

The Sign of Ouroboros

Ouroboros, #1

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Prologue

Wychmere, England, Autumn 2016

Now this is what I call a nice house, thought Andrew Leadsom. Should be some rich pickings here.

He stopped his car outside the gates of Garlock House. The stone gateposts were topped by heraldic stone lions. The lions were badly weathered, but there was a new feature on one gatepost. A brass plate. Leadsom frowned. The plate bore no words, but was etched with an unfamiliar circular design. He leaned out of the car window to peer more closely at the image.

A snake eating its own tail? Weird. But the English aristocracy has always been a tad eccentric. They keep marrying their cousins, all that inbreeding sends them daft. Just look at some of the royals.

Leadsom glanced up the broad driveway to the large house, then turned and looked back down the road he had come. The village of Wychmere was a small, sleepy place, and after a few moments of thought, he had decided not to try his luck there. It did not seem especially wealthy, despite the number of tourists who came to see the prehistoric stone circle. The big house on the outskirts of the village seemed like a much better bet. It could prove an ideal target for a veteran con artist like Leadsom.

He got out and tried the wrought-iron gates. They were not locked, and he was soon driving his car up to the house's classical portico. He was just setting foot on the steps leading up to the front door when it opened and a statuesque, dark-haired woman appeared.

Well, today really is looking up, he thought. Nothing like a curvaceous hottie on a cold day.

The girl was an inch or so taller than Leadsom, who noticed that she was barefoot. She was also dressed quite skimpily for a chilly October afternoon, in a colorful silk wrap of some kind that was not very well secured. The house was

well-heated. A wave of warm air washed over Leadsom as he tried not to stare down her cleavage. She smiled down at him as he reached the top of the steps.

"Yes? Are you expected?" she asked.

Her voice was surprisingly deep, a husky contralto. Her eyes were a wonderful golden-green and were large, almost freakishly so. Her mouth was wide and full-lipped.

This one just gets sexier by the second, he thought. *But let's not mix business with pleasure.*

"I'm afraid I don't have an appointment, no," he replied. "But I am here to do you a big favor, I hope. You see, I deal in antiques, and I'm sure an old place like this must have some hidden treasures that could raise quite a tidy sum."

Leadsom handed her his business card, a lavishly produced one, calculated to inspire consumer confidence. The card was embossed with a fake name, a useless email address, and the phone number of a Thai restaurant in Coventry he had selected at random. But the details, coupled with Leadsom's nice suit, professional but friendly demeanor, and shiny Lexus inspired confidence. Nobody had ever tried to check his background until it was much too late.

The girl smiled, showing impressively white teeth, as she took a step back. Leadsom stepped inside. As he passed close to her, he got a strong whiff of perfume. It was patchouli, rather stronger than he normally liked. There was an undertone of something else, a less pleasant odor that, for some reason, triggered childhood memories.

Maybe she just doesn't bathe too often, he thought. *Anyway, that's not important. Focus on the smell of money, Andy.*

"Nice to meet you, Mister Nuttall," she said, handing back the card. "I'm Olivia. You'd better come in and speak to Jonathan."

"Ah, Jonathan is your husband?" he asked. Then, when Olivia shook her head, "Your father?"

"No, he's the spokesperson of our group. We are a small spiritual community."

The words took a few moments to register, as the entrance hall was better than Leadsom could have hoped. Glancing around, being careful not to look even slightly impressed, he noticed a Louis Fourteenth clock and a fine Georgian table. If the rest of Garlock House contained similarly fine antiques, it could prove to be a very lucrative visit.

"Religious, you mean?" he asked, becoming wary. Conning any large organization was hazardous. It was always best to target individuals; the older and greedier, the better.

"Not in the conventional sense," said a new voice. "We are very broadminded in our attitudes."

A plump, bald man appeared from a side door and came up to shake Leadsom's hand. Leadsom noticed that the man was limping slightly and filed the fact away. Even the most trivial detail could come in handy when you were trying to win someone's trust.

"Mister Paul Nuttall, wandering antique dealer," said Olivia, "Meet Jonathan Clay, the Herald of Ouroboros."

Now that does sound barmy, thought Leadsom, smiling at Clay. *These people could be ideal marks.*

"Please, call me Jonathan, we don't need fancy titles," said Clay. "Come, join me for a cup of tea, and tell me what brings you to our little colony."

Clay led him into a splendid drawing room with wood-paneled walls and a huge fireplace.

"Excuse me while I help Olivia with the tea tray," said Clay, gesturing at a fine divan suite. "Can I offer you biscuits, or some of our home made Victoria sponge cake? No? Oh well, make yourself comfortable, Paul."

