

Chapter 1 – Troubled Waters

I was tumbling.

Our disabled boat had been drifting at the mercy of the high seas. With nightfall came the ripping sound of wood. I tried to grab the safety rail of the upper helm, but the sloop lurched as rocks tore into the hull, and the boat took on a rush of water as it capsized. I was thrown overboard to meet my fate.

The water was cold and salty, I thrust out my arms protectively; pain erupted as sharp rocks tore into the flesh and bone, my joints bent impossibly as head and stone collided in union of death. Then there was nothing – nothing but the restless, relentless swell of grey water, and the ceaseless taste of brine.

Moon, and sun, and moon once more completed their daily survey upon the greatness of waters below. Despite my flotation jacket, I felt my life draining away, salt water enveloping me, it was gorging upon me and I began to willingly become its fodder. My feet scraped rock and sand that I barely registered; from deep within, I sensed the spark of life returning.

The incessant roar of the raging sea competed for a place within the cacophony of sounds that ricochet around my salt-addled brain. There was the regular thud of something weary, something heavy, my blood whispering tales of enlightenment that remained just out of reach. Unexpectedly, a quiet calm embraced me. A soft female voice entered my disparate thoughts and beguiled me, “Move now child; you will soon be safe.”

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

The pull of the voice, far stronger than my weak will to reside, empowered me, crawling like a tentative toddler, half-aware. I thought to open my eyes, and found they were already working to try to decipher the strange and almost surreal world I had become a part of. I comprehended mere snapshots: beach, bushes, rocks picked out of the senseless dark scenes before me. My mind began to wander, but was pulled back by the calming feminine influence one last time, her silvery and almost feathery touch entreating me, “A little farther unto the rocky lot, and you can rest in peace my child besot.”

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

My dreams lay scattered like briars and nettles around a sepulchre, as life ebbed and flowed from within my deepest being. Ebbed, flowed, and flowered. Ebbed, flowed, and flowered once more – each time a little stronger than the last. I began to heal, cocooned within the womb-like bower between the unforgiving rocks, as with daybreak, my body dried and warmed beneath the saturnine sun, and in due course, my mind became less scattered.

My ordeal was over; my ordeal was just beginning.

I awoke battered and bruised, but not broken, both my mind and my body somehow intact, I was weakened by duress, and ravaged by hunger. My face was crusted with salt that matted my eyelids together as I started awake and fumbled for my bearings. I felt hard rock to my back and sides, and the warmth of the sun on my face. I thought to myself, *Jack Barleycorn, you are very lucky to be alive.*

I teased the salt crystals from my eyelashes and, floundering to sit, stared in wonder at the sea in front of me, vast in her enduring might. To my left lay a pristine beach, and behind me some scraggy dunes that reminded me of holidays long ago in Wales. To my right were rocks, as if extrusions from the towering volcanic walls that appeared to reach into the sky itself, and circled inland, barricaded my beach except where a rivulet trickled down a steep rocky incline in search of its great mother.

My mind jolted as I realised the significance of this stream. I knew it must contain fresh water, and not the life-threatening brine I had unintentionally imbibed these last days. *Now I remembered.* A lightning strike upon my vessel, rendering it powerless; and later I was thrown out of the upper helm, and cast adrift in the great South Pacific miles from any form of land, with a mere inflatable buoyancy aid for assistance.

In my rush for fluid, I made to stand and run for the water source, only to half-rise and fall, crashing onto the unforgiving rocks as my feeble legs gave way. Pain seared through my bloated knees. Willing back the tears, both of joy and pain, I rose once more, but gingerly, and hobbled over the rocky obstacles – a cripple seeking succour.

It took great determination, but I made it to the small waterfall, once more crawling to save my life. I stood shakily and let the cool waters flow over my face and fully clothed body, washing away the grime of salty seas and days of bodily neglect. I gulped mouthfuls of the life-giving fluid avidly.

There was a startling and sudden cawing of several large marine birds behind and above me. In reflex, I attempted to move too quickly on feeble muscles and unbalanced, crashed down heavily. My left arm jarred between hard rock and the Mae West I still wore, and intense pain brought me to the edge of blacking out once more. I flexed my fingers and presumed no bones were broken, but the injury could prove serious for my survival prospects. I wiped away the water from my eyes and pulled my hand away, only to discover it was covered with blood.

Probing the area tentatively, I found a ragged gash of torn flesh on my temple, and saw blood droplets staining the water beneath. My fingers were runed with watermarks, nearly beyond feeling, but I could make out a large bump on my right temple area and from it a long slash that jagged dangerously toward the corner of my right eye before ripping back across towards my right ear.

I rolled to the side and away from the flow, finding a dry ledge within arm's reach. Hauling my fractured body across to the shelf, I took a moment to still my beating heart before carrying out a proper investigation of my situation. Removing my life jacket, I give a mental shrug and followed suit with my other clothes.

Still slightly lightheaded, I remained seated and peeled off my upper clothes to reveal a badly injured left arm. Tender, it sported black bruises competing for space. I knew from the colour and previous experiences that these were days old; my recent fall only compromised the healing process. Nothing was broken, although it must have been a narrow escape.

After shoes and socks, my jeans became a small battle. The wet and adhering material was staunchly clinging to my legs, but I overcame. Once completely naked I ensured my clothes were safe and began a full assessment of the rest of my abused body.

Gingerly I headed back the few paces to the waterfall and scrubbed myself clean, removing crusty, caked salt deposits, and washing out the best I could; first my hair, followed very gently by my face, paying particular attention to my wounded temple. I continued, not considering the job finished until all my personal nooks and crannies were properly cleansed. Crystalline salt could be a killer when exposed to the hot sun, as it draws out water from the skin beneath.

I sat back to rest; my energy already depleted. I took a few minutes to recover from my exertions. At least no hostile natives or deadly snakes had found me yet, but I made a wary mental note to remain ever vigilant.

At first absent-mindedly, I began to sort through my clothes, taking out whatever possessions I found in the pockets. There wasn't much: a soggy wallet containing pictures of my home and friends that I lingered over, wondering would I ever see them again. Those treasures required careful separation to act as keepsakes. There were a couple of credit cards, plus Chinese and Australian cash – *much use they will be here!* I scoffed.

Hoarse laughter escaped my sore throat as I retrieve a very wet mobile phone, knowing it was switched on last time I was conscious. Normally I turn it off when at sea, but the trip was supposed to be a short sea trial of a few hours' duration only. This brought back the ludicrous nature of my unplanned excursion, and I looked up to stare out over the vast ocean before me, wondering where in the world I was.

My thoughts drifted with the waves, before returning to the phone clutched in my hand. I was on the point of throwing it away before my mind caught up and warned me of the possible trials to come. It became imperative to keep everything I had, or found in the future – I realized I had virtually nothing, and did not know what hazards mere survival would throw at me. My jeans contained nothing else but a set of house keys and a couple of small coins.

In my seaman's jacket I discovered a small compass attached to a piece of sturdy string, and North was where I expected. There were a couple of packs of unopened and probably soggy cigarettes, two gas

lighters in a waterproof pocket – one of them full. I flicked both in turn but neither of them worked. Nonetheless, when they dried out I would be able to make fire, which could prove the key difference in my bid for survival.

Reaching deeper I came across a spoon, triggering a memory – I was eating soup whilst on drift-watch up top when lightening hit the radar scanner. *Now how did I manage to keep hold of that?* I wondered.

In other pockets, I found a sodden logbook with a ballpoint pen and marker, a monogrammed cotton handkerchief, and a plastic wallet of squelchy tissues, and a combination manicure set. I clutched my prize, glad of the fortune in finding a tool, what once seemed a common item.

I set everything apart to dry in the sun and made a labourious job of washing my clothes in the running water pools at the base of the waterfall. Once my chores were finished, I took another long drink of the fluid of life, and exhausted to my limits, rested for a moment to recover in the warm sun. A gnawing hunger centred on my stomach. I had no option but to push past my weariness and attempt catching something to eat. My recovery, my life, depended on it.

Casting my eyes around I settled upon some likely-looking rock pools to my right. I edged gingerly down, and was soon herding prawns around a pool, catching several and gathering them in the remnants of my shirt.

In a pool nearer the sea, I spotted darts of silver and investigated. I found a small school of fish three or four inches long and, after securing my prawns, carefully stepped into the tide pool with hungry intent. I herded them to one corner, but they escaped to hide under an overhang. I shook my left foot into their hideout to scare them from cover and let out a scream; a very large fish with evil teeth attached itself to the big toe of my left foot.

Refusing to let go, the fish caused me to hobble backwards in pain and surprise, the fiasco ending with me toppling backwards out of the pool, as rock caught behind my knees. My impromptu foot fishing brought my catch out with me and it released its grip on my toe once airborne. Landing, it tried to flop and flounder back to the safety of another pool. I leapt on top of it with a survivalist energy, and crushed it under my weight before carefully grabbing it struggling by the tail and bashing it against some nearby rocks. It quietened in my hands but was still not dead, so I smashed it again with a sympathetic wince, this time ensuring the head took the full force of the blow.

Before carrying the fish back to the lee of the small rise I had designated as temporary camp, I collected a few broken razor shells from one of the ponds. I used the sharp edges to gut the fish and scale the sides. I washed it thoroughly before stalling to examine my big toe, which was already thick with blood and I worried I might lose the nail.

Collecting my plunder from the tide pools, I scrambled warily over the rocks to the beach, quickly seeking out the rise once more, and drinking deeply from the small stream. *Today is going to be my day.* I was not a superstitious man, but I did respect the Three Sisters: Lady Luck and her siblings, Fate, and Serendipity. I was not dead yet – and by rights I should have been. That macabre, yet somehow cheerful thought, spurred me on. There was obviously something left in life that I had yet to accomplish.

The ridge I now called home sheltered me from the light sea breeze. Now that they had had a chance to dry out some, I tried both lighters, and was stunned when one of them worked. The cigarette packets were unopened and intact; upon investigation, I found the contents to be dry – one of those small mysteries as to the how. My locale lacked ‘no smoking’ signs and I saw no reason not to allow myself a small luxury, because unless I was rescued soon, luxury they would be. I lit one, and as the heady rush of nicotine filled my lungs, my mind lingered to dwell upon sweet memories of home. My heart broke unexpectedly, I felt so small and lonely, trapped now between the vast ocean before me and the towering volcanic walls behind.

The next few hours passed quickly as I scouted the hinterland nearby, finding good tinder and some woody brush with which to build a small fire to cook my fish. I turned clothes on the sun-warmed rocks as the smell of cooking filled my nostrils, and set me salivating.

I turned the fish and hooked out the prawns, greedily ignoring painful heat as I peeled them roughly and savoured the texture of food once more. Driven by extreme hunger I checked the fish, which showed signs of slight charring on both sides. Removing it from the fire, I was stuck for what to do next, and thought to take a large bite. At that moment, I remembered the spoon. Soon one half of the fish and all the prawns were consumed; I was replete.

Absentmindedly I fingered the jade pendant my oldest friend Dawn had given to me, as I departed Blighty; it was a golden dragon set on white jade. The delicate carving was quite rare, as the dragon was engraved in the yellow portion of the bi-colour rock. *It must have been very expensive*, I initially thought, and immediately chided myself. I kissed it and relived good times past, instead of filling my mind with stupid thoughts about money. This was my personal treasure, and one of my few remaining links to my loved ones. I wondered how they were and worried over the despair caused by my disappearance.

The beach, hospitable as it had been, was far too exposed for me to be comfortable. The sun drew low in the sky behind the volcano wall, as I donned the almost dry clothes and gathered my few belongings, banked my fire, and followed the rivulet upstream, searching for a more permanent location to shelter in.

After half a mile or so, I discovered a small, semi-enclosed ledge to my left. I dropped the half-eaten fish and scrambled up to the projection, dislodging rocks and almost losing my grip, as my weakened fingers clung to what little points of leverage there were. With the light failing, I crested the top, and found an alcove about four yards wide by two yards deep. It was only a small dent in the rocks, but sheltered from the prevailing wind, and large enough for me that night.

Over-exhausted, I rolled into the niche. My mind felt fevered; scattering, shattering, and sleepy, my thoughts dying upon the whims and twisms' of twisted fate.

Chapter 2 - Resurrection

I awoke shivering, but *compos mentis* for the first time in days. The sky was vaguely lightening to the east. Today I would live or die; it was up to me, alone. Stretching aching joints and muscles, I scrambled down to the stream in the half-light and found the water cold and refreshing.

I looked up and saw the half-eaten fish, which appeared to have been left undisturbed. *Interesting: I really must be alone here.* I examined it as I collected my wits, and my thoughts turned towards this new day. I ate the cold fish as I reviewed my options and drank from the stream once more. The sun was low in the sky and beginning to warm already as the crisp night air dispelled. Fortunately, it looked to be a fine day.

Risk assessment? I arrived before midday yesterday, so natives, hostile or friendly, would probably have discovered me – but I would take no chances until this was confirmed. I recalled watching a TV programme featuring one of the minor Galapagos Islands, inhabited solely by venomous snakes. I shuddered at the thought, but so far, I had seen no sign of any life on this land, apart from my own, the plants, and the fish. Looking around I saw no insects, although there were a few birds far off out over the sea.

With full daylight approaching, I gained a sense of urgency. With hopes of rescue in my mind, I hurried down to the fire from yesterday, but there was nothing on the horizon or in the air. The fire was out, so I quickly remade it with grass and branches I collected on the way down, setting a large blaze that I covered with drying seaweed in order to make smoke. Once satisfied, I returned to my new camp.

I worried about carrying everything with me in my weakened state, but could not make myself part with my resources. Bearing my load staunchly, I decided to follow the stream into the interior of the island. After a country mile, the rivulet turned sharply, and up the impossible slopes of the volcanic walls. Even if I were at my physical peak, I would never attempt such a long and difficult climb. I stopped to rest and had found nothing yet suitable for carrying water. I presumed there would be other streams, but where, and how far away I could not tell.

I looked at the life jacket with its inflatable panels. Feeling very resourceful, I emptied the air out, replacing it with fresh water. This was not an easy feat, and I ended up blowing mouthfuls of water into the device. Later I sat to wonder at my good fortune and worried about the survival to come. I needed to find proper shelter before dusk fell, as thus far I had been lucky with the weather.

I found I was staring at a white rock in the river and was reminded of Dawn, and summers walking in Snowdonia National Park in North Wales. Sometimes we would camp out overnight and pretend to *live rough off the land*. Those were good times and great fun, before I sensed the parallels of life that day, as the burden of my reality crashed down upon me. I turned away before emotions of isolation overwhelmed me.

My eyes returned to focus on the white rock among the masses of dark grey. I jarred alert, wondering if this could be marble, or quartz perhaps? I examined it and found it felt like agate. *Agate can have sharp edges.* I took the rock and smashed it several times with another, chipping off a few flakes before gaining the prize of a wedge six inches long, and sharp along one edge. I capered with delight before reverently placing both parts and the biggest flakes in my largest jacket pockets.

I scanned the area for anything else of note and continued on my way. There was no trail to follow, but I made good time as I covered the stacked ridges that must have been the remains of lava flows from aeons passed. My exploration was cut short by a deep gorge and taller facing wall. I doubted I could climb either in full health, let alone in my current weakened state. Feeling inept and overwhelmed by the enormity of this unknown, I searched around, and seeing no passageway along the volcano walls, headed east with my back to the volcano.

I was headed downwards on a very shallow incline, and the other wall nearby had a corresponding declination. To my right were dunes of white sand, and a maze of microcosms where clumps of tall grass and hardy shrubs clung tentatively to life. There was a lot of tinder thereabouts, so I took enough to start a fire. However, there was very little else in those windy and harsh, sand-swept conditions. I worried my chances of survival.

After another mile or more, pushing past exhaustion, I found a natural breach in the opposing wall. Both banks were now about half their original height and definitely not as steep. I cautioned myself for one last effort before I rested, and picked my way down before scrambling up the opposing side.

Reaching the top, I sat and stared in amazement; before me stretched a large and fertile plain with a lake set slightly to my left. I recognised many of the trees and shrubs; others were alien. There appeared to be another small rim on the other side of the valley – I estimated I must be standing near the bottom of a bowl five miles across. Beyond the lake to the west lay a swathe of grass and large-leaved plants, before the terrain rose gently to a rim and the steep volcanic walls took dominance. Nothing was moving. There were no trails indicating animals or people. The place appeared to be a pristine environment, totally deserted.

There were similarities with the landscape to wild China. I looked out over this wilderness and wondered what, if anything, I had gained. The vegetation was not unlike that growing near my home in Canton and the extreme Southeast of China.

Thoughts of doubt and the unknown haunted me as I thought about the worry that friends and family would be feeling at that very moment – so many miles away. I stared into the distance as my mind replayed treasured memories; gloom clouded my spirit, and I wondered at the chance of ever seeing home again.

Lost within melancholy, I started as a honeybee flew past just in front of my eyes. *There is life here – perhaps not all is lost.* The thought galvanized me into action, and I stood to stretch, before following my instincts and heading for the lake.

