seriousness of the situation, it had been selfish to drag Claire any deeper into it. The only defence Siobhán had was that, since then, she had done everything she could think of to minimise the danger for her friend.

She had planned her arrival at the railway station in Aberdeen so as to give herself plenty of time before the departure of the train. Standing by a public phone box in the concourse, she had wanted to observe the other passengers waiting there or passing through, before finally committing herself to the reckless plan and phoning Claire.

Many had purposefully walked towards their platforms, with no more than a brief glance at the departure board. These had usually been unaccompanied men, with the appearance of business travellers, probably working in the oil industry, returning home for the weekend. Others had taken a moment to consult the departure board and to get their bearings to the right platform. Among those had been a few groups of tourists, who looked as if they had been hiking in the Northern Isles and had arrived that day in Aberdeen on the ferry. There had also been families who apparently had started their journeys locally. Some parents had pulled their luggage with one hand, while holding on to their tired-looking children with the other, as they stumbled along behind them. Others had carried very young children, already asleep, in their arms. No one had lingered in the concourse any longer than they had to, and no one had paid any attention to

her.

For all the activity, the mood at that late hour of the evening had been subdued, with a weary quiet that had only been broken by the occasional monotonous announcements that had echoed inside the long hall with its high-domed glass ceiling. And following each announcement, the “London Euston” destination had become increasingly lonely on the departure board as, one after the other, the remaining trains for the day had left the station on time.

During that wait in the busy concourse, surrounded by the other travellers, Siobhán had felt more exposed than she had ever done at the lonely lighthouse. And although she had not spotted anything that had given her any cause for concern, she had left it to the last minute before stepping inside the phone box and, still somewhat reluctantly, picking up the receiver. With a final glance around, she had heard the fifty pence coin clatter into position. She had heard the steady dial tone inside the receiver. And the moment she had punched in the well-remembered sequence of numbers, she had known that, from then on, Claire’s life would be her responsibility.

Now that they were approaching the end of the long curving bridge, it would only be another ten minutes – fifteen at the most. Watching the sparsely populated landscape glide past the window, what she could see of it in the dark, her nervousness further increased as the moment approached at which Claire would be boarding the train and, in doing so, possibly step into serious danger.

It was time for a final check. Inside her own coach, still no

one else was in sight. If someone had followed her onto the train at Aberdeen, they would have had to do so at very short notice, and would likely not have been able to get a berth in any of the sleeper coaches. She therefore went along the deserted corridor with its dimmed lights, past the quiet compartments, across the shaky connecting gangway, into the first of the seated coaches farther down the train.

All was quiet there as well. Everyone was reclining in their seats, wrapped in identical woollen blankets, trying to make the long journey as pleasant as possible. Standing at one end of the coach, she could not hear the sound of any whispered conversations. Only a few of the reading lights were still on. And no one reacted to her presence.

She stepped back into the sleeper coach, walked past her own compartment, and carried on into the next sleeper coach. There, too, the narrow corridor that stretched out in front of her in the dim light was deserted. All was quiet, except for the more pronounced rattling in the connecting gangway.

Still nothing indicated that she was under any kind of observation. But the oppressive feeling did not leave her that the quiet was deceptive, that the danger she had felt surrounding her at the lonely lighthouse had followed her onto the train and would henceforth follow her wherever she went.

Now, the moment had come to make her final decision. Should she call the holiday off? On the basis of what? Some vague nervousness that she had already felt for weeks? The same nervousness for which, throughout this time, she had not found a single tangible justification? How would Claire react to that? With

disappointment, obviously. But how angry would she be? Considering who she was, not nearly as angry as she should be. It was far more likely that Claire would mostly be frustrated by her perceived inability to help her friend get over an anxious period.

How could Siobhán weigh the potential danger of taking Claire with her on a holiday against the certainty of burdening Claire with worries about her depressive state of mind? She knew that there would not be an objective answer to the question. And she would be trapped in indecision, as time was running out fast.

Any moment now, the small railway station was going to appear between the two lines. Siobhán looked ahead as far as she could through the closed window. Indeed, a cluster of lights was emerging out of the darkness.

How many other people would be waiting at the station? And how many of them would be innocent travellers? Suddenly, her nervousness turned to panic. The thought of Claire, all by herself, in this sparsely populated area, in the middle of the night, terrified her. Had they already got to Claire? Would the train arrive at the station, and she would not be waiting there?

The train was noticeably slowing down as it approached what could now clearly be distinguished as two parallel rows of lights, with the dark shape of the small station building between them. Near the beginning of the platform, Siobhán could make out the silhouettes of a waiting couple, apparently intending to board one of the seated coaches at the end of the train.

Aside from them, there was only one other person standing on the platform, a woman. With immense relief, Siobhán recognised her by her fidgety movements seconds before she could see

her clearly. Claire had a small rucksack slung over one shoulder and, as the train pulled into the station, picked up a holdall that had been sitting next to her. She looked intently at the windows of the passing coaches but apparently was unable to see inside the corridor from the lighted platform. She did not react to Siobhán waving at her and oriented herself towards the door at the other end of the coach, as the train slowed and eventually came to a standstill.

Siobhán pushed open the door as soon as she heard it unlock and leaned out. 'Claire, we're in here.'

Claire turned. Her pale expression showed her own nervousness giving way to relief as she hastened towards Siobhán, a little awkwardly, with the holdall bouncing against her right leg.

Siobhán reached out towards her. 'Here, let me haul this in for you.'

With some effort, Claire handed the bag up to her. Then, she held on to Siobhán's other hand as she climbed in after it.

'Si, I was so glad when I heard your voice and saw you leaning out of the door. I'd been so worried, even after you'd phoned from the station in Aberdeen, thinking about what might still happen on the night train during the journey here. Everything is all right then in here, is it? Nothing suspicious?'

In the hushed atmosphere of the otherwise deserted corridor, Claire had instinctively lowered her voice to a whisper. She was outwardly calm, but even under the dim light, her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

Siobhán pulled her into a brief hug. 'It's all right, but I'm glad to have you here now.'

Claire smiled, all her apprehension gone. ‘So, this is where the adventure begins.’

‘Let’s hope it won’t come to that. I’m quite content to while away our holiday doing nothing more exciting than sitting outside Paris cafés watching people, or lying on a beach in the Riviera, or visiting a lonely old monastery up in the Pyrenees. I was worried as well, you know, about you, out there, alone in the dark.’

Claire squeezed her arm gratefully. ‘To be honest, I have been looking over my shoulder ever since I found out about the meaning of the inscription on the pendant. Even in the venerable faculty club, during the busy lunchtime hour, when Professor Harris read it aloud to me, it gave me quite a chill down my spine, almost as if he’d uttered an evil incantation. After that, I can appreciate much better how you’ve felt for the past months. Every time I heard someone walking behind me, I’ve wondered whether I was being followed. But I never noticed anything that would have justified my anxiety. Otherwise, I would have told you, no matter how much I was looking forward to going away on this holiday with you.’

‘I don’t think that there is anything standing in our way now. Come on, I’ll show you to our compartment for the night. It’s quite cosy, although I didn’t have the nerves yet to settle in. I’ll let you have the choice of berths, up or down. I don’t know about you, but I’m ready for bed. All I need now to set me up for a relaxing holiday is a languorous pillow talk to catch up with you, and the steady rattling of the train to carry me off to dreamland.’

* * *

She could not possibly get any more tired. The relief of drifting away into sleep was tantalisingly close, but always seemed to remain a step ahead of her. If only the air would finally cool off. But the heat hung motionless over the great city as a dense and humid cloud.

The city itself did not sleep either, not on an early Sunday morning. Through the open window and the door to the little balcony, she could still hear the noise from outside, people roaming the streets below, enjoying the legendary nightlife, with nothing worse to look forward to than a hangover whenever they would eventually wake up in the afternoon.

No breeze stirred the gauze curtains, already drawn back as far as they went. Nor would there be any relief from the lazy ceiling fan. Its soporific powers too, watching it rotate out of half-closed eyes, had worn off long ago. In the end, it had only seemed to draw her deeper into a spiralling confused state of mind.

The illuminated display of the alarm clock on the bedside cabinet showed 02:17. Even if, at that very moment, she could finally let go of her circular thoughts and ignore the oppressive heat, she would not get much sleep anymore. Hopefully, it was going to be a quiet day with as little sightseeing as Claire would allow.

In front of the alarm clock, the raven necklace lay neatly curled up, the smooth black surface of its pendant glowing dully in the red light from the digital display.

It had been almost five months since that other early morning,

when she had been far removed from any bustling metropolis, on top of that lonely mountain. It had been freezing then, with snow lying on the rocks around her. The icy wind whistling around her had seemed to carry with it the voices of those who had preceded her into eternity. And instead of a desperation to finally escape all conscious thought, the threat of an endless sleep had lain over her like a heavy blanket. Then, the arrival of the raven, heralding the first light of day, had guided her back to life.

Despite the differences to her current situation, that moment, and the events leading up to it, were still clear in her mind's eye. And yet, the struggle and the apparent victory that had felt so crucial at the time, now in retrospect seemed insignificant and fleeting, no more than a bad dream from which she had woken up to find herself back in the real world, with the ultimate challenge still waiting for her.

It was as if those earlier experiences somehow did not count; as if, instead of preparing her for what was to come, they had only left her feeling tired and weak. And as the dangers seemed to become increasingly real, she felt less certain that she would ever be ready to face them again.

But, as it had done then, the sun would rise again later that morning too. In less than five hours, a new day would dawn, and she would be in a much better situation than she had been in then. As a matter of fact, she already was in a perfect situation. Why could she not feel that? She was on a late-summer holiday in France, with the best companion anyone could hope for. Even the heat was not going to bother her after a few days, once they had left Paris behind. It was only the contrast to the bracing

sea air she had become accustomed to in the north of Scotland; perhaps a sense of claustrophobia after suddenly finding herself in a sprawling urban environment, surrounded by millions of people, having lived for the past three months at the tip of a lonely peninsula, under swarms of seabirds, that circled around the lighthouse in a wide open sky. Really, all she had to do was to shed the cloud of negativity that had surrounded her ever since her return from Norway.

Claire had turned since she had fallen asleep. She was now facing away, towards the window, resting in the diffuse glow that emanated from the city, and outlined by the soft shadow of the window frame. She had pushed the duvet down to her waist. Evidently, she was warm too, but nevertheless sleeping peacefully. Her shoulder blades expanded with regular deep breathing.

From that angle, in the low light, it could well have been Alison lying there – the same long dark hair, only a bit more wavy perhaps, but the same fair skin, the same slender arms, and the same delicate shoulders and neck.

At that moment, Claire took a quick irregular breath and stretched her legs. Her side of the duvet slid further down her body to reveal the hem of her short nightgown. Then, she lay still again.

She had a small mole on her right shoulder, but that was only the most prominent one. From closer up, her skin looked much more freckled than Alison's had. And Claire did not have Alison's scar on the outside of her right forearm, the scar she had had ever since the final of the regional school hockey championship. She had gone down under an unfair tackle, instinctively trying to break her fall with her stronger arm, and had landed on

a piece of glass that had been overlooked during the preparation of the field.

It was just inside the opposite shooting circle. From their own goal, Siobhán had to watch as Alison slumped onto the ground, in obvious distress, holding her arm in an unnatural position, while the match was suspended. What was happening became difficult to see, as more and more people crowded around her. But, eventually, one of the accompanying mothers, who appeared to have a medical or nursing background, supported Alison as she walked off the field. When details of the injury had finally travelled back to Siobhán, she was relieved to hear that Alison's arm had not been broken. But she had received a nasty cut and would need to be patched up before she would be allowed back into the match.

Once play resumed, those were anxious few minutes, during which their opponents were determined to make the best of their temporary numerical superiority, putting them under increased pressure. It had taken a full year of intensive training to make it to that regional final. Driven initially by Alison's individual initiative, then by their growing collective enthusiasm, they had already greatly exceeded the usual ambitions of their modest comprehensive school by qualifying for the final alone. They were leading by a fragile one-goal margin, and now they were going to lose that advantage so close to the end.

Then, Alison was allowed to return to the match, a bandage around her arm and visibly riled up. And when she scored with only slightly more than a minute of regular play to go, they were all confident that, surely, this had to be the winning goal. Again,

Siobhán had to watch as her teammates rushed towards Alison. But, while everyone crowded around her, she extricated herself from the ecstatic huddle and looked back towards her own goal. And there, in that moment, the hundred yards across the pitch were nothing between them.

Sometimes, it still felt like that, the same closeness between them that could bridge any distance. But Alison had now disappeared from the playing field, and this time she would not be coming back.

With a sigh, Siobhán turned onto her back again, looking up once more to the monotonously rotating ceiling fan.

Immediately, Claire mirrored her movement, squinting at Siobhán over her shoulder, still only half awake. ‘Si, can’t you sleep?’

‘No, it’s too warm. I’m not used to that.’

‘Neither am I, but somehow I like it. You’ll be fine after a few days. Didn’t you bring your pills?’

‘Yes, I’ve got them in my rucksack. But the only effect they seem to have is to make me feel queasy. And I can’t go on taking pills all the time.’

‘Today, if you’re too tired, we can limit our activities to quietly absorbing the atmosphere from the comfort of some of the many cafés in the different *arrondissements* of the city. They are all meant to have their own individual characters. There is really no rush. We just got here, and there is still plenty of time to visit all the places we may be interested in.’

‘Sounds good. But weren’t you sleeping? I thought you were.’

‘I woke up a minute or two ago. I noticed that you were rest-

less. But it isn't only the heat, is it? You're worried about the New Atlanteans, whether they might be following us. Or what will happen when you get back to Britain.'

'I ... Yes, I ... Actually, no, I wasn't. I was thinking of Alison.'

Claire hitched up the thin strap of her nightgown and turned to face Siobhán. She looked at her encouragingly.

'I don't know how I'm ever going to get over this. With Gran it's different. She's still around – spiritually, I suppose. I know what happened to her. I was there when she died. I was at her funeral. I can visit her grave whenever I like, without too much hassle. She had a long life. And I always had the impression that, despite all the tragic events in it, she was happy during the latter part of it. Because of that, when she's around, in my mind, it's a warm and comforting feeling.'

'But Alison was still so young. I still don't really know what happened to her. I don't know how her life ended, and where she was when it did. All I know is that she was all alone, up against those three phantoms, and it should have been me instead of her. It doesn't matter how often I try to convince myself that I would sacrifice my own life to save hers because I will never get the chance to prove it. I thought that, after a few months, it would start to get easier. But all that happens is that the realisation that I can never be near her again is getting clearer and more painful. And so ...'

'When you saw me lying here, you wished that I were Alison.' Siobhán could not get herself to admit that, even to herself.

'That's all right, Si. I know you don't want me dead instead,

or otherwise out of your life. Don't blame yourself for that as well, on top of everything else. Because it isn't just Alison you blame yourself for, is it? It's Peter as well. And I understand that. It's completely unreasonable, of course; but if I were you, I'd probably feel exactly the same.'

She paused with an askance look at the hotel room door, as if she was worried that they might be overheard. Then, after a few seconds, she pulled her attention away from the door, still looking concerned. She drew the blanket up to her chest, and moved a little closer to Siobhán.

'Already before Norway, ever since you came back from Antarctica, you've lived with ghosts. I noticed that when you visited me in February. You had shadows surrounding you, and I was worried about you even then. Now, you're in a situation with a much more definite threat hanging over you. But despite that, I genuinely fear that the greatest danger to you is yourself. I've been there myself, remember, walking through life shrouded in a darkness that no one else can see. That's why I'm so determined that you shouldn't be alone for too long.'

Then, she froze, looking at the door again and listening intently, her eyes wide open.

'Claire, what is it?'

'I just heard something.' Her voice had sunk to an urgent whisper. 'Siobhán, there is someone at the door.'

'I can't hear anything.'

'Not now, but there was the sound of a key in the lock. That was the second time I thought I heard something, but the first time I wasn't sure. And earlier, when I woke up, I heard soft

footsteps coming up the stairs. I just thought they were other guests trying not to wake anyone up.'

'But, Claire, who ... How could they ...'

Claire grasped Siobhán's hand with increased urgency and determination. 'Siobhán, do not blame yourself – for anything.'

Then, the door swung open in one swift movement. The two men out on the landing immediately stepped inside the room and quietly closed the door behind them. One of them switched on the light. For a moment, they seemed surprised at finding both occupants of the room awake, but they recovered quickly. They were dressed in ordinary summer suits. Out on the busy streets, no one would look at them twice – except if one noticed that, despite the heat, they were both wearing thin leather gloves. And one of them now held a handgun with a suppressor.

He looked at Siobhán. 'Not a sound.'

Then, he waved his gun at Claire. 'You, get dressed. You're coming with us.'

'No, not Claire. This has got nothing to do with her. If you want me ...'

The man with the gun made an impatient gesture. 'No, Dr Dannreuther. We need you to do something for us. And while you're busy doing that, we'll look after your girlfriend.'

The other man walked around to Claire's side of the bed. He was going to get her, and they were going to take her away.

She gave Siobhán's hand a reassuring squeeze. 'Remember what I just said – always remember that. No matter ...'

'Come on, hurry up. We're not going to hurt you unless you force us to. So, don't waste our time.'

The man pulled Claire out of bed by her arm. ‘Get some clothes out of your bag. You can change in the bathroom. But don’t lock the door, and no noise. No silly things like shouting out of the window, or banging on walls. We would get to you before anyone else heard you, or decided to do anything about it.’

The man with the gun stepped closer to Siobhán. She reluctantly shifted her attention to him, as Claire was being pushed away from the bed.

‘So, what do you want?’

The man with the gun sat down on the side of the bed, next to Siobhán; but he glanced across the room, where Claire was squatting by her bag, hastily collecting the clothes she would wear on an uncertain journey.

Then, he looked at Siobhán, with a relaxed smile, apparently entirely at ease with the situation. ‘I’m sure you’re very fond of her. I respect that, and we’ll take good care of her.’

‘You better . . .’

‘Oh?’ He leaned closer to be able to hear Siobhán’s fierce whispers.

‘Because from now on, it’s only she who stands between me and you.’

He suppressed a laugh and cleared his throat. ‘Aside from this gun, you mean?’ He waved it casually.

‘Yes, I suspect that’s exactly what those other three would have said. And they didn’t look too happy – in the end.’