Free to act unobserved, Leadsom wasted no time in scrutinizing everything that looked valuable. As in the hall, he was impressed by several fine-looking antiques, calculating that there must be at least ten thousand pounds worth of loot in this one room. He was also struck by the presence of a number of odd statues in stone or clay. They varied widely in style, and he thought he recognized Indian, Aztec, and Babylonian artifacts. But he dismissed them as they were outside his field of interest.

Leadsom turned his attention to the paintings, hoping to strike gold again. But here he found nothing of obvious value, just a few mass-produced topographical prints. The only large picture was over the fireplace, and it was more grotesque than attractive. It was, he concluded, a scene from classical mythology, but Leadsom had no idea what the story behind it might be. Against the backdrop of a huge city on a plain by the sea, a horrific multiple killing was taking place. Three men were struggling in the coils of a huge serpent while aghast spectators looked on.

"Ah, I see you are admiring our rather graphic masterpiece," said Clay, appearing at the door with a silver tea tray. Olivia followed him in with a plate of biscuits.

"I don't recognize the story," said Leadsom. "But I assume those three angered the gods? That's usually the way of these things."

"Quite right," said Clay, limping across to stand by him. "Laocoon, the old man in the middle, warned his fellow Trojans not to take the wooden horse into their city. The gods, who wanted Troy to be destroyed, sent a serpent to kill him and his sons, the two lads on either side of him. The Trojans took the wooden horse inside the city, and the rest, I'm sure you know."

"But why kill his sons?" asked Leadsom, genuinely curious. "It seems so pointless and cruel."

"To put an end to his line, of course!" said Clay. "Even today, in much of the world, to be without sons is to be ranked not quite a man. But you have more pleasant things to discuss, I'm sure."

A few moments later, Leadsom was seated on a fine Edwardian sofa while Olivia handed him a cup of herbal tea. He pretended to be fascinated by all things spiritual, as he chatted with Clay about the latter's crackpot beliefs.

"So you see, Paul," Clay was saying, "we use the symbol of Ouroboros to signify recurrence, rebirth, regeneration. The story of Laocoon, taken literally, is grim indeed. But if one sees the serpent as symbolizing 'nature' it is simply a statement of the obvious, that nothing human endures, only life itself, and struggling against the inevitable merely leads to suffering."

"Fascinating," said Leadsom, cautiously taking a sip of the steaming tea. It was more pleasant than he expected, and he took a generous mouthful, almost scalding his tongue.

"Our tea is a mixture of herbs," said Clay. "Very refreshing, and a good way to alleviate stress. But you came here to discuss business, I believe?"

Leadsom set his half-empty cup down.

Now we get to the nitty gritty, he thought.

"Well, Jonathan," he said, "I've recently set up shop in Hereford, and I'm essentially familiarizing myself with the surrounding area. I specialize in less valuable antiques, the kind of things that people tend to just put in a cupboard or the attic and forget about. I have an international network of buyers and, with no false modesty, I can say I've managed to raise tidy sums for a lot of locals already."

"Fascinating work," exclaimed Clay, "isn't it, Olivia?"

"Yes," she said, topping up Leadsom's teacup from a silver pot that he valued at around six hundred pounds. He could think of at least three collectors who would snap it up.

"And very satisfying, to help all those little old ladies turn their knick-knacks into ready money," added the girl, settling herself next to Leadsom so her slim hip just touched his. "Why, you're quite the public benefactor, Paul!"

Is she taking the piss?

Something about the tone of the girl's voice bothered him. It wasn't the only thing that seemed off-kilter. There was a distant roaring noise, like a waterfall or waves breaking on a beach. And again, under the strong perfume, there was that other smell. Stale, vaguely feral.

"Are you feeling all right, Paul?" asked Clay. "Would you like to lay down?"

"No, I'm fine," said Leadsom. But the simple phrase did not come easily.

"Tell us, Paul," said Olivia, running a finger through his hair, "is there anything around here that takes your fancy?"

He guffawed stupidly, staring more blatantly down the front of her wrap. She laughed and tapped him on the end of his nose.

"Now you know I meant antiques!"

"Well," he said, "there's a ton of stuff here I could shift. This couch is worth a cool thousand. That little gilt clock in the hall, another two grand at least. Lovely item, that."

Leadsom babbled on, giving a completely honest assessment of the valuables he had seen. Part of him, the seasoned con man, looked on in horror as he continued to blurt out tricks of the trade. He even told them his real name.

"The best way to take in your classic little old lady," he babbled, "is to make her think she's put one over on you. Buy some piece of tat for way over the odds, then trick her out of something really valuable."

"You naughty, naughty boy!"