The way was awkward. I waded through long grasses, skirting dense clumps, but there were no nasty surprises lurking within the stalks. In time, I made good progress, and arrived at the lake's edge, the sun hovering directly overhead. The heat had me shed most of my clothes and tie my jacket into a rudimentary knapsack. I drank tentatively from the lake's clear waters. I imbibed little as a precaution, but it tasted like the best thing I had ever swallowed.

Dense vegetation to the east contrasted markedly with the clear path over rocks that lay to the side of the lake. I headed west towards the volcano walls, and I followed the lake's contour for almost one mile. The lake was shaped like an exaggerated egg, its broader end toward the sea. As I continued, I saw fish, yet another good omen for my future, should I remain forever marooned. My ever-pressing concerns about survival justly heartened, I imagined discovering an outpost of civilization, friendly natives, and means of communicating with the outside world. Fleeting I thought to prepare another signal fire, as others must be searching for me at that moment.

My legs were tiring as I stopped to rest, where a stream entered the greater waters of the lake. I threw off my burden with relief, and took a long drink from a petite waterfall. My feet ached, and I removed my trainers, dabbling my feet under the flow. Tired, I lay down, toying my feet at play under the cascading waters, whilst I felt rock and earth beneath my back. I drifted, as within a 'power-nap', and came back to life quickly, trying to absorb the unique essence of this new world.

A disconsolate chord struck within me, this was not any new world; it was where I must now live, or die. During my life, I had always considered myself an entrepreneur, nay loner; I did whatever I wanted. Previously, I always had others' doing my bidding. Now I was completely alone; my chances of life or death rested entirely within me, and what I did next. This time, my life, my continued existence was personal.

My back against the slab of ancient volcanic rock, I sat up purposefully to regain my mental grip on life. Scanning this new world, I realised there was but half a mile of flat land sandwiching the brook, before it tumbled down from what appeared to be a wide ledge some twenty or thirty feet above the valley floor. My logical direction should be either to head up to the rim – leaving me exposed and highly visible, or to head for the northwest corner of the presumed peninsula.

Choosing the safety of the latter route, I made good progress through the shorter grasses, stands of wild flowers, interspersed with shrubs that inhabited this rockier region. I stopped to admire some, as they were unique; the smell of one in particular reminding me of fuchsia, and another flowering shrub of bougainvillea – but the plants themselves looked nothing like.

Nearing my immediate destination, grimacing upon weary legs and protesting muscles, I focused upon a large, and very old banyan tree standing in a quiet glade near to where a natural pathway led up

to the rim. Knowing my route lay ahead, up the easy slope, I took a moment to visit the ancient tree, and rest, because it remained the most remarkable feature, of this unique landscape.

I sat for a while in awe beneath its giant boughs, and cherished the bees busy at their work amongst the flowers of this unusual grove, one that unlike the rest of the surrounding area, looked like the most picturesque English summer meadow. A sense of calm washed over me; one I could not explain. The place simply felt perfect.

My mind wandered back to the little farm in England where I grew up. I was the farmer's son, working alongside time served field hands as we ploughed fields and harvested grain. It took me ages to master how to milk a cow and I smiled as I remembered the warm taste of fresh milk, and skimming the cream off the top of churns before they were sent to the dairy. My mother even made butter on occasions, but it was never salty enough for me.

I grew up with cattle, pigs, and lambs as my friends, our nearest neighbour lived one mile down the country road. There were dogs, cats, chickens, ducks, and geese – the latter would try to attack you if you were not careful. In time, some would be sent to market, including one calf I had nurtured to maturity entirely by myself. My heart was broken when it was despatched to the slaughterhouse, and I first realised just how tenuous the link between life and death – as a mere boy of seven years old.

Later I learned to use a shotgun and hunted rabbits. I was chastised upon bringing home five one day, and told never to kill more than needed; life is precious and we should never waste it needlessly. My parents were good people who lived off the land and taught me to respect life, and expect the unexpected, always; of this, I now had very full measure.

At this thought, my throat constricted and my eyes moistened uncontrollably. Those days were long-gone, and since I had travelled the world, always seeking to find my unique place within it. Until yesterday, I had never travelled the unknown world, but at that moment it lay before me; for the first time I travelled without a map or guide. It was all I had to live; or, die for.

It always seemed to me that I made a difference wherever I went; I changed people's lives, and moved on. In many ways, my childhood was idyllic, but small farms have no place in the modern world and struggle to survive. It was made clear to me when I left school; that I would need to seek my own fortune. My parents always supported my various endeavours, but there simply was no place for me in the business.

Apart from growing up on the farm, I never had a home – not a proper one like most people.

My heart yearned for more than memories of what was past and lost, as I slowly became aware the sun was nearing the end of his daily route. Shaking off the lure of this propitious place, I stood and walked the short distance to the natural ramp toward higher ground, and what must surely represent the opposite side of this most beautiful prison.

I did not know what I had been expecting to find, but what confronted my senses as I crested the rise, was another of nature's perfect natural forms. The slope was as if a divot was once made and badly replaced, allowing easy access to the ridge that was about twenty yards wide in most of its course, and curved like a ring encompassing the lands below. It took me but minutes to walk up the gentle rocky incline, towards embracing once more the unknown, and to discover what lay beyond.

Two large sentry rocks appeared like guardians of nature's secrets. They stood resolute to greet me, as I moved forwards with resurgent interest. I absent-mindedly brushed one with my fingers as I passed, noting the hard rock that has withstood the ravages of time. Beyond lay a short and relatively steep decline, but one easy enough to walk without using hands for assistance.

I stepped between the aged rocks, to where the land broadened into a small plateau some seventy yards deep by twice as wide at the most seaward point. What fixed my attention was the fact it had a small stream running through the centre from the volcano walls immediately rising west of this base. The stream crossed, and passed out through a natural gully to the east. Stands of hardy deciduous trees extended, as the stream became a trickle into the sea, past reaches of muddy ground, flanked by dryer stands where tropical vegetation flourished.

I already knew this would be my new home. Upon reaching the far side, I found the headland gave naturally to a sharp drop. Beyond lay a pristine beach flanked by high rocky walls to either side. A solitary sentry rock prevailed imperiously against the sea; I stood for a moment to admire, captivated by

its lonesome beauty of æonic vigil. Across the sea I noticed a line of rock, as if remnants of an earlier volcanic eruption. The waters were calm, indicating a lagoon.

I dropped my belongings and quickly scouted around, finding a natural slope near the western side that offered a giant's causeway of steps down to the white and sandy beach below. I followed the natural path and was soon making the only footprints, fresh signs of life in untouched fine grains. I wandered over to the rock of ages passed, and patted its weary side, wishing it well. Distractedly, I noticed what could be a quite simple climb to the top, but left that for further exploration another time. Of prime importance was the need to build a shelter, make fire, and find something to eat.

I noticed the tide was coming in, and resolved my food issue at once; removing four feisty crabs from several of the rock pools near the plateau, I now called my temporary home. There was nothing to burn nearby, but I remembered seeing a few old stands of grass and gnarly bushes on the other side of the rise. Trapping the crabs in a hastily built rock prison, I headed off with only my new agate knife in search of making fire.

The wind picked up as I crested the rise, making me wonder whether wearing just a tee shirt was enough. I quickly put the thought aside as I had work to do, and the sun was already dipping towards obscurity behind the towering volcanic walls. My new camp was sheltered from such elements and I remained pleased with my choice.

After gathering bundles of dry long grass for my fire, adding what dry and fallen timber I could find easily, I returned to make fire. I created a small pit by using rocks and a natural stone formation, and quickly had a small blaze ready to greet my crabs. I threw them in live as the Chinese do, and worried as they flexed and curled in the throws of an unexpected death; needs must. I sent my thanks for this bounty to the stars that were just beginning to show in the heavens above. I ate ravenously, and slept shortly afterwards next to the fire, the clear night allowing me reprieve from building a shelter until morning.

I stirred as the first rays of Helios' awakening shattered the night sky with myriad orange and purple displays of Khæos' wonton palette, and ever-evolving artistry. The morning freshness retained a chill, as I remade and banked up the fire, adding wetter grass to make smoke. I tied two cooked crabs to my belt and attached my agate knife with some stout twilled grass twine. On my way to the lake, I saw what looked remarkably like tall stands of bamboo. Bamboo is such a useful plant that I made straight for it and was elated to find the tallest of stands that must be over seventy feet high. The area was a total mess, as bamboo naturally grows before becoming top-heavy and breaking lower down, as the weight of leaves bends it over to impossible angles.

I fought my way inside, cautious about snakes and other nasties. The free bamboo lengths I discovered were far too big for my immediate purpose, and whilst they are easy to break when growing, they dry bone-hard. With my limited tools, they would prove impossible to cut. I sat down on a nearby rock and questioned what I was actually trying to achieve, a proper house, or a temporary shelter? The answer was obvious; I needed to build a shelter quickly, and improve it later.

I ate breakfast and lay back to rest a moment on a flat and warming rock. I came alert, suddenly aware that the day was already passing, and I was not making any progress. I chastised myself and grabbed as many shorter bamboo lengths as I could carry, forging a new path direct to my home. The first two trips were difficult, until I established a rudimentary path.

On the third trip, I found some shorter pieces I could work with immediately. Gathering clouds reminded me that my luck with the weather would not hold forever. I needed some sort of waterproof covering. I remembered seeing some large leaves of a ground plant on my trip across the valley yesterday, so retraced my route and came across a large mass in a slightly soggy area, southeast of the stream that fed the lake. I yanked at the stems and was amazed to recognise the tubers beneath as being *Wu Tao*, a type of Chinese potato I knew well from Guangdong.

The leaves were two feet across by four long, and had a fresh and waxy sheen that would definitely be rainproof. The bulbs were large and typically black. I knew they would need a long cooking, as the sap of the skin can cause a nasty rash if handled raw. Simply tossing them into a fire-pit seemed to be the answer.

I staggered back with a heavy load. My mind running an inventory, as I gathered more resources – I was conscious the sun was nearing the volcano walls, and knew the darkness came quickly in these, obviously tropical latitudes.

I dearly wanted to stop and rest for a while, but my survival was at stake. I allowed a small time for a long drink of water from the homestead stream, before resetting the fire, and taking some strands of grass with which to tie up any crabs I found along the shore. The tide was a little later coming in that day; so, I moved farther out, finding a large lobster in one rock pool, and adding several crabs to my catch. While securing my haul, I caught sight of a large fish and turned to investigate. I was not positive, but I was almost sure it was a salmon. I was struck by an urgent need to know; I love eating salmon, to me it remains the king of fishes.

I wasted ten minutes chasing it around the pool, before finally getting clever and cornering it. I managed to stab it with my agate blade, mortally wounding my soon to be dinner. I gutted it before leaving the shoreline; pleased when the meat inside turned out to be the deep orange-pink colour I was hoping to see.

This was all I needed to eat tonight, and more; I was guardedly assuming seafood was plentiful. Wary of wasting my efforts and these creature lives for no good reason, I circled around to the west, where on higher rocks in the gloaming, I found several deep pools that gave the distinct impression of rarely being engulfed by the sea. Unlike their lower rock pool cousins, they had many snails and aquatic plants making homes within. I placed the lobster and crabs in the largest pool, if only to see if they would still there the next day. If they remained entrapped, I would have a sort of fresh seafood larder.

The salmon was delicious. I threw a couple of Wu Tao into the flames and left them to roast until they exhibited a hard-baked shell, similar to a baked and burnt potato. I cut one with my agate knife and found the inside nicely cooked, and it had the slightly spotted appearance of this unusual tuber. I sniffed the root, and tentatively took a small bite, being ready to spit it out immediately. Damn me! It actually tasted like Wu Tao. I took a larger bite and chewed the marginally tasteless, soapy insides, before swallowing. It was just like a weird and pasty potato, which is exactly what this tuber tasted like in Canton.

I went back for a second, and third helping, as the night embraced my efforts. Between the flickering flames, my eyes searched the darkness seeking self-absolution. I looked across to where my piles of bamboo and giant leaves lay unused, and promised myself that tomorrow; I would finally build a shelter of some description.

Contentment filled my mind and belly, as I sat at the edge of the small plateau, dangling my legs over the side and stared out past the sentry rock. For no reason I decided to climb it, and later sat atop to gaze out over the vastness, and up to the stars and moon. Her silvery light reminded me of my hallucinations.

I wondered whether it was the great lunar lady herself that became my Guardian Angel, when I was so very close to death on the other shore of this island. The idea was of course preposterous, but I no longer lived in a modern society, as primitive instincts, long buried by contemporary culture quickly dismissed; were replaced by simple survival and respect of all nature's bounty.

I looked up as a child at her majestic countenance, and blew a wish of gratitude to her on the wind; hoping that whichever elemental spirit was responsible for my survival, would receive my wholehearted thanks. As is the way with Angels and wishes, once cast they should be left alone. I returned to the fire and banked it up, before stretching out in front of the blaze, and fell asleep within moments.

Chapter 3 – Castaway

Dawn of a new day, and that of a new life, I set a signal fire of black smoke with damp leaves and wreaths of seaweed. I had seen no trace of ship or plane, but everybody knows this is what a castaway is supposed to do. I had the distinct impression, that for me, this would turn out to be a complete waste of time, but I did it regardless.

My shelter design was a lean-to with grass bundles for sides and Wu Tao leaves as thatch. It worked better than expected, but was not ideal. Over the next week, I created proper cutting tools from likely rocks and, fashioned a surprisingly good axe. The rudimentary tool revolutionized my building techniques, and it became simple, if hard work, to cut bamboo to length and build a proper dwelling.

By the end of the first week, I accomplished construction of a reasonably large dwelling for myself. I incorporated a thatch of bundled grass, before applying exterior leaves to the roof. I repeated, making wall panels from bundles of grass stands. The design of my building satisfied, and I built two more. One was a dry store for grasses and other inflammables. The second was a proper cookhouse at the farthest corner of my homestead, near the passage down to the beach, for reasons of hygiene and convenience. I felt rather proud of my chimney design, just a covered elevation of a hole in the roof, but it worked perfectly. My seafood larder also worked well, and proved to be the ideal place to store fish and shellfish for eating later.

Spending more time at the homestead, I decided to save most of my easily available fuel resources, by setting the signal fire ready, without lighting it during the day. Some evenings, I sat atop the sentry rock and kept watch over the dark emptiness that echoed my inner spirit. I searched in vain for ships' lights in the enduring night; and turned my eyes unto the heavens, casting my hopes and desperation amongst the stars. I neither saw, nor heard any ship or aircraft, and was beginning to lose track of the days.

People would probably search for me for one week, perhaps two I mused disconsolate, before presuming me lost at sea. I started to keep a log of the days I had been on the island, using a simple marking system of scratches upon the western rock standing sentry to my one-man realm, as my small life fell into a routine. I gathered tinder, tried my hand at weaving with the long island grass, and survived.

Small discoveries and endeavours now dominated my daily thoughts and waking hours. I stumbled upon stands of olives and figs, some date palms, and many other fruits and vegetables, during one of my forays. At home, I designed a latrine system and planted large patches of Wu Tao and other edible plants I had found, including coriander and a relative of wild asparagus.

I am making a life here, I ruminated, albeit not one of my own choosing. With sadness, I marked on the sentinel rock the coming of my fifteenth day; my hopes of rescue dwindled, as I stood to stare at the mark; inside my spirit drooped. Unbidden anger surged through me and I screamed out "Why, why me?"

My rage passed quickly, but the frustration of my predicament remained, gnawing away inside of me. I dropped to my knees, and cried.

By the third week, I was living a 'sort-of' life, feeling like being in a fast-forward history lesson on evolution. Advanced enough to build a second shelter, I created another, being a vast improvement upon my first design – I now had four buildings and jauntily dubbed the collection *The Village*. For no reason except my tentative hold on sanity, I plaited colourful dried grasses into a number six, and hung it outside the door.

One of my butane lighters was getting low on gas; I spent one whole day trying to make fire. I had not discovered anything like flint, so tried several experiments with techniques culled from movies, reading, and the like. Sincerely hoping at least one author or director had done real research, I varied materials and ideas, until finally succeeding in fashioning a form of bow-drill from bamboo that worked surprisingly well, and was easy to use. The next day I quickly made a second, one that would be handy to take with me, because there were still several areas of the peninsula I had not properly reconnoitred.

Time passed quickly; as I worked agate into blades, made a new knife with proper handle, and several light spears for fishing. I also improved the hearth so that it had many functions, and set a separate fire pit for relaxation purposes, and a third as signal fire.

My skills improved. I made several new carriers out of twisted and knotted grass string, fashioned traps to catch crabs and lobsters, and even made a couple of simple fishing nets with which to make

catching salmon a great deal easier. My menu was often a seafood soup cooked in a hollowed out rock ideal for the purpose.

It became my habit to climb the sentry rock most evenings and gaze out from my new home. My fire's singular point of light marking a stark contrast to the vast, sparkling entreaty of the stars above. Sometimes I merely watched the skies, whilst at other times; thoughts centred upon my family, friends, and others. Memories came unbidden and clouded my mind with a longing for human contact, and with them sadness that I may never see them; nor anyone, ever again.

When my stone calendar marked the passing of over four weeks in exile; I dismissed the idea of rescue. Constant worries about missing the chance passing of a boat or a low-flying aircraft, were becoming debilitating obstructions to my longer-term survival prospects.