For a moment, the man seemed unsettled, looking at Siobhán with increased interest. But he quickly recovered his previous

swagger. ‘Now, let me tell you, Dr Dannreuther, we’re not like them. This whole affair was very regrettable, and we had nothing to do with it. Had we known how reckless those three really were, we would have done our best to stop them.’

‘Cut the crap. The only thing that worries you about all the deaths they are responsible for is that they might be linked back to you.’

‘No, Dr Dannreuther, trust me. We are genuinely sorry you got entangled with those three. Which is why we are offering you one – but only one – very fair opportunity to get yourself out of this mess for good.’

Claire had collected her clothes and straightened up. She looked over to Siobhán and gave her a confident nod.

‘Claire ...’

‘No, Vawny, don’t worry about me.’

Then, she was ushered into the bathroom.

The man sitting on the side of the bed next to Siobhán chuckled. ‘Vawny?’

‘Listen ...’

‘You can call me Jawny – or Jimmy, if you prefer.’

‘I don’t care who you are. But if you harm her in any way ...’

‘I told you already, we’ll be treating her well – Claire, is it?’

‘Yes. But you don’t know anything about her. You barge in here, and you think you’re so clever. But really, you don’t have the faintest idea – about me, about her, about anything. Do you know, for example, that she doesn’t eat any kind of meat or fish?’

‘All right, we’ll consider that. We don’t want ...’

‘She does eat eggs, occasionally, but she only has light breakfasts – some cereals, yoghurts, lots of fruit. Although, she was looking forward to her first croissant in Paris this morning ...’

‘Hey, don’t cry. You were such a big girl just a moment ago.’ He turned to his partner. ‘So brave, wasn’t she, Jimmy?’

They laughed.

‘But don’t be too hard on yourself over all this. You did manage to evade us for quite a while, and we had almost given up, when one of our colleagues finally saw you return to your flat in Aberdeen.’

‘Yes, I thought that might happen. So where was *he* hiding, then?’

The man betrayed himself only with a faint smirk in reaction to Siobhán’s pointed question. It had been a woman then.

‘The colleague would have been very discrete. Don’t blame yourself for not noticing them. You were doing all right, it seems, waiting at the railway station in Aberdeen for as long as you could, watching the people around you, making it as difficult as possible to follow you onto the train. It was a good strategy. As a matter of fact, the colleague didn’t follow you onto a sleeper train that was bound to be fully booked for most of its journey, not without a valid ticket. Of course, it was a safe bet that you would be staying on until London. For any shorter trip, to Edinburgh say, you would likely have taken one of the earlier regular trains. But I admit, it might have been a bluff, and we did get a little lucky there.

‘Anyway, we must get down to business. We have a very simple proposition for you – simple, but non-negotiable, I’m afraid.

All we want are a few things. You bring us these things, and you get your girlfriend back. That's it. Understood?

'Get on with it.'

'All right. In March, you went up to one of the Lofoten islands – why is not our concern. Then, in one night, five people apparently vanished. At least one of them is dead, and we have to assume that the others are dead also. Again, what your involvement was in these – shall we say – disappearances isn't really our concern. But we believe that, before you left the island, you went back inside the home of one of these individuals and took something.'

'I didn't.'

'It's all right. We're not accusing you. We just want these items back that you took out of the old trunk.'

'Which trunk?'

'Please, Dr Dannreuther. Now I know you're playing stupid with me. You know perfectly well which trunk I'm referring to.'

'How could you possibly know what's inside any of the houses on that island you're talking about?'

He sighed. 'We know far too much for you to bluff yourself out of this situation. This past winter, we became aware of the fact that three of our associates had become very interested in the circumstances that led to the founding of our organisation. After we hadn't heard from them for about a month, naturally, we became concerned. We suspected that they might have gone to visit one of our former members – by the name of Ralf Behring – who lived on a small island in the Lofoten. When we were unable to make any contact with him as well, we tried to get in

touch with his son, who lived in the northeast of Germany. His son's wife told us that her father in law and another German – by the name of Peter Janssen – had disappeared. Behring had mentioned to us, years ago, when he moved to that island, that a German neighbour of his had also briefly been amongst our members, but apparently showed no further interest in maintaining his affiliation. We therefore had to assume that two of our former members had disappeared from the same small island in the same night.

‘That in itself was highly suspicious. But then, Behring’s daughter in law told us that her husband had died in a fire a week before his father’s disappearance, and that two days prior to her husband’s death, she had received two unusual phone calls. The one in the evening had been from our three former associates, who had presented themselves as acquaintances of her husband’s, wanting to meet him, unaware that he was in longterm care in a clinic. Even more interesting for us was the phone call she had received that same morning, from the curator of an archive of records concerning the German submarine fleet during the Second World War. He had been keen to find out as much as he could about one combat submarine in particular, the *U-112*. I don’t need to tell you what central role that submarine played in the founding of our organisation. So you can imagine that we became very interested in the *U-Boot Archiv*, and it didn’t take us long to find out about the magazine they are publishing, of which the latest edition had just come out. I also don’t need to tell you who the author of the lead article is, do I? The granddaughter of the commander of *U-112*, apparently, which is

truly remarkable, as we have reason to believe that his only child died when she was very young. But who knows, perhaps things happened differently. It's such a long time ago. And in the end, as far as we're concerned, it doesn't really matter who you are.'

He gave Siobhán another nonchalant smile. 'So, this is how we got on to you, Dr Dannreuther, through that magazine – with your name and photograph, and mentioning your affiliation with the University of Aberdeen. But believe me, the decision to come after you was not taken lightly. As a matter of fact, initially, it had been decided not to act in this affair at all. Unfortunately – as you guessed rightly, it seems – that changed the instant we became aware of reports in the Norwegian media about a dead body that had been found washed up in the Lofoten.

'We realised then that it had been a mistake not to act sooner, that now we needed to ensure that no sensitive material was left among the possessions of the two Germans who had disappeared. But we knew it was going to be difficult, which is why we had been so reluctant to get involved. You see, in a big city like this, you can do anything you like, and no one notices anything – at least, you can convince them that they don't want to know about it. You're practically invisible. In a small isolated community, it's a different story. You can't simply show up without people noticing you, and without people getting suspicious once you start asking questions.

'So, we took one of our boats up to the Lofoten. We timed our journey such that we got there at night, approached the island from the southwest, and anchored in a little bay on the opposite side from the village, right by the entrance of a cave. Then, we

followed a narrow path up the cliff to where the outlying houses of the village are.

‘Behring’s home had not been emptied yet by his surviving relatives in Germany. In it, we found a necklace and a few other mementos from his short membership in our organisation, immediately after the war. We removed all of that.

‘Janssen’s house had a police notice on the door. It too appeared to be as he had left it. The only item of interest we found there is a letter that was lying on the kitchen table. And you know what? It turns out that you’re the beneficiary of all his belongings – yes, indeed. You didn’t notice the letter, did you, when you went back and took these other items? And the police didn’t properly search the place either. It seems that, after they verified that no one was inside the house, they simply locked the door and started looking for any remaining relatives.

‘Janssen wrote the letter just before he went to see Behring, and before they both disappeared. Of course, without any witnesses, that letter will never be accepted as a valid will, and Janssen would have known that. We are therefore convinced that the letter contains a secret message. We believe that, in that letter, he’s communicating to you where he hid certain things. There are several phrases that made us suspicious. One line in particular caught our attention, where he writes “all my jewellery, I leave to you,” when we couldn’t find a single piece of jewellery anywhere in the house – very curious, wouldn’t you say? It made us wonder whether you’d already taken it. But as you insist that you did not remove anything from the house after Janssen disappeared, it follows that there still is something of

great value to our organisation hidden somewhere on that island. And you're going to find that precious item for us and return it to its rightful owners. But there could be more – a notebook, perhaps. We want anything related to our organisation. The coded references in the letter are written such that only you can decipher them because they are personal to you. And, in any case, as I explained to you, we could never carry out a careful investigation on that island.

'Now, don't look so disgusted, Dr Dannreuther. Owing to our involvement, you can now read this letter.' He pulled an envelope from the inner pocket of his jacket and dropped it onto the duvet. 'You should be grateful for that. But don't read it now. Keep it for when we're gone. I'm sure it will make sense to you. Then, act quickly. The faster you get these things for us, the faster you'll have your girlfriend back. And if, after that, no more sensitive material surfaces, and there is generally no further exposure for our organisation, we'll consider the case closed.'

He was about to continue, when he hesitated, as if he had just remembered something. 'You know, when we searched Janssen's house, we found an old cloth drenched in gun oil lying on the table in the living room. In the aforementioned trunk on the floor, we found a box of old 9×19-mm cartridges, with several missing. It's quite obvious that Janssen had a firearm. Perhaps his old service pistol? Or perhaps something more modern, like this Glock? We couldn't find any weapon in his home. You wouldn't happen to know where it is, would you?'

'It's gone.'

'Is it? In the news, they were saying that the man whose body

was recovered was already dead when he went into the sea. But they didn't say anything about gunshot wounds. What did you do to our former associates, Dr Dannreuther?'

'You wouldn't understand.'

'But I do understand quite a bit about these things, and I'm curious. Did you shoot them and then throw the weapon away? Or do you still have it with you? Right here, under your pillow, perhaps? How very romantic that would be: a gun under your pillow, a pretty woman by your side ...'

He leaned closer and casually pushed his free hand underneath Siobhán's pillow, while keeping a close look on her. Then, he backed away again, as Claire came out of bathroom.

She was now wearing the most formal outfit she had packed for the holiday: dark blue chino trousers and a white long-sleeved shirt. Her hair was pulled back into an uncharacteristically simple ponytail. She looked pale and was noticeably more nervous than she had been before, but the smile she gave Siobhán showed that she was still determined to project confidence. Without acknowledging the two men in any way, she quickly walked through the hotel room, collecting her belongings, and began stowing them in her bag.

The man sitting on the side of the bed turned his attention back to Siobhán. 'Right. As the moment approaches for us to say goodbye, there are just a few more things I need to explain to you.'

He pulled out a second envelope. 'Here's some money. You'll find that there is plenty for everything you'll need to do. In the morning, you'll make one last withdrawal from your own ac-

count, here in Paris. Make it a convincingly large amount to last for several days. From then on, don't use your charge card anymore. And obviously don't travel by air. You have to make yourself untraceable. Remember, officially, you'll still be in France with your girlfriend. We know you were planning to stay in this hotel for another night. That gives you enough time today to cancel any other reservations for accommodation you may have, and to make new travel arrangements. Then, you can leave early tomorrow morning.

'In the envelope with the money, you'll find the spare key to Janssen's house. We found it in one of the kitchen drawers. The main key must have been on the rack by the entrance, and the police took it when they locked the door.

'From now on, you'll be on your own. We trust you to make the right decisions – the sensible decisions to recover everything that is of significance to our organisation. We'll give you plenty of time to get to Fareøya and accomplish your mission, a week at least. Even you may need some time to solve the riddle. But from the eighth day onwards, start looking out for us. We'll be travelling by motor yacht and anchor outside the harbour, in full view from the village, with an "alpha" or "diver down" signal flag prominently displayed. Being a diver yourself, I'm sure you'll recognise it immediately. That same night, you will walk down to the shore on the other side of the island, to the bay where the cave is. We will then come ashore for the exchange – your pretty girlfriend for our precious artefact. That lonely bay is the perfect place for that. All you have to do, prior to that, is to mention casually in the village that you're expecting a friend to join

you in a few days, who will be arriving on the ferry from Bodø.

‘If you need to contact us before we get to the island, if something goes seriously wrong, you will find a phone number in that second envelope I gave you. However, if anyone else ever calls that number and asks silly questions, the line will go dead, you understand?’

Seeing that Claire had finished packing all her belongings, he got up from the bed; while the other man, who had stood guard by the hotel room door, picked up her two bags.

Claire attempted to reach Siobhán, but the man with the gun pulled her back and towards the door.

As Siobhán stepped out of the bed to go after them, she caught sight of the raven necklace lying by the alarm clock. Following an impulse, she grabbed it and hid it in her hand.

‘Claire!’

The men reacted with surprise at seeing Siobhán rushing towards them, but the gun had been stowed away again inside the jacket.

Claire managed to pull herself free and took a step towards her approaching friend. Their hands met. A questioning gleam showed in Claire’s eyes, as she recognised the touch of the necklace.

‘Claire, hold on. And remember what you told me about walking a dark path.’

She nodded and managed a faint smile. ‘When the right moment arrives . . .’

Suddenly, her eyes widened in a hopeful realisation. Then, she was roughly pulled away again by one of the men. But the

necklace was now hidden safely in her hand.

Hastily, she looked back over her shoulder, straining against the hold of the man. She managed to twist out of his grip and turn around once more. For a moment she struggled for balance, with her arms outstretched towards either side – or was that a deliberate imitation of the motion of a bird's wings?

‘Watch out for the raven’s flight!’

Any trace of fear had left her eyes and had been replaced by confidence, perhaps even a glimmer of triumph, that the two men, standing behind her, could not see. Every muscle in her face struggled to communicate without words the plan that had just formed in her mind.

But, instantly, she was grabbed by her arm again, impatiently pulled back and pushed out onto the dark landing.

Then, the door closed behind them with a soft click.

CHAPTER SIX

BETWEEN THE LINES

The air entering through the open window and the door to the balcony had finally cooled off. But the hazy shine of the rising sun over the nearby buildings suggested that the reprieve from the oppressive heat was only temporary.

The happy voices of the night-time revellers had faded away. Even the traffic along the narrow street below the window was only intermittent, on this seemingly ordinary Sunday morning.

The illuminated display of the alarm clock on the bedside cabinet showed 07:12, and the raven necklace no longer lay curled up before it. Instead, the space was now occupied by a plain unaddressed envelope, bulging with banknotes in three different currencies, which represented the three countries she would soon have to travel through. And lying on top of it was an old-fashioned house key.

After only three hours of sleep, Siobhán felt little less tired than she had when the shock of the sudden intrusion into their hotel room had finally given way to an exhausted state of unconsciousness. And now she had woken up to the same nightmare that she had briefly managed to escape.

Peter's letter still lay opened on the bed beside her – that side of the bed where, only a few hours earlier, Claire had been sleeping peacefully. Would Siobhán ever see her again? The only chance of that happening appeared to be hidden inside that letter.

But Siobhán remembered well the panic that had overcome her while reading it for the first time; realising that, if it contained a coded message at all, that message was by no means as obvious to her as the New Atlanteans had assumed. And yet, Claire's survival would depend on her ability to decipher that code.

Reluctantly, Siobhán picked up the folded piece of paper once more and straightened it out.

Chevonne,

I wrote this letter just before I went to confront the person who has contributed to so many tragic losses. I did not know how this confrontation would play out. I hoped that, together, we would be able to find closure in a non-violent fashion. But since you are now reading this, it did not transpire like that, and I did not return from that confrontation.

You are the only person I have left in this world. Everything I own, I therefore leave to you.

My house and everything inside it, I leave to you.

In my office upstairs, in the cabinet, you will find all my personal documents. In the drawer of my writing desk, you will find my bank passbook. All the funds on it, I leave to you.

My boat down in the harbour, I leave to you. It is the classic 22-foot wooden motor launch, with a white waterline. Someone will be able to point it out to you.

Finally, all my jewellery, I leave to you.

I'm sorry about what I said at the end of our meeting, that you do not have what it takes to understand the past. That was wrong. I am sure that you will come to recognise its true mean-

ing, once you returned to the place where it was first revealed to you.

I would have liked to see you again. I'm sorry I failed you, but I had to do it. I hope you understand.

I'm proud of you.

Love from

Peter

Once again, just as after reading the letter for the first time, a dreadful feeling of guilt took hold of her. It had, after all, been her arrival on Fareøya that had triggered Peter to confront Ralf Behring after several months of living in close proximity on that small island, if not amicably, at least peacefully, as it seemed.

Moreover, it had been her fateful decision to go down to the cave that had led to an escalation of that confrontation, as they had all found themselves caught within the dark passage, with turbulent water rising from both ends. The chance of the two men killing each other under any other circumstances had been exceedingly small, and Siobhán could not shake the devastating feeling that it had been she who had led both of them to their deaths.

Then, there was the growing anger that she had not been the first to read this very personal letter, that these heartfelt words had first been seen through hostile eyes. Nonetheless, she had to admit that it had been the suspicion based on their hostility that had allowed the New Atlanteans to recognise something that would doubtlessly have escaped her, had she received the letter in any other way. With that hindsight, it was undeniable that

the style in which the letter was written hinted at some hidden meaning.

Clearly, Peter had suspected that the New Atlanteans would find out about his former affiliation with the Order, if Ralf Behring had not already told them. Even if Behring was going to die as well during their confrontation, Peter had to assume that the New Atlanteans would be able to find out where he had lived, and would remove all incriminating material from his house. He had therefore wanted to leave a clue that only Siobhán would be able to understand, to allow her to find something important that he had hidden before confronting his former comrade.

If it was true that there was not a single piece of jewellery in the house, that one line certainly was highly suggestive, particularly as it stood at the very end of the list of bequests, after Peter had already explicitly passed on everything inside the house to her. Was that a clue that a particular piece of jewellery was in fact hidden somewhere outside the house? Siobhán had noticed that Peter had still been wearing his wedding ring, but he had not given her the impression of being someone who was interested in any kind of fashion accessories. If there really had been some other jewellery inside the house, which he had hidden just before his death, it could only have been an amulet necklace of the type she had seen in the photograph the police had shown her.

She lay back again on the bed, with her eyes closed, and tried to recapture the mental images of the key steps in her interaction with Peter, when they had returned to his home after their long conversation outside. What she needed now was more than the processed memories of what she had seen five months ago,

possibly tainted by misleading interpretations based on her incomplete knowledge at the time. She needed to extract from her recollection more than what had seemed important to her then. For that, she needed to return to those crucial moments and look along the edges of her memory.

Starting with the moment when Peter and she had finished washing up after dinner, had made some tea, and had gone into the living room. For several minutes, they had sat side by side on the sofa and had leafed through old photo albums. As with Alison's and Siobhán's photo albums, from the age of three onwards, there rarely was a photograph of Rosemarie's that did not also feature Siobhán's mother, Lena. Then, the pictorial story had abruptly ended in the summer of 1940, when her father had left home for the last time and had never got to see his wife and daughter again.