Olivia ran her hand down his cheek. Her flesh was cool despite the warm room, and slightly rough.

"You should wear rubber gloves when you do the washing up, darling," he said. "You've got dishpan hands."

The girl giggled, then got up just as Leadsom made a wobbling lunge at her. He ended up face first in a velvet cushion and dropped his teacup.

"Oh dear," said Clay, putting down his own cup, which was still full to the brim. "It seems we have a dishonest man on our hands."

"True," said Leadsom, as he struggled upright again. His mouth seemed to have a mind of its own, resisting his best efforts to control it, "I'm a total bastard who cons pensioners out of their family heirlooms. Pays them a pittance, and when they find out I lied, I'm long gone. Move on to a new area, start again."

Herbal tea, he thought desperately. *They drugged me. Jesus, I'm in trouble.*

Leadsom's first instinct was to make a run for it, but his effort to stand up merely led to him plunging face first into an Afghan rug.

"Oops a daisy," laughed Olivia, helping him to his feet.

"Bloody hell, you're very strong, even for a big girl," said Leadsom. "Must work out. I blame feminism. Ruining romance. Not natural."

The roaring in his ears was so loud now that he could barely make out what Clay was saying. The plump man was talking to the girl. Something about 'having a little lie down.'

"I'm fine, really," Leadsom insisted. "People will be wondering where I am. I must be going."

"I don't think you'll be able to drive in such a state," said Clay, looking closely into Leadsom's eyes. "Yes, pupil's dilated. But it's hard to calculate the dosage with these things. After all, everyone's different."

Clay took Leadsom's other arm. Between them, Clay and Olivia steered the befuddled con man out into the hall, then up two flights of stairs. Leadsom lost consciousness for a while. When he came to, his mind was still clouded by the 'herbal tea.' He was apparently on a bed in a dimly-lit room.

He could hear voices. Clay and the woman were out in the corridor, just out of sight. They seemed to be arguing. Clay said something about an 'unworthy subject,' but Olivia cut him off, sounding insistent. He made out the word 'sacrifice'.

Oh God, they really are some kind of insane cult, he thought. *They're going to kill me!*

He made a tremendous effort to move. His body resisted his urging and all he managed was a groan of despair.

The light from the doorway diminished as a slight figure entered. Again, he smelled patchouli, its cloying fragrance. And once more, he detected that undertone of something else, the odor that conjured up an image of a favorite aunt, ice cream, a day out at the zoo.

Olivia climbed onto the bed next to him. She was naked, her curvaceous body pale and sinuous. He felt her flesh brush against his limp hand and again felt that odd roughness, coldness. Her face, just a couple of inches away from his, looked subtly different somehow. As if her features had coarsened in some way. *Is her mouth larger, were her eyes that far apart?* Leadsom wondered if it was a trick of the half-light.

"You've told us so much about yourself, Andrew," she said. "You have no family, no close friends, and you always keep a low profile. The only people who'll wonder where you are have a strong aversion to contacting the police, isn't that right? You're the sort of man who can vanish easily, and never be missed."

Olivia's tongue flicked across her lips, then she opened her mouth. It gaped far wider than any human mouth had a right to. A pair of fangs protruded from her upper jaw. At the sight of them, he suddenly remembered where he had first encountered the stale, unpleasant smell that was not quite masked by the patchouli.

It was somewhere hot, and dark. The Reptile House at the Zoo!

Her mouth closed on his neck for a moment and he felt cold, sharp pinpricks penetrate his flesh. When Olivia pulled away, her face was barely human. Her eyes were a bright green now, displaced almost to the side of her head, their pupils turned to slits. Her mouth was opening again, wider than any human mouth, a glistening void that soon filled his entire field of vision.

Before her transformation was complete, the venom had done its merciful work.

Chapter 1

A Dream of Armageddon.

In his dream, the world was coming to an end, and his daughter did not want to know him. It was hard for him to decide which was worse.

Brad Steiger saw the world from an astronaut's perspective, a beautiful blue and white orb lit by dazzling sunshine. Directly below him was the Atlantic, with the Americas in full daylight to his left, Europe and Africa emerging from darkness on the right. He got no pleasure from the vision, though, because he knew with the certainty of nightmare that something bad was coming.

The catastrophe began on the night side of the earth, where Brad could just make out the scattered light of cities in Asia and the Middle East. A brighter light appeared, very different from the blue-white of human settlements. This was an angry orange-red glare, and formed a sinuous line. More lines appeared, intersecting and spreading at terrifying speed. As they grew, the glow they emitted brightened.

The planet is cracking open, like an egg!