A unique experience allowed me to banish forever, the last of my modern paradigms, and accept life as it came. I learned date palm fruits fermented into a lethal form of rum that was highly delicious, even in its raw form.

The day following my first interaction with this debilitating fluid, saw me less than well for most of the duration. As penitence, I ate half a crab and drank only water before sleeping the day away. Once I got over the hangover, I cursed myself for being so stupid. A wiser section of my psyche stated the point of, if I enjoyed the release – *yes!* – What was the problem?

I had absolutely no answer to that. I strolled barefoot along the beach hoping inspiration would strike; the more I reflected, the freer I felt to hop and play within the lapping surf.

My musings carried me to the sentry rock. La Luna was coming once more into her glory, and atop I felt immediately at peace. I had no idea how long I stayed there. I simply stared into the vast skies above and felt worthless beneath their glory. As I lost the day-to-day relevance of modern science, I appeared to be coming greatly aware of the nuances of nature, and Gaia's great works all around me.

I slept well, and in the morning felt restored. There was a full day ahead, which I would use to collect tinder, and anything that looked remotely useful from the far side of the island. I particularly needed more dry seed heads, like large Dandelion heads, to start my fires.

My day's wanderings returned me to the place I came ashore. I stopped to wonder just how I had survived, because the only sheltered place was where I crawled to that night. Sometimes it is best not to question such improbabilities. However, I remembered her voice, her words of kindness and insistent urging comfiture. I blew a wish of thanks, and sent it into the ether.

I walked over the rocks, retracing my initial day – I was still a bit incoherent during that time and felt an instinctual urge to check for anything I might have missed. Catching sight of a seal playing in the ocean waters, I smiled with understanding of its frolic. Admittedly, I was also smiling because seals hunt fish ... so where there are seals, there are also good catches. I followed the stream as I did on my first day, stopping briefly to collect some pumice, and closing to where the water veered towards the volcano walls.

I stopped to rest on an inviting rock, laying the bundles I had collected to one side. The climb, although gentle, was a long one. I recharged my muscles and leaned to drink from the stream. I saw an oval rock about one and a half inches long that was very distinct with unusual redness. I picked it up curiously, and held it to the sun; it was translucent, and yet unworldly. I was sure, if polished, it would be beautiful and was possibly a carnelian. I pocketed the crystal before picking up my burdens and heading homewards.

Within a few minutes, I reached the dividing gorge and looked properly at the landforms. A long detour was not what I needed that day. Perhaps it was because of the light being a different, or because I felt so much stronger, but I recognised the shortcut. Getting down my side of the divide looked relatively easy, and just to my left was a slight rill that ran up the opposing wall. I check it thoroughly and it appeared to work as a rudimentary staircase. I wondered how I missed it last time?

Very pleased about finding the short cut, I scrambled down, then up the rill on the other side. It was simple enough, although it did require me to use my hands and crab a little. I scrambled down the other side into the valley I knew so well, and was soon following the rim that runs between the volcano walls and the verdant valley below.

The going was effortless; I looked around and spotted small flowers and shrubby resistance, as the brook that fed the lake came into view. I had almost reached the stream that fed the egg-shaped lake, when I saw paired standing stones. They were less than two feet high, but as I looked closely, I could

make out ancient symbols, probably of runic derivation. I did not stop long, because the day was passing, my pack heavy, and the sun was setting quickly. Then I saw it, a shimmer of darkness in my peripheral vision. I looked and there was nothing. I retraced my steps, and it came again.

Fixing where I knew the aberration to be, I dropped my pack and headed directly for it, passing between the two standing stones. Despite knowing whereabouts it was, the anomaly was hard to find, but I had fixed in my mind where it was, and walked directly towards it. I was stunned to find there was a small rock porch. It led into a channel that led deep within the rock.

I found I could just squeeze through the gap, if I tucked my head down and crawled. It ended after several feet, and I felt an opening down and to my right. I squatted and slid around, feeling the aperture was perhaps three feet high; I extended my left leg into it, and found a gap. I edged down and discovered a rough step inside. I worried about continuing; if I were to proceed, would I become trapped and unable to get out again—never mind what horrid beasties may lie salivating inside.

My chest began to heave, and I felt as if the small space was shrinking. I could sense the entire bulk of the mountain above me. The logical side of my brain kicked in, and I overcame my animal instincts. Somewhere so hidden could be a great refuge in times of ghastly weather. Then I noticed that had I taken another step, there was a hollow of almost an alcove set back to allow for turning. *Could this be manmade?* I set my body deep into the alcove, and had room to manoeuvre once more. With a twist and rise, I could get in and out easily, whilst an inner opening was now directly facing me, and appeared to have steps down.

I ventured inside, and once past the threshold, could stand easily once more. I felt I was in a large chamber, and sat for a minute, allowing my eyes to adjust. With time, I began to make out a hollow perhaps twenty yards at its widest, by the same deep. The floor was smooth and level, the immediate cavern empty of debris or impeding features. Walking confidently forwards, I noted what I had imagined to be one large space, actually divided centrally near the rear, with a large part of the rear right side covered by fallen rocks, and the left side an equal space that was clear.

I headed left, and noticed slightly prominent columns stood proud of the curving walls. Upon closer examination, mainly by touch, these revealed deliberate markings. *It was manmade!* With eyes and fingertips, I made out something similar to pictographs, but quite reminiscent of a very ancient Chinese script I saw once while visiting The Forbidden City Museum in Beijing with Mai Li. I had absolutely no idea what anything meant. It was mainly composed of horizontal and vertical lines, occasionally intersected by other shapes, such as circles, ovals, and dots. Some were rune-like in appearance. I knew that even if I could see it properly, I would still have absolutely no clue what it all meant.

My time spent enduring years of nightshifts, often conducted in low-level light, finally brought rewards. So long as I kept the exit out of line of sight, I could see fairly well. There appeared to be other columns protruding from the rock face, and a small, carved rock set to one side. Perhaps this was an offering stone to the ancestors. With my back to the light, I cast my eyes around again and noted the otherwise smooth walls and ceilings. The shape was generally that of a heart, as looked at from above, with the entrance at the pointed tip; I sensed there should be a reason why, but it eluded me. I took a seat on one of the caved-in rocks and noticed its rough surface, so very unlike the rest of the smooth and shiny stonework. I spent another minute looking around, but there was absolutely nothing else, apart from the strange carvings.

I took one last glance back at the curves and slopes; I imagined that if I were to cut a modern 3-D heart shape in two, then this is what I would have left. With that thought I left, and managed to get out far easier than I had feared. It was awkward, but once the correct body dynamics were used, it became a breeze. The place would be perfect if I ever needed to hideout for any reason, so I left a small block of pumice on the ridge below the entrance, to help me find it again next time.

The way back was easy; I stopped briefly to collect my gleanings, walked to the nearby stream, and took a long drink. Before long, evening shadows encroached once more, I headed directly for the homestead, and to continue with my simple life.

That evening I was restless; images of the cave nagged my mind, but could not understand why. I ate, but was inexplicably agitated; I stared down from the edge of the village at the beach some twelve feet below. I looked over to the volcano walls, and headed towards the causeway of a ramp that gave easy

access to the sand and surf. I wandered aimlessly, before I took myself up to the top of the sentry rock, and stared out across the infinity of time and space. Calmed, I fell asleep.

I woke with a start as daylight broke the horizon. That was not what bothered me; I was clutching a bone, the remains of a hand. In my sleep, I had dislodged a clump of hardy grass within the rocky top, and was left staring at aged bones, and a strange black stone they held. It reminded me of the hidden cavern, and I examined it carefully. It was identical, star like flashes entrapped within the two-inch diameter round that was a quarter of an inch deep, and concave on both sides. It was most odd. I pocketed it, and made my way down for breakfast.

Chapter 4 - Mystery Food

One might consider the island a paradise, but it was not. Everything concerned with maintaining my life I had to do myself. That was good, because it stopped my mind from idling and dwelling upon my fate. I knew I was talking to myself a lot, often out loud. The insidiously mounting pressure of always being alone threatened to engulf me, to rend my mind apart, and scatter my sanity. Yet I remained steadfast in the face of each adversity, despite bouts of desperate loneliness – I determined to prevail.

Being busy and focusing on survival helped greatly, securing my mind in the present. I worked hard that day, and slept well. I woke with dawn breaking, as usual, stretched out, and knocked something near my head. I froze knowing nothing should be there, before leaping out of bed and drawing my knife.

I stared at a small parcel wrapped in banana leaves, and neatly tied with a wrap of grass-like string. I grabbed my spear in total alarm, and began searching the village for any sign of intruders; there were none. The beach was devoid of tracks, as was the only other approach to my camp from the heartland. I doused my head with cold water from the stream and drank deeply.

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

I reached forward tentatively with my left and weaker hand, and briefly probed the inside, before jumping away like a backwards-leaping frog. The parcel remained there, unmoved.

I sat on my haunches and tried to conjure an explanation, but nothing was forthcoming. To understand it, I needed to know exactly what it was. I advanced brazenly towards the package, and stabbed it again for good measure. I took a deep breath, and risking my weaker left hand, tentatively picked it up. Exhaling, I examine the puncture wound in the enveloping leaf and discovered what appeared to be a grain offering, just like some I had eaten in China. I smelled it, and it smelled of food. I set it down on the floor once more, and proceeded to break it in half with my knife. Flicking the sides apart, I made the acquaintance of two halves of a rice loaf stuffed with either a fruit or vegetable filling. I dipped a finger to taste, and it was good. I ate a little, and then a little more: very good.

§

My mind was preoccupied, as the enigmatic food packages continued to appear, one each night; and every morning found me suspiciously inspecting them. During the first few days, I remained vigilant in my mistrust; later I came to accept them as a part of my daily routine.

Yet, grateful though I was, I could not let go of my need to discover where – and from whom – this bounty came from. I laid ingenious and futile traps to expose my benefactor, and stayed awake late into the night. With one eye shielded by my arm, I feigned sleep, my focus steady upon the single spot where these parcels inexplicably and persistently appeared. But I was unable to discover the mechanism of their delivery.

The rice packages continued to arrive every morning, before a hint of first light. I could only conclude I was not paranoid – someone, somewhere was looking out for me; but whom, and where? I tried to avoid thinking about how the parcels arrived; my sanity of lonesome exile was already stretched too far.

One night by chance I slept early and came awake before my usual time. I glanced at the spot and realised there was nothing there. I sheltered my eyes immediately, observing through eyelashes. After ten æon-long minutes, the air shimmered, and the food appeared. I lay there absorbing this impossibility. I could hear my mind as it; *Crack'd*.

For the life of me, all I could think was, “Wow! Beam me up Scotty.” This was impossible, but there it was, a rice parcel where nothing was a moment before.

My mind lurched; I was close to the edge of lunacy. Instead of falling into the abyss, I whirled around and without thought, climbed the sentry rock. I stared out into the nothingness for a long time, before returning in acceptance; any other resolution embraced madness. I returned to my home and untied the rice parcel, eating with relish. The normal metre of my life resumed, this time with the accepted inclusion of teleported rice packages.

Sometimes I woke in time to witness 'The Appearance' as I came to call it. As every time before, at first there was nothing, the air shimmered weirdly, and the food package magically appeared. I concluded this always happened at the very earliest edge of dawn, and before I would naturally awaken with the sunrise.

To make thanks for the parcels and return the blessing, I left out gifts of my own over the course of a few evenings; a crab, fish, or lobster. None were taken. Were my offerings unwanted, or was this whatever it was, unavoidably a one-way thingymagig?

My days continued to be filled with the trifles of survival. Summer arrived like a supply train for the poor and bereft, bringing the world to vibrant life. The vegetation, and I upon it, thrived. Late one day I was chopping dry wood for my fire, using the latest, improved axe I had fashioned from agate, when I was struck by a revelation. It was so obvious I could not believe I had missed it.

How could rocks fall from a perfectly formed and intact ceiling?

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

The hairs upon my back came alive; I was searching for denial. Memories connected. I also found the small black rock that night. Reflecting upon those events in conjunction, I realised I found the red stone the same day. The possible significance of any of these escaped me, and I surrendered the entire confusion to my intuitive subconscious.

It was getting late, the sun set quickly in those parts. I forwent an expedition back to the cave until the next day, thinking, "I'll satisfy my curiosity and start on stocking it up at the same time." Not that I ever expect to need such a hidey-hole. I had been alone so long I could not sometimes tell if I was speaking my thoughts aloud or not.

I departed at the cusp of the coming dawn, and made directly for the cavern. I found it easily enough, and after my eyes acclimatised to the low-level light, which seemed slightly brighter than previous, all was revealed; my memory was correct. The ceiling above was flawless. The smoothness meant the rocks were placed for a reason. *What secret are you hiding?*

With mounting expectation, I started removing them, and some were so cumbersome they had to be rolled away. Working inwards I soon came across a hard, raised layer of slightly metallic black rock. It was perfectly unmarred and once wiped clean, was highly polished, and identical to the stone I found atop the sentry rock. I took the small stone out of my pocket for comparison, and the light imperceptibly increased.

I stopped. Another aberration? I put the stone back in my pocket, and the light dimmed, but the change was ever so slight. Another mystery, but the stone and cave had to be related. I placed the stone on the exposed rock; the material was identical. I removed more boulders and began to reveal the outline of a large stone circle. There was a lot of rock to shift and I was eager to discover what lay beneath.

I spent the entire day hauling rock out of the cavern; there was tons of it. The largest I rolled or levered away, and I was exhausted. I had revealed nearly all of a large circle made of the same star-lit black stone, but there was still a few hours work left to clear the whole. The light grew dimmer outside, and I had to call it a day.

I gave the round one more glance, before grabbing my rucksack and heading for the entrance. My eyes were very well adjusted to the low level light, and so much so that upon reaching the alcove I had to stop and close them, as even the indirect sunlight hurt my retinas. The air was fresher there, and I lingered for several minutes before continuing to the outside.

I could feel the dust of ages past on my face, a reminder of times long gone. Once clear of the small tunnel I went directly to the lake, washing off the grime, and taking a long drink. Once cleansed, I sat and mused. Who or what made the circle. Was it a device? Why should it even be there, and how was it put there in the first place? Perhaps more importantly – why did someone go to so much trouble to cover it up? I had no answers except that the chances of this discovery being a natural formation were simply impossible.

The next morning my muscles were aching, but I packed more than previously, including extra food and the ubiquitous rice package. I had a mission to complete, and knew this would be a day of

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

I examined everything, and could not find the slightest hint of a join. The thing had been manufactured as one whole. I shook my head and took brunch at the nearby stream, eating half a lobster and a Wu Tao. I needed time for thinking. With no resolution, I headed back, throwing my carryall down just within the circle. I spent several hours trying to understand what the cavern was, but to no avail. I felt deflated, and perched my backside on the circle rim, abstractly reaching for the remains of the lobster. I was not hungry; I just needed something physically distracting.

Upon a whim, I took out the round stone I had discovered atop the sentry rock, and examined it closely. It was a perfect match for the circle, the consol, the entire room. I leaned over to compare it with the nearby rock, but my oily fingers lost their grip, and it flipped from my grasp. I reached to retrieve it, but stopped, shocked, amazed. The stone rolled around the surface of the circle, following exactly a path between the twin spirals. I stared transfixed, as it closed on the centre, span, and settled dead centre.

I went over to pick it up, but it was locked in place. Impossibility surrounded all my senses, I stood and tried to prise it away with my knife, but to no avail. I hit it in frustration; the absurdity was undermining my grasp of reality. The stone depressed into the centre, and I was faced with twelve glowing runes that waxed and waned. They encircled the black centre, and some looked strangely familiar, as if astrological signs.

I was facing a puzzle, and had but one clue. By deduction, I made out all twelve signs of the zodiac, although their configuration was a little odd. After studying the possibilities, I became reckless and punched the runes of my star-date: Aries, my sun sign; Scorpio, my rising sign; and Pisces, my mid heaven.

The runes locked as I pressed them, glowing red; I could not change them, or make them go away, they were set. If this was a lock, I needed the key. Not knowing what else to do, I looked to the heavens, only to find the leering black ceiling full of pointed glimpses of light that seem to be laughing at my futile travails. I wrenched my eyes away disconsolate, imagining the stone disk button joining them, I stabbed it with my index finger in frustration.

Off balance as my forefinger continued to thrust into the heart of the now forgiving stone, I realised something was not right. I was falling, being drawn inwards by such powerful forces, I was completely at their mercy, helpless to resist. I was sure to drown within this monstrosity, but instead; a flash of shimmering white light surrounded me, as I continued to feel as if I was falling further, and further still.

I was left hanging in some form of suspended animation within light that surged, as it powered within and around me. I had the very odd sensation that I was being scanned. I could not determine whether I was held for moments or hours, because time was suspended in that weird place. It resumed its earth bound metre once more, as I heard the thudding of my heart replace the wondrous engulfing light, which subsided as quickly as it came.