After that, Peter had fallen silent for a while, clearly lost in thought. At first, Siobhán had assumed that he had been affected by the renewed reminder of the tragic events during the war. But when he had eventually pushed himself up from the sofa and had laboured up the steep stairs to the upper floor, she had guessed correctly that instead he had been preoccupied with his earlier promise to show her something that had once belonged to her grandfather. Although he had still been determined to keep this promise, his thoughtfulness suggested a noticeably greater reluctance to do so than before dinner. Soon after he had gone upstairs, she had heard him slowly descend again and had helped him carry the old trunk into the living room.

He had then knelt down and rummaged inside it, until he had

found the pistol and the box with cartridges. But what else had been inside the trunk? It had been almost full. Lying at the top, there had been a layer of woollen blankets. Peter had removed them and had placed them to one side. This had revealed a cardboard box without a lid. In it had been a few leather bound boxes – some dark red, some black – which looked as if they might have contained medals. He had casually put them on top of the pile of blankets.

Underneath the cardboard box had been an old ship's lantern. Peter had briefly picked it up and wiped over the dusty brass surface with his fingers, as if wondering whether he could use it again. But he had then carefully returned it to the corner it had previously occupied.

At the centre of the trunk had been a stack of old books. The one lying at the top had displayed a technical drawing of a wooden sailing vessel on its cover. Peter had treated the books with respect, careful not to dent them, but had otherwise not shown any interest in them.

Then, impulsively, Siobhán opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. In the mental image in front of her, she could see it clearly now. Next to the stack of books had been a thin bundle, standing on its side; something flat that was neatly wrapped in an old grey canvas fabric, something like another book. Peter had briefly touched it, as if wanting to pick it up. But, with a sidelong glance at Siobhán, he had released it again. Although, was that exactly what had happened? Upon reflection, Siobhán was quite certain that, before releasing the bundle, Peter had pushed it into the narrow space between the stack of books and one of the side

walls of the trunk.

And lying next to the canvas bundle had been a small grey felt pouch, which was closed with a drawstring. In what had been intended to be another casual sleight of hand, Peter had pulled a pile of folded signal flags over it. Underneath the flags, he had then discovered the pistol and the box with cartridges, which had drawn both their attention away from the trunk.

At the time, the seemingly incidental covering up of the two items had only fleetingly caught Siobhán's attention. But with the benefit of hindsight, the felt pouch and the canvas bundle might well have contained, respectively, a necklace with a sizeable pendant and a notebook. And the way the two items had been stowed next to each other inside the trunk, and the similar manner in which Peter had dealt with them, did suggest that they were somehow connected.

Relying entirely on her own recollection, as re-interpreted through the biased expectations of the New Atlanteans, this was of course pure supposition. But if she could confirm that the two items she now clearly remembered seeing were no longer inside the trunk, that supposition would be as good as confirmed. It would mean that Peter had removed these items before leaving to confront Ralph Behring, most likely with the aim of hiding them somewhere outside his home. They certainly had not been found by the New Atlanteans during what had to have been a very thorough search.

Having made that small progress, Siobhán felt herself relax a little. And as the hazy light outside the window gradually intensified, she began to believe that, with that increased optimism,

she might be able to process her situation rationally and come up with a viable plan. She did not have to remind herself of the catastrophic consequences if that plan failed.

If there really was another amulet necklace of the New Atlanteans out there, the situation was perilous. One amulet, even with that inscription, worn by an unidentified individual who had died under unknown circumstances, ultimately, would not be too problematic for them. But a pair of these unusual pendants provided two reference points between which a connection could be drawn through time and space from abductions and murders during the Second World War all the way to a series of similar violent crimes in the present. Together with a notebook that might contain detailed information about participants and locations of secret meetings, as well as about topics that had been discussed during these meetings, several lines of enquiry might present themselves that, if followed up, could unearth highly embarrassing evidence against some of the current members of the secret organisation.

It all came down to recovering those two critical items, and Siobhán had still not made any progress with interpreting Peter's letter. He would have known that, eventually, the Norwegian authorities would enter his house, and he would have hoped that they would do so before the New Atlanteans did. Furthermore, he would have hoped that they would find the letter and somehow manage to pass it on to Siobhán, as he himself had not possessed an address or other contact information for her. Unfortunately, it had not played out like that, either because the letter had not been found during the cursory search by the police, or it had not

been recognised as being of immediate importance.

Peter would have known that he could not hide the letter itself. Should it be found by the New Atlanteans, he must have hoped that, since no attempt had been made to conceal it, and due to its apparently innocuous content, it would not be removed from the table and destroyed. Yet he clearly expected Siobhán to be alerted by the manner in which it had been written to the fact that there was some vital evidence hidden somewhere, and that she would then be able to work out where to find it.

Siobhán carefully read through the letter again, although at this point she was confident that she could recite it by heart. Suddenly, one sentence did seem odd to her: “I’m sorry about what I said at the end of our meeting, that you do not have what it takes to understand the past.” She was quite certain now that that was not what Peter had said. Instead, in a desperate attempt to get her to return to England, and to get the police to protect her, he had warned her of the immediate danger she was in, making it clear to her that she was up against an enemy she could not possibly defeat on her own. Was there any chance that, in the immediate aftermath, Peter would have misremembered that? Especially as, afterwards, down in the cave, he had talked to her again about defeating her enemies.

That scene, and Peter’s final words to her, was not something she had to struggle to recall to memory. The events in the cave had haunted her in vivid detail ever since. Whether in her waking state or in her nightmares, echoing along the dark passage of the cave, she could still hear the urgency in Peter’s voice, as the water rose around him, and he felt his life ebb away. “For-

get what I said earlier on, about you not having what it takes to defeat your enemies. That was wrong.” These had been Peter’s exact words to her.

Siobhán saw clearly now what it was about the letter that, initially, had only given her an unsettling feeling, a discomfort that had been lost beneath the pain of reading Peter’s final message to her. He had carefully chosen these words to partially echo and partially contradict what he had actually said to her, in the hope that it would still attract her attention when she eventually received the letter.

Combining the two sentences, Siobhán was now convinced that Peter had been trying to tell her, in this coded fashion, that there was something she did not yet have that would help her understand the past; and by understanding the past, she would be able to defeat her enemies. This could only refer to information regarding the New Atlanteans, and specifically the people responsible for the murder of his wife and daughter.

Even if she was in a position to recover and use this evidence, it was too much to hope that, by itself, it would be conclusive, especially after half a century. Otherwise, Peter would have handed it over to the police a long time ago. Likely for that reason, he had initially decided against showing her the amulet and the notebook, if that really was the contents of the felt pouch and the canvas bundle. This attitude had changed dramatically when she had told him about Kathleen’s murder, about Alison’s disappearance, and about the note she had found in Alison’s flat with the mysterious reference to Ultima Thule. Following that, Peter must have thought that the information he had gathered after the

war, combined with the information that might be obtained in connection with the ongoing police investigations, could still be useful.

What worried Siobhán most was that it was likely pointless to attempt to work out where Peter had intended to hide the amulet and the notebook. Whatever his plan had been when he had written the letter, it had changed the moment he had stepped outside his house and had seen Ralph Behring heading towards and then scrambling down the cliff along the path that led to the cave. From then on, the events of that tragic night had played out in a manner he could not possibly have foreseen. It was therefore futile for her to remain lying in bed, speculating and reciting to herself the few lines of the letter over and over again. There were essential questions that could only be answered by returning to Fareøya.

To complicate matters further, Claire had left her with another riddle to solve. When Siobhán had given her the raven necklace, with the spontaneous reference to “walking a dark path,” she had simply intended that to be a gesture of encouragement. All she had wanted to do was to give Claire the confidence that she would do everything she could to get both of them out of this dangerous situation again, and that it would be all right in the end.

But, in a moment of realisation, it had meant more to Claire. It had triggered an association between “a dark path” and something she had not been able to express plainly in the presence of the two men. Instead, she had tried to convey her thoughts in a coded form through her mentioning of “the raven’s flight,” as

something she wanted Siobhán to look out for. This could not have been referring to the search for the amulet necklace and potentially a notebook. Otherwise, there would have been no need for this secrecy. This was another quest that Claire had tasked Siobhán with, something else Siobhán needed to find on that island. And the discovery of this object, or the witnessing of this event, would lead to a better outcome for the two of them than the recovery of the items relating to the New Atlanteans. Whatever had been on Claire's mind, it had clearly given her hope, far more than any of Siobhán's wishful platitudes could ever have.

The immediate interpretation was that Claire had been referring to Siobhán's encounter with the raven that had allowed her to return from Fareøya, when she had come so close to death, knowing that now Siobhán would have to go there again, looking for any potentially incriminating evidence against the New Atlanteans. But it had to be a metaphorical interpretation of that event, or of the circumstances surrounding it.

In that case, what exactly was it that the raven represented in Claire's coded expression? What was it that she wanted Siobhán to look out for, and where? The answer to these questions had to lie in Siobhán's own mentioning of "a dark path," which had been the trigger for Claire's mysterious association. That phrase, of course, allowed several literal and metaphorical interpretations. But given the urgency of their situation, it was not likely to be something as slowly evolving and as abstract as "a path through life." There had to be a more practical meaning, something tangible, a line or progression of sorts embedded in real physical space.

Siobhán closed her eyes again and thought about the path she had taken towards that dreamlike encounter with the raven, beginning with the moment she had left Peter's home. From then on, their two paths had been intended to diverge – would have diverged, at least for a while, had she left the island on the last ferry, as Peter had wanted her to.

Then, with a sudden rush of energy, Siobhán pushed herself up from her reclining position, sitting bolt upright and wide awake now. She stared at the opposite wall but only saw a place far away.

She finally knew what dark path Claire had been thinking of, and where the search for hidden evidence against the New Atlanteans had to begin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A DARK PATH

The sun was sinking low now over the horizon, creating a fiery trail across the calm ocean that followed the yacht on its steady course. It was the first clear reference point she had obtained that day for the general direction into which they were heading. And so, the second day at sea was gradually coming to an end.

Her nervousness and forced inaction had stretched each hour indefinitely in her perception, until the hands of her watch had seemed to come to a complete halt. It already felt as if weeks had passed since she had been taken away from the hotel in Paris, down the creaking old steps in the otherwise quiet stairwell, out the back door into a small courtyard enclosed by the walls of residential buildings. Without stopping, she had been steered through a gate into a narrow passage between two of the buildings, through which they had reached a deserted street, where she had quickly been pushed into the back of a waiting car, one man climbing into the backseat beside her, the other joining the driver in the front. While it had been a French car, the men had exclusively spoken English amongst each other. They had not been concerned about conversing freely in her presence, nor had they attempted to prevent her from seeing where they were going. From Montmartre, they had initially navigated slowly over narrow cobbled streets, with frequent turns around tight corners. After they had emerged from the maze among the old build-

ings, they had driven along wider streets onto a dual carriageway, which had taken them along the outskirts of the city. Following the signs to a motorway, they had been swallowed up by a seemingly endless tunnel, which had finally opened onto a bridge. After crossing the river, they had left the big city behind. Based on the signs along the motorway, they had been heading straight for the coast. The sky had gradually become brighter, and they had reached Le Havre just before sunrise. Having driven past the commercial docks and the ferry terminal, the driver had at last pulled up at the marina. Only few other people had been about at the time, and she had been ushered along a floating gangway, past rows of mostly sailing boats, to a large motor yacht. They had quickly led her aboard and into one of the cabins below deck. The engines had already been running, and they had left the harbour shortly afterwards.

She had been worried that they would take her over to Portsmouth, where they could comfortably have arrived by midday. But instead, they had still been at sea when the noontime sun had shone into the window of her cabin, and they had continued in a westerly direction until evening. The men had clearly decided that keeping her on board was the safest option. She would have no chance then of escaping or being discovered. The next morning, there had been nothing but water outside her window, as she had looked towards a dark horizon – the same horizon that was now set aflame by the setting sun. It appeared as if they had changed course overnight and, throughout the day, had been on a steady trajectory north, most likely along the west coast of Ireland, which might then be visible from the other side of the

boat.

Under different circumstances, there would have been nothing to complain about regarding her cabin. The luxury she had experienced so far was beyond anything she could ever hope for on a holiday cruise. She had a comfortable double bed and an *en-suite* bathroom, which she did not have to share with anyone. The mahogany wall panelling stylishly concealed a refrigerator, which was stocked with bottled water, cans of fizzy drinks, and miniature bottles of wine and spirits. She was served food four times a day, beginning with a light breakfast, which had included fresh croissants on the first morning after their departure from France. This had so far been followed by a soup and canapés for lunch, an afternoon tea, and a pasta dish with a salad for supper. Between mealtimes, she could dip into her supply of sweet and savoury snacks, but she did so mostly out of boredom, rather than hunger. She had not bothered yet to switch on the television set opposite the corner sofa. She had also ignored the few romance novels on the shelf above her bed, as well as the small stack of celebrity gossip and fashion magazines on the coffee table. But their presence indicated how well prepared her abduction had been, despite the short timeframe. Realistically, the New Atlanteans could not have known that she would accompany Siobhán to France until their agents had seen them arrive at London Euston Station on the sleeper train from Scotland. Twenty-four hours later, she had been taken from a hotel room in Paris and had been driven to the coast. That was all the New Atlanteans had needed to plan and carry out her abduction, to arrange for a yacht to be waiting for them in Le Havre, and

to prepare for her arrival on board. It made her realise what a formidable enemy Siobhán and she were up against.

After they had left France, she had not seen either of the two men who had abducted her, although she assumed that they had remained on board. The moment they had ushered her into the cabin, she had locked herself in. Since then, the only one who had shown any interest in her had been a female crew member – by her accent of East Asian descent, but used to speaking French – who had served her the food, removed the empty dishes, and replenished her supplies of snacks and drinks. There was no doubt in Claire’s mind that the woman had known nothing about the abduction. And by the time she had realised that something was wrong, they had already been at sea for a few hours. At that point, she had been stuck on that yacht as much as Claire. Although their interactions had always been brief, the woman had regularly enquired politely whether she had enjoyed the food, and if she had any other needs. For the first supper, the pasta had been served with a remark of “no meat, only vegetables, mushrooms, some herbs, and cashew nuts.” And none of the dishes so far had contained any meat or fish. The possession of that personal information about her gave the New Atlanteans an uncomfortable aura of omniscience, in addition to the unlimited power and resources they seemed to possess.

Despite the first-class treatment Claire received, she had no illusions about the enemy’s ultimate plan. From what she had overheard of the conversation in the hotel room, it was apparent that the New Atlanteans had cynically laid a deadly trap for Siobhán and had given her no choice but to walk into it. The

moment Claire had been dragged away from Siobhán, she had known that the only way out of this situation was on Fareøya.

The chance to set her plan in motion had come sooner than she had expected. They had still been driving through Paris. The man sitting on the backseat next to her had looked over when she had put on the raven necklace. She had not been concerned about the men knowing that she had it, even if they had guessed that Siobhán had handed it to her. But after she had attracted their attention, they had teased her about the odd behaviour she had displayed as they had manoeuvred her out of the hotel room. She had then taken the opportunity to play up to their impression that she was being hysterical and had staged a nervous breakdown, yelling at them to take her back to the hotel immediately, trying to convince them that Siobhán had no chance of finding any of the incriminating evidence against their organisation because Peter's plan for hiding these objects had been prevented by unforeseen developments after he had written the coded letter to Siobhán. She had tried to convince the men that, based on what Siobhán had told her, and what she had overheard in the hotel room, she had worked out where these objects really were hidden. But the men had simply laughed at her and had let her descend into a fake bout of hopeless sobbing, at which point they had ignored her again.

However, they now did appear to be following a course that might take them to the Lofoten, while keeping out of the way of the busy shipping routes across the North Sea. Whether she had been able to convince the men to take her directly to Fareøya after all, as a backup should Siobhán fail in her mission, or whether

they had planned to do that all along, made no difference. As long as she managed to get to that island before Siobhán felt that all hope was lost, there was still a chance.

* * *

For a few moments, she lay with her eyes open, gazing unfocused into the dim light that surrounded her, until she became consciously aware of being awake. She listened intently for any sounds that might have awoken her. Then, she realised that, instead, it must have been the absence of the steady droning of the engines towards the aft from her cabin. Over the past three days, it had become such a consistent feature of her confined world that she had stopped to notice it.

She stumbled out of bed, got the dressing gown out of the bathroom, and wrapped it around herself. Then, she walked over to the sofa and knelt on it, so that she could look out of the window. They had docked at what appeared to be the commercial part of a harbour. It had to be in the middle of the night. The sky was completely dark, and the scene was only illuminated by the row of harsh neon lights along the quayside.

On the left, she could see a fuel tanker truck, from which a rubber hose led towards the yacht. Two tired-looking crew members, recognisable by their dark blue uniform trousers and their white short-sleeved shirts, were supervising the refuelling operation. On the right, boxes of different kinds were unloaded from a van and carried aboard. It seemed as if they were preparing the vessel for several more days at sea.

She wondered where they could be. Only the previous morn-

ing, following breakfast, she had left her cabin for the first time and had walked around deck for half an hour or so. Back then, they had been surrounded by nothing but calm blue water and a bright sky with scattered white clouds drifting in it. There had not been a hint of land in sight. She had hoped, on that occasion, to be able to find out about their destination. But the female crew member who had led her up onto deck had discretely withdrawn soon after – to exchange her bedding and towels, as it had turned out upon her return to her cabin – and there had been no one else around outside. When she had attempted to enter the rooms on the main deck, she had found all their doors locked. Due to the intense sunlight reflecting off the tinted windows, she had not been able to see inside, but she assumed that this was where the men had established their mobile control centre, where they communicated with their associates on land and planned their cleanup operation.

Since that morning, they appeared to have continued along a northerly trajectory, but she had no way of knowing how far they had already travelled. In the darkness, away from the glare of the nearby neon lights, she tried to pick out any clues to their location. This was made difficult by the fact that her window was only a couple of feet above the quay, and her view was restricted. But eventually, through its gently waving motion, she spotted a saltire on a flagpole next to what looked like an administrative building. It was seemingly one of the smaller Scottish harbours, still large enough to receive some commercial traffic, but without any indication of other nighttime activity around them. She suspected that this was partly why it had been chosen over one of the

larger ports. Along the neighbouring quay, she could make out the silhouette of a tall ship. Judging by its shape, it could have been one of the ferries that connected the Scottish mainland with the Western Isles. Not knowing at first why, she had the distinct feeling that she was back in Stornoway, until she recognised the outline of the ferry terminal. This was where she had arrived on her way to Callanish, looking for Siobhán. And this was where they had departed again together the following day.