The lovely blue and white of the sunlit earth began to vanish, swamped by gouts of black and brown. Brad realized that smoke, volcanic ash, and steam were rushing out of the cracks in the world's crust. And the seismic eruptions had created vast tsunamis. He could see one now, a dirty-white wave of terrifying force heading for the eastern seaboard of the United States.

"Dad? You're not listening. Again."

Brad was sitting in a Starbucks with his daughter, Kelly. Outside, the world did not seem to be ending. As usual, she seemed disappointed with him. She reached out across the table littered with cups and sugar packets to take his hand. He saw that she had a tattoo on the back of her hand. It was an ornate circular pattern, the weird image of a snake apparently eating its own tail.

"You're not supposed to see that," Kelly said, reprovingly. "Just stay out of it, Dad. Listen to me for once."

Because it was a dream, she was not just the Kelly of today, but all the Kellys Brad had known. She was the young woman he struggled to understand, the little daughter he had loved more than life itself, the teenager who had so bitterly resented him for leaving her mother. And she was more. There was someone else looking out of her eyes, a stranger.

"Kelly, where did you go?" he asked. "I just want to know you're okay."

"It's a bit late for that," she said. "Seven years too late. I'm gone for good now. The world you knew is gone, too. Sorry, Dad. That's just how it is."

There were screams from outside, the sound of car horns and sirens, a huge crash that sounded like a building collapsing. The sky darkened. A great wall of glistening dark green appeared in the distance. There were more screams, people began to run. He grabbed his daughter's hand in both of his, determined never to let her go again.

"Kelly, we have to stay together, there's a tsunami coming! We might make it to high ground if we get to the car!"

She shook her head.

"That's not what's happening, Dad. It's just the same old cycle coming around again, like it always does. Rise and fall, birth and death, renewal."

Brad stared out of the window. She was right; it was not a great wave that was blocking out the sun. It was a vast wall of scaled flesh, gleaming dully in green and gold, higher than the tallest skyscrapers. It moved ponderously, growing ever closer, smashing down buildings in great explosive clouds of glass, dust, and rubble.

"Ouroboros," said Kelly, pulling her arm away from his grip. As she did, the tattoo on her hand became a living serpent, uncoiling and rearing up, growing at an impossible speed, becoming so vast as to blot out the sky, its huge jaws gaping as it lunged down to devour him.

"No!"

Brad woke up shouting, tangled in sweaty sheets. As always, the dream left him disoriented, and he only slowly came to realize that he was not at home. He groped for the bedside light, flicked it on, and saw a standard hotel room.

Okay, I'm in London, he thought. Get a grip. Focus. Right, this is the Russell Hotel, so-called because it's in Russell Square. It's Monday morning. Everything's normal.

It was just after four, and Brad was badly jet-lagged from the six-hour trans-Atlantic flight, but he knew better than to try and go to sleep again. He had been having the same apocalyptic nightmare about Kelly for nearly three months, ever since she had stopped replying to his calls and texts. At first, he had dismissed it as an inevitable symptom of fatherly concern. She had once been his little girl, but now she was a grown woman of twenty-one and living her own life. Making her own mistakes. Maybe taking big risks. Of course, he was worried. And of course, it seemed like the end of the world, because in a sense, it was.

But try as he might, Brad had been unable to rationalize the sheer scale of the disaster in the dream, and the way it was somehow linked to his daughter. And there was the recurrence of that word, Ouroboros. He had tried Googling it but ended up none the wiser. It seemed to be just one of many mystical symbols from

ancient times. He wondered if he had he read about it, or maybe seen it in a TV documentary.

"Something must have planted it in my subconscious, that's all," he told the bathroom mirror. "And my God, Mister Steiger, you look like crap this fine morning."

His reflection showed a man just on the right side of fifty, with a full head of iron-gray hair, and what his mother had always insisted was a firm jawline, 'not a big chin.' He shaved, showered, and then went back into the bedroom to make himself some coffee. As he glanced across the room, he saw a form rearing up in the shadowed corner opposite. It seemed poised to strike. He flicked on the main light and the cobra-like being was revealed as a desk lamp.

"And that's getting really old," he muttered, pouring boiling water on instant coffee granules.

He had been glimpsing serpentine forms for weeks, now. It might be a laptop cable on the floor, or the hose of a vacuum cleaner curled up in a closet. Anything elongated and winding might suddenly take the form of a snake, and move like one.

Brad had not told anyone about the hallucinations, but was sure they were linked to Kelly. If he could find her, they would end and so would the nightmares. He clung to that belief.

Now tidy yourself up, man, he thought. You've got to come across as a solid citizen, and concerned father.