I came to lying on my back within the circle. The cave appeared to be the same, and so did I. I sat, but wobbled slightly and waited until the after-effects wore off. Looking down, I prodded myself to check my body was still real. I noticed the black disc in the centre of the transporter, and reached to pick it up. This time it came free and was soon clutched in my right palm. Tentatively I stood, and was soon feeling like my old self, and extremely healthy, alert. I shook my head in denial and wonder, breathing aloud, "Was that real?"

I looked about and noticed the cave appeared to be the same, but was slightly different. The light intensity had greatly increased, allowing me to see with ease. The cupboard had altered, and now stood like a desktop set upon a pedestal. I ran over to it, finding a flat surface to the front, which now banked sharply upwards to the rear. In many ways, it looked like some form of console, but was blank.

I inspected it at length, and the only thing of note was a small, circular depression set to the centre front, and about the size of my stone. My next move would appear obvious, but I remained wary after my recent experience. However, after careful examination there appeared to be nothing else to do, so I placed the black disc in the slightly convex depression.

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

Later I pressed buttons in order, when I tried a new group, most of the panel locked out. There did not appear to be an “undo,” so whatever I had done was perhaps activated. I tried other groupings, one revealing a scene that was very familiar, yet different. I was witness to a vast caldera; I presumed this was what lay on the other side of the volcanic walls.

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

I felt as if I came apart – merest happenstance of microcosms of futile resistance, pinpoints of life becoming my residual worth, the only remnants of my being scattering; yet recombining substance, within the brightness.

The light invaded every fibre of my existence, everything that was my essence, I: my essential core of being. Panic rose as the bright intensity reached a crescendo; my known world warped. A powerful force engulfed me, pulling away my body at its whim. I was terrified – accepting that; I had now lost my mind.

The light left me as quickly as it came, and I felt sun-warmed rock beneath my hands. I jerked my head up, and stunned, stared at the world confronting me. It was somewhere I had never been before.

I had materialised somewhere I almost knew. Gone was the cavern, replaced by verdant vegetation, and the familiar volcano walls. This time I was lying inside them.

I was at the focal point of the screen I had just used.

Chapter 5 – Company at Last

I stood on shaky legs, and turned around to survey this wonder. Volcanic walls still rose unto the heavens nearby, but this time I was inside their protective shield. I could not think, but simply gawped in awe. This was absolutely impossible. I closed my eyes hoping the world would revert to normal; but, when I reopened them, it remained the same.

I was aware I had just been teleported somewhere. From the sky, ambience, temperature, everything; I knew instinctively I was very close by to where I had been moments ago. Physically I felt fine and had not lost an ear or a toe; mentally I was completely shell-shocked. My eyes instinctively scanned for signs of life in this new realm, but my mind was far away, hijacked by the devilish imps of impossibility.

The Unknownst and Unknowable surrounded me; engulfed me, their entirety entered my soul; invaded my most private of being: Yet – without; I remained alone.

Questions crashed within me: How could this be possible? Was I insane, hallucinating wildly? I pinched myself deeply and yelled out with pain. It was real; I was real; so what had happened? For the sake of my sanity, there was only recourse – those rare writers, Gene Roddenberry, Stephen Donaldson; who imagined the possibility of molecular transportation; they were correct. I had just been transported.

Despite the feeling of fading disorientation, I pulled myself away from the delusional reverie, and heard the trickle of water somewhere nearby. The stream was clear and smelled good; I subsequently quenched my thirst.

I felt like a toddler who had just punched an arbitrary sequence into a brail keyboard, and had been sucked into a video game. I stared, but was no longer fazed, which was weird. I had half expected the cavern to be a transportation device. Now I had physical proof.

Everything I had placed in the circle had been transported with me; this was now my new reality. Once more, I had little of nothing, castaway in the hinterland, and a new life to begin all over again. I wondered momentarily, “Will this life include people? If it does, will they be friendly?” I needed to be ready and alert; I packed everything into my rucksack and hefted it onto my back. It was a shame I did not bring the spear with me, but I could make another. At least I had two sharp blades kept handy and ready for use.

My mind awash with disjointed thoughts; safety, exploration, hiding, and how I got there – confusion reigned. Intangible notions battered my remaining senses, as I battled to secure my presence in this unknown and probably hostile world. Constantly, my mind drifted back to contemplate the strange and surely Alien machine, if simply because it was beyond my known technology.

Like a lost child, my brain overloaded with howling conundrums. My eyes were seeing, but only looking inwards. I reached into my bag instinctively and light a cigarette. The smoke was quieting, invading my being with something I understood. I sat to wonder, my heart slowing as I acclimated to my new situation. With the nicotine came a sliver of clarity. I rose with purpose, knowing the unanswerable could wait; it was time to begin surviving all over again.

Threats? There did not appear to be any – yet, but if my intuition was correct, and this was the inside of the volcano, then it may have a separate fauna and flora. Until I was reasonably sure of security, I needed to be careful and not take any chances. I needed to scout the immediate vicinity, and find some form of shelter for the coming night. The sun had already passed its zenith; there was no time to waste.

Spurred to action, I set off at once. I did not go very far as the land below the rim was thick with foliage, interspersed with animal trails. In places, it was like a jungle, but at other spots, grass and shrubs prevailed. I stumbled upon some straight wood and finding a river, stopped to fashion a spear. It was far from perfect and not tempered by fire yet, but it was far better than nothing.

Constantly, when not preoccupied, my mind wandered back to the transportation. I fought to put the thoughts aside; they were becoming a weakness. Savage animals or warlike natives could find me at any moment. I needed to make my mind right in order to survive any challenge.

I spent several hours in discovery, and did not feel unduly threatened by the wildness surrounding. It was similar to what I already knew from the headland. I followed the stream back whence I came, and found a suitable crevice nearby that was obscured from view, yet provided a panoramic field of sight. I reasoned this would be ideal for the night, and it was more than large enough to accommodate my belongings and I.

I searched nearby, and found long grass that was dry and suitable for making a bed. It was warmer; the volcanic walls protected the interior from the wind. With shelter obtained, I searched the surrounding area for tinder, moving quickly to cover as much ground as quickly as possible. Later I sat hidden within my vantage point as the waning sun cast shadows across the land before me, and I watched alert for any signs of movement or human activity. There appeared to be absolutely nothing.

Satisfied I had not been observed by anyone with hostile intentions, I decided to eat. I had one cold lobster left, which I devoured, accompanied by a Chinese potato and small rice parcel. I took the shell out of habit, and washed it in the stream, before taking a long drink of water. I also filled my bamboo mug with water and returned to my vantage point. I checked the surroundings again in the half light and satisfied, lay down to retire for the day.

My sleep was unsettled, I woke several times in slight panic, but sensed nothing untoward. The mysterious device that apparently transported me, I had to accept it as fact; but it continued to trouble my mind. I came properly awake as dawn broke, and wondered whether to go around the outside of the crater, or head for the centre. The previous night was not comfortable, and I still had not assessed the danger properly. I decided to reconnoitre the local area quickly.

I sat up and, perceiving no movement, began to thoroughly inspect the terrain. I clambered up the volcano walls until the going got difficult and the rocks treacherous under foot.

Sitting against the slope, I made a careful inspection of the land below. There appeared to be a forest way over to my right, which was north. I estimated I could see quite clearly for maybe ten or twelve miles, after which the vista became blurred, but I thought I could make out volcano walls at the extremes of perception. At the farthest of my definite vision, to the centre and right, lay the sparkle of water. There appeared to be a large lake of indeterminate shape.

There was no sign of fire or smoke whatsoever. The rest of the land was very similar to that which occupied the headland I had been living on for the last four months. Assorted bushy shrubs mingled with the verdant vegetation, interspersed with occasional stands of palm or tall firs. Deciduous woodland held tenure of the northwest, and jungle permeated the central area, fed by several rivers. The pastiche was incredible, a microcosm of fertility in all its forms.

I returned to my temporary camp with no firm idea of where to begin my exploration. I packed ready for leaving and noticed the wrapper and ties from the last gift I received. There had been no offering left by my head during the night.

I spent the day making a thorough examination of the area in front of me, searching for better shelter and sustenance. I discovered a type of large damson, and more Wu Tao, which I cooked on the second morning as hunger pangs started to make my life miserable. I tempered the point of my new spear in the fire as I sat to ruminate on my confused thoughts once more.

Later, near the forest, I disturbed a small wild boar foraging in the undergrowth, and watching it flee, understanding immediately my chances of survival had dramatically improved. That evening I had returned to my hideaway, as nothing better had presented itself to me thus far. I had already decided to start out at first light the following morning, and walk straight ahead towards the interior.

I woke with the first hint of dawn, and found a food parcel perched precariously on a rock by the entrance of my hideaway. I was wondering when my island angel would catch up with me. The parcel was larger than the others before, but contained the familiar wild rice and mango. I decided to take it with me and eat later. I packed everything I had with the intention of not returning, and would make a new bed elsewhere that evening. I collected enough dry tinder to start several fires, but not any secondary kindling or wood, as that was plentiful.

My trek began in the luminescence that precedes dawn, and I made steady progress as I walked straight ahead. Passing a brackish area, I discovered it was formed by the overflow of a small stream to the west. I tasted the river water and it was cool and sweet. The rivulet headed westwards, and I followed it until it disappeared into the swallow-hole. The land rose before me, as stands of larval deposits barred my passage at every turn to the west. I stopped to gauge the sun, and found it was already after midday.

My search for a way over or through the containing perimeter continued, as I followed the barrier north and came to the southern edge of the forest. My mind was still puzzling about the transportation device as my eyes searched for a way around this obstacle.

I froze. Something was not right. I took my spear and knife in hand, and smelled the air, all my senses aware. I heard a strong thump of the ground before a crashing movement to my right revealed the largest, hairiest pig I had ever seen in my life. It was hurtling towards me with its tusks lowered to the ground. I reacted instantly, scrambling up the nearby rocks, and throwing myself onto a small ledge in desperation. The giant hog, the size of a hippopotamus, tried to follow, but was no match for me, even if I only just put enough distance between us in time.

Climbing higher still until I was sure the brute could not follow, I turned and looked down at this most dangerous beast. He in turn looked back at me with piggy eyes and a menacing icy stare. Time passed, and it became apparent he was waiting me out; I needed to break the spell. I took out a cigarette and lit it—simply because I thought this was a very stupid and unknown thing to do. The monster below soon caught the strange repugnant scent, and watching me blow smoke into the air, grunted deeply in disgust, and digging his hoof into the earth, mooched off Northwards. Relief came as laughter; I considered I might be the only person alive, whose life was ever saved because they smoked a cigarette.

As my pulse finally slowed, I realised that heading for the forest was no longer a good idea. The rocky barrier confronting me was proving to be most troublesome, for someone with no mountaineering instincts and a fear of heights. It was a formidable, natural barrier. I needed to understand my situation in the larger sense, so spent a little more time looking for a way to climb higher. I also intended to head in the opposite direction from *Boss Hog* so scrambled south along the rocks for as far as they would allow.

Dusk was closing in quickly by the time I found a breach that could be suitable for my limited rock-climbing skills. I worked my way tentatively forwards and became aware of the sound of water falling nearby. I reached the end of the crevice as it tightened to a constriction and I could get no further. However, through a very small gap I could make out the vague shapes of lowland ahead, before it faded into blackness with the setting sun.

I returned to the main ledge and acknowledged I had mere minutes left before nightfall engulfed me in darkness. Scanning quickly, I detected the outline of a small crevice, and headed for it instantly. It was just large enough for me to enter and had a rolled edge that would stop me falling out during the night. It was also quite close to the ground, and had I known of its existence beforehand, I thought I could have scrambled up. Weary, I took up residence and stopped to eat for the first time that day. The simplest food was the rice parcel; I tucked into it with gusto and leaning back, fell instantly to sleep through exhaustion.

I came awake the next morning as the slightest hint of daylight marked the sky. My problem was that I knew I was awake because I heard something. Senses alert, I stayed immobile, hoping the giant hog hadn't found me once more. I was reaching for my trusty blade, when I heard a small pebble plop to the ground beneath, closely followed by a faint human grunt similar to "Hey-ah!"

My fingers gripped the dagger fiercely, as I covered my head with my other, left arm. I hid my wide-open eyes, whilst leaving my ears with excellent reception. A small escape of breath near my head indicated somebody was extremely close. I watched amazed, as a small yellow hand placed a food parcel near my head. Dropping the dagger, I pounced with both hands, and grabbed the extremities. I heard the shrieking of a girl as I rose to see what and whom I had caught.

My eyes locked with those of a teenage girl, who was petrified. The faint light revealed that she was sort of Chinese looking, but a bit too yellow and simply *wrong* somehow—the eyes had it. I gently released my grip and held up both my hands; fingers spread skywards and palms outwards, hoping to display I was no threat and meant her no harm. She bolted instantly, and before I could get a proper look at her, she disappeared and was gone.

I started to chase and hunt her down, before it dawned upon me this was exactly the wrong thing to do with the person presumably responsible for providing the food packages. Basic animal communication was where we were at. I reasoned that if she were still around, she would be watching me. I needed to define my reaction, as she would interpret it. I needed to show her my true intentions. I deliberately made a show of gathering my belongings, and picking up the rice package, headed down to ground level. I was still wary of the boar, so found an exposed and handy rock five feet above the ground, and sat down upon it to eat.

I placed the package before me, and clasped my closed right fist within my left, making the traditional sign of Chinese greetings and honour to another. The same sign, but with extended left fingers, is the Kung Fu fighting symbol, with the angle of raised fingers revealing the depth of respect. I kept my hands

closed and bowed around. Taking the parcel, I made a deliberate show of really enjoying the contents. A couple of times I mimicked like a dog and chomping, made a great show of opening and closing my mouth in obvious delight.

My one wish was for the girl to return so we could renew our brief encounter, and whilst my instincts told me she had come closer once more, I could not see her, or even guess at where she was hiding. I inwardly cursed myself for being so stupid as to try to catch her – probably frightening her half to death in the process. *Stupid, stupid Jack – you finally meet another person for the first time in four months, and you scare her away by your clumsy antics.* I continued to castigate myself, but in the end acknowledged; what was done, was done.

Finishing the food, I made a show of licking the wrapper, before putting it in my rucker. I had the feeling I was back somewhere quite close to where the stream disappeared into the swallow hole. First checking for gigantic pigs of malevolent intent, I jumped down and promenaded towards the south. I heard the slightest giggle from somewhere over my left shoulder, guessing the origin, and turning, took a deep bow. However, I was now baiting her, so swivelled and continued my fanciful strut. What the hell, it's not everyday you catch a glimpse of somebody else on a completely deserted island. This interaction was so very important to me; so easy to get utterly wrong.

My bearings were a little bit off, but not by much. I found the stream after a short walk and made a show of laying down my pack, washing, and taking a drink. I realised I was thirsty, so took more water before another thought struck me. I got the bamboo cup out of my rucksack and filling it, took a small drink, before setting it down beside me. I smiled and gazed around as if I were on a beach, as I abstractly took another drink. I toyed with the idea of lighting another cigarette simply for show, but thoughts of her seeing me smoking could represent a threat, so I decide not too. The boar though, that was a threat to remember, but I didn't want to scare this girl away.

I need not have bothered, as the faint sounds of running footsteps behind me to the South indicated she had already made a run for it. I thought I may have caught the merest glimpse of her, or I may not have done. It was pointless trying to follow, as she was long-gone. However, I now knew I was not alone; and I also determined there must be others.

The impact was shocking; the totality of great relief and thankfulness overtook my rationale. To finally know there was friendly company at last – Oh how had my life suddenly become so much richer for that small discovery. She could just have easily stabbed me through the heart. However, she did not. Instead, she gave me food.

My mind awry: I thought back to the image of her, caught as it were, like prey in the headlights of a car. The briefest image, but one ingrained forever in my mind. I smelled the hand where I held her hoping for a further clue, but found not the faintest scent. I even licked where our strongest contact was, but again, I perceive naught, even when I held this to my nose and breathed in deeply.

Finally, a faint sound from the north disturbed my inner monologue, and I remembered the horrendous hog, the size of a small bison, and deadly. I came back to my senses and thought on my feet, throwing the rucker over my shoulders once more, and headed off south at a trot.

I had been expecting some sort of sign after one hundred paces or so, but the first came after almost half a mile. There in the scrubby dirt was an intentional mark that lay diagonally across the path. It appeared fresh and very deliberate. I presumed this was pointing to my right (West) and not left, where I could see nothing but dense scrub. There was a stand of thorn bush plants blocking my way and view; beyond them only more rock. However, a closer inspection revealed bent blades of grass going round the bush. I followed and was amazed to discover a long sought breach in the walls that had trapped me.

I strode confidently through, and reaching the natural path down, stopped stone cold dead. Before me lay a long and wide valley stretching as far as I the eye could see. My focus was upon the obvious signs of human husbandry. There were water channels, far too deliberate and straight to be natural. In the distance, rudimentary buildings prospered, perhaps five miles away, whilst over to the north, a fine lake took up much of the immediate landscape. Beyond this were trees and shrubs that were not of a natural happenstance.

My eyes returned to the hamlet and signs of human presence. Nearby, the lone figure of a girl ran along a track, away from me. I watched her intently, until my vision wavered. My walled mind cracked within that fractal moment with an outpouring of fortuitous, emotional release.