She was reminded how worried she had been about Siobhán even then. The moment she had heard on the phone that Siobhán had gone to visit the site, all by herself, she had known that she had to find her friend as soon as possible. She remembered her growing apprehension as she had walked up to the ancient monument, across the sombre heathland, while the sun had died in the west. She remembered the shiver she had felt as the first outlines of the standing stones had come into view. She remembered her temporary relief when she had seen Siobhán's lonely figure materialise inside the wavering fog that shrouded the dark pillars, standing near the centre of the circle, at the very heart of the lithic constellation. But then, in a sudden shift in her awareness of the scene, she had been overcome by a cold premonition, as she had perceived her friend surrounded by the shadows of death, caught in an invisible web of unearthly powers that was spun among those ominous shapes on the crest of the hill. Once she had finally stood next to Siobhán, she herself had felt the pull into another world. She had felt the perilous nature of the primordial powers around them. And she had known then that she had to get her friend away from there immediately.

She wondered if she would manage again to arrive in time to help Siobhán get out of a desperate situation. She guessed that from Stornoway at least half their journey to Fareøya still lay ahead of them; whereas Siobhán had to be in Norway by now, at that very moment getting close to her destination, if she had not arrived on the island yet.

She would still be pursued by the tragic losses she had experienced over the short period of just a few months. She would still be haunted by a feeling of guilt that somehow she was responsible for all these deaths, which would be exacerbated by the realisation of how often she herself had narrowly escaped death, feeling that her survival had been unearned, that it had been granted through interventions outside her control.

Now, more strongly than before, Siobhán would be caught again within the sphere of influence of the other side. And this time, if she thought that she had exhausted all other options, and there was no one left on this side to turn to for help, she would find that pull impossible to resist.

* * *

And so the quest was over almost as soon as it had begun. There was not going to be an easy solution, no easy way out.

If Peter had remembered that he still had the amulet necklace in his coat pocket when he had arrived at the cave, he might have hidden it among the rocks, in the recess near the right side of the entrance, into which he had collapsed after getting shot. But if anything had ever been hidden there, it had long been carried away by the sea.

This realisation did not come as any great surprise, rather as a numbing feeling of despondency, a resigned acceptance of a scenario that, on the long journey north, had increasingly seemed unavoidable.

The excited confidence Siobhán had felt at her departure from Paris had quickly worn off. Once she had removed herself from the claustrophobia and the stifling heat of the big city, she had begun to think more clearly. And it had become apparent to her that the cave as a hiding place could not have been what Claire had thought of in connection with “a dark path.” Her instruction to “watch out for the raven’s flight” was not connected to the cave in any way, but rather to the mountain peak towering above it. And that too was out of the question as a hiding place. The meaning of these phrases had to be metaphorical, another coded message for Siobhán to decipher. On the train journey from Paris to Kiel, she had therefore tried to find any reasonable interpretation of Claire’s enigmatic last words to her, and had only given up when she had arrived at the harbour.

On the ferry to Oslo, she had then turned her attention to Peter’s letter again, which was a crucial piece of information that Claire had not been able to see. Out in the fresh air, reclining in a lounge on the upper deck, the solution to the riddle had immediately presented itself. As she had expected even back in Paris, the clue lay in the misrepresentation of what Peter had said to her shortly before her departure from his home, and the uncharacteristically flowery sentence that followed: “I’m sorry about what I said at the end of our meeting, that you do not have what it takes to understand the past. That was wrong. I am sure that

you will come to recognise its true meaning, once you returned to the place where it was first revealed to you.”

The place where the past had been revealed to her by Peter was the flat boulder lying on its side near the edge of the cliff. That was where Peter had intended to hide the necklace and the notebook – neither down in the cave, nor up on the mountain, but in the transitional zone between these extremes. And it would have been these tokens of the past that would have allowed her to recognise the true meaning of what had happened during the war.

The moment she had arrived on the island and had moved back into her familiar room in the guesthouse, she had been keen to go out and check around the boulder for any hidden items. However, the sun had already gone down at that late stage of the evening. It would have been pointless to search in the dark, and would only have raised the suspicion of everyone in the village. But the following morning, after a restless night, her fear had been confirmed: Peter’s original plan had not been carried out.

It had required the despair resulting from that confirmation to make use of the stolen key, to gain access to Peter’s home, and to enter against the oppressive silence that had settled inside the abandoned rooms. As a result, she now knew that both the amulet necklace and an associated notebook really had been in Peter’s possession. This had been proven beyond any reasonable doubt by the disappearance of the felt pouch and the canvas bundle from the old trunk, which was otherwise still sitting on the living room floor, exactly where it had been when she had previously left the house so abruptly. After that discovery, the

cave had been the only remaining plausible candidate for a hiding place. And that possibility had now also been removed.

Standing by the entrance of the cave, she noticed consciously for the first time the ancient wall paintings that Dagmar had briefly mentioned to her on the morning of that fateful day five months ago. By that evening, when she had gone down into the cave, daylight had been fading rapidly, and her mind had been preoccupied with other matters. Now, she was reluctant to step any farther into the cave, remembering vividly the freezing cold of the water that had attempted to pull her into the chasm within the side passage of the cave; remembering also the suffocating claustrophobia that had taken hold of her in the complete darkness while squeezing through the narrow tunnel that led upwards from the end of the passage. But even from the entrance, the assembly of painted human figures was faintly visible, gathered most densely just before the end of the main part of the cave, where the side passage branched off towards the right.

Whatever the motivation for these paintings had been, thousands of years ago, this had to have been a spiritual place. But did that mean that the cave, in some way, also preserved a memory of those who passed through it more recently, at least as long as there was someone left alive who cared for them? Would Peter's spirit be able to linger there, when elsewhere in the world it had slipped away? If she stood there long enough, listening, would any whispered inspiration enter her desperate mind? But not even the wind was whistling past the entrance of the cave on that calm morning. The only sound she could hear was the gentle rushing of the waves on the rocky shore behind her.

She turned away from the dark path into the underworld and stepped outside the cave. To her left, she could see the scatter of small islands that formed the southernmost tip of the archipelago, with the sun rising above them into a clear sky. Ahead and towards the right was the vast expanse of the open ocean, the calm water almost as blue as the sky.

She shivered despite the fine weather, realising that she should have acquired a larger selection of warm clothes than she had on her way north. But she was not going to stay long on the island, now that her worries had been confirmed on the first morning of her return.

Four days had passed already since Claire had fallen into the hands of the New Atlanteans. Time was running out. Soon, the enemy would take control again. They would bring this affair to a decisive conclusion, while creating a story that would suit their purpose. And she could not allow this to happen.

She would give herself this one day to work out where else Peter may have hidden the necklace and the notebook, when chance had intervened, and he had been prevented from carrying out his original plan. She would also try to establish if, by accident, someone else had found these unusual items.

Then, if that failed, it would be time to prepare for the telling of her own story.

* * *

The oscillating currents swirled lazily around the stilts that supported the seaward side of the house, with short-lived eddies trailing off the solid obstacles. The water had returned to its full

height since the ebb that morning and had picked up from the seabed the dinghies that were moored to some of the neighbouring houses, so that now they were rocking gently on the waves. The ocean seemed to enjoy the brief moment of relaxation between the alternating periods of push and pull of the tidal cycle, a calm that mirrored the atmosphere that infused human society during these early hours of a sunny afternoon towards the end of summer.

‘I did not want to ask during lunch, with Gunnar and the other guests there. But how did you find going back into the cave?’

Dagmar had stepped out from the kitchen onto the balcony, carrying a tray with two coffee mugs and some slices of cake. She placed the tray onto the table and sat down, with an inviting gesture for Siobhán to join her.

‘Yesterday evening, when you arrived, and you asked me about the time of the low water, I guessed that you were thinking about returning to the cave. Then, I saw you this morning walking up the hill, from where you can go over to the other side of the island. Of course, I can see why it was important for you to go there at the earliest moment. In your memory, the cave must have been a bad place. But I hope you have seen now that it really is not so. And I hope you will take away with you only the good memories from us this time.’

‘You’re right, I did go down to the cave, and it did make a difference seeing it in the light of a fine morning. On this occasion, I even noticed the wall paintings that you had mentioned to me on my first visit.’

‘Yes. I was very happy when you telephoned, when you said

that you would come back to the island, to see it in summer, and maybe forget a little what happened here in winter. I remember very well that morning in March, when you came down from the mountain and told me about everything that had happened. I can still see you sitting here in the living room, on the sofa by the wood stove, wrapped in a blanket, sometimes falling asleep for a little while, waiting for the ferry to take you over to Bodø in the evening.

‘I have thought about that day very often, and about Peter. It seems strange now that we never thought that he and Ralf Behring could have known each other before they came here – two Germans of the same age. And there always seemed to be something between them, you could feel that, when they met each other. But no one could have believed that Behring and the other three men who suddenly arrived here were looking for a treasure that they thought had been hidden during the war, and that they thought that Peter knew where it was, or that you had found out about it and had told Peter. Every normal person should know that something like this is stupid. But they believed it, and they wanted to do crimes for it, even murder. It is really very difficult to understand.

‘But you know, Siobhán, even nice people sometimes get funny ideas. In this village, you can find, very soon I am sure, people who think they know which treasure it is that was hidden, and they will want to talk to you about it. So, I am telling you now to make you prepared. It has to do with the rescue of the Norwegian gold reserve from the Germans, when they invaded us during the war. The true story is very exciting, of

course. Every child in Norway learns it in school; how only a few hours before the Germans reached Oslo, the gold was removed from the bank there and brought more and more to the north, to Lillehammer, to Åndalsnes, to Molde, and then all the way to Tromsø, which is even more north from here. And we learn how they had to stay ahead of the Germans, who were also coming north. In Tromsø, the gold was then loaded onto an English warship and brought to London, where it was put into the famous Bank of England. It is true that the gold passed by not far from here. It is also true that, along the way, the gold had to be taken on small fishing boats, because they were worried that the large ships would be bombed – and maybe the Germans tried to do that. But I never heard that a single boat was sunk. In fact, we were always told that only a few coins were lost on the long journey.

‘But now, there is this idea going around in the village that one of the smaller boats was sunk near our island, and it was never talked about because it would have been bad for morale, or something like that. The truth is, Siobhán, people around here simply have too much time in the evening. They sit together, they drink their beer and their aquavit, and they make up stories. And, of course, everyone wants to tell the most exciting story. So, that is how this goes. Now we have a sunken treasure of gold near our little island, and everybody wonders where it is. And all from this tragic day that happened here in March.’

‘Oh, dear. I’m sorry to hear that. But thanks for the warning, Dagmar. Now I know what to expect, should I ever visit the pub. To be fair, the idea of cruising around the islands is very

attractive, although I wouldn't necessarily want to do it looking for a lost treasure. When I was here in winter, Peter did suggest we could go on a little tour together. He mentioned that he had a motorboat.'

'Yes, he had. And it is a very nice boat, as I remember it.' She craned her neck, looking over to the small fleet of fishing vessels in the harbour. 'I cannot see it from here. It will probably still be sleeping underneath a blanket since the winter because no one has used it. But if you go over there, someone will show you. I can see Lars Ole by his fishing boat, or is it his son? You can meet him after you finished your coffee and maybe had another piece of cake.'

* * *

Excited swarms of seabirds circled around the fishing vessels that had come into the little harbour on the high tide. They were all moored, side by side with smaller boats, to the pier that reached out into the sheltered bay. Only one of the smaller boats, resting on a trailer and covered by a grey tarpaulin, had remained back on land.

At first it seemed as if, by then, all of the fisherfolk had gone inside for a late lunch, and to rest after the hard work at sea. But then she noticed a lone figure sitting on a stack of wooden crates, apparently happy to postpone his meal for a quiet moment in the sunshine.

He looked over to her, as he heard her approach over the pebbles along the shore, and got up, taking a few steps towards her.

'Hello. You must be ... Sorry, I forgot your name.'

‘Siobhán Dannreuther.’

He acknowledged Siobhán’s outstretched hand with a friendly nod. ‘Lars Ole Iversen. My hands are oily, as you can see. I heard about you. You were here when Peter died.’

‘Yes, I was.’

‘Very sorry. Sad day. That was a bad storm. And that snow coming down from the mountain . . . Every winter, we have one or two of these snow flows over there. That is why we built all the houses on this side of the mountain. But I do not remember that we ever had such a large flow. It moved even the biggest stones at the bottom of the mountain. You can see it if you remember how it looked before. You got very lucky. But I do not have to tell you that. You were there, and I am sure you will not forget it in many years.’

‘I don’t think I will ever forget that night. And I wouldn’t want to.’

He nodded gravely. ‘No. You would have to forget Peter as well.’ He buried his hands in his oilskin jacket and looked out to sea. ‘I miss him. He was a good man, a good friend. You could always trust him. Knew something about boats, about engines. Often helped me with my old *Havfrue* when something was wrong with her. Went out with us, sometimes, with me and my son, to help us bring in the catch when it was the main fishing season. Yes, I miss him.’

He turned back to Siobhán. ‘I heard from Dagmar what you had told her after that terrible night. A tragic end to a tragic life. Very sorry when I heard about Peter’s wife and daughter. He told me he was captured by the British at the end of the war,

worked in Scotland as a prisoner, then moved to England and worked there as a shipbuilding engineer until he retired. But he never said anything about his family. I knew there was pain in his life. But I thought he would talk about it himself if he wanted to. Sometimes, you do not want to step into someone's private life, but I am thinking now that I should have asked him.'

'Did he have many friends in the village?'

Mr Iversen looked uncomfortable, fighting against his natural honesty. 'He had a polite relationship with everyone. But there were some people who had stupid ideas about him, and Peter knew that. They did not like that he never talked about his past; that he never explained why he had moved to this little island. So, they started questions between themselves. Was he hiding from someone? Did he maybe kill someone? Things like that, always behind his back. And now, they feel sorry, about Peter, and about what they said about him. But they are glad that they have found out what happened during the war, to Peter, to his family, and here on our island before we built the village. They understand why Peter came back to live here, and why he did not want to talk about the past.

'Now, we are wondering what will happen to his house and his other things. If he did not write a testament, and if he has no family, the government will get everything. Then, I will try to buy his boat – except, if you want it?'

'I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to afford it.'

He looked thoughtfully at her. 'You know, I am wondering. What would Peter want? That is the main thing. And I am thinking this. You are the granddaughter of his best friend, and you

came all the way here to meet him. What happened exactly, I do not know. But I heard that you found out about what happened during the war, about Peter's family, and you told him about it. Then, you were attacked – because of something stupid, something to do with a treasure – and Peter saved your life. He must have liked you very much. And after he lost his wife and daughter, I am sure he felt about you as if you were his granddaughter.'

His composed demeanour had become more animated. 'I feel it, you know. I have known Peter for more than ten years, since he moved here. And I feel that he would have wanted you to get all his things. But he could not write that down into a testament because he did not have the time.'

He glanced over to the boat that was still covered by a tarpaulin. 'I am mostly thinking about his boat – a very beautiful wooden motorboat. You will not find many like her now. Quite old, fifty years or so – except the engine, of course. But if you look at her, she could be new. Peter always worked on her a lot during the summer. And I told you, he was very good with boats. It would be nice for her to be out on the water again, to get the engine running, you know. I think she would like that. And Peter would be happy too. I do not really have the time to take care of her, but I look at you, and I think you and *Arja* could become very good friends.'

He winked at Siobhán.

'Well, I do have a powerboat licence that is valid in the UK. And I've got quite a bit of experience with rigid inflatables, with twin outboard engines. But I'm not sure about an older type of motorboat.'

‘Don’t worry about things like licences up here. If you have experience with some of the smaller motorboats, you can handle *Arja*. Now is the perfect weather for taking her out. You only have to remember the strong tides around here. Also, look out for rocks under the water. And don’t let the islands get out of your sight. Always take enough fuel with you, of course. For a start, you can get that from me, no problem. Then, you can refuel on the larger island north of here. And I will help you get *Arja* back into her element.’

He sensed Siobhán’s continued reluctance and looked sideways at her with a shrewd smile. ‘She is right here, you know. I could remove the cover. Maybe you change your mind when you see her.’

* * *

Looking across to the harbour, from her upstairs room in the guesthouse, Siobhán could see *Arja*, now safely moored to the end of the pier, the clear varnish over the dark wood gleaming warmly in the sun. She was aching to take Peter’s boat out to sea, but the afternoon was rapidly slipping away from her, and she still had not managed to make any progress with her quest. As time was running out, this had to be the sole focus of her attention.

Neither her conversation with Dagmar, nor that with Lars Ole, had helped her to get any closer to finding the amulet necklace or the notebook. Both had spoken disparagingly about the notion that there could have been a hidden treasure behind the tragic events of that night in March. Surely, they would not have done

so had Peter, before following Ralf Behring down to the cave, deposited the two objects with any one of his neighbours, likely with a remark to pass them on to Siobhán. News of that would have spread rapidly. Lars Ole would undoubtedly have heard about it as one of Peter's closest friends, if he had not been the one to whom Peter had entrusted these items in the first place. And Dagmar would have heard about it because she was the one person in the village who knew how to contact Siobhán.

Had anyone, by accident, found either of the two mysterious objects, news of that would have spread equally fast, and would have been eagerly integrated into the tales of hidden treasure that were already circulating in the village. An amulet with runic symbols around it, and a notebook written in a foreign language – those were story elements that were simply too good to ignore.

What else then was there left as a potential hiding place? She could not get herself to search Peter's home, with him gone forever. Entering it briefly once, to check if the felt pouch and the canvas bundle were still in the old trunk, had been difficult enough. But aside from that, she was confident that the New Atlanteans had already subjected the entire building to a thorough search. Similarly, Lars Ole had carried out a careful inspection of *Arja* before refuelling the boat and launching it back into the water after a long break on land, which also had not revealed any hidden items.

Now, the sun had already moved over to the other side of the island. Soon, it would sink beneath the horizon, and darkness would return with another restless night. For the first time since her arrival in Moskenesvær, she felt genuine panic creep

up on her, as the realisation of what she would have to do was truly sinking in. With her senses sharpened by her state of high tension, she consciously became aware of the groaning of the wooden building, as the waves rhythmically pushed and pulled against the stilts underneath its seaward side.