Brad looked up dubiously at the block of apartments. Much of London's notorious East End had been regenerated, thanks to the 2012 Olympics. But there were pockets of squalor. This apartment building looked shabby and neglected, especially in the drizzle of a dull English April morning. As he stood watching the entrance, a couple of girls emerged, deep in conversation.

They look like students, he thought, moving to intercept them. Maybe they can confirm I've got the right place.

"Excuse me," he said, taking out a picture he'd found on Kelly's Facebook page, "I'm looking for someone who used to live here. Perhaps you knew her?"

They had known Kelly to talk to occasionally, but did not know where she had gone. Brad thanked them, went inside, and sought out the building supervisor. Doris, a middle-aged Nigerian woman in pink overalls, agreed to show him Kelly's room, as it was technically still hers. The dim-lit corridors were suffused with the smell of junk food and less pleasant odors.

"You say she was quiet, no trouble, Doris?" he asked the supervisor.

"No trouble at all," replied Doris, "not like some of these young rapscallions! Always in nice and early, Kelly, and she spent lots of time studying. A credit to you and her mother."

"But then she just disappeared?" he asked, looking around the bleak little room.

She slept in that bed, he thought. Studied at that desk. But I get no sense of her identity in this place at all. It might as well be a hotel room.

"Gone like a thief in the night," said Doris. "That happens a lot in a place like this. But her rent was paid up a month in advance. Now that's very unusual, believe me! Anyway, this is it."

Doris unlocked the door of an apartment and ushered Brad inside. It had a few posters on the wall, but not for singers or bands. Instead, they showed exotic locations in the Middle East and Asia.

"Did she travel a lot?" he asked, gesturing at the posters.

"No," replied Doris, "Kelly told me these were famous places in the science she was studying. Archaeology, I think."

"And she took all her personal belongings?" he said, opening the wardrobe to find nothing but clothes hangers.

"Yes, all her stuff was just gone one morning."

Doris shook her head.

"And you tell me you can't get in touch with her? That's a terrible thing. Family is the most important thing."

Brad could see nothing in the cramped little apartment that might help him find Kelly. All it told him was that she was no longer there. He felt a familiar despair start to well up as he looked through a chest of drawers, then the bedside cabinet. In the latter, he found a pamphlet. The front page bore an ornate circular symbol and a single word.

"Ouroboros," he said.

He stood staring at the black-and-gold cover. He was back in the nightmare, the world ending, his only child rejecting him.

How can I have dreamed this word? Maybe I read it somewhere, connected it to Kelly? Did it burrow into my subconscious?

"Beg pardon, sir?" asked Doris, coming over to look at the pamphlet. "Oh, those things. Disgraceful ungodly gibberish!"

"You've seen this before?" he asked, snapping out of his reverie and flipping through the glossy pages.

"Yes, somebody left one on the hall table. I threw it in the rubbish!"

Skimming the pamphlet, Brad could make little of it. It seemed to be promoting a bizarre, alternative view of history and spirituality, based on a rejection of Christianity and indeed, all Western culture. The tone struck Brad as less crazy than some religious propaganda he had read. The language was insidious and seductive, not ranting and judgmental. But the overall feel was still disturbing.

A cult, he thought. Kelly has joined some kind of cult. Brainwashed. Oh Sweet Jesus.

"Do you mind if I keep this?"

"No, take the evil thing away!" exclaimed Doris. "I'm only sorry I can't give you any more help."

Brad glanced around the bare room again, and shrugged.

"Not your fault," he said. "Thanks for letting me take a look around. Erm, do you mind if I use the bathroom? Had too much coffee at breakfast, I guess."

"No, not at all."

Brad felt slightly guilty, as he didn't need to pee. He just wanted to check and see if anything of Kelly's might have been left in the bathroom. It was a totally irrational impulse, and all the more powerful for that. All Brad wanted was some trivial object or item that would provide a sense of contact with her. But the cabinet over the sink was empty, though. He flushed the toilet and was about to open the door when he noticed a triangle of yellow material protruding from the

plughole in the tub. He thought at first that it was a piece of plastic. But when he pulled it out with his thumb and forefinger, he found it was more like a parchment. It was dry, waxy in texture, with a natural curve to it. It reminded him unpleasantly of fingernails and calluses.

Old skin. Dried skin.

The sound from the cistern was dying away, so he put it into his pocket and rejoined Doris.

"Thanks for letting me see her room," he said.

"It's the least I can do, you poor man," said Doris. "I hope you find her. Come on, down to my room, I'll make you a cup of tea."

"Thank you, but I really need to keep looking," replied Brad. "And this afternoon, I have to meet a guy who's good at finding lost people. A professional."