I wept.

Chapter 6 – Welcome

My tears subsided as I heaved with relief. I came alive with unbridled elation and the portent of what was to come.

I could make out a faint trail running close to the canal in the distance. The girl was farther away some miles distant. Was she running away from me, or leading me forwards? I knew that her and mine destinations were the same. That was where I was headed directly.

I scrambled down and followed in her footsteps. My descent was by no means elegant or easy. Reaching the bottom, I regained my composure, and meeting the trail, marched forward. In my eagerness, I jogged much of the way, quickening my pace, longing for human contact once more.

After several miles, the path crossed a small stream, where a primitive canal and irrigation network watered an area that was growing wild rice. As with modern rural China, there were occasional plantings of mangos and other crops. I hurried past into the unknown, until the village finally came into view atop a slight rise.

I was out of breath after my run, so sat upon a nearby rock to recover. Up until that point, I had not seen a soul, but knew there must be people watching me intently. There was still half a mile to go before I reached the village, but I wanted to arrive fresh, not jaded.

My mind urged me to run to the village, but I paused – this was probably the most important play I had ever made in my life, so I decided: *Go confident and non-threatening*. Therefore, instead of rushing recklessly into the unfamiliar, I took a moment to clear my mind and drew the *chi*, centring myself in preparation for whatever was to come. With my eyes closed, I felt the warmth of the sun and drew it into my solar plexus.

The whole performance took only one minute, but I had made a show that also delivered great benefits for my composure. Opening my eyes, I rose immediately and walked purposefully towards the village, impatient to meet people and rejoin civilisation.

The hamlet was composed of at least fifty large round houses that vaguely resembled Mongolian nomadic tents. However, they were not covered with canvas or hides, but instead were enclosed with grass bundles that resembled a primitive thatch. I presumed that either long lengths of bamboo or other wood acted as internal supports.

The doorways were gaps, about five feet high, and slightly tapering to the top. One or two had a similarly constructed frame propped nearby, which presumably was the door. All had an ornate crown and were decorated with colourful grass plaits and flowers.

The hamlet was set out in a rather odd fashion, with one very big hut directly in front of me. Another hut, not quite as large, stood nearby, with the rest of the buildings being smaller and perhaps ten paces across by twenty feet high. Five others to each side, formed a large horseshoe, flanking the central buildings. In the middle of the round lay what appeared to be a circular open-style gazebo featuring only a roof. The remaining houses were haphazardly grouped behind other dwellings, as if they represented family lines growing over time, and I caught glimpses of many more behind the main buildings.

I was very close to the buildings and there was still no sign of anyone. I kept my eyes mainly focused on two large rocks, one to either side of the path. I wondered if these represented a gateway. There had been no other significant symbols along the trail thus far, and the heart of the village was just fifty feet before me. I stopped dead and looked towards each rock in turn. I stood straight with arms at my side and feet together. I made the traditional Chinese bow with closed fists, bending low and holding the position for several long seconds. I straightened, and boldly walked onwards to meet my fate.

Immediately, two pairs of warriors jumped out in front, appearing from behind the large stones. They were brandishing rudimentary wooden shields and holding spears aloft – but not pointed at me. They had strangely painted faces and long red hair that I doubted was a natural colour; it looked like henna. They were wearing baggy shorts that appeared to be fashioned from fine grasses, twisted to form a thread. There was no other clothing, although many variegated and unusual things dangled from their necks and extremities, including posies.

From willow and grass belts hung various tools and weapons: lethal-looking tomahawks, sharp stone knives, and many other implements. I considered that fearsome warriors do not usually wear flowers in their hair, but there again, nothing thereabouts was remotely normal.

Standing to bar my way, they commenced what in a different situation, I would consider to be a *Haka*, the traditional Maori dance. I watched with growing enthusiasm, as the deeply yellow skinned natives with large oval eyes, heavysset brows, and raking foreheads; greeted me in what I supposed was their traditional way. Their bodies were covered by intricate patterns, their faces especially. Once complete, they began a weird dance, encircling me whilst chanting in a language I found completely incomprehensible. Under other circumstances, I could imagine being with Red Indians. Their circumnavigation of me complete, they fell in, two in front, two behind, and began a different chant.

I deliberately stood in the centre of the path, held my head up high, and walked forwards with resolute purpose. The chanting continued, and sometimes changed tone. I noted any one of them could have killed me already, and still could. Marching onwards, we were drawing closer to the nearest buildings, when musicians appeared from a hut on my left. They started playing very weird instruments in accompaniment, as they joined the parade. There were primitive drums and pennywhistles, and I recognised one instrument as being a Chinese Xun, an ancient stone type of conch.

They turned as a group and started forwards tunefully, when a swathe of children rushed out from the first hut on my right, becoming the next to bar my path. I had the sense this was a ceremony. I stopped in front of them and bowed deeply. They giggled, and some stole a touch of me, before they were called to order. They danced playfully, encircling me and throwing flower petals into the air. After their distraction was completed, they grouped before me, and one or two tried to imitate my bow, with hopeless results, but I appreciated this very basic communication, and replied to each in turn.

As I was escorted deeper into the heart of the village; garishly painted warriors before and behind me, children leading the way to my personal future, as a wandering band of minstrels danced around to the sides—I thought to myself, “Surely this can’t get any more surreal”; but of course it did.

I had forgotten that any ripping yarn should have *sirens* in it—meaning scantily clad females of a youthful disposition that warp and weave around unsuspecting males. As the procession drew level with the first doorways, ten such beauties sashayed towards me, again appearing from the same building the musicians came from. I paid them due homage in turn, starting to really respond to this bizarre charade. After so long alone, I was so grateful to finally have human, or at least, almost human contact.

The girls were almost five feet tall, and of the same lithe build as the men, but shorter by an inch or so. The beguiling large oval eyes and heavy brows were set beneath foreheads that were wider than my own and tapered severely from the brow. They had the same deeply yellowed skin, and hairless bodies covered by decorative grass skirt wraps of mid-thigh length, and matching waistcoat-like tops. They had flowers wreathes hanging in large bunches from their necks, and entwined within their long and straight black hair. Their bodies had weird painted designs and finely streaming ribands flowed from their hair. Having bowed to the girls, they in their turn placed a large necklace of flowers round my neck. Afterwards they began to sway in some form of hypnotic dance, and sung quite a catchy melody.

A siren locked onto each of my arms, the remaining girls dancing to either side. The children gambolled enthusiastically about, and everybody appeared to be very happy, as if treating this as a festival. I had absolutely no idea—except that that was what it appeared to be.

I was brought before the central building where we stopped. The two warriors in front turned to face me. The younger of the two gestured at my knife, which I remove and offered to him, blade pointed towards me. He took it and after a cursory examination raised his eyebrow in a look of astonished concern; presumably it resembled no weapon he had ever encountered before. I knew this was not a complement. However, he was more impressed with my spear, but confused by the fired, tempered point.

I simply shrugged my shoulders and he smiled as he handed the spear and blade back to me. I held my arms outstretched and spread my legs, expecting to be frisked, but this confused him greatly, so I stood straight once more and bowed to him. He looked to the elder warrior, as curious looks passed between them, but no words were spoken. It was like the communication of twins or brothers. The younger turned immediately and shouted.

The grass wall before us opened at once, revealing a doorway, which I alone had to stoop to enter. The guard that inspected my knife walked to my right, and his comrade to my left. I was not a prisoner, but neither was I a free man—sometimes a life hangs in the balance upon the wiles of Fate.

Before me were two large stone chairs set upon a roughly raised platform, an imperious man sat in the one to my left. The other and slightly larger central seat remained empty, whilst either clerks or

dignitaries were seated to the front and side. There were no other seats, as all others stood. I was brought to a halt a few yards before the King, and duly proffered my best Chinese bow.

He looked at me intently, before rising and coming down to inspect me as if I were an alien, which of course, I was in their society. During his circumnavigation, I felt him touch my clothing, and briefly my skin. Inspection complete, he stood resolute and powerfully before me, looking me directly in the eye.

I had no idea what to do, so knelt before him and bent forwards, deliberately exposing my neck as a sign of non-threatening behaviour. I felt his hand on my back and looked up as he reached to take my hand, assisting me rise. Locking our right arms together, he thumped me on the shoulder in what I assumed was a display of brotherhood.

Breaking apart, he stared into my eyes once more, before returning to his throne. He barked a series of commands; a gong sounded, and a Lady of high stature entered. Everyone, including the King, rose as she took the larger throne next to him. I had not been expecting that level of chivalry, or had I misread the situation? He nodded to her and sat down, and I noticed the others who had been provided chairs, follow afterwards in suit. The Royalty spoke at some length, before the Queen issued a short series of commands. My focus of attention was diverted when the King spoke, but I was sure I saw the eyes of a most unpleasant woman rake my form, before she whispered something to the Queen, who immediately rose, as did everybody else in the room, and departed at once with her advisor.

The King came down towards me, speaking rapidly to the younger warrior. He offered his right palm to me, held openly towards me, before beckoning with it towards the exit. We walked together with the warriors close behind, as he appeared to wax lyrical in a language alien to my ears.

The building next door was similar to the King's court, in that there was no central support column. Instead, long lengths of fir tree reached upwards from the outer circle and formed a complex interlocking crown at the top. Opposite me was a small raised platform composed of stones and mud that proved to be a primitive stage, complete with grass partition to the rear.

Running around the building above head height, were a series of composite straw panels that were propped open with pieces of wood. The crude bamboo frames were tied with sturdy grasses and had a typical thatched covering, which were in turn hinged with rope. The design was similar to my own building techniques, albeit a lot more accomplished.

Wooden and stone tables and stools were strewn irregularly around, whilst a small aisle passed through the centre leading directly to the platform. I walked towards it with the King as my guide. He continued talking eloquently, but was to me total gibberish, sometimes casting his arms around as if to extol the various virtues of the structure, or perhaps its uses. I continued to gaze in awe, and realised there was another small stage set to my left, again with rustic seating and tables.

Reaching the main stage, he pointed to certain objet d'art near the back, and also to a couple of ropes that hung secured back. The tour complete, we headed towards the smaller stage where he indicated a seat for me, and took the central, and second largest seat next to me for himself. The Queen was already sitting in the larger seat to his left, while a presumed Prince sat apart nearby.

The seat beside me was taken by one of the beautiful girls, and her companion sat opposite. In front of me was the younger warrior, his brother to his side. I watched in total amazement, as the whole village seemed to cram into the hall. Children rushed and gambolled through impossible gaps, assisted by a couple of peculiar looking dogs, as every available space was filled with a writhing mêlée of humanity. The whole scene reminded me of sheer, unadulterated chaos.

Intermittently, people stared at me, as if I were some green skinned alien from another planet. They whispered to friends or family, before animated discussions and more pointing ensued. The mood was festive, but I remained wary. I had seen neither hide nor hair of the girl from that morning, and hoped I did not scare her so badly, she thought of me as the devil incarnate. The only person I knew, or rather, the only person who knew of me, was missing from this festival.

As parties to the banquet settled, I became torn. For so long had I been alone, yet who or what were these people? They did not seem nearly as surprised to see me, as I was to see them. I had been made welcome, yet there was a pervasive undercurrent of unease that I found difficult to pinpoint. Cast adrift within my doubts, I became aware of two eyes watching me intently, as if trying to read my thoughts.

Snapping back to reality, I looked into the eyes of the warrior opposite, and he broke into a cheery grin that was most comforting and infectious. My mood lightened instantly, and in full knowledge, unspoken understanding flashed between us within the blink of an eye.

The gong sounded and everyone stilled as the hall fell silent. Serving girls ran laden with drinks and goblets as everyone present was served. Once our table was provisioned with rock-wrought thimbles of clear liquid, the King and others of our table, except the Queen, stood and raised their drinks, and I did likewise. The King gabbled on spouting more gibberish, for what would be equivalent of a toasting, before turning to face me and raising his beaker to drink deeply. The others around us returned the salute, all facing myself. The warrior reached out a hand to stop me from drinking; obviously, this salute was in my honour. The King sat and the others followed. They all turned to look at me expectantly.

I knew I was required to return the honour, so with my small tumbler in hand I cast my gaze around the hall, and smiled broadly with my arms outstretched. I clasped the drink in my right hand and held it high for all to see. Once done I lowered it and said the following in a mixture of English and Cantonese; "Thank you for welcoming me to your community, I am most honoured. D'oh d'Zhee, D'oh d'Zhee sai. Ho xi cheurng-ah; ho pung yao, yut chai –yam-sing!"

The impromptu speech completed, I raised my goblet to the crowd and turned to focus on the Ruler, slugged it back in one go. I closed my eyes as the liquor venom passed my throat, and hoped this was the right thing to do.

Jesus Christ! It was *Firewater*. They had obviously taken distilling arts to a new level, as the liquid seared my throat; all breath was forced from my lungs. A moment later, a warm glow began to appear correspondingly in my stomach. I staunchly held back a cough, but otherwise it was fine, and probably 90% proof. Aware that the entire village was quiet and all eyes were upon me, I beamed a radiant smile and felt as if the sun was rising up from within me. I held the goblet high and pointed it towards the ruler. I tipped it upside down to show it was empty, turning it upright once more, before finally setting it down with a thud on the table before me, and sat. That would be correct etiquette in China.

The whole place was silent for a split second, before erupting into raucous cheers.

The King at my side, smashed me in the middle of my back with a mighty blow that almost sent me flying into the warrior opposite. I turned to find him laughing, and I warmed to his natural and infectious nature. Meanwhile his wife remained eminently affable, but was offish, as if she hid a dark stain behind her mask. I had seen that look before, when people fear of losing something they hold most precious.

I was taken straight back to Cantonese Shunde hospitality and drinking games, as everybody wanted to toast me individually. I was having none of their shenanigans, as experience had taught me that group toasting was far wiser. However, I did always toast the King and Prince individually; the Queen never proffered. Meanwhile, I tried to decide how to play the situation; I would soon end up quite drunk, unless an alternative beverage was found, and quickly.

The gong sounded again, and bidden, the writhing sea of humanity parted as a flood of serving wenches came rushing out bearing platters of food and liquor. Our table was soon overflowing with wooden and stone plates, and wicker baskets of cold delicacies: rice parcels of which I was familiar, a bowl of stodgy white paste, succulent fruits and vegetables. There were definitely olives. My attention was immediately caught by the fact that there was no meat or fish.

The band struck up its unique melodies, as a performance began on the main stage. There was singing, dancing, a short monologue, and various stunts and tricks were performed, which the audience and I loved. Having grown up with my Grandmother's love of amateur dramatics, I enjoyed every second of this unfolding presentation. The ropes were used for a performance of primitive aerial acrobatics, but more in the Tarzan vein than Beijing Opera House. However, the show remained a grand spectacle, one I doubted any human being had ever witnessed before.

The mood was very contagious and laughter abounded. Children and oldsters took delight in passing by, in order to look at me – this strange and unknown wonder, before turning away as my eyes smiled upon them. Much later, everybody ended up singing and dancing in the aisles.

I was presented with more firewater, but noticed the soldier was given a larger beaker that he drank deeply from. Curious, and seeking beer, I pointed at it with a questioning look. He proffered his cup to me and bowed his head out of respect.

I sniffed the contents and deduced it was light, primordial ale. I locked his eyes and indicated a drinking motion with the beaker. He responded, his mouth broadening in a great smile; placing his palms upwards in front of him, he raising them very deliberately. I took a sip, and tasted of rudimentary ale. I took another, longer swallow, and found it not distasteful at all, if a tad odd.

I leaned well back and held the draught out in front of me, closing my eyes to dwell and indicate I really enjoyed it – well, anything must be better and more sobering than whatever their cauldron of a still entrapped. I made a very large and happy smile, before opening my eyes, and offering the vessel back to the soldier. He held up both his hands before him and called for another beaker of beer for himself, and I held my beaker out for a refill.

Once refilled, I placed my beaker next to his and nodded my head upwards to indicate *drink up*. I touch my vessel to his and raised my goblet, drinking the contents down in one go. He kept pace, and beckoned the waitress for more.

The girl beside me was quite entertaining, but we had moved on to dispense with verbal conversation, although not with communication itself. We were in the realms of eye contact, facial expressions, smiles and laughter, body language, mime, and touch. In lieu of banter I remembered a trick of dexterity from my youth, and thought to have some fun:

Place your hands together to form a circle, with each finger or thumb directly opposite its counterpart. Holding the thumbs together and straight in line, fold the forefingers and third fingers so the second joints are touching. This in turn means the other four digits are making a sharp triangle. Separate the up-stretched fingers whilst keeping the second joints solidly together – this should be fairly easy. Then swap over so the other fingers are up or down accordingly. You will find it very simple to separate your raised forefingers, and virtually impossible to separate you third fingers.

The girls were in stitches of laughter, but did actually manage to do it, something that had always eluded me. The warriors were also able to do it, and soon the whole room was dedicated to mastering the tease. I noted that most people were able to accomplish the feat, unlike my own kind. More importantly, it passed the time and let me observe discreetly what was happening in the round, whilst they twiddled their fingers and thumbs.

The time passed swiftly, and at one point, I realised that none of the ample food presented has been cooked. This became more apparent several hours later when darkness descended and there was neither light nor fire.