But was it just her ordinary senses that had become more receptive? Or was it a more subtle perception, which was alive to her connection to dark forces that had been established during the winter; an unbroken link that still tied her to another world and had been awoken with her return to the island. Already, there was a prickling feeling at the back of her neck, which tried to warn her of impending danger.

She quickly turned away from the window, now facing the door. She could sense, more than she heard it, the creaking of the stairs leading up to her room, as if someone were quietly ascending from the water beneath her. Any moment, the door handle would slowly begin to move. Then, the door would be pushed open, revealing a darkness on the other side that was not part of this world. And out of that darkness, three figures would emerge, with lifeless eyes in their pale featureless faces, coming to take their revenge on her. Yes, the phantoms were still around her. And she knew they were never going to leave her alone.

This was pointless. Stuck in this room, she would never be able to concentrate, never be capable of any rational thought. Once more, one last time, she would therefore return to the location where the past had been revealed to her. Perhaps, at that intended hiding place, in her hour of need, she would receive some inspiration about where the necklace and the notebook had

actually ended up.

* * *

The evidence of the passing of the avalanche was still preserved in the rocks that lay scattered at the foot of the western slope of the mountain. Some of the boulders had been uprooted and had toppled over. But a particularly massive one, near the flat boulder on which she and Peter had been sitting during their long conversation, was still standing, possibly even straighter than before, and more firmly rooted in the ground. It now towered over the rest of the assembly.

If only human activity had also been recorded in the landscape. But there was no trace left of Peter's presence, neither while she had been with him, nor afterwards. And there was nothing hidden in any of the crevices in or around the boulder.

She leaned against the cool surface of the tall standing stone, which felt reassuringly solid, and looked out across the ocean towards the sun that was now nearing the horizon. If the quest for the amulet necklace and the notebook was truly at an end, was there still a chance that, during the last few hours of daylight, she would be able to solve Claire's riddle?

Siobhán could still see the confidence in Claire's eyes, when she had thought of a way out of their perilous situation; with a hint even that, in her mind, they had already won – all this at the point at which she had been abducted by a seemingly invincible enemy. Not for a second could Siobhán allow herself to betray her friend by thinking that Claire, in that moment of high tension, had seen an unrealistic solution; that she had not seen a genuine

light at the end of that dark path, a light that she had expressed as “the raven’s flight” – something that Siobhán would be able to look out for, presumably on this island.

It was the symbol of the raven as the bringer of light. But in a situation of acute peril, what pragmatic interpretation had Claire thought of to give her that level of confidence in the success of her plan? What realistic possibility had she been able to see? And why had she been so certain that Siobhán would be able to understand her hint? Was there some crucial information that they both shared? Some point of connection in their common past?

These were the same questions she had already asked herself a countless number of times, but it was hopeless. She simply did not possess Claire’s intuitive way of thinking, her ability to latch onto quick associations, and to recognise subtle relationships. It had been the same with the library book that Alison had hidden behind her wardrobe. Siobhán had only found that important clue by pure coincidence, and she could not expect to have the same luck twice.

All she could do then was to make one final attempt to construct in her imagination those events of that tragic night that she had not witnessed herself, events that had unfolded after she had gone down to the cave. She left the support of the standing stone and walked across the headland towards the row of houses on the other side of the mountain. When she came in sight of the one at the end of the row, she stopped. This had been where Peter had lived during the final years of his life. As she had done frequently in her dreams, but clearer now, she watched him leave his home

for what had turned out to be the last time. That was when he had seen Ralf Behring heading towards the cliff and then scrambling down the steep rocky path. Peter would have stood by the edge of the cliff, waiting for Behring to come back up; wondering what he was doing down by the shore with the tide coming in, whether he was meeting someone who had secretly arrived by boat.

Peter would have held in his hands the two items he had been planning to hide: the notebook still wrapped in the grey canvas fabric, and the amulet necklace now similarly protected against the elements. He could have taken the opportunity then to hide both in the intended spot by the flat boulder. But something had prevented him from doing so, or had changed his mind.

As she walked out towards the end of the headland, she tried to remember every detail of the scene as it had been on that evening, as she had seen it herself, moments before Peter had arrived. She saw again the peaceful picture of the fishing village in the sheltered bay on her left; and she saw the storm clouds approaching from the open sea on her right. Torn between the two sides, she experienced once again the moment of hesitation until, finally, she had made that fateful decision to visit the cave.

How long would Peter have stood there? In her recollection, her nervous encounter with Ralf Behring before Peter's arrival undoubtedly stretched longer than it had lasted in reality. But even so, Peter must have waited for several minutes. And then something had happened that had caused him to follow Behring down the cliff, at a time when the water was about to flood the lower part of the path – knowing that, with his damaged leg, he

would struggle to get back up.

There had to have been something significant that triggered that decision, something that was missing from the image she had in her own mind, from just before she had scrambled down the cliff herself. She tried to imagine how Peter would have seen the scene shortly afterwards, after she had passed through it. There would have been no change to the environment, no lasting trace of her presence.

She took a few more steps closer to the narrow path that led down to the shore. Then, with a sudden realisation, she turned away from the cliff and ran back towards the village.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SYNCHRONICITY

It had been her rucksack that had told Peter that she had not left the island on the last ferry. When he had seen it leaning behind that boulder near the edge of the cliff, he had realised where she had gone instead. And it had also told him why Ralf Behring had gone down to the shore, with the tide rising rapidly, and the storm closing in.

If Peter had put the amulet necklace and the notebook into any one of the compartments of her rucksack, before scrambling down the cliff himself, she would have found them by now. But there was another possibility, which she had been desperate to check as soon as she had returned to the guesthouse.

In an unobserved moment, she had hastened upstairs to her room, pulled the rucksack out of the wardrobe, pushed her hand between the frame and the back of the main compartment – and there it had been, the grey canvas bundle that she remembered seeing in Peter's old trunk. But the felt pouch had been missing.

Peter, realising that he had waited too long, and without another second to lose, had quickly pushed the bundle with the notebook into the frame of the rucksack. It would have been too big for his coat pockets, and he needed to have both hands free on his way down the steep rocky path. Yet he had kept the pouch with the necklace. It appeared as if, in a change of mind, he had wanted to confront Behring with it in Siobhán's presence. But

the moment he had arrived in the cave, the situation had escalated in a shootout, and the two men had injured each other.

She had only briefly glanced inside the bundle to confirm that, as expected, it contained a plain notebook with a grey-green cover. This was not something she could study in her room in the guesthouse. It could take hours for her to translate and otherwise process its contents, as it was likely written in German. It would attract attention if she spent that amount of time cooped up by herself inside her room. The evening's socialising in the pub would be starting soon. Someone was bound to come by and invite her to join them, keen to talk to her about hidden treasure. In that case, it would be impossible to find a polite excuse.

She had therefore hidden the notebook inside her jacket and, as quietly as the creaking floorboards allowed, had left her room. Out on the landing, she had stood for a moment, listening for any noises from the floor below. But Dagmar and the few other guests had seemed to be out. She had then managed to leave the guesthouse again unobserved, and had quickly walked back up to Peter's old home near the end of the path that led to the cliff. Only few people ventured up to the houses on the plateau above the village, even by day, and fewer would do so now that evening had fallen. Inside, she had carefully closed all curtains, hoping that this in itself would not be noticed by any rare passerby. Surrounded by the flickering light of a candle that she had found in the kitchen, she had then settled down at the little table by the sofa and opened the time-worn notebook.

It contained the same old German handwriting her grandmother had still used during the war, as well as for the first few

years afterwards. As a child, Siobhán had noticed the annotations of the earliest photographs in her mother's album, those that had been taken in the internment camp on the Isle of Man, and later in Liverpool. The curious style had caught her attention when she had begun to write herself, and Alison and she had asked her grandmother to write the German letters side-by-side with the English ones they had learned in school, so that they could memorise them and use them as their secret script.

The first section in the notebook was entitled

Ultima Thule

She was unable to translate most of the writing that followed, but it contained several references to *U-112*, Narvik, and Loch Cairnbawn. It appeared to be an account of the crew's final mission, a part of the larger secret operation that had been codenamed *Ultima Thule*, for which they had attempted to reach Scotland to obtain important military documents from their British collaborators. However, this had ended with the attack by a British warship, and their escape to Fareøya. There, the encounter with the British commando unit had led to their uneasy alliance with the enemy while sheltering in the cave during a blizzard, and ultimately to the disappearance of *U-112*.

After a few empty pages, another section began, which was entitled

Verschwörungstheorien

She transcribed this as *Verschwörungstheorien*. Broken down into its different components, the last part, *theorien*, by itself,

was easy enough to interpret. She assumed that, following on from the true account of their final mission, which had been given in the first section of the notebook, this had to be a summary of the conspiracy theories that had sprung up around the disappearance of *U-112* – although the submarine now seemed to be represented by frequent references to Atlantis, while the lost land that featured heavily in the conspiracy theories was referred to as Thule, or by the abbreviation UT. Similar to the first section, from what Siobhán could gather, this part also contained nothing that Peter had not told her.

Following that summary were again several empty pages, which she flipped through carefully, determined not to miss anything – even holding some pages close to the candle to check for any signs of invisible writing. And just when she thought that there would not be any further entries, she turned a page to reveal the start of a new section, entitled

The Order of the New Atlanteans

She involuntarily held her breath, as she had no difficulty deciphering this as “The Order of the New Atlanteans.” Then, with her heart racing, she scanned across the neat handwritten lines beneath the heading. A name stood out, Quarrington’s, with an address in St James’s Square in London, most likely a gentlemen’s club, embedded in a few paragraphs describing what appeared to have been the first meeting that Peter had been able to infiltrate. This was followed by another address, this time on Holland Park Avenue, likely a private residence, which might have been used for the more secretive meetings.

She slowly continued turning the pages, all of which listed names. Some entries only contained the first or the last name; occasionally they were followed by a question mark, when Peter must have wondered whether someone had given him their real identity; occasionally they were associated with addresses, although these were often incomplete. The named individuals were mostly men; women exclusively appeared in connection with their husbands. Under some of the names, Peter had written a few keywords only, while for others he had gathered enough information to fill an entire page.

At the very end were the names of a couple with a primary residence in Maidstone in Kent. Underneath that address it said, in English, “manor house near Eyrie village, Loch Cuirinnein, Sutherland.” This was followed by the most comprehensive writing associated with any of the names, apparently done over an extended period, as some passages were written in English, but most still in German. This had been the moment of Peter’s important breakthrough in his undercover investigation, when the couple who had attempted to protect Rosemarie had opened up to him and had told him the truth about the abduction and murder of the German woman and her daughter – although they had still withheld the true identities of the victims. The notebook contained a detailed summary of Peter’s conversations with the couple, and a great sadness overcame Siobhán when she saw her mother’s first name frequently appear in the notes. At that time, Peter had still believed that he was recording the fate of his friends’ daughter. Had he known then that, in fact, it had been the fate of his own daughter, could he have written this summary

at all?

She slowly closed the notebook and laid it down on the table in front of her. With its own shadows dancing around it in the warm flickering light of the candle, she had the sudden impression that it was moving by itself. Having lain dormant for almost half a century, it looked as if it might be breathing, as if reading in it had brought it back to life, and had allowed the voices of the past to speak again.

After what she had seen in the notebook, she had no doubts that this really was a dangerous object, not only for those whose ancestors' names were recorded in it, but also for anyone who held it in their possession. Peter had gradually and methodically built up a picture of this secret organisation: its members, where they lived, what they did professionally, what their involvement had been in the espionage operation, or whether they had joined afterwards. Initially, his goal had been to discover if anyone knew anything about his wife and daughter. But, at the very end, he had attempted to find out who had been involved in the abduction and murder of a close friend and her young daughter.

It was clear from the meticulous nature of the notes that Peter had at some point considered taking action against individual members of the New Atlanteans. But the only detailed information he had been able to obtain in connection with the murders concerned those two people who had, by their own account, attempted to save the little girl. Without any tangible evidence against any of these influential families, and considering his own insecure position in Britain at that time, he had eventually given up. But he had kept the old notebook despite his many reloca-

tions, including his final return to the Lofoten. Somehow, he must have believed that the old record might yet become relevant.

And he had been right. The chance to make use of it had now come. With the police forces in three different countries beginning to draw a connection between the recent murders and disappearances, the notebook had become a vital source of information if the police wanted to extend their investigations beyond these incidents. If they were to follow up on all the families that were named in the notebook, that investigation would likely turn up damaging evidence against well-connected and seemingly respectable individuals, and shed light on their financial and other dealings.

Peter had realised not only how important but also how perilous the notebook had become the moment Siobhán had told him about Alison's disappearance, and about the message she had written into the library book. That was when he had made the decision to hand the notebook over to the police, at the first opportunity he would get, ideally without burdening Siobhán with it. But he had been compelled to confront Behring that same night and, as a safeguard, had intended to hide the amulet necklace and the notebook for Siobhán to find, should he not survive the confrontation. Now, this dangerous object had come to be in her possession, and it was up to her to decide how to use it.

Suddenly, she was overcome by a vivid memory of Alison, of all the good and the seemingly bad times they had shared, and imagining all the good times they could still have shared for many decades to come. She felt again the same boundless anger

and hatred she had felt in the immediate aftermath of her escape from the flooded cave. But the situation was different this time. Her anger and hatred then had been nothing but impotent rage aimed at an unknown group of individuals, who had been obscured by an impenetrable cloud of uncertainty. Now she had names, addresses, and she had come face to face with two representatives of that secret organisation. Momentarily, she had been intimidated by this encounter. But within only a few days, she had turned the situation around. Now, she was in a position where she could finally defeat her enemies for good. A powerful weapon had been handed down to her from the past. All she had to do was to use it. She felt the eyes of a previous generation on her. She could hear their distant voices. She had an overwhelming desire for retribution, and not just for Alison. She wanted to bring to an end, once and for all, the larger quest for justice that Peter had been forced to abandon.

Then, she saw Claire, with her unconditional loyalty, her boundless optimism, despite her troubled past – even at the point of being abducted, knowing what had happened to the previous victims. And as that new image took hold in her mind, Siobhán's vengeful feelings subsided. She remembered that she could not betray her friend. She could not use the notebook while Claire was within the enemy's power.

But even if she handed the notebook over to the New Atlanteans, what would happen? Would they really release Claire? She tried to picture the scene as it had been promised to her in Paris. She imagined how, one afternoon not far off now, she would see a boat anchored near the harbour of Moskenesvær.

She would see the familiar white and blue signal flag that warned of divers in the water, but also represented the letter A. That would tell her that the New Atlanteans had arrived – and with them, Claire. She would then wait nervously for darkness to fall. She would watch as, one by one, the lights went out in the houses clustered along the shore. She would then quietly leave her room in the guesthouse, carefully walk down the stairs without turning the lights on, out into the night, along the now familiar path up onto the headland, from there down again to the shore, and around to the other side of the island. Once she reached the little bay, the entrance to the cave would appear beside her as a dark void. On the other side, the vast surface of the open ocean would stretch out towards the western horizon. If the fine weather held, as it had done so far, there would be moonlight glinting on the water. Waves would gently run up on the rocky shore, but otherwise it would be quiet. Then, she would wait until, finally, the boat would come into view and anchor at a safe distance from the hazardous coast. She would be able to see the dark figures of the men as they readied their dinghy. Suddenly, she would see the slender figure of Claire appear amongst them. Hopefully, they had given her something warm to wear – and they could not let her wade ashore in the light summer shoes she had packed for the holiday in France. Claire would then get into the dinghy with some of the men. They would row the short distance to the shore, as the high-pitched revving of an outboard engine would carry too far in the still of night. They would carefully beach the dinghy and, in the unsteady beams of electric torches, step onto the island. They would keep Claire back, while one of the men

would approach Siobhán. She would have to explain to him that the necklace was lost, but here was the notebook that Peter had compiled. The man would take it from her, page through it, see the old German handwriting, and decide that it looked genuine enough. He would then indicate to his accomplices that they could let Claire go. She would swiftly walk towards Siobhán . . .

But would it really play out like this? Or was that not just wishful thinking? It was obvious that the New Atlanteans could not be trusted. They were ruthless. That much was certain, considering Claire's abduction alone. Releasing Claire and letting them both live came with too many risks for that secret organisation. It was far more likely that sending Siobhán back to Fareøya had very little to do with finding any hidden objects. If they could recover one of their amulets, and perhaps receive some other incriminating evidence, all the better – especially as it came with no risk of exposure to themselves. But this had never been their primary objective.

From the beginning, the return to Fareøya had always been a trap, and she had blindly walked into it. She had made the long journey all by herself. All by herself, she had checked into the guesthouse and had told a convincing lie about why she had returned. If she followed her instructions, she would now announce the planned arrival of a friend. Then, one night, when the exchange was meant to take place, she would disappear, and so would Claire – two more unexplained disappearances linked to the island.

It had probably been Peter's letter that had given the New Atlanteans the idea for this deception. If they were willing to take

a risk, they might even be able to remove Peter's boat from the harbour, sometime during that night, tow it away from the island, and sink it in deep water. Based on the description in Peter's letter, they would have no difficulty in identifying *Arja* amongst the other vessels in the harbour. Claire's and her disappearance would then be put down as a tragic accident at sea.

Of her own accord, she had taken herself out of an environment in which the police expected her to be, and where she would be able to receive protection. Eventually, the police investigation into their disappearances would confirm that they had travelled to France together, as planned. Then, for some reason, they had split up. Rather than continuing the holiday with Claire, Siobhán had returned to Fareøya on her own, clearly still unable to let go of the tragic events in winter. Apparently, the plan had been for Claire to join her a few days later. There was therefore the possibility that Siobhán had decided to pick Claire up by boat, either from the mainland or from another island, but something had gone wrong, and both had perished on the journey. These were, after all, treacherous waters.

There was now no longer any doubt in Siobhán's mind that this was the New Atlanteans' ultimate plan. With the notebook in her possession, and a few more days of freedom until they would arrive on the island, there was still time for her to escape and to carry out her act of revenge. This would only be possible if she left the island together with *Arja* because the ferry traffic arriving in Bodø from the island was likely to be watched. With Peter's old boat, she would be able to reach the village of Å on the island immediately to the north. From there, she could catch

a bus up to Narvik. She might even take *Arja* all the way, if she found it difficult to part from the old boat. Once there, all means of transport would lie open to her.