"Good luck," called Doris after him as Brad left Trafalgar House. "And may the Lord go with you."

Let's hope he does, thought Brad. I need all the help I can get.

The Peninsular Agency was based on the third floor of an office building in Canary Wharf, a thriving business district right on the river Thames. As he got out of the elevator at the reception, Brad felt reassured by the professional feel of the business. It was nothing like the shabby office of the old-style Hollywood private eye.

These people look like they get things done, he thought. I've done my best, let's see if the professionals can do better.

A smart young PA showed Brad into a bright, spacious office. Matt Arnold, a senior partner in the firm, came around his desk to offer Brad a firm handshake. The detective was of average height, slender, and about thirty-five. He also looked kind of nondescript, the sort of guy you would not remember if you saw him in a bar or walking through the park.

"Can I ask why you got in touch with this particular agency?" asked Arnold, gesturing at Brad to take a seat. "No shortage of private detectives in London, after all."

"A colleague at my company recommended you," replied Brad. "He said you have a good reputation for getting the job done."

Matt shrugged slightly.

"That's in part because I pick cases I think I can solve," he said. "Missing persons can often lead to frustrating dead ends."

"But you have found people who've gone missing, been abducted, whatever?" demanded Brad.

"Sometimes," said Matt. "Quite often, in fact. But I prefer to be up front about this. Most of a private detective's time is spent on mundane stuff. Checking up to see if a husband or wife is cheating, or if a mild-mannered corporate accountant is spending a lot of money on, what you Americans call, boats 'n' hoes. That kind of thing."

"Not as exciting as I'd thought," commented Brad.

"It pays the bills," returned Matt. "But we didn't meet up to discuss my career choices. You hinted, rather strongly, that this is not a routine job."

"No," said Brad, "here's the problem."

He explained that Kelly, who had been studying archaeology at London University, had simply dropped off the radar a month earlier. At first, Brad had assumed she had been preoccupied with college work. But after she had failed to return calls and texts for over a week, he had flown to London to find out what was going on. He had found that Kelly was no longer at her apartment, had moved out weeks earlier, telling no one where she was going.

"But there was a clue, this group she was meeting up with?" asked the detective.

Brad nodded and took the Ouroboros pamphlet from his jacket pocket, handed it over. Arnold looked at it, and frowned.

"How do you pronounce that?" he asked.

"Not sure," admitted Brad. He considered mentioning his dream, decided not to. "I'd never heard of it before. But apparently, Kelly had cut her old friends out of her life and hooked up with these people."

"So where did you get this?" asked Arnold.

"From the student apartments where she lived," replied Brad. "It seems that these things had been spread around the campus recently."

Arnold frowned at the pamphlet.

"*The Earth doth like a snake renew*," he read. "Very poetic. But if we're dealing with a cult, things could get very complicated."

"You mean legally?" asked Brad.

The detective nodded.

"Yes, because your daughter is an adult. So if she wants to join a bunch of nutters who dance naked in the woods on alternate Thursdays, there's nothing you can do to stop her, under English Law, that is."

"That's what the police told me when I called them from the States," said Brad, feeling increasingly frustrated. "Look, Matt, I'm not paying you to tell me what can't be done. I want to find her and..."

He hesitated, and Arnold nodded in sympathy.

"You want to save her from herself, and from these weirdos?"

"Yeah," said Brad, "she's still my little girl and I want to save her. That simple."

"I'll do my best," said Arnold. "And if you agree, I'd like to bring in an expert on cults and all things mystical? He charges reasonable rates."

Brad shrugged.

"Money's no object at this stage," he said. "I just want to know she's okay. And to talk to her."

Arnold paused for a moment, coolly appraising Brad before speaking.

"And if, when you talk to her, she tells you she's fine and to leave her alone?"

Brad took a deep breath.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"And there's nothing else you can tell me?" asked Arnold. "No other data other than the raw facts about Kelly, her course, and so forth?"

Brad looked out of the broad office window and saw the curved trail of a jet climbing high over London. It transformed itself briefly into a serpent, writhing in the sky.

"No," he said, looking Arnold in the eye. "There's nothing else. Just those facts."

“Okay, first the good news,” said the detective, “nobody can do much these days without leaving an electronic trail. If she's left the country, I have contacts who can find out where she's gone. If she's still in Britain, she must be registered with the National Health Service and other agencies. Again, there are ways to get that data.”

“I don't care what it takes or how much it costs,” said Brad. “Just find her.”

“I'll keep you informed,” Arnold assured him. “How long are you in London?”

Brad shrugged.

“My firm has given me a couple of weeks of unpaid leave. After that, we'll have to see. Are you sure there's nothing I can do?”