I ended up talking with the King, who also took to drinking beer after his wife departed in apparent and respectful disgust. She was again in close companionship with the woman I had instantly taken a dislike to. We had a serious conversation about life, the universe, and how their race was related to my own. I have no independent corroboration of course, but I remain certain that was what I was discussing with him in our equally alien and slurring tongues, as dusk turned into night.

Both girls had also been drinking quite heavily, as had the warriors. Despite the fact that several hours passed, we were infectiously merry and obviously not sober, but neither were any of us completely drunk. The food had all been consumed using our hands, leftovers being spat out onto the floor where dogs quickly consumed them. Some of the offerings I was familiar with, but most were either completely new to me, or presented in most unusual combinations.

Finally, the King stood and his voice boomed abroad. Everyone quietened and came to attention, as the main serving girl – whose name I gathered was Bu Te, rushed to fill everyone's beakers.

The King made another eloquent and absorbing speech, and all the remaining goblets were raised in companionship, as afterwards, people began to depart for their respective homes. Taking me by the shoulder in conspiratorial fashion, the King pointed at the girls. I shrugged my shoulders, not quite knowing if he was intimating what I thought he might be intimating. He waved me aside, talking quickly to the beautiful girl that had been my constant companion.

She took me by the arm, and led me out via the main entrance into the dark. I stopped her, really needing to attend to the call of nature, and tried to imitate a man going to the toilet, but this she completely misunderstood as meaning something else.

Remembering China, I squatted down, screwing my eyes up, making straining noises. Her eyes illuminated and she laughed uncontrollably, before grabbing me by the hand, and leading me around the

back of the hut. There we bumped into several departing others, who were leaving by the rear entrance – all of us headed for the same place to do the same thing.

Within a short distance, we came to a form of reed bed that followed a slight natural decline in the terrain. I was stopped in front of a lily patch that had a drop of several feet down to the vegetation below. A small stream trickled into it, and the entirety, smelled of excrement.

I had been holding for far too long, and took a very long, and apparently impressive time to empty my bladder completely. The communal toilet had eyes that occasionally glance at me for reasons of inspection of my equipment, and I paid no mind. I noticed the beautiful girl was also relieving herself, and doing this standing like the men. I once met an Australian chick called Wendy who did the same, so this was the second woman in my life I knew to use the male method.

Ablutions complete, we again bid our fare-thee-wells, and in company with the girl, I was steered towards one of the outlying huts behind the King's quarters. The inside was not as I had expected, as the hut was divided into many smaller spaces by hanging grass woven curtains. There was just enough room for a bed of two-part construction. The base being made of a warp of willow enclosed by reeds, whilst the upper part had lighter grasses on it. Some form of wicker box stood to the corner, completing the simple furnishings.

The girl led me by the hand, and beckoned me to sit beside her on the bed. What happened next – well, I cannot say, although a little while later, we both slept contentedly.

Chapter 7 – Secrets Shared

I awoke as dawn crested the sky outside, and was drawn to observe the strange new flesh beside me, slumbering peacefully with her left arm and leg draped over mine. Apart from her long black hair, she was virtually devoid of any other hirsute growth. There were wisps to her underarms and below her navel, but otherwise her golden yellow skin remained unblemished, apart from a golden patina above her eyes, as if protecting her most prominent brow.

Her skin was perfectly smooth to my touch, echoing the golden nature of her race. Her forehead rose like my own, but then sloped backwards at a far greater angle just below the hairline. Overall, her head would be about the same height as my own, but was noticeably wider, delving into an oval face and almost pointed chin. Below her amazingly large eyelids, her pronounced cheekbones sheltered a flat and flared nose and wide mouth, which was grinning at me.

Caught!

Her eyes flew wide open in mirth as she embraced me, flinging her arms around me and kissing me urgently. Soon she was gone, hopping out of bed, but stalling to sashay her behind for my benefit, before donning the same grass skirt from yesterday. I was left to conclude she was wide awake and watching me watching her.

Following her lead and dressing quickly, and gathered my stuff together. People had been curious as to what I had been carrying, but no one had so far asked me to show them anything; I found that a little odd. I took a moment to run a rudimentary inventory and all appeared to be present and undisturbed. Taking my rucksack in hand, I walked out to meet the new day.

The fearsome warrior was waiting for me inside the house, and immediately proffered a beaker of something. Surely, it could not be more beer? I remembered his name was n'Gnung – pronounced with a nasal n', and almost silent G – as I observe his make-up was a bit the worse for wear, as apparently was his head. I nodded, and laughed with relief once I realised the vessel contained only water.

That was a mighty fine fluid, and hit the spot directly. I drank deeply and finished in one long knock. I nodded again and smiled. He departed and soon returned with a refill, and a bottle gourd container that I gratefully accepted. I removed the bung to find it contained water. I replaced the stopper and slung it over my shoulder using the attached grass-work string.

He saluted me with a Chinese bow, which he must have been practicing for some time, and I returned the honour in true friendship. The beautiful girl called Xi Xah – 'See Shah' to my ears – returned with a basket of fruit and a parcel of pasty meal, and we picked at the morning offerings with little enthusiasm.

After we ate, my companions showed me around, and I began to understand their daily lives. I reasoned they were assessing whether or not I posed a threat to themselves and their culture. That day, people were productive outside the village; as we wandered down the path I entered by.

From the main canal, smaller secondary channels emerged randomly at vaguely 90-degree angles. These in turn gave rise to even smaller channels, which reminded me so much of the modern version still used today at my friend's parental village in rural China.

The vegetation was quite unusual. It was certainly farmed in some manner, but not in any way I would. It was as if a useful plant has grown in a place, and been encouraged to spread. The fields were definitely not tilled, but they did show signs of weeding and nurturing. The same was true of the mangos and other stands of trees and useful shrubs, which appeared as clusters, presumably where a seed had taken root. As well as rice, I noticed other grains, again showing the same kind of unsystematic husbandry. I left the path to take a closer look at the seed heads of one plant and knew they are wild oats. Nearby was a stand of a far more familiar grain, being either wheat or barley. I took one and bit into the hard exterior. It gave with reluctance, and had the familiar powdery interior and taste of flour.

Many inhabitants were tending crops and working in the fields. In rural China, this could be performed by either sex, although most of the workers that day were male. In time, we circled the village to the south and came to the other side, where a significant river flowed. I bent down to take a drink and top up my gourd, and was soon followed by my two companions.

We sat for a moment and looked at the scenery, before n'Gnung pointed far into the distance where I could just about make out the far rim of the other side of the volcano. He said something to me and I nodded in complete dis-understanding. He said something else, and realised I did not have a clue what he

is talking about. He pointed to the sun above and raised one finger, saying simply “Dao,” before pointing back into the same spot on the horizon.

Well thank you, that's as clear as mud. I considered that understanding their language was going to be my biggest problem, and made a mental note to try to remember, and use it as much as I could.

As we sat a while and enjoyed the sunshine, Xi Xah became interested in my rucksack. She was studying my rudimentary grass-works and shaking her head in disapproval. I was quite proud of my creation, but it seemed she could do a lot better. Just like modern Cantonese people, she was very inquisitive about the contents, some of which were easily visible. I knew they desperately wanted to check out what possessions I had, so tipped the contents out for examination.

I let them have a good look, and removed my leather belt so they could see that as well. I knew they would report to the King, and it was better done with and out of the way. n’Gnung was not impressed with my knives, and I had to admit their stone-working skills were way more advanced than my own.

Of everything they saw, only my clothes retained a lasting interest. They handled the stout leather belt in awe, and smelled it whilst testing its strength with their teeth to great approval. My trainers, jeans, tee shirt all underwent great examination, as they had no comprehension of what they were made from. However, I kept some things to me like my wallet, precious stones, metals, and especially my lighters.

These people did not appear to possess the use of fire, and it had been lingering on my mind that it would be very wrong of me to pollute their culture with advanced technology. I could always introduce this later, but once the cat was out of the bag there was no return. As they continued their inspection, I chuckled and considered my Overriding Principle – I needed to understand much more about this society before doing things that would affect their future dramatically.

I mused that on the one hand, all I had witnessed so far was a very primitive culture using stone tools and a little agricultural husbandry. On the other hand, with the mysterious delivery of the food packets, they appeared to have access to a technology so advanced, that it made my own pale into insignificance. The bit in the middle was missing. My only route to understanding this, to unearthing the missing link, would be through my present companions; and the only other person thereabouts I knew of, the one I had not seen since yesterday morning’s first light.

I kept my own counsel, and we rose to follow the stream for a while, before circling back to approach the village from the opposite side. We joined well-worn trail, which obviously led west to somewhere important, but we headed back towards the village.

As we walked, I noticed the fine lake was now easy to define and I stopped to better fix my bearings of this new world. The central land was lush with vegetation that appeared jungle-like in several places, as it disappeared into the vastness of the interior.

I came out of my reverie as n’Gnung pointed out a place of significance far over on the other side to my left. I could discern a break in the vegetation in that area, but little else until my eyes focused on what could be another village. I pointed at our village and raise one finger. I pointed at the other and raise two fingers. He thought for a moment before nodding his head. His face cracked in a wide smile and he pointed far to the west, and raised three fingers whilst waving his hands as a great ark in the air. If I understood correctly, this would indicate we are now at one of two villages, with a larger town far to the west.

Returning to the trail we had several miles to walk, so, I considered teaching them a few words of English, and they replied with their own words. We began by exchanging associated simple noises like “Hello,” “Sun,” and “Water”; it would appear that we all made a little progress as the time flew by. All too soon, we entered the village and encountered several huts for industry indicating clothing, tools, and other specialised trades.

The first one was set a little aside and dedicated to woodwork of all imaginable, and unimaginable types. I noticed willow being woven to make baskets, bowls and plates. Some of their other working eluded my mind’s alacrity.

Nearby huts appeared to be dedicated to processing reeds and grasses for thatching and bedding, most produce had been left outside to dry in the hot sun. The majority of the workers were indolent, as represented their culture. They obviously liked to live well, and worked only as or when needed, which was perhaps something my own western culture had overlooked. What they appeared to have in abundance was a sense of family and collective.

Farther along the road, another large hut revealed workers in a clothing factory, who were a mixture of women and children. I was fascinated, as apart from being fashioned from rudimentary grasses, what they were making was of high quality.

A woman who was obviously the boss stopped to chat to my companions. They showed her my clothes and she made a very detailed examination. I could see her eyes were full of questions, and no way to express them. Sensing her tension, I smiled and made light of it. I was sure they had cotton plants around there somewhere, as there were on the peninsular, although none were being cultivated.

Opposite was another hut that appeared devoted to making stone tools and weapons, many with fearsome sharp edges. I watch amazed as several teenage boys and girls chipped away at lumps of rock and produced blades suitable for shaving with. I was impressed by their skills, although noted smaller sharp edges were cast away, rather than be used as tips for spears.

We walked inside where one wizened master craftsman was fashioning a blade into a knife, and I watched, awed by his great skill. Up until that point, he had not acknowledged our presence, nor my interest. However, once he was satisfied, he looked at us and broke into a wide and infectious smile. I guessed, that like me, he was one of this world's single-tasker's.

He became fascinated with my leather belt, asking me by curious looks and mime to remove it. He viewed my blades with total disgust, but looked away, and nodded his head as if in understanding. All of a sudden, his eyes flared wide open in wonder, and asked many questions of the warrior.

Next, he took my hands; palms uppermost in his wrinkled ones and peered down to inspect them in great detail. He traced a couple of lines with his finger, noting one that had always been broken, tapping the place before he continued. Again, he nodded and smiled his most enigmatic of smiles.

He noticed the strings around my neck and pointed at them. I was still wearing the two pendants, the female Buddha I had worn had for many years, and the golden dragon that was given to me by Dawn when I left Blighty. I had kept them out of sight, as I did not want these people to see them too soon.

I took each off in turn and handed them to him. He marvelled at the designs and texture. Both were made from jade, a stone he would probably have no knowledge of. He held them close to his eyes and studied the craftsmanship. In particular, he fingered the dragon, nodding his head appreciatively, and staring deep into indeterminate space with no focus in his eyes. He said something so low it was but a whisper. A tear formed in his eye and he handed the pendants back to me, and bent his head to thank me. I bowed deeper in return, which amused him greatly.

Again, he point at my pendants, so I made to remove them. He stopped me and waved his hand palm upwards into the air. I thought for a moment, before it dawned on me he was asking if I had any more things that were similar. I reached into my pocket and pulled out one of the stones; it was the lovely red one. He examined it, and handing it back to me, made the gesture again. I pulled out the other stone and he grasped it to his heart immediately. Obviously, this was very emotional for him, but he alone appeared to understand the significance.

I was sure the sunlight must have changed angle, because his cragged face came alive with a new inner light, looking at the smooth black disc in his hand. With a deferential smile, he gently placed the disc back in my hand and closed my fingers around it, shaking my enclosed fist carefully within both of his own.

The sprightly gentleman caged within an elderly body reappeared, animated; and sent Xi Xah on an errand, before he in turn rushed off like a mad professor into the depths of the hut. n'Gnung waited and looked askance between us, not knowing what the oldster was up too. There was an almighty crash; I saw he had upturned the whole rear storage area, before all became calm once more. He emerged from a small plume of dust with something wrapped in a very old piece of grass, and took his seat once more.

The old Master placed the ancient grass package in my free hand, and again closed my fingers around it. He barked a command to n'Gnung, who immediately disappeared on an errand. He tried to speak to me alone, but our understanding was undone by lack of common language.

n'Gnung returned a short time later with a substantial grass scabbard, and handing it to the smith, he in turn made to cut my throat, and his next was to stab my heart, the intention being that my life was in danger. He pointed a finger to the warrior's heart, followed by my own, and having us hold hands, tried again to slit my throat and stab me, this time without success as n'Gnung intervened. From this I

concluded that n'Gnung would protect me from whatever danger was present, and by extension, that I should trust him with my life.

Once this message was received and understood, the scabbard was attached to my belt and the smith beckoned me to open the package in my hand. I popped the stone back into my pocket, before unwrapping what appeared to be a very fine and ancient knife. The craftsmanship was exquisite, to the point that it almost appeared to be machined by a modern factory, rather than having been chipped by hand using stone-age tools.

I handed it back to him, knowing I was not worthy of the blade. He smiled and insisted I was, placing it within the scabbard by his own hand. I bowed to him in Chinese style, and he smiled and nodded in satisfaction, returning the bow. The smith was the first person I had met to apparently know my Chinese form of bow, and he was well practiced and very good. I also noted we bowed equally and difficultly low to one another, something I had seriously not expected.

We settle once more as he talked openly with the warrior. He asked to see my other possessions, so I opened my rustic rucksack and displayed the contents. He thought little of my large carryall, but found the bamboo beaker interesting, making a drinking motion to which I nodded in shared understanding. He spent some time examining my fire maker, noting the charred remains in the bottom that the others had missed. He smelled the area to be certain, before he fell into deepest thought, and nodded his head.

A noise at the door signalled the King's arrival, accompanied by Xi Xah. The other warrior I was familiar with remained on guard at the door; I was by now almost certain he was n'Gnung's elder brother. The King did not stand on ceremony, and took a cursory look at my meagre possessions. Nothing held his fascination, not even my pendants or red stone. I made a play of rummaging in my pocket for the other, and caught a glance from the old man, as he tried to stifle a grin; he knew the game I was playing.

When I produced the black stone, the King held it in his hand, and the group silenced in awe. The King began to feel and examine it under the direction of the aged smith. He rose and moved to stand away from everybody, under a beam of light from the sun, and marvelled at the drop in his hand. Returning he nodded and the disc was passed around between them, as they all wanted a feel of this treasure, until it was returned to the King once more.

The King handed it back to the smith who cautioned me by placing it in my hand, and again sealing my fingers around it. He made a curious gesture, by pinching his lips between his thumb and forefinger, intimating silence. The King and others follow suit, leaving me to copy them. I was left with the distinct impression the artefact was never to be mentioned, nor seen again by anyone outside of our select group. Later, when I was completely alone, I concealed the black stone within a pouch of my wallet.

When we were done; hands at my elbows turned me, and we headed for the door without looking back, whilst the King remained behind to talk to the old smith. With my mind full of questions, my companions led me quickly into the nearby heart of the village.

Chapter 8 – Forest Meade

The main road into town ended in a large open square, where a bustle of activity suggested boarding houses, restaurants, and hostelryes. People lazed around and tried to avoid the heating afternoon sun. Everybody I bumped into or interacted with in some small way, greeted me with great pleasure, but there seemed to be an edict that no one was to approach me unless bidden. That suited me well.

In front of me and centrally situated, was a low and extended version of the gazebo. I was sure it stood directly behind palace gardens. The structure consisted of five interconnecting gazebos that were linked together to form a whole, reminiscent of thatched sun-shelters in the Maldives. Some had people in them, and this appeared to be the commercial hub of the district, presumably where governance and populace interacted.

The square was sub-divided into groupings that were ill defined. What was notable was that all of one type of trade or service was grouped together, as if seeking security and sanctuary within the greater whole. Therefore the presumed bars were all together, the hostels the same; and over towards the northern side there were piles of fruits and vegetables on display.