Of course, this option of retribution would immediately result in more acts of violence. It could never be the final solution. The eternal circle of hostility would only be broken if she relinquished the use of the powerful weapon she had just received. But even so, the current crisis would not resolve itself without some intervention. And after all those who had gone before her, that would require one more sacrifice.

* * *

The bright moonlight reflecting on the calm surface of the ocean scattered into countless bright spots that twinkled on small ripples like the stars above. There was still no land in sight in any direction. But under the healing influence of that silvery radiance, she felt her nervousness lessen, her pulse slowing, and her breathing becoming more regular. It was good to be outside her cabin again.

The morning after their refuelling stop in Stornoway, together with her breakfast, Mei-Ling had brought her a stylish travel bag, informing her that it contained a set of warm clothes, in case she wanted to spend more time on deck. Mei-Ling had warned her that it had become colder outside since her last outing, as they had been travelling north at a steady pace.

After that, for almost two days, Claire had ignored the bag, letting it sit next to the door to the walk-in closet, where Mei-Ling had deposited it. She resented having to accept any more

favours from the New Atlanteans, as she already had to accept food from them, to keep herself alive until the right moment arrived when she would be able to get away. Now that she was confident that they were on a straight course for Fareøya, she had no need anymore to engage with the men and was determined to avoid them, until they got to the island.

But confined to her cabin, her nervousness and claustrophobia had gradually increased, until she had become too anxious to find any sleep. Restlessly turning in her bed, she had more and more frequently glanced over to the closet, where she could just make out the dark shape of the travel bag in the dim light that fell through the window by the seating area.

Shortly before midnight, she had finally given in, got out of bed, and opened the bag. Lying at the top and carefully folded, she had found two fine cashmere roll-neck jumpers, together with a matching set of a woollen headband, a loop scarf, and fingerless gloves. Lying underneath that had been two pairs of leggings with a soft fleece lining, and a thin down parka with a hood. At the bottom, she had found an organiser case containing a selection of underwear and socks; and in a separate bag, a pair of ankle boots.

Grudgingly, she had to admit that these were exactly the kind of clothes she would be wearing in Scotland later during the autumn months, although with very different price tags attached to them. She had not managed to get herself to hate them sufficiently to return them to the bag, and to continue to ignore them. Purely from a practical point of view, she was going to need them on her way out of this situation. She had therefore tried on some

of the new clothes – not surprised, at that point, to find that they fitted her perfectly. But she had left the boots in their bag, and had slipped into her own canvas shoes instead. The boots could wait until they had reached their destination.

She had then unlocked the door to her cabin and quietly stepped out into the dimly lit corridor. Whether it was the confined environment, or whether it was the persistent but slightly unsteady forward motion, together with the droning of the powerful engines, she was suddenly reminded of how she had met Siobhán on the night train to London.

She felt again her trepidation as she had stood, all by herself, on the platform of that lonely railway station, having arrived far too early in her nervous state of mind, and always looking over her shoulder for any sign of danger. All the while, she had worried that someone had already got to her friend, desperately attempting to push aside the terrifying mental images of what she might find once she had boarded the train and entered their compartment. Then, finally, she had seen the string of lights appear within the darkness that surrounded her, gradually getting bigger and brighter, until the train had pulled into the station. She remembered the immense relief when she had heard Siobhán's voice calling her name from one of the open doors. She remembered Siobhán's confident grip around her hand as she had helped her inside. She experienced again the hushed atmosphere in that dimly lit corridor, as the realisation had sunk in that they had then truly been on their way into a holiday in France. In that moment, she had felt closer to Siobhán than to any other person ever before. She could not fail her now. Surely, it could not be

too late already to save her.

There had been no indication that anyone else had been about the yacht at that time of night. The door at the end of the corridor forward from her cabin had been locked. This was likely to lead to the galley and to the crew cabins. There would be an internal staircase in that part of the vessel that connected the different decks. This was where the men did not want her to go. The door aft from her cabin was labelled “Engine Room,” and she had not attempted to open it. But, as before, the staircase next to that door had taken her up onto the outside area of the main deck.

As on that previous occasion, she had found the doors on the main deck locked. The aft-facing windows had been dark, but through the tinted glass, she had vaguely been able to see the outline of furniture that seemed to belong to a lounge. There were groups of sofas, and what looked like a bar in the background of the room. Soft light emerged from the forward-facing windows, as well as from the bridge on the deck above; but she had felt no desire to run into any of the men, and had therefore walked across the sun deck to the railing at the stern of the yacht.

Mei-Ling had been right to warn her. It had become distinctly colder than it had been when she had last spent time outside. She would have been justified in putting on the headband and possibly even the gloves. But she had to remind herself that the first time on deck had been during the late morning, while the sun had been well up in a clear sky. It was an unfair comparison, and it made it impossible to estimate how much farther north they had really come since then.

She clutched the raven pendant of the necklace she had given

to Siobhán for her birthday. She had continuously worn it from the day it had been entrusted to her, and she would continue to wear it until she could return it to its rightful owner. It felt reassuringly warm; and if she gripped it tightly in her hand, she could feel it resonate with her own pulse, as if it had come alive.

By now, enough time had passed for Siobhán to travel to Fareøya. She would have searched the cave, as well as the originally intended hiding place that Peter had told her about in his letter. She had been honour-bound to return to the island, knowing that whether she did or did not find the amulet necklace would not make the slightest difference. But where else could she have gone, fully aware of the fact that – contrary to their promise in Paris – the New Atlanteans would undoubtedly keep an eye on her, at least until she arrived in Norway. She would have walked into that trap to buy herself some time, and to be able to carry out the plan that, to her, was the only way out; the only plan over which she had any control, and which she could therefore rely on.

The closer to the Lofoten Siobhán would have got, the more conscious she would have become of the continued presence around her of those she had lost; the more keenly aware of their sacrifices she would have become, and the more determined to follow their example. She would return to the place at which Peter had departed this world, and she would follow him from there. The sleeping pills she kept with her would help her along that final journey. Weeks ago, already, when they had stood together at the top of the lighthouse, Siobhán had told her how she would want that transition to happen, as if looking far across the

world beneath them had also allowed her to look ahead in time. She would let the sea enter her dreams and gently carry her away over that final threshold.

As Claire clutched the raven pendant, feeling its feeble pulse in her hand, she knew that the moment was close now. Time was running out fast, if it was not too late already.

But just then, she noticed a small change in the engine noise beneath her. The water's surface in the wake of the yacht became less turbulent, and she had the distinct feeling that the vessel was slowing down.

She turned to look past the streamlined superstructure into the direction in which they were travelling. For several seconds, she stood in awe, motionless. Ominously looming ahead of them, she could now see the ragged silhouette of a line of mountains, as if they had silently risen out of the calm ocean.

* * *

Through the open window, cool night-time air came streaming into her room, soothing her nerves a little and easing her anxiety. But she knew she would not get any sleep that night.

The village had gone quiet and dark. The only sound she could hear was the low rumbling of a large motorboat apparently passing on the other side of the island, but it faded away quickly.

Soon, it would be time for her to leave. Under the silvery moonlight, *Arja* now had a ghostly sheen, as if the boat already belonged to a different world, as much as this. If only it would be that easy. If only the boat could carry her away across a wide ocean over to the other side.

There was no other path open to her now. She had failed in her quest. Moreover, she had realised too late the true nature of the quest. From the beginning, she had been too focussed on recovering the items that were of importance to their enemy, instead of concentrating all her energy on solving Claire's riddle, and to discover the solution that had given her so much hope.

Now it was too late. She could not rely on the New Atlanteans to keep their promise to give her a full week before they would come for her. The previous evening, they would have watched her get into Bodø by train, and take the ferry over to Fareøya. One, maybe two days was all they were going to give her. If she was still on the island when they arrived, all would be lost for Claire.

She had failed her, exactly as she had failed Alison. For a while, following her return from Norway, she had been allowed to remain the last survivor. But that shadowy existence had been on borrowed time, just as it had been after her return from Antarctica. Somehow, she had been aware of that ever since she had unsuccessfully tried to reconnect with her prior life. And now, her borrowed time had finally run out.

But she was not ready yet. She was terrified. She knew that, if she went down to the cave that night already, she would only fail again. Perhaps if she gave herself one more day; if she got herself away from the island, into a different environment, and looked at the problem from a distance, with some detachment, might she not be able to solve the riddle after all?

If not, she would have to write that dreadful final letter to Claire, explaining that she had returned to Fareøya hoping to

find closure, but had found instead that living with the past had become impossible. It would clearly imply that she had expected Claire to have returned to Britain, after they had split up in Paris. When that letter would be found, it would instantly draw a police presence to the island. This would quickly be followed by media attention, especially after the other disappearances from the same island, and the excitement around the discovery of a dead body on an island not far away. The New Atlanteans could not fail to notice that, and they would be left with no choice but to complete the story that Siobhán had started, rather than carrying out their own plan. They would have to release Claire alive and well, to prevent any suspicion from arising around Siobhán's disappearance. Without any other witness left to back her up, and no doubt intimidated by her ordeal, Claire would not be seen as posing any threat to them. And Siobhán's final act of desperation would give them confidence that she had been unable to carry out the task they had given her, and that there was no longer any incriminating evidence against them.

Before that, however, she would allow herself one last chance, and there was no point in delaying her departure any longer. If she left before the morning, she would avoid the cheerful socialising during breakfast. She would leave a note for Dagmar on the kitchen table informing her that she had taken Peter's boat to visit Å. As Dagmar herself had recommended that journey, it would not come as too much of a surprise to her, despite the early departure. In Å, she would get herself a day's supply of food and drink, and then depart, following the eastern shoreline south again, until she found a lonely bay in which she could cast

anchor. Lying back in the boat, her eyes closed, and gently rocking on the waves, perhaps the solution to Claire's riddle would come to her after all.

CHAPTER NINE

THE RAVEN'S FLIGHT

Rounded pebbles and larger rocks shifted under her feet as she carefully stepped out of the reach of the waves. Thick drops pearly off the polished surface of the leather boots, but they had kept the water out during the short wade ashore from the beached dinghy. It looked as if the sea had just started to go down from the peak of its cycle. Along the narrow strip behind the receding tide, the rugged shoreline glistened brightly in the moonlight; while in the sheer cliff that rose above her, the tall entrance to the cave loomed as an imposing dark void.

The night was quiet now. There was no sound loud enough to travel to them from the village on the other side of the island. And there did not appear to be any more boat traffic in the vicinity. When the men had rowed the dinghy over from the anchored yacht, they had stopped for a while as the noise of a motorboat had suddenly erupted, apparently in the harbour on Fareøya. But the boat had begun moving northwards, away from them, and had remained out of sight.

The two men who had scrambled along the base of the cliff, just above the highest waves, had disappeared around the headland on the right. Their goal was to approach the village from the lonely side of the island, rather than more openly from the harbour. They would undoubtedly check on Peter's house, hoping to find Siobhán there, to be able to bring this annoying affair

to an end that very night. There would never be a better opportunity to rid themselves of two potentially dangerous witnesses. No one would ever find out what had happened. And this time, the two bodies would never resurface, they would make sure of that.

But they would not find Siobhán. She would never sleep in Peter's old home. The memory of him would haunt her, and it would be too painful for her. She was bound to be staying in the guesthouse that she knew from her first visit to the island. Keen to avoid drawing any attention to themselves, the men would not risk barging into the wrong house. Even if they correctly identified the guesthouse, there would not be a reception that was staffed around the clock. There would not be a night porter who could be intimidated or bribed into revealing a certain room number and handing over the master key, as they had done before. Instead, they would have to proceed as they had announced in Paris: retreat back out to sea, and the next morning anchor in plain sight of the harbour, to draw Siobhán out the following night. That was what Claire had to prevent.

Behind her, waiting by the dinghy, she could hear the other two men talking to each other, still making fun of her. They had told her that it would be pointless to search the cave for the amulet necklace. When they had first come to the island, to check out the houses of their two former members, they must have landed in that same bay, out of sight of the village. And it seemed as if they had carried out an examination of the cave and had convinced themselves that there was nothing of interest to them. Even so, as the two men had to wait anyway for the

others to return from their search of Peter's house, they had seen no harm in letting the silly girl scramble about the cave for a little while. It would get her out from under their feet. And they obviously felt confident that without a light she would not stray far from the entrance.

But they were wrong. Already on her first outing on the main deck of the yacht, Claire had noticed a cabinet near the staircase where she had come up, labelled "Emergency Equipment." In broad daylight, she had not dared to open it, afraid that someone might see her and guess what she was planning. But alone at night, when the islands had finally come into view, she had discovered that, as she had hoped, in addition to some bulky lanterns and flares, the cabinet contained a few small electric torches. And one of them was still safely hidden in the inside pocket of her parka.

With that find, it had all seemed to go according to plan. By the time the yacht had cast anchor and the men had come down to her cabin to get her, they had found her door unlocked and herself lounging on the corner sofa, wrapped in a dressing gown, morosely leafing through a magazine, and at her stropky best. The only truth she had told them was that she had been unable to sleep.

After the men had left her cabin, she had quickly changed back into the warm outdoor clothes. When she had come up again onto the main deck, the men had been preparing the dinghy, while not a single crew member could be seen. She had overheard the men saying that Siobhán had access to a boat and might not be on the island. How they knew that, Claire could not tell.

But she had to assume that it was true. And that complicated things.

Previously, in her hopes, Siobhán would have been in the village, and Claire would have been able to find and warn her, once she had got away from the New Atlanteans, and they had left the island. In this new scenario, in which Siobhán was able to travel freely by boat, the New Atlanteans could not be allowed to find out that Claire had escaped, rather than perishing in the cave, until Siobhán was safe as well. Otherwise, they would be forced to abandon their original plan. Rather than letting Siobhán walk into their trap, they would have to start looking for her. This would come at a greater risk of exposure for them. It would make it more difficult to let her vanish without a trace. And it would raise more suspicion about her disappearance. But they did have a good chance of finding her before the police did.

Based on Claire's own experiences over the past five days, it was abundantly clear that the New Atlanteans had unlimited resources at their disposal, and that gave them immense power. They could station agents at several strategic locations on the mainland, as well as on the surrounding islands. They might even get harmless-looking fishermen to keep watch on Fareøya from the sea. These agents would notice if any police vessel were to start cruising around the southern part of the archipelago. They would notice any unusual activity on the island, particularly in the vicinity of the cave. The moment they suspected that Claire had escaped and had alerted the police, Siobhán would be in serious danger.

What worried Claire most was that, if Siobhán really had left

the island, there could only be one reason for that. She wanted to be alone to prepare herself for that desperate final step. She would then secretly return to the cave to carry out her plan. There was no other place she would contemplate for that. But for how long would she be away from the island? And would any agents of the New Atlanteans already be in place when she got back? These were questions that Claire would never be able to answer. And there was no more time to lose. All she could do was to leave a message for Siobhán, together with a sign that would prove that she had escaped.

She could feel the men's eyes on her as she made her way over the slippery rocks to the mouth of the cave. But when she glanced back to the dinghy, she saw that they had both lit cigarets and were talking to each other, apparently unconcerned about her. She quickly stepped inside the cave and squatted down, just a few paces away from the entrance. She would not have much time before the men got impatient and came after her. But she could not simply pass through this space on her way to safety.

She let her eyes adjust to the darkness. She was still too close to the entrance to switch on the torch. With a normal tide, the sea had not quite risen to the highest level of the cave. But the dark layer of water that had crept out of the depth of the mountain still flooded the lower part of the passage. And during the night of the tragedy, when a storm had driven the waves to break high against the cliff, there would have been no safe place anywhere inside the passage, or elsewhere along the shore.

Surrounded by that turbulent sea, Peter had sat not far away, possibly fatally wounded. From what Siobhán had told her, it

had to have been in the deep recess on the right side of the passage. It was the only place where Peter would have had cover from shots that were aimed at him from within the cave. With the residual daylight, anywhere else near the entrance, his silhouette would have been clearly visible, and would have made him an easy target. There it was, then, where he had died, leaning against these sharp rocks.

She knelt down in front of the recess and closed her eyes. As she allowed the essence of her surroundings to enter her consciousness, she recognised that, at the entrance to the cave, it all came together: the running wave, the flowing air, the quiet earth, and the shining stars. And for a moment, she felt nothing but deep peace.

Peter, your journey is over now. But Siobhán's struggles continue. She feels left behind since all her loved ones have passed away. She blames herself for their deaths. And when all hope seems lost, she will feel that now it is her turn to make that final sacrifice. She will then look to you for comfort and strength. She will be planning to follow you, to go the same path as you did, to let the sea take her away. But this must not happen. This is not her time to join you. And I will do everything I can to prevent that – I promise.

Then, she picked up a sharp splinter of rock and edged her message into the lower part of the wall. It could not be long or easily detected away from the recess. Nor could it be too plain in its meaning to be understood by anyone but Siobhán. Soon, the men would come looking for her, and they were bound to search the entire cave. By then, she would have to be gone.

She stood up and looked ahead into the uncertain darkness. Then, she took a few careful steps away from the entrance and switched on her torch. The passage was longer than she had expected, and the light beam only just reached the far end. The floor in the flooded part of the cave was likely to be as uneven and scattered with rocks of different sizes as at the beginning. She needed to be careful. If she seriously injured an ankle, her escape would fail. At least the water was calm, and not nearly as cold as it would have been when Siobhán had been there.

As Claire made her way down the long passage, the unsteady light danced over the rough walls, casting menacing shadows from protruding rock formations, much like flaming torches would have done millennia ago. Then, she noticed the first of the human figures on a relatively smooth patch over on the left wall, followed quickly by a small group on the right, and then a larger one on the left. The figures were crowding around her more and more densely the closer she got to the end of the main part of the cave.

After a few more steps, she became aware that she had arrived at the invisible threshold. It felt as if the figures were all around her now, not only represented by the paintings on the walls, but closer, in the air, released from the lifeless surface of the rock. She stopped for a moment, closed her eyes and, in her mind, reached out to them. Then, she passed through the solemn gathering of ancient spirits into the underworld.