Arnold paused, and gave Brad an appraising look.

“I can't let you tag along on my investigation,” he said, “but if I come across any situation that you can help with, rest assured I'll let you know at once. In the meantime, let me give you my card. You can call any time.”

The detective took out a business card, then produced a second card and handed them both to Brad.

“Contact details for Marcus Valentine, the cult expert I mentioned,” he explained. “He lives in London. I'm sure he'd be happy to talk to you about all this, maybe offer some advice on how to win Kelly over.”

“I might just do that,” said Brad. “Thanks.”

He was about to leave when he remembered the odd substance he had found in Kelly's apartment.

“Do you have any idea what this is?” he asked.

Arnold took the parchment-like material and turned it over.

“Long time since I saw this stuff,” he said, with slight distaste. “An old girlfriend of mine kept a Burmese python. Bloody thing ate live mice, gave me the creeps. Eventually, I gave her an ultimatum, said it was me or him, and she chose Monty.”

The detective handed the fragment back to Brad with a grimace.

“Yeah, that's definitely shed snakeskin. Where did you get it?”

Chapter 2

Close to the Serpentine.

Matt Arnold walked out of Hyde Park Corner Tube station and unfurled a map of London that he had just bought at a vending machine. He was dressed in smart but casual clothes, and looked around curiously like a tourist. It was a tried and tested way of looking like a borderline idiot, the sort of visitor to the capital that Londoners habitually ignore. At the same time, it allowed Matt to gaze at anything and anyone for longer than would normally be considered polite.

Across the street was Apsley House, residence of the first Duke of Wellington. He gave it a puzzled stare, referred to the map again, then took out his phone for a picture. He added a selfie of himself in front of the Underground station sign.

Right, that's more than enough camouflage for now.

He checked his phone for texts. Sure enough, there was another one from Kathy Hopkirk. Sensibly, she had agreed to meet in Hyde Park in mid-morning. It was a public place, but one covering hundreds of acres. This would allow them to talk well out of earshot of onlookers. He crossed the road and went through the gate heading for the Serpentine, the sinuous lake that wound along the eastern edge of the park.

Odd coincidence, picking that particular location, he thought. Or maybe she has a weird sense of humor.

Brad called Marcus Valentine after he got back to his hotel on Monday afternoon. The cult expert was keen to help in any way he could, so they arranged to meet up at Valentine's apartment the following day. After another uneasy night, Brad traveled via the London Underground to Camden, where Valentine lived in an apartment over a bookshop. He was buzzed in and was met on the landing by a man of about fifty who was almost a parody of the old-fashioned English gentleman. Valentine wore iron-framed glasses, a tweed suit, and a waistcoat with a watch-chain.

"Mister Steiger? Please, come in!"

"Thanks for seeing me so promptly, Mister Valentine," said Brad, looking around a small apartment that seemed to be entirely walled with bookshelves. A large ginger cat lay sleeping on the only armchair that wasn't covered in books, magazines, or computer printouts. A PC stood on a desk by the window. Valentine cleared a space on a sofa for Brad.

"Please call me Marcus. Can I offer you some tea?"

Brad smiled, and shook his head.

"Sorry, I'm a coffee kind of guy," he replied. "And call me Brad."

"Very well, let's get down to business," said Marcus. "Take a seat."

After talking for a few minutes, Brad felt sure that Marcus Valentine was a man he could trust. He opened up about his troubled relationship with Kelly.

"Pat and I split up when she was five," he explained. "I was away from home a lot; it put a big strain on the marriage. Then I had an affair, a dumb pointless affair that smashed up my family. And since then I've seen Kelly hundreds of times, but as the absent father. Deadbeat Dad. She called me that once. The fact that I work for an oil company doesn't help. Destroying the planet, all that stuff."

He paused, still feeling the hurt of uncounted blazing rows with his only child. Marcus gave a rueful smile.

"You know," he said, "I've often observed that it takes about five minutes for an American to reveal things that an Englishman might hint at after five years of friendship."

That got a laugh from Brad, and they moved on to the Ouroboros cult.

"Well, I might have a breakthrough there," offered Marcus. "But first, what do you know about this group?"

"Only what I read in this thing," said Brad, offering the pamphlet he had found at Trafalgar House.

Marcus glanced through the pamphlet, nodding.

"Yes, this is much the same sort of thing as their website."

"They have a website?" exclaimed Brad. "They advertise their craziness?"

Marcus looked at him for a moment, then asked, "Have you seen the internet lately? There are people proudly proclaiming their belief that the Earth is flat."

Good point, thought Brad. Why wouldn't a cult use every means to lure in converts?