It appeared; I was free to go anywhere I wanted to, just as long as my two shadows accompanied me. This was fine and I appreciated their company and protection. To be fair, we were getting along very well with each other, and shared many laughs as our understandings and knowledge of one another grew from the merest kernels of comprehension.

I was interested to look at what the ordinary people ate, as last evenings' celebratory meal would have been a special occasion. I recognised most produce immediately, even if they were local varieties. At the far end, I discovered olives. They were very few, small, and somewhat dry; not being soaked in olive oil or brine. Overriding Principle or not, I knew I needed to teach them that trick.

I was trying to work out what the local currency was, before my stupid brain realised that there wasn't one. Over the changes of centuries and millennia, these people had worked out what each one needed to produce each day, month, season, or year. They supplied their results for the population, as offered different produce, a skill, or service. I guessed there must be some sort of quota system in use, but as a visitor, I could try anything I wanted and there was no charge. My stalwart companions did the same, which led me to suspect that this was the fact of daily life.

I gazed in wonderment, as was reflected in the daily lives of the ordinary people I witness about me. What struck me most, was they did not hurry, but enjoyed the day for what it was; another gift of life. Everyone appeared happy and at peace.

I was being steered by n'Gnung and Xi Xah to an area set back from the main thoroughfare, where a small hut welcomed guests with informal style. Seating was vaguely cast around outside under a straw awning which provided shelter from the sun. The hut was away from the main square set in an alleyway. They spoke quickly to the Mâtre Dame, and goblets of ale were set before us men, and a smaller beaker for Xi Xah.

In quick time, peanuts arrived, and they were straight out of the earth clumps of peanuts, with plant still attached above and earth below. I broke off a segment of bulbous root and snapped it to remove the peanuts inside. I offered one to each companion in turn, before eating the last myself and nodding in approval. A brief questioning glance passed between them, which I met directly with a conspiratorial wink, whilst breaking off another piece of nutty root nodule. They creased in laughter – and in the process, we increased understanding of one another.

I needed to go to the loo again, and whilst I did attend to the call of nature in the fields, that had been several hours before. I thought I remembered roughly where the lily pond should be, but was not certain, so tried some mime again. I stood and pretended to zip my fly to n'Gnung, and receiving no response, so tried the squatting again to Xi Xah. She giggled and said something to n'Gnung. He laughed loudly, and rising, led me around to the square where we cross the northwest corner, turning down a row, then another, to where the communal latrine was situated.

I made a point of walking back the long way, and via the palace. I wanted to see this entire village, and was escorted by n'Gnung, until I had a clear mental map in my mind. Neither had I seen the north of the hamlet, but the reason soon became obvious, because there was a steep slope down near where the

houses finished. Beyond the land was not cultivated and looked marginally like a marsh in places, echoing the battle between lake and land fought over centuries passed.

In time, n'Gnung steered me back to the western road and we went to talk to the head woodsman. I was asked to show him my bamboo mug, and he stared at it, before making a drinking motion. He called other people to him and they all had a good look at my design, before rummaging amongst the bamboo outside, and orders were given. We left, but stopped by the weaving hut where n'Gnung selected a proper and sturdy carryall and presented it to me as a gift. It was far superior to my own feeble efforts and I thanked him copiously for munificence.

Returning to the saloon some hours later, we found Xi Xah was in animated discussion with a couple of the other girls that were dancers for my arrival procession. I sat aside with the warrior as we sipped our drinks, whilst several bowls of fruit were placed nearby for our enjoyment. He was very interested in the blade the old man gave me; I passed it to him and he handled it with greatest respect. n'Gnung made several grunts of satisfactory confirmation of the wondrous knife, examining in great detail the craftsmanship, weight and balance. Much later with curiosity sated, he placed it back in my hand with a bow of his head, and smiled contentedly.

I noticed all the girls were drinking from smaller cups and I hesitantly gestured to touch one. Xi Xah squealed with delight, picked up her beaker, and came over to sit next to me. She handed me her drink, and I found it contained a dark red fluid. I smelled it first before taking the smallest sip. It tasted like a raw, plus slightly sweet and sour red wine. It was definitely alcoholic; I pointed at the fruit on the table, and subsequently at the liquid. She thought for a moment before shaking her head and pointed at my bag.

I remembered I still had a couple of large damsons left, so took them out and laid them on the table. She clapped her hands in delight and playfully pecked me on the cheek. She quickly peeled the fruit with her long nails, and deftly split it to remove the stone. Thinking for an instant, she finished her drink and dropped the fruit inside. There was a small branch lying nearby which she picked up, and imitated bashing the fruit to a pulp. I followed her explanation in complete understanding, broaching one of my broadest smiles. Xi Xah offered one piece of fruit to my lips, whilst popping the other into her mouth, before ducking back into a state of giggles with the other girls. I was sure their animated discussion could only have one focus, me.

n'Gnung rolled his eyes, as if in agreement with my thoughts. There were a few piles of dried grass nearby and my friend motioned me to join him. We sat; we sipped, we watched the afternoon wane. We learned about greetings from each other, and I was amazed when he just about managed to say "Hello, how do you do?" Eventually our brains filled with too many new words and we took a siesta. Theirs appeared to be a laid-back life, and one that well suited the slow pace of time in those parts.

Whilst I did take a short nap, I spent most of my time with my eyes closed considering everything I had witnessed since my arrival. I focused in particular on why I needed a bodyguard, and was haunted by the secrecy surrounding the black stone. That did not compute with what I experienced all around me. Perhaps there were other tribes, and they are not so friendly?

Later as dusk approached, we roused as others joined us. I recognised many of the girls and boys from the day before; smiled and nodded by way of greeting. Friendships renewed, we wended our way back to the village pub where we dined last evening. That night was a lot more intimate and less formal, with a small group of tables being set out with food and drinks for us to enjoy.

There were perhaps fifty people in attendance that night, with many cliques appearing to have a regular spot or favourite table. Our own group had swelled to seven girls and five boys plus myself, and we took seats directly in front of the Kings table. The ruler noticed our appearance, and rose to greet me, proffering an unspoken toast across the distance that separated us. He gestured for me to continue to take pleasure in their hospitality, in company with my new friends.

While we settled down to enjoy the evening meal, which for all intents and purposed seemed to be a continuation of what we had already been doing, I noticed the King was in deep discussion with the old man. The Queen and Prince were listening intently, while their group concluded with three others of presumed high status or rank. I remained quite sure my arrival was the main topic of conversation, and the old stone smith's presence would indicate something was afoot, because he remained the centre of their undivided attention for long periods.

We were drinking a little quicker, and filling our bellies as Bu Te and her fellow waitresses tended to our needs. I had not noticed the meeting at the King's table conclude until I heard his unmistakable rumble of laughter beside me. I turned to find The King holding a beaker of ale ready to toast me.

I stood with a full measure in turn, and we saluted each other, and drank deeply in each other's honour. He motioned me to join him at the main table, accompanied by my two faithful shadows. He bid me sit opposite him flanked by my companions, the old man remaining at his side. The Prince and advisors from last night sat to one side, whilst the Princess sat beside the Queen and her entourage.

The old smith pointed at the knife, his gift to me; the others knew of it and smiled in agreement. He leaned forward with a twinkle in his eyes, and motioning to my chest, entreated me. I had already guessed what was coming and immediately removed my pendants and handed them over in turn. He extolled their virtues with respect before handing them to the Queen for examination. She in turn passed them to the King, who handed them around the group until they completed the circle. The Smith handed the pendants back to me with a shake of his head and spoke to the others.

During the conversation, I learned the elder's name was Lo Si. The old man motioned again, and I brought out the red stone for examination. This in turn was handed round from person to person, whilst the smith spoke in some depth about the merits of the stone. When it was returned to his hand, he held it up and made several further points, before shaking his head and handing it back to me.

He turned away from me and started to talk into the round. The Queen was already departing with her entourage, as if betrayed by rancour; the female I did not like heading immediately for the door, I caught her name, Sar Tan.

Once they departed, the King issued a short series of commands, the Princess left as soon as he was done. He spoke next to his son, who also departed in a hurry. We relaxed and enjoyed a drink in companionship before the Prince returned and had a brief word with the King, whom in turn smiled in satisfaction.

Minutes later a messenger arrived wearing an armband, the seal bearing a design I had not seen before. He trotted directly to the King; smashed his right fist to his breast and made a short report. Xi Xah tried to explain what was happening, but her efforts were wasted and distracting. Lo Si said a few words and the messenger nodded in understanding, as he turned to me and asked to see my pendants once more. I took the two from my neck again, and handed them over as requested. The messenger examined the jade in some detail, before handing them back, and we repeated with the red stone.

Lo Si said something and shook his head. n'Gnung took my forearm and indicated I should stand. The messenger studied me in some detail, noting my height, hair, and eyes in particular. The King made another announcement, and the messenger knelt with right fist to his heart. Rising, he was motioned to a table set aside and given refreshments, partaking of only water plus a little fruit and meal.

We all took our respective seats again and drank a couple more short toasts as the sun's rays died upon the fast approaching edge of night. The King appeared to be very happy and I often caught the old smith looking at me with an expectant sparkle in his eyes. However, the evening soon concluded, and well before we had drunk half as much as the night before.

I rose with my two stalwart companions and we returned to the dorm via the latrine, echoing last evening's routine once more. Again, I shared a bed with Xi Xah, but I took time to sleep, as my mind wandered haphazardly over the strange events of the day; especially regarding the black stone, which repeatedly played upon my mind.

I knew it was a stone of power, and so it seemed, did the old smith, if that was what he actually was. Of the others, I accepted the King and my two companions, plus I presumed n'Gue, the warrior's brother who stood guard as the King examined the stone and much was said within his presence.

My problem remained; why was this information not relayed to the Queen, and others of the Royal household. These included senior officials, and the messenger for that matter.

Then there was the missing girl, the first of the islanders I made contact with. Something was going on I did not understand, but I determined to have full knowledge of this court, and all its intrigues. Perhaps tomorrow I might become enlightened? With this deliberation in mind, I finally fell into fitful sleep, as troubled dreams echoed my conscious thoughts.

Chapter 9 – Walking Towards the Future

The next day arrived with the sound of a gong, well before the first rays of dawn crested the distant horizon. We shared a simple breakfast in our dorm, of water and fruit, plus the meal mulch that appeared to be a staple of their daily diet. It reminded me of *mealy-meal*; the staple African mixture that friends from Malawi used to make on occasions. I presumed we were going on a journey, because we packed, and both my new friends checked I had taken everything with me. Satisfied we sat for a moment before the gong sounded again and we rose to leave the hut.

We made our way to the square, where a small group was already forming. All had packed a few belongings, and were excitedly expectant of the day ahead. My suspicion was confirmed when the King arrived with his entourage and bid me good morning. The Prince ran a head-count and reported back, but we waited another five minutes for the Queen and her Ladies in Waiting, before immediately striking off for new pastures at a fairly relaxed pace. The entire population seemed to be with us for the first hundred yards, as they cheered and later waved from the outer edge of the village proper.

Our party comprised of roughly twenty people, two warriors walking ahead as vanguard. The King, Queen and Princess led from behind them, each having a couple of Royal attendants, while Xi Xah and another girl followed behind. To my right were the ever-faithful n'Gnung, his brother n'Gue walking on my left. Of the others, I only recognised a couple from fleeting meetings.

We were all carrying our own belongings including the King. The Queen only was the only exception. I had already formed the opinion that whilst he held an iron grip on power, he also considered himself an ordinary person, and the equal of any other when not engaged in his official capacity.

I considered it prudent to assume that people only started a journey as dawn broached, for a limited number of reasons. Either we needed to be somewhere by a certain time, which I doubted was the case due to our languid pace. Or, we had a long way to travel and needed all the hours of sunlight with which to accomplish the task without turning the trek into a race against time.

We made steady progress along the fairly flat and open plain, although any discernable trail petered out at times as we crossed grassy swathes and rocky outcrops by turns. We maintained a reasonably straight course with only few minor detours around nature's natural obstacles.

The countryside changed little as we progressed, although signs of cultivation grew fewer as the distance between the village and ourselves increased. A couple of hours into our journey, we took rest for ten minutes by a babbling brook that tumbled down one of the few low volcanic inclines across our path. The water was cool and refreshing, and we all welcomed the break.

From this small vantage point, I could clearly make out the two main lakes and the small settlement hidden on the outskirts of the tropical forest that I saw yesterday. Looking ahead, jungle-like greenery faced us, and cut across our path. I still found it hard to discern the farthest rim of the volcanic caldera that trapped us all within. However, the morning mist was hampering long distance vision by creating a slight haze, so I left the thought alone until later, when perchance the sun might have burnt-off the excess moisture in the air.

The short break completed quickly and people began standing impatient to continue. With a nod from the King, soldiers took the lead once more, although others behind them formed in different groups as the raggle-taggle band wended its way across the daunting plain. Gradually, the vegetation thickened as we entered one of the jungle sections, but surprisingly, a clear and straight path was maintained. By turns, we crossed more open countryside, evinced by grass underfoot. Along the way were stands of shrubs, some bearing wild fruits we picked or passed to our want.

Later, we continued again through jungle passageways. Roughly, two hours later we rested for a second time close to another small river, and again departed within ten minutes. I had decided we would be walking all day to reach our destination, and relaxed into a steady gate.

The sun was central in the skies above as we crested a small ridge, and I once more had a good vantage point. I stopped to look around as the others hurried by. I could finally make out the western rim of the volcano, which now appeared closer than the eastern rim, which had been the focal point of my last four months spent on this island. Much of our route had been in a southwest direction, although I could discern no reason why, except that was where the trail led.

Turning around full circle, this was the first time I had been able to see the entire crater and it was clear that the volcanic walls formed one very large ring. I was not quite central, with the northern walls being now the farthest away and difficult to make out. These sheltered a lake that occupied a large area slightly to my left (north). I could just about make out two villages, one to either shore, and a connecting track from the smaller eastern village that ran towards us through dense greens of more husbanded land.

I walked a few paces to the tip of a small promontory, and discovered the new path ended where a small group of dwellings were grouped half a mile distant. I counted one large hut, and seven smaller ones that nestled to the south of a fork in the road. There were a couple of others a little way distant, and unusually separated from the main group. However, a ridge of rock prevented me from seeing more than the outline of their rooftops. They were all of similar design to the ones of the village I knew.

My two friends had remained with me during my pause, whilst everyone else has rushed on ahead. I thanked them for waiting and struck off for what was bound to be a halt for lunch. The staging post was of most basic design with one large communal building serving as a hostelry and restaurant. Nearby were several dormitory buildings, one featuring a few girls of questionable morals, looking to entice weary travellers with dreams of *what could be?*

Of the other huts, one appeared to house the small crew who maintained the tracks through the surrounding jungle, as evidenced by certain tools that would be useful for such work. The remaining buildings looked residential and seemed to be reserved for the proprietor's family and workforce.

I had been expecting us to stop at the larger building for lunch, but instead we passed through the settlement and found a well-worn path that meandered over a small incline. The rise was gentle and I could see the thatch of two other buildings easily as we walked towards them. The ground soon levelled to reveal a curious area below, which was host to an assortment of pools, nestled between sheltered bowls of rock. Steam was gently rising from several, and I was astounded to find what must be hot springs.

There remained no wonder why the others of our party did not tarry with me, as they were already leaping around in a couple of the larger pools, splashing and having fun. We hurried down to join their frolics, quickly removing all our clothes. My companions took a mere ten seconds, whilst I with a full set of western clothes took about one minute. I made a pile nearby as the others had done with their own dress, but ensured mine was quite visible, and that the pocket with the stone that intrigued everybody so much was well bundled into a wrap to prevent easy access.

Everybody was skinny-dipping, and all eyes turned to inspect my physique, a sight they had never seen before, Xi Xah excepted. I rose to the occasion with good humour and a broad smile, although without any undue physical embarrassment. However, I did notice the girls giggling and blushing; and noted by comparison with other men, that I was bigger built in virtually all areas of my body.

I tested the water and it was lovely and warm, without being too hot. I slid in and was soon frolicking about with the others in general and harmless fun. Some lingered there, while a few others had gone to a larger pool nearby. Curious, I followed, noting it was slightly hotter, but easily bearable. After dipping my toe, I entered with a dive and swam underwater for most of its width, breaking the surface with a large spray and show. Once again, I was the centre of everybody's attention as I languidly swam back across the pool.

A cheer erupted and people came rushing over to watch me. Not at all sure why, I lay back and floated for a few seconds, before breaking into a backstroke. I heard whistles and hoots of delight through my water filled ears, and was seriously perplexed. I found one of the few places deep enough to tread water, and waved to the masses. For some strange reason I had never been very good at the crawl, always getting my equilibrium and timing wrong. I was always good at both butterfly and backstroke, but I was exceeding powerful at breaststroke, often quicker than those who crawled.

To further enhance my celebrity status I took a few very long and powerful breaststrokes and easily crossed the pool floating to a stop against the edge with one last long pull. n'Gnung and his brother were immediately at my side, praising me with a landslide of questions and astonishment. To make their point they tried to swim, only to come to a spluttering halt within a few feet. It dawned on me; these people did not know how to swim.