She heard clearer now the sound of waves – coming no longer from behind her, but from ahead – and soon arrived at a lower passage that branched off towards the right. Inside it, the water

was more agitated than in the main part of the cave, routinely sloshing to above her knees. But just past the highest point of the tide, the currents were relatively gentle. From Siobhán's narrative, Claire knew that a narrow ledge of safe ground ran along the left side of the passage. But it had to have been terrifying when Siobhán had been there, with the water of a storm surge boiling up from the abyss, not knowing if she would ever be able to find the hidden way out, and without any light to guide her. Claire shivered as she realised how easily Siobhán could have taken a false step in the dark and vanished forever.

Keeping close to the wall on her left, and following the beam of her torch, she waded deeper and deeper into the mountain. By the time she arrived at the end of the passage, the water had risen to her waist. Even knowing of the existence of the secret exit, Claire had to look hard to spot the ledge that ran across the passage just below the ceiling. She put the torch into her coat pocket and began climbing.

Then, she heard the distant voices of the men calling her name. They appeared to be still standing near the entrance of the cave. But they must have realised that she no longer was in the main passage; and they would now be following her, reluctantly no doubt, into the flooded lower part of the cave.

She reached into her pocket and extinguished the torch. Now she was in complete darkness, just as Siobhán had been, and she still had the last distance to climb. Groping and treading blindly, she worked her way up the uneven wall of rock, which was slippery with a wet layer of algae. Soon, she felt an open space in front of her. Resting one elbow on the ledge, she pulled

herself up onto it, until she lay flat, with the ceiling just above her.

Now, she needed to prepare herself for something she had never done before. And it would have to be convincing, otherwise it would ruin her plan. She reminded herself of all the dangerous situations that Siobhán had been in, and possibly still was. Then, she took a deep breath and gave a terrified piercing scream that echoed within the low passage.

Careful not to dislodge any loose rocks on the ledge, she pushed herself feet first into the narrow crack, just far enough to completely vanish from sight for anyone standing in the passage below. There would be no need for her to crawl all the way back into the outside world, as Siobhán had done. All she needed was a safe resting place.

Already, she saw the unsteady light of electric torches getting brighter in the main part of the cave. Soon afterwards, the two men appeared at the beginning of the side passage. They shone their torches down its entire length, taking in the waves that continued to well up from beneath the ground, only to be pulled down again a few seconds later. To them, there was nowhere to hide, and no one could be left alive inside the passage.

They stood together for a while, discussing the situation. But some kind of commotion broke out in the main part of the cave behind them. There were other voices, calling. The two men turned immediately and waded back out of sight. There was a sudden sense of urgency in their behaviour that her apparent death had not managed to inspire.

Over the sound of the waves, she was unable to make out any

of the words that were spoken, but the issue they discussed had to be serious. Something had happened. Perhaps the other two men, who had gone off to the village, had discovered something in Peter's house.

Whatever it was, it was clearly more important than anything they thought had just happened inside the cave. And Claire had a strong feeling that they were now going to leave the island.

* * *

The day away from the island had brought no inspiration. It had not helped her to see a way of avoiding her desperate plan. And the return to the cave was not likely to provide any guidance and support for going through with it. She knew this would not be the last time she would come there. This was only a temporary stay, while she waited for the next high water to come in during the night. Before then, she would have to return to her room in the guesthouse to finalise all necessary arrangements. But, already, she felt too removed from the living to be able to endure socialising with them.

After the day at sea, when she had finally decided to return to Fareøya, it had already started to get dark. Approaching the island from the northeast, even from a distance, she had seen the otherwise welcoming lights of the houses in the sheltered bay. She had moored *Arja* at an unused jetty by an old warehouse some distance outside the village and had walked undetected around the cluster of houses onto the plateau. From there, she had seen that an unusual number of people were still outside, congregating by the harbour. Glad of her decision to remain out

of sight, she had quickly walked down to the cave.

As on her first visit, evening light was now streaming warmly into the long passage. For a while, she stood by the recess near the entrance, overcome more powerfully than she had been throughout the summer by the memories of that terrible night. She realised that the events had not faded since then. All the images were as clear as they had always been. And she was convinced that it would be these images that she would see in her final moments and take with her over to the other side.

Then, she slumped down onto the hard ground, leaning back into the recess – not unlike Peter’s collapse after he had got shot, which she had witnessed from inside the cave. What guidance and support, what comfort could she receive from these memories? She already knew what she had to do. Under the circumstances, it was the only solution. No one else was going to die for her ever again. But, in the end, would she have the strength to go through with it?

She looked over to the gathering of human figures near the end of the passage. They were clear evidence of the spirits of those who had painted them, if not of the spirits of those they had mourned. And these spirits had lived on through the millennia. In this sacred place, might it not be possible that messages from the afterlife could percolate through to this side? Just like the rainwater that had fallen long ago, which now came dripping down from the ceiling. And yet, as ever, the mundane sounds of the ordinary world were all she could hear: the soft wind streaming past the entrance of the cave, the waves down by the shore, and the calls of seabirds from above.

There was no point fooling herself. She was all alone now, with no one left to talk to, and no one left to save her. No ethereal message would appear inside the cave, telling her that all would be well when she had passed over to the other side. That was what the early visitors to the cave had understood: that memories fade, and lasting messages had to be written in stone.

What traces would she leave behind when she had departed this world? Certainly, no one else was going to paint a representation of her on the cave wall. She therefore picked up a sharp splinter of rock that was lying nearby and turned to see if she herself could leave a mark that would linger once she was gone.

Then, she froze. Unnoticed by her when she had slumped down into the recess, along the bottom of the wall and hidden in shadow, a message was already edged into the surface of the rocks behind her. It looked recent. And it certainly had not been there when she had checked that same spot for the amulet necklace only the previous morning.

DON'T

This could only be the contraction of “do not.” And if it was English and recent, it had to be intended for her. There was no other native English speaker on the island. But if it was intended for her, who could have left such a message in such a fashion? And what could it mean?

This was creepy. There really was something very odd going on in this cave. Perhaps this was a gateway to another world after all. In some contexts, the negative imperative of the message could seem harsh or forbidding. And yet, at that place and in that instant, it did not feel threatening or malevolent in any

way. Then, what benign spirits were these that lived in this dark passage?

And having asked herself that question, the meaning of the riddle that had eluded her for days suddenly became clear. She clutched the sharp rock tightly in her hand, as a wave of relief washed over her, because she now knew who had held that same rock not long ago. For a few happy moments, she struggled to breathe as she felt her chest and throat constrict, and she found herself caught halfway between laughing and crying.

As she should have known all along, the correct solution to the riddle really was the most straightforward. Even her first instinct, back in Paris, had been right. Of course it had been the cave. It had always been the cave: a dark path; and at the end of it, when the right moment arrived, the raven's flight.

Claire had been there.

CHAPTER TEN

SERENDIPITY

The only sound that marred the calm atmosphere of the evening was the sharp clinking of rocks, as the man cautiously walked up the narrow path from the shore. Upon reaching the top, still standing by the cliff's edge, he briefly looked across to the western side of the headland where, over the ages, the group of boulders had gathered at the foot of the steep mountain slope. Viewed from his direction, that quiet assembly would now be displayed as dark shapes against the blazing sky.

Having convinced himself that no one else was outside on the headland, he turned and began walking towards the last of the row of houses on the other side of the mountain. But he stopped as he heard the flutter of wings behind him. Looking back, he saw that a raven had landed on the largest and most prominent of the boulders. Yet, blinded by the low sunlight, he still did not notice Siobhán leaning against the shaded side of the tall standing stone. And, after a brief moment, he continued walking towards Peter's house.

The raven, perching on top of the boulder, gazed down to Siobhán. With the warm glow of the setting sun on its shiny plumage, she had a peculiar feeling that they had met before. Its oversized silhouette projected onto the ground ahead of where the man was walking. Then, with one last enigmatic look at Siobhán, the raven rustled its feathers, spread its wings, and flew

off in the direction of the village.

The man glanced up as the bird passed him by overhead, apparently without any particular interest. But looking down again, he now saw Siobhán's shadow cast in front of him, as she had stepped away from the boulder after the raven had taken flight. Only the slightest irregularity in the man's step indicated his awareness of Siobhán's presence behind him. Then, his right hand moved out of sight in front of him. He still hoped to have the advantage of surprise on his side.

But she was not interested in playing games anymore. 'I'm here.'

The man turned around, now holding a gun in his hand, half raised in her direction. Seeing her only as another dark shape amongst those of the boulders, he could not be sure whether she was armed herself. Squinting against the sun, he began walking towards her, away from the houses, until he too was hidden from view within the field of boulders. When he realised that she was unarmed, he let his weapon sink.

'So we meet again, Dr Dannreuther. You found it then, the necklace?'

'I did.'

'Where is it?'

'Where is Claire?'

'Your girlfriend is on the yacht, alive and well. Give us the necklace, and we'll bring her over in the dinghy.'

'On the yacht, you say ... Are you sure?'

The man's expression was hard to read. But there were subtle hints in his movements that he was getting nervous. Or was it

just impatience? Could it really be that Claire had been caught again after she had left the cave?

A deathly quiet surrounded the island as the daylight gradually faded away. Over on the mainland in the east, night had already fallen, and the brightest stars had begun to appear. Following the departure of the ferry, no more lights could be seen out on the water. Nor was there the sound of any approaching vessel. What she needed was time.

The man took a further step towards her. 'I'll ask you once more: where is the necklace?'

'I have it right here.'

She slowly reached up to her neck, watching closely for the man's reaction. She felt the raven pendant smoothly slide up her chest as she pulled it out on its chain. For a few seconds, she held it hidden in her hand, then she let it drop onto the outside of her jumper.

This time, undeniably, the man's expression displayed a moment of shock. Not only did he realise that this was the wrong necklace, but he had seen it before.

'You know, "Johnny," I think your colleague may have misunderstood when I told him on the phone that I had found the necklace. He never bothered to ask which necklace I was talking about. He simply said you would come here for the exchange, and I told him I would look out for you and meet you in Peter's house. He insisted that I should come down to the shore, but I had no intentions of playing along with your game. So, I waited up here. I hadn't expected you to arrive before it got dark. But, I suppose, by then the tide would have been up again, which

makes this shore such a treacherous place, doesn't it? No, what really convinced me that you were desperate was when I saw you scramble all the way up the cliff, rather than staying down by the shore and letting me come to you.'

The man remained silent, waiting for Siobhán to continue.

'You recognise the necklace, don't you? You've seen Claire wearing one just like that. And now you're wondering: is this hers, or do we have the same? And you're troubled by the fact that I am casually talking about the possibility of this being exactly the same necklace that Claire had been wearing when you saw it. Surely, there could not have been any contact between the two of us since you cowardly abducted her in Paris – if she still were on that yacht, as you claim.'

'Let's not engage in idle banter, Dr Dannreuther. Tell me where the necklace is that you found together with the old notebook, and you can have your girlfriend back. She can be with you in a few minutes. You can hold her in your arms again, and all will be well. We have been very accommodating so far, but our patience is running out. I am therefore asking you one last time: where is our necklace?'

'It's gone.'

There was nothing more to say on that subject. That token of evil was no longer part of this world. But she still needed more time. She strained her senses to reach out into the gathering darkness. Was there really a low rumbling sound approaching from the north, something like the noise of large ship engines? Or was that just her hopeful imagination?

'But as you are interested in necklaces, there is a story to be

told about this one here. It's entirely unique, you know, made especially for me. And when I found it down in that cave, by the narrow exit at the end of the side passage, I knew that, as unlikely as it seemed, only one person could have left it there.

'Obviously, Claire had not come here on her own. Therefore, I immediately went back to Peter's house and discovered that the notebook was gone. That was a terrible mistake I had made, leaving it lying around like that. I had intended to put it back into Peter's old trunk, where it belonged. I knew I couldn't use it, not while Claire was in any danger, but I couldn't get myself to throw it away either. Somehow I had believed you would be reluctant to take the risk of searching the house again. But that had been wrong. You had returned, and earlier than you had said you would. Now you knew, or at least you thought you knew, that I'd already found all the incriminating items that you wanted to recover, and I hadn't informed you about that yet.

'As far as you were concerned, I still believed that Claire was within your power. There were then two possible scenarios. I might continue to withhold from you what I had found because I intended to use it against you. That would mean that my desire to take revenge for Alison's murder outweighed my affection for Claire. Alternatively, I simply had not had the opportunity yet in this intimate small community to make a confidential phone call. In that case, I would be bound to panic as soon as I had discovered that the notebook had been taken, and I would contact you immediately. This latter scenario, of course, was exactly what I wanted to confirm for you. So, you see, something good came out of you finding the notebook after all. It made it more

plausible when I informed you that I had found “the necklace.” And look how quickly you returned, how eager you were to get it.’

The man stepped farther into the assembly of boulders, with a furtive glance back over his shoulder. Had he not realised that they both were well out of sight of the houses on the other side of the mountain? Or had he heard something? Perhaps the same sound that had caught her attention? Because there could be no doubt anymore that the low engine noise was real and slowly getting closer. But it was still too far off.

‘Of course, when I discovered that you had found the notebook, I checked the sea all around the island, and your yacht was nowhere in sight. I assumed that you had retreated into international waters and would be waiting for my reaction. I didn’t know whether Claire had really managed to escape, or whether you had caught her again afterwards. In either case, I knew that I had to act quickly. But as long as I couldn’t be sure that Claire was no longer within your power, I couldn’t risk getting the police involved, or creating a big stir in the village. It was possible, after all, that you had agents stationed there, posing as tourists. Still, this was the opportunity to draw you out, and to lure you into the same trap that you had laid for me. For that, I needed to get you back to the island. Then, I could observe you, to find out how desperate you were to meet me.

‘But I had to consider the possibility that you would now be hunting for me. I therefore walked back to that lonely jetty north of the village where I had moored Peter’s boat. Then, I left the island and returned to Å, which is where I was when you came

here two days ago. It was just the two of us, *Arja* and I, out on a calm sea under a starry sky, exactly as it had been on our first journey. But how different the same world suddenly looked, as I was wearing my raven necklace again, and with the confidence, if not complete certainty, that Claire was safe. In Å, I waited until the morning. Then, I contacted you from a public phone box. There are none in this village, by the way, and I couldn't very well phone you from the guesthouse. I don't know if you had considered that. But anyway, afterwards, I bought a sufficient supply of food and drink to be able to live on *Arja* for a few days. An old, but wonderfully bulky and warm sleeping bag I had found in Peter's house; and it didn't look like rain. Then, I left Å and cruised around a bit until I remembered Peter telling me about a relatively sheltered bay, just a short distance to the north from here. They had landed there with their submarine during the war, in a blizzard, after they had navigated submerged for a while and didn't know where they were. But in good weather, and during the day, it wasn't difficult to find. So, I anchored there, nicely hidden, and waited. Regularly, with Peter's binoculars, I scanned the ocean, wondering when you would return.

'Then, finally, this afternoon, I saw a fancy motor yacht come over the southern horizon, and I suspected that it was you. I drove around the northern part of the island, moored *Arja* at the unused jetty again, and walked here. When I saw the yacht anchor at a discrete distance from the uninhabited side of the island, I was sure. I watched you launch your dinghy and row over, all by yourself. I watched you pull the dinghy up onto the shore. And then, I watched you walk along the narrow path and

scramble up here.’

As the sun sank lower over the horizon, the figure of the man got darker and began to blend in with the shapes of the boulders around him. He had taken a suppressor from his jacket pocket and attached it to the barrel of his gun. He took a few steps closer to Siobhán. He was about to bring this affair to an end.

At that moment, Siobhán saw the sleek outline of a darkened coast guard ship slip stealthily past the little harbour. She struggled to fight back the surge of elation, not to reveal anything by her facial expression or movements. She could not give the game away.

From the yacht anchored on the other side of the island, the coast guard ship was still hidden by the headland. But if the man turned around, even for an instant, the situation would escalate. So far, he was still too focussed on her to notice what was happening behind him. She had to continue to occupy him.

‘She got away, didn’t she – Claire? I finally understand what it was she had attempted to tell me, back in Paris, before you took her away – do you remember? You were there, but you didn’t pay attention to her, did you? You didn’t take her seriously. You thought she was just being hysterical, and that was your downfall. She wanted you to think that she had died inside that cave so that I would not have to go through with it for real. It was the symbol of the raven, together with my casual comment about a dark path, that gave her the idea. It’s what the symbol represents to her, the duality of life and death.

‘I remember now how excited she was when I told her about the cave, immediately after I’d got back from Norway. I had

mentioned the entrance opening towards the southwest, and the old paintings of human figures inside it. Claire had asked me if they were concentrated in an area where, at sunset, the light of the dying sun faded away into darkness. I wasn't sure at the time. Someone had told me about those paintings before I went to see the cave for the first time; but when I got there, I was too distracted to pay any attention to them. I've now seen that Claire was right. She guessed that the earliest inhabitants of this island perceived the cave to be a gateway between life and death; and the human figures represent their ancestors who have passed away through this gateway. Claire knew that, if she could somehow manage to get into that cave, she would be able to disappear from you. Then, she would pass through death and return as an avenging spirit to haunt you. And that is what she has now done.'

The man shrugged his shoulders. 'This is out of my hands. I wish it didn't have to come to this. I'm sorry to tell you that your girlfriend is dead. You're right, she was in that cave, but she definitely died down there. We checked the few possible hiding places, and she was nowhere. Why she was so determined to get into the cave, and why she left her necklace there, I don't know. She really must have believed in this spiritualistic claptrap of passing through death and returning to life, or whatever it is she thought was going to happen down there. We were there when the water was still fairly high, and she drowned in the flooded part of the cave. There is no one coming to rescue or to avenge you. I suspect you found our necklace together with the notebook. If you carry it on your person, I will find it. But in the end, by itself, it isn't that important. The real problem is that,

after you saw the notebook, you know too much. You may have been able to read the old handwriting. You may remember some of the names. You may have made copies, to decipher and translate afterwards. This is too important for us to take any chances. It was a dangerous book for you to read. The old German did you no favours by passing it on to you. He should have destroyed it a long time ago. Now, you leave me no choice.'

As the sun vanished below the horizon, the dark outline of the coast guard ship had reached the southern tip of the island and was about to round the headland.

The man's face was expressionless as he smoothly raised his weapon and took aim.

But he was startled by an explosion of light and sound as the coast guard vessel engaged the yacht. The bright beam of a searchlight flared up; and the distorted sound of a loudspeaker reflected off the tall cliff, commanding the crew, in English, to come out on deck.