The pool, high in natural salts and minerals, was very buoyant and ideal for teaching first-time swimmers. However, I knew this would take longer than the few minutes we would have, and never having taught anyone how to swim before, I decided to see if they could float on their backs. They were

not too good at it until I made a big display of drawing in my breath and holding it. I repeated several times before making shallow breathing noises with full lungs. They both got the idea and floated well.

I took n'Gnung aside with his brother, and showed them how to pull underwater with their hands. Previously they had been doing this to splash others, but I showed them how to feel the water pressure instead. I demonstrated a short backstroke and returned to them. They tried, and ended up as hulks of coughing uncertainty. Thinking quickly, as my intention was for immediate effect, and not teaching swimming properly, I called for a couple of helpers. One held my friends' head above water, whilst the other supported his buttocks. I relaxed him into the float position, carving the arm strokes guided by my hands. Once he had the motion, I quickened it, and made a show of pulling the water beneath him.

To everybody's surprise, including my own, he started to move. I motioned the supporting people to move with him, and very soon dispensed with the girl at his head. He was a lot more confident, and immediately stood and turned to float when he reached the other side of the pool. Once settled he tried on his own, but still needed the slight support of his buttocks. I provided minimal assistance that time, but otherwise he actually swam across the pond himself. He was splashing his feet in the water for effect, rather than as part of any known stroke, but we achieved immediate progress. I had not thought this would work so well, but he was a good student, plus with water containing such a high salt level, it was a gamble worth taking, which paid off.

The crescendo of excitement that greeted my friend was completely out of a comic book. People thronged all around and enjoyed the moment immensely. All of them came into the pool, and wanted to learn how to swim. We endured twenty minutes or so of coughing and spluttering, before they began to realise it might be a little more complicated than they first thought. I tried to get away but I was in the thick of it, as I notice towards the end, n'Gnung had actually managed to cross the pool completely unassisted. I decided there and then, that he was destined to become a swimming instructor.

Meanwhile, I appeared to have become the object of desire for many of the local ladies; fleeting fumbles and touches of my neither regions implying their immediate source of interest. I firmly broke away to find safer territory, of which there appeared to be none, except for the rocks above. I saw Xi Xah was already on shore, so got out of the water and headed determinedly to join her. We relaxed for a moment sitting down by one of the huts still totally naked, which I had forgotten about. We were brought beakers of water and some assorted fruit, while we watched the others play for a while.

She was looking at me discreetly in a most appraising fashion; the way women sometimes look when they are deciding to take a husband. The air stilled between us; I did not intend being drawn into her trap.

I would never consider other, and newer family options, if for one moment I thought there was a possibility of one day returning. On the other hand, if I was destined to remain on the island for my entire lifetime, I could not do so without a family of my own. People are weird that way, and I knew my fatherly biological clock was ticking loudly.

My body had virtually sun-dried by the time I returned to my bundle of clothes, intending to dress. That was until n'Gnung leapt out of the water and embraced me fully for the very first time. He was excited and extremely happy. He made swimming motions and clasped me again; his face alive with pure joy. Turning abruptly, he bombed back into the water, cascading people nearby with a great spray, including myself. He stopped and appeared to count for a moment, before lying back and swimming almost all the way across the pool.

I clapped with genuine enthusiasm and cheered loudly as he turned; and I stood rapt as a couple of others joined him for a few strokes on his return swim. My eyes watered with genuine and shared happiness. These people may not be original thinkers to any great degree, but they were all exceedingly good imitators. The King was one of his fellow swimmers and he strutted out of the water with great swagger to greet me. He clasped my forearm, as was his way, and pulled me close as a brother, hugging me long and hard to his chest with his other powerful paw.

Breaking the clasp, the King smiled and nodded his head to me, and this time I smiled back with pleasure. As he departed, heading off to retrieve his belongings, so others began to swamp me. I cast a despairing look towards n'Gnung, and he dealt with their exuberance, matched equally by his own; guiding them towards the refreshments hut. I took the opportunity to reclaim my belongings and quickly dressed. My things had yet again remained entirely untouched, although I did run a cursory inventory and all was present, especially my beloved black stone.

The staff were fussing around the King and his party as I entered the main structure for the first time. The Queen had taken a separate table for herself and her trusted companions, far away from the rest of us. Xi Xah was with the company of girls I was wishing to keep a small distance from. They appeared to be very good friends, and I wondered what work or service they provided for a living.

Meanwhile, some staff turned to greet me, and at sight of me, one young girl screamed and dropped her fruit basket as she ran off to take shelter behind a grass partition. The matronly Mâtre Dame chased her back to work with a stout broom as everybody laughed. I settled nearby at the edge of the Princess's table (the quietest and most sheltered part of the inn) and enjoyed refreshments consisting of meal dough, fruit, and water.

The Princess and her small party were affable and given to small displays of appreciation, which contrast markedly with the rest of the interior. I was joined by n'Gnung who asked if I wanted a beer, but I politely declined, noticing nobody else was drinking heavier fluids either. The brief luncheon was soon concluded, which was immediately followed by a short nap. This was taken outside on straw bedding, and Xi Xah nestled beside me as we drifted in slumber.

I started awake as the King's voice boomed out, marking time to continue our journey. Despite a couple of sleepy looks, we were all soon assembled and ready to leave. As we departed, I again noticed that no form of payment appeared to have been made. The sun was still very high in the sky, but now two hours passed its zenith.

We walked onwards for another hour before there was a marked change in the scenery. Instead of long stretches with little appearance of humanity's handiwork, the land began to bear telltale hallmarks of cultivation by primitive people. I noticed the jungle had thinned to disappearing and was replaced by a more orderly presentation of Gaia's bountiful gifts. This bounded a swamp area at the base of the larger lake miles distant, which evidenced miniscule figures toiling within what I presume were large reed beds and a small mangrove-like swamp. The land was becoming fascinating again, and the next hour brought progressively more order to the land, as fields and groves of shrubbery were interspersed with stands of trees scattered unevenly around our path.

Unexpectedly, we emerged from the luxuriant vegetation and, rounding a bend in the trail, I saw another, and larger staging post, lay directly ahead, a mere four hundred yards or so distant. This one rested in the quadrant where the road forked, but the main road was not the one we were currently travelling. Instead, it linked to a larger village on the lake, similar to our own. In the other direction, was a town that was peeping from behind a rocky peninsula of larval deposits that hugged the southwest.

With over four miles yet to travel, and a long day behind us, we stopped for a short break where the King and others of our party greeted old friends with a relaxed yet intimate air of brotherhood. Xi Xah took me by the arm and introduced me to some of her friends that were loitering with greatest disarming charm outside what was presumably the best, and only, bordello in town. The girls all wanted to touch me, marvelled at my hairy arms, and tall alien looks. I bequeathed smiles and laughter all around, secretly hoping for a speedy withdrawal.

My rescue came in the form of n'Gnung, who swaggered into the mêlée of feminine wiles, and planted kisses on two of his favourites; I presumed he had been this way before. He didn't linger, but instead handed me a small goblet of beer and we toasted. The girls clapped and danced around as he planted a gallant arm around my shoulder, and flicked an eye for us to depart. This was fine by me; the last thing I needed complicating my life was a gabble of excited and inquisitive, predatory girls.

He strutted off with me enrapt, as if we were about to hit the beers big-time. I played along because I had grown to trust his judgement; and was rewarded when we regained the shelter of the King's court and he called for water. However, it seemed we both made a big face with the girls, and no doubt, stories of our passing would be exaggerated tenfold as soon as we departed.

I estimated it is now around three in the afternoon, and we had another two hours or less to walk. I was a little weary, but nothing of substance. Since most of his retinue had returned from their frolics, the Queen signalled, the King bellowed once more, and we quickly formed a column on the road outside.

Our party immediately swelled to forty or more people, as the procession became a parade. About one mile out from the township, other people came to greet us and joined in, some dancing, others singing, or playing instruments. The air smelled of *Carnival*, and I was up for it, in spite of my slightly wearying limbs.

Chapter 10 – Grimwaldi Rinns

I was certain this was the Capital city of their island culture, as evidenced by a grand and decorated gateway arch. Before we reached this, still more people came to line the path and amalgamated to swell the parade even more. The King was magnanimous in his gracious exuberance, and I had to conclude that we are about to meet the Emperor. I also kept an eye out for the girl I met briefly during our first contact; she remained central to my understanding – I was sure of it.

The scene replayed as of two days previous, but on a far grander scale. A large party of warriors wearing more professional make-up than before greeted us at the entrance gate. They issued their Maori-like challenge and offered their dance, before flanking us both front and rear as they escorted us into the township proper. However, this time the street was lined with people eager to welcome us, and I heard much banter as we headed for the main square.

Professional musicians and dancing girls joined us, as did the people lining the road, with their children and dogs gambolling amidst the growing throng. We were also joined by a stray chicken (the first I had seen on this island), which caused much gaiety as it repeatedly headed in all the wrong directions in order to escape.

I was made up, as everyone wanted to peek at *The Alien* amongst them. I stood taller and reacted to their inquisition with bolder strides and larger bearing, plus a magnanimous smile and endearing crinkle of the eye.

The town was far larger and consisted of more than two hundred buildings, although some were obviously places of work and commerce. A substantial river ran to my left as we approached, demarking what appeared to be an industrial area in the lower reaches lying east of the main township. We were walking up a delicate rise, and passed over one of what became several rivers that headed northwards. A large block of rock acted as a bridge, and building technology appeared to have reached its highest point as we turned off the main trail, and entered the square at the heart of the Capital. Again, the main building facing us was long series of gazebos, this time eleven structures combined.

Above rose a small hill that stood a mere twenty feet higher than the ground surrounding; where resided the local dignitary. Steps lead down from houses larger than any I had seen before, and ended at a short bridge that crosses to a platform set on the roof of the central gazebo. A rostrum sat on this central portion; which in turn became the first and only two-tiered structure I had witnessed so far.

Standing to the front was the Emperor in all his glory. He was bedecked with finery, flowers, and authority; and welcomed us into the heart of his society. We came before him in honour and he cast a small glance askance at me, before paying tribute to his brother, my new King; I knew this without need for words, because the family resemblance was so striking and immediate. Soon we were led through the central gazebo where paired stone staircases has been carved into the rock. Reaching the top I realised there was a ledge that linked the main staircase to the platform. The Emperor welcomed us and made a grand show for the expectant crowd below. My two companions followed but were stopped to wait within and below at the bottom of the stairs.

After official salutations, we took drinks in honour of my welcome. The Emperor spoke first and last, whilst his brother introduced me, and I made a similar, short speech to last time. I bowed deeply to the crowd, deeper to the Emperor, and casting greetings with a waved arm, as grand gestures of goodwill, finished with a flourish. We played to the crowd for about ten minutes before the Emperor turned and we were bidden to follow his footsteps up the short grand staircase to the Imperial enclosure.

The central building atop the rise appeared to be his court, as I could make out a large throne set above to the rear, with seats to both sides and a large space in front. We passed by to the eastern side and came to a complex of huts that numbered about twenty, the west being open parade ground before meeting sheer walls of natural rock. The houses were spread out in the familiar, yet unusual groupings I had seen before at the village of Forest Meade.

Our destination was a large hut adjacent to the court that turned out to be the official ballroom, come theatre, restaurant, and bar. Its purpose and functions were the same as the one I was familiar with, but it was far grander in every detail. Our group entered from the main front door, but inside the layout was different. The Emperor's seating was set on a stage about three feet above the floor and was on my left. It projected into the room as a large peninsula, and to the rear had a grass screen for servants use.

The stage lay directly opposite and was about the same height above the rocky ground beneath. Like the one in Forest Meade, it had a grass screen to the rear, but featured greater embellishment and many props set to either side. I noticed a band was assembling to one side, so I expected the evening to be a repeat of my first with this civilisation.

The Emperor led us to his dais and took a central carved stone throne of rudimentary design; it had wide arms, and featured straw matting for cushions. The throne to his left was slightly larger and already graced with the Empresses' presence. I stopped purposefully to bow to her as I arrived. She nodded her head in return, but with little enthusiasm, and pretended to be immediately distracted. The first chill nudged alive the slight uneasiness in the back of my mind. Our Queen had been sitting next to her and they were deep in deliberations as we entered. However, as the table filled she took a seat opposite her superior, and the King sat down beside her, opposite his brother.

I was left to stand for a while as others of the Imperial party took their customary positions. The seat next to the Emperor remained empty and was presumably where I would eventually sit, once people remembered me. I started when the Princess arrived and sat to the left of the Empress, as I almost knew her face, but it was slightly different. She caught my look and smiled back with no countenance of recognition. On closer study, she appeared younger than the first person I met on this island, and might have been only fourteen years of age. She was seated opposite our own Princess and soon the two were engaged in girly chat, whilst the Empress' courtiers occupied the remaining seats. Sar Tan sat next to the Imperial Princess, and I could feel her malevolent eyes on me, but she was always speaking with others when I looked at her directly. My feelings of disquiet increased disproportionately.

A maidservant rushed up and whispered to the highest-ranking female, and she smiled with pleasure. Turning her gaze on me like a searchlight, she immediately feigned disgust that I was still standing, and indicated I should sit next to her husband. He also offered what could pass for apologies, and stood to welcome me, guiding me into the seat next to him. I returned his entreaty with gay abandon, and as if everything was amazing, and I was at fault for becoming enrapt in adulation of my surroundings. Meanwhile, my mind was seriously tortured by this very odd display.

The hall filled, as my King leaned forward and spoke with his brother. He motioned towards n'Gnung behind him and then at me, presumably intimating we had a good understanding of one another. The Emperor acquiesced and people moved along one seat to accommodate the warrior so he could sit next to the King. Our table filled with much food and drink, but whilst everyone was pleasant to me, I was left mainly to my own counsel. There were some weird swimming motions, so I guessed this was the tale of the moment. I looked to n'Gnung for succour, but he was making them also. Ho-hum!

Feeling somewhat neglected, I welcomed the chance to people-watch, and I cast my gaze around the hall observing the commoners, and my particular table with immense interest. There was something very *wrong*, which was *right* at the Kings' table. It was not until I questioned the family resemblance between Emperor and King that I conclude that the Emperor was in fact the younger sibling; how did that work?

I pondered this for a few minutes, when by chance, there was a crash from my left as a servant girl dropped what she had been carrying. However, what startled me was the sudden realisation that the Empress and Queen were also siblings, something previously disguised by their different dress, hairstyles, and make-up. In profile and by physical reaction, they were like two peas in a pod. What warped my mind was the fact that the Empress was older than her sister, the Queen.

As I absorbed this new fact, a gong sounded and a conch blared to indicate the beginning of our celebration for the evening. The progression was very similar to before, where the Emperor extolled my arrival, followed by his elder brother. We drank rocket fuel in toasts, and I offered my same short speech. The Emperor concluded and the show began. The acts were a lot better than last time, and I could actually accord the title of acrobats to a couple of the performers. However, it was a similar mix of song, dance, monologue, and comedy as before.

n'Gnung called a waitress and ordered a couple of beers. The King said something, so I was not surprised when three beers were delivered to us. We rose to toast the rest of the table. I followed the King's lead, whilst noting the others at the table did not rise and return the salutation with wine, nor spirits. It would appear we were uncouth, and I became aware of whom my real friends were. I homed in on the olives, which apart from not being properly preserved, were large, succulent, and delicious.

I was pleasantly surprised when the Prince to my right joined us for a few beers. We toasted and n'Gnung made a big show of interpreting anything I uttered. He had absolutely no idea what I was saying of course, but it seemed to serve a purpose. Satisfied, the Prince returned to his spirits and courtiers whilst, my warrior friend smiled magnanimously and proffered a conspiratorial wink.

I half-noticed a curious child speak to n'Gnung, but thought little of it at the time. A young girl gave him a basket of rare fruit. With great approval, the Imperial party greeted the gift, a cantaloupe melon, a fruit obviously held in highest esteem. As the nobility enthused over the offering, n'Gnung beckoned me with a flick of his eyes to go with him.

We headed for the reed bed latrine, and I noticed guards mustering as we left the great hall. That seemed curious, but n'Gnung hurriedly ushered me to the far side of the latrine, an area that was obviously seldom used. He said, "Give girl black rock," and pointed at the pocket where he knew I kept my treasures. He urged me to keep walking, miming a knife slitting my throat, and forthwith, stabbing my heart. I followed a faint trail into a ravine amongst the nearby rocks.

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

I did not know her name, but was almost sure by family likeness; she was the Empress' eldest daughter, one who had been missing from the banquet. I suspected she was the usual occupant of the empty seat I had used, something n'Gnung later confirmed. I knew she alone had looked out for me when I survived, marooned and castaway on the shores of the Outlands.

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

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

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

I turned to leave, but looked back into the eyes that bewitched me, and the girl nodded back at me, not breaking eye contact for a hint of blink. I rejoined n'Gnung at the reed bed latrine, as the sounds of guards grew closer. Our eyes locked briefly, his flicked momentarily towards the darkness, and he left by a sideways route. I knew what was coming.

I was arrested and marched to a cell...

[Book One, Chapter One first page, continues from this point.]