A helicopter took off from the stern of the ship, the beam of its own searchlight sweeping the bleak shoreline and resting for a moment on the abandoned dinghy by the cave. Then, it turned and moved towards the houses on the other side of the island, but caught on to the two figures standing among the dark shapes of the boulders.

The helicopter stopped to hover just a few feet above the tops of some of the taller boulders, while four officers jumped out. Then, it ascended again to a safe height but kept hovering over the headland.

The man with the gun stood isolated, trapped inside the col-

umn of light and the vortex that was stirred up by the rotor blades. He realised that he had lost. With a disgusted smile, he placed his weapon on the ground and raised his hands in an exaggerated gesture. He tried to regain his previous swagger, but within seconds he was wrestled to the ground, face down, with his hands cuffed behind his back.

He only put up a brief struggle to be able to turn his head and look at Siobhán – but she had seen enough.

She had a friend to meet.

EPILOGUE

Green, with a few dark brown spots, the same colour as her hair. Her eyes were a little tired after the early start that morning, but no longer troubled by the experiences of the recent past. She had recovered her usual pale freckled complexion after the faint, though hard fought for, summer tan had finally faded away. And she was smiling.

‘Claire, it’s really good of you to have made the long journey to see me off. The Christmas decorations all over the railway station remind me that it’s been three months since we last saw each other.’

‘It has, and I don’t need strings of Christmas lights to tell me that. You’re a difficult woman to pin down, Siobhán Dan-neuther. Always on the move between Aberdeen and the field station – the dear old lighthouse, I’ll have to visit you there again sometime – then down here to Cambridge for your training, and now off to Antarctica for the next three months.’

She waited for the echoes of an announcement to die down inside the long concourse.

‘So, Antarctica . . . Are you looking forward to returning there?’

‘I don’t know. Since I only got back from Germany yesterday . . .’

‘What’s wrong? You don’t seem very enthusiastic about it.’

‘No, look, it’s just the initial inertia I need to overcome. I’ll get into the spirit once I meet up with the others at the RAF

station in Brize Norton, and we're all bundled together into the transport aircraft for the Falklands. Most of the old gang will be there, but there will be many others to help clean up what's left of the burnt-out base, and to start building the new one. In the first briefing we had, they showed us illustrations of what the new base is going to look like. It'll be standing on stilts, which can be extended upwards every year to keep the buildings above the accumulating snow. I think it's going to be much more comfortable than in the old buried tunnels, just by having windows all around. Yes, you know what, I am looking forward to returning to the ice shelf.'

Claire seemed pleased. 'And the memorial celebration in Germany, how did that go? Yesterday, on the phone, we only had minds for talking about the murders in prison.'

'Yes, I know ... But the celebration: that was really lovely. Mr Karsten and his society had made all the arrangements. Most of the relatives of the British soldiers and of the German submariners are quite elderly, of course, and many needed assistance. But, logistically, it all went exceptionally well. And having met some of the other widows now, and hearing their stories, has helped me come to terms with the tragedies in my own grandmother's life, and ultimately with her passing. These women who had the same experiences on opposite sides of the conflict, who have gone through the same trauma and hardship, having had to raise their children alone, surrounded by the ruins of their homes – seeing how they ended up speaking the same emotional language, how they effortlessly understood each other, with a look, or with a smile, or with an embrace – that

was very powerful. The main moment was the unveiling of the memorial stone in the garden of the archive, with a bilingual inscription: “Between the fronts, briefly united against the last enemy.” Nothing official, but I thought it looked very nice, standing in a peaceful spot, surrounded by old trees. And I did have a rough moment when I thought how much Gran would have liked that. But, fortunately, Monika was there. She’d come up from Hamburg that morning, and Stefan too.’

Claire raised her eyebrows. ‘Oh?’

‘Yes, Claire, with his girlfriend, and she’s nice – a bit of a visionary, just like you.’

Claire chuckled.

‘But, you know, as thoroughly as we talked about it yesterday, the seriousness of what happened in that Norwegian prison is just slowly sinking in.’

‘Si, it’s the same for me. When the police phoned me yesterday morning, and you hadn’t returned from Germany yet, I had no one with whom I could have discussed that for hours. Then, when I finally got you on the phone, emotionally, I was completely numb.’

‘Yes, I felt like I needed to sit down when you told me. But, I suppose, it wasn’t entirely unpredictable. Over the past two months we’ve seen an increasing number of exposures in the media of high-profile members of society, both in business and politics – all this leaked information about fraud, tax evasion, and other criminal activities. To someone who hasn’t read Peter’s notebook, these scandals might seem unconnected. But if you have, and you recognise one family name after the other, the

pattern becomes clear. Your abduction, and the plan to kill us both, clearly hadn't been sanctioned by the entire organisation. It was likely carried out by those who had most to fear from any kind of exposure, and so they panicked. Those would probably have been the oldest members whose history goes back to the founding of the Order. The others must have been terrified when they found out. The last thing they would have wanted, after what had happened in winter, was more violent crimes linked to their organisation. Consequently, they tried to purge themselves of those families who had conspired to come after us by leaking to the media any incriminating information they possessed that was unrelated to the Order. But the exposed families are clearly fighting back, giving like for like. And neither of the two sides could afford to let the case against those who had been arrested in Norway go to trial. You and I know better than anyone alive how ruthless the New Atlanteans can be. Therefore, looking back, what happened in Norway wasn't all that surprising.'

'No, and it seems to have been an effective strategy. The police told me that, after the murders of the two men who came into our hotel room that night, the prosecution against the others is likely to collapse for lack of evidence. You can't place them at any of the crime scenes, and no one will be able to testify against them. But I have to say, I'm relieved by that. It would have been an absolute nightmare having to testify in court against those whom we encountered in Paris, possibly even under police protection. Ultimately, I think it would have been very frustrating because we really have nothing against any of the people at the heart of the organisation. That threat to them only comes from

inside, and they finally understand that now. So, let the New Atlanteans destroy themselves in this civil war they started.'

'Exactly, Claire. And let us move on from that sorry affair.'

'Only ... I can't help thinking about the crew of the yacht. I know they were all released without charge, after it was established that they had been hired, on very short notice, when the New Atlanteans had chartered the vessel for a cruise to the Lofoten. But it must have been a terrible shock to them having the Norwegian *Kystvakten* appear out of nowhere that evening and arrest them. Most of them probably didn't even know I was on board until I was brought ashore on Fareøya. As a matter of fact, when they took me off the yacht, I didn't see any of the crew. Of course, Mei-Ling must have realised that something was wrong, if only because I kept myself locked in. But while we were at sea, she was as powerless to do anything about the situation as I was. And she was always so sweet. You know, from the third day onwards, she placed a folded lotus flower on my pillow after she had completed the room service. Considering what that symbol means in her culture – rising from mud and through water into the light – I wondered whether perhaps she knew what I was planning to do. I know that was silly, but it meant a lot to me during those long days of waiting, and of uncertainty.

'And I could tell that, after the refuelling stop in Stornoway, as we got closer and closer to the Lofoten, she got increasingly anxious and concerned about me. I therefore started chatting with her in French, just casually about random things, to reassure her. Of course, I never spoke to her about my situation. She was already compromised enough as it was. But the men couldn't

have known that. They must have assumed that I would tell her exactly what had happened, and they clearly didn't care. They had this attitude that they could simply intimidate anyone who could potentially harm them; first, by demonstrating to her how much wealth and thus power they have; then, by sending her to wait on me, without any concerns about what I might confide to her. Once they had let her know in that fashion how insignificant she was in their eyes, the threat was implicit. At that point, they didn't have to spell out what would happen to her if she ever talked to anyone about what she had witnessed on board. All this first-class treatment just to keep me quiet and out of their way. And because it was beneath them to bring me the food themselves, they casually dropped an innocent outsider into this horrific situation. That alone was an evil thing to do. I probably shouldn't say this, but it's true: I'm glad they are out of this world forever.'

She giggled. 'Look, I know it's a terrible cliché, but in retrospect I'm far more sorry about having had to hand over to the police those clothes the New Atlanteans had given me. They were in a right old mess coming out of the cave, but they weren't torn, and I think they would have cleaned up nicely. Believe me, I understand everything the police explained to me. They had my fingerprints and other forensic evidence to link me to the yacht. But they needed the clothes to link me to the cave. Then, it would have been difficult to explain why I would have done that dangerous thing of crawling into the narrow crack at the very end of the passage, if not for the fact that I had been afraid for my life and hiding from the men. I get all that. But do

you have any idea how long it would take me to save up enough money for the parka alone, or those boots?

‘Although, the better pay of the Senior Lecturer position has begun to make an impact on my bank balance. And they gave me a nice new office as well. Not as grand as Professor Harris’, of course, but it’s a place of my own. And you know what, Si: that rock you brought me back from the cave, I now keep it on one of my bookcases in the office, together with the three folded lotus flowers. At first, I had it on my desk, but people kept asking me about it, and I didn’t know what to say. I mean, how can you explain to someone what happened in just a few sentences? Especially if, by asking such a casual question, they didn’t exactly bargain for that kind of drama.’

‘Yes, the adventure does feel rather personal, doesn’t it? But Claire, during summer break next year, I want to return to Fareøya with you. Without that kind of drama, as you put it, it’s really quite a lovely place. Unfortunately, you barely got to see it, and not in the best light either. We’ll take *Arja* on a cruise of the other islands. I think she would like that – as Mr Iversen would say.

‘Which reminds me. Yesterday, just after I had spoken with you, I phoned Dagmar – Mrs Olsen. I wanted to get in touch again before disappearing to Antarctica. Mr Iversen occasionally asks about you and sends his regards. He’d received your letter, but apologises for not being a great writer himself, even in Norwegian. Still, I think the old gentleman really took a shine to you. You certainly left quite an impression when you showed up so unexpectedly down by the harbour, very early in the morning,

after you'd escaped from the New Atlanteans.'

'Yes, I can imagine. I must have looked rather startling, still wet and covered all over in this green muck from the back of the cave – algae, I suppose. A complete stranger who had, apparently, materialised out of nowhere on that little island in the middle of the night. Lucky really that he and some of the other fishers were returning just then because otherwise no one else was about in the village at that time.'

'In the pub, of an evening, he still enjoys recounting the exciting tale of how he smuggled you off the island in his fishing boat, to take you over to the police station in Bodø. Based on what Dagmar told me, I'm getting the impression that you significantly undersold the story to me.'

'Did I? Well, perhaps I abbreviated it a little. But, you know, after what you'd gone through, I didn't want to make a fuss.'

'After what I'd gone through? Claire, you were the one who got abducted, dragged at gun point from a hotel room in Paris, in the middle of the night, and kept prisoner on a boat for five days.'

'Yes, I know. But it was obvious from the beginning that you were the one who was in real danger. Can you imagine how devastated I was that night when it became clear that you weren't on the island? Mr Iversen told me about meeting you the previous day and took me to your guesthouse. After we had roused Mrs Olsen, we discovered that you had disappeared overnight. Then, we found your letter saying that you had gone north to Moskenesøya. In my original plan, you would have been there, on Fareøya, and everything would have been fine. Of course,

you sorted it all out in the end. But at the time, in the mental and physical state I was in, I don't know what I'd done without the support of Mrs Olsen and Mr Iversen. After I'd explained the situation to them, they agreed that the New Atlanteans were likely to have someone stationed at the ferry terminal in Bodø, to intercept you in case you returned to the mainland that way. We had to assume that they would recognise me as well. Mrs Olsen, therefore, gave me her Sou'wester – which was too large for me, as you can imagine, so that I vanished completely into the hood. Then, we went back to the harbour. Mr Iversen's son had unloaded their trawler in the meantime and had told his mother that father would take the boat out again. Mrs Olsen stayed behind on the island. And while Mr Iversen and I were *en route* to Bodø, she phoned a friend there to meet us by the quay for the fishing vessels. The moment we arrived, they rushed me to the car and drove me to the police station. That was it, really. The rest you know.

‘But those were three terrible endless days at the police station, with all that uncertainty, not knowing where you were, and what was happening to you. The first thing the police did was to search for you in Å, because of what you'd written in your note to Mrs Olsen. But they couldn't find you there. They had to be careful, of course, not to reveal to the New Atlanteans that I was still alive. Even so, we had to assume that they would be starting to search for you as well. The coast guard were warned immediately about a large motor yacht that might be cruising in the vicinity of the Lofoten. Fortunately, they have a ship stationed in the Vesterålen, that group of islands to the north of the Lo-

foten. They then started looking out for both you and the New Atlanteans during their patrols.

‘The police wanted to fly me back to Britain the next day, but I refused to leave until they had found you. They therefore put me up in that room in the police station where we met. Now, looking back, I feel sorry for these officers. I must have been the absolute last thing they needed under their feet during that time, constantly hanging about the incident room where they had that big map on the wall, and asking for updates – until, finally, the radio call came in from the coast guard ship that they had spotted the yacht on its way back to Fareøya. Then, as you know, they managed to get there just in time. Another positive outcome of all this was that I learned quite a bit about the geography of the Norwegian islands – together with the word *Kystvakten*, which I have become very fond of.’

She smiled happily. Then, she cast a glance at the station clock and motioned towards the trolley. ‘But you mustn’t miss your train.’

‘No, probably not. There is no hurry, but we might as well start walking over to the platform. I’m sorry we didn’t have more time together before the departure. What else have you planned while you’re here? Did you already pick up those books you’d ordered from the University Press shop?’

‘I did, yes. Now, I’ll have plenty to read on the train home. When I’ve seen you off, I’ve got just enough time to get myself ready to meet one of Harris’ friends and colleagues. They were at uni together, in Edinburgh. He’s retired now as well. If he’s as eccentric a character as Harris, and as knowledgeable, it should

be an interesting evening.

‘Professor Harris was funny when I told him about our little adventure. We met up in the faculty club, as usual, although for dinner on that occasion – very fancy. We hadn’t done that before. It was the first time in ages that I got properly dressed up, gown and all. Harris looked quite dashing himself. He took the news in his stride, as he always does. It was hard to tell how shocked he really was, although he should be used to some tension by now when it comes to stories involving you. The next meeting we’ll have to organise for the three of us together. For now, he sends you his warmest regards – and best of luck for Antarctica.’

From the bustling concourse, they stepped outside into the chilly air and a drift of wet snowflakes along the windswept platform.

Claire kept her flowing hair out of her face as she squinted up to the departure board. ‘Looks like this is your train.’

‘Yes.’ This was it, again. ‘Claire, you’ll take good care of yourself, while I’m gone, won’t you? If you ever have the feeling of being followed, or you feel that your flat has been invaded while you were out, no matter how vague these feelings are, do not believe for one moment that you might be imagining things, or that you’re being paranoid. Don’t be embarrassed to talk to the police. After everything that’s happened, they are bound to take you seriously. And if there is anything important, you know how to reach me. We won’t be able to speak on the satellite phone because the whole system is still down after the fire. But contact Personnel Section here in Cambridge, and they will get your message through to me on the radio.’

‘Vawny, the only thing I’m feeling right now is that those invisible enemies that have haunted you for so long are no more. Well, perhaps not the only thing I’m feeling, but ...’

Then, she interrupted herself, looking shocked. ‘Something important, of course. I almost forgot to tell you – or ask you, rather.’

‘Yes?’

‘No, don’t worry. It’s all right – nothing dangerous, or anything. It’s just that, on Friday, after you’d already left for Germany, I got some holiday brochures from the travel agent and made some phone calls to the south of France – Languedoc province. Our first attempt to go vacationing there was a bit spontaneous, without having had the time to organise anything. And then, of course, we didn’t get very far. I should have mentioned it on the phone yesterday, but with everything else going on ... I don’t think we should wait until summer when it’s too hot and too crowded. At that time of year, it’s much better to go up to the Lofoten again, as you suggested. But with you getting back from Antarctica around the middle of March, the last week of that month, or very early in April would be a good time to go down to France. We would then still avoid the main frenzy around Easter. I already found this *chambre d’hôte* in Perpignan, very *bijou*. I phoned them – with my best French, which I practised recently – and they would have vacancies during that time. It’ll be great, I’m sure: right between the mountains and the sea. I could make the reservation and organise everything else while you’re on Antarctica.’

‘Great, that sounds ... Sorry, did you say Perpignan?’

‘Yes.’

‘Isn’t that where Montségur is?’

‘Sort of, amongst other tourist attractions.’

‘Oh . . . Excellent thinking, Claire. I mean, what could possibly go wrong in a place that’s famous with crazy people who are out on a quest for objects with supernatural powers?’

She looked thoughtful for a moment. ‘Hmm . . . I see your point. But I think we should be safe. And all those stories around the Holy Grail are really quite fascinating, you know. It’s one of the reasons I would like to visit the area.’

‘All right, Claire. I’ll trust your instincts.’

Then, an announcement warned of the imminent departure of the train, and the last passengers who were still left on the platform boarded their respective coaches.

Claire pulled Siobhán into a brief hug. ‘Bye, Wawny. You better get in now.’

Siobhán lifted her heavy kit bag off the trolley and stepped up into her coach. She kept standing by the open door – but in a moment, it slammed shut in front of her. Muffled from the outside, she could hear the guard’s whistle that signalled their departure. With screeching wheels, the train rattled into motion.

Claire, smiling a little strained, gave her a final wave through the grimy window. Then, she gradually receded as the train gathered speed, and her slender figure on the platform became obscured by the swirling snow, until she was finally lost from sight.

But this time, the departure was not the end. This time, it was just the beginning of another story; a story without hatred and

murder, without conspiracies and dark secrets. Because in that earlier story, not all had been lost; and in time, there was much to be gained.

Meanwhile, Siobhán still had a score to settle with Antarctica. And this time, it would really be a perfectly normal adventure.

PART FOUR OF **THE SIGNS OF A MYSTERY**

Siobhán is carrying out research from a lonely lighthouse in the Moray Firth. The north of Scotland rests under bright sunshine and uncharacteristic heat.

But while everyone else enjoys the peaceful atmosphere, she still struggles with the feeling of guilt about her perceived role in the recent tragic deaths.

Then, the shadows she thought had been defeated resurface, and she fears that her own personal history is about to repeat itself.

When she is given the task of recovering an item of great importance, all she knows for certain is that she cannot allow anyone else to die for her.

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