"So what's the real deal about Ouroboros?" he asked. "How long has it been around?"

"Not long," replied Marcus. "It first appeared in the mid-Nineties as a fringe group in what was called the New Age movement. What's odd about it is that its founder, Jonathan Clay, does have some genuine academic credentials. A doctorate in archaeology, in fact."

"Kelly was studying archaeology," Brad pointed out. "Could there be a connection?"

Marcus shrugged.

"Could be. Like a lot of cults, Ouroboros seems to try and snare bright young people, especially students. Some of its adherents are highly qualified in various fields. One of Clay's own students, Olivia Ballard, was among the founding members."

"But what made this guy go off the rails?" asked Brad. "Assuming he wasn't wacko from the get-go, of course?"

"He was the obsessive type," said Marcus, "there are a few hints in his early work. You see, he was fixated by ophiolatry."

Seeing his guest's puzzlement, Marcus got up and gently dislodged the cat, who meowed in protest, looked at Brad accusingly, then stalked out of the room.

"Here it is," said Marcus, handing Brad a hefty volume. The title was *Snake Cults In The Ancient World*.

"People worshiped snakes?" said Brad. "That really is crazy."

"But common," said Marcus, perching on the edge of his desk. "The symbol of the Pharaohs was an Egyptian Cobra, for instance. The Aztecs worshiped Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent. The Minoan civilization of Crete venerated snakes. In India, there were snake-beings called Nagas, rather similar to the Lamias of ancient Greece. Putting together all these legends, Clay formed the theory that they represented some kind of deep, primal truth about our species. A kind of vague ancestral memory, if you like. There's much more to it than that, I'm sure. Every cult has a big secret, one only revealed to the highest initiates."

Brad flipped through the book, pausing at illustrations of various idols and demons.

"The only snake I know of that was linked to religion is the one that tempted Eve," he remarked. "So does that make Ouroboros a devil-worshipping cult?"

"Clay would deny it," smiled Marcus. "The Ouroboros is an ancient symbol that has no evil connotations. Clay claims that the story in Genesis is a hint at the way other deities displaced the old, worldwide snake-cult. Thus the Ouroboros, symbol of regeneration and recurrence, proclaims the need to return to the old way, become one with Nature again, all that New Age malarkey. He's one of those clever debaters who has an answer for everything. And he did have a point, it must be said. Turn to page one-three-five."

Brad found himself looking at a picture of a snake-woman, voluptuously human from the waist up, sinuous reptile from the waist down.

"Is that a Naga?" he said.

"No, but she may be a close relation. That's a medieval painting of Lilith. In the Hebrew Talmud, Lilith was Adam's first wife, but was banished when God created Eve. Predictably enough, she is said to have born sons and daughters to him, all nice and scaly."

Brad stared at the weird hybrid creature.

"I thought Lilith was Frasier's bitchy ex-wife in that TV show."

"The original one was even more formidable, and much more seductive," said Marcus. "The Victorian painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti was very keen on the legend. 'Not a drop of her blood was human,' he wrote, 'but she was made like a soft, sweet woman.' Rossetti depicts Lilith as a rebel against God, seeking to recruit Adam for a kind of cosmic revolution."

"Fascinating," said Brad, closing the book. "But how did all this wild-eyed speculation turn into a cult that brainwashed my daughter?"

"Good question," said Marcus. "Something happened to send Clay over the edge. He was trying to prove that prehistoric stone circles were related to his universal snake-cult. He was excavating one in Ireland when he seems to have had a breakdown, or an epiphany, or something. Ouroboros emerged about a year later, and he turned his back on academia for good."

"Presumably he has some kind of headquarters?" said Brad. "Wouldn't that be a good place to start?"

"Ah, now that's interesting, because the original headquarters of Ouroboros in London was closed down last year after the group moved out. Where to, we're not sure."

"But you do have something? You said earlier," pointed out Brad.

"Ah, yes, I've just relayed an email to Matt Arnold about it," said Marcus, getting up and turning to his PC. "Come and look."

Brad watched Marcus log on to a site entitled *Cult Survivors*.

"It's mostly an opportunity for people who've escaped cults to share experiences in a safe online environment," Marcus explained. "Sometimes we're contacted by fugitives, people who are afraid of retribution. For instance, this person contacted me via a secure link."

The Englishman opened a window, and Brad saw a dialogue between Marcus and someone called Kathy Hopkirk. The last few exchanges concerned arranging a meeting.

"And Kathy is a fugitive from Ouroboros?" asked Brad.

"So she says," replied Marcus, carefully. "You'll note that she gives a mobile phone number. I passed that on to Matt first thing this morning to see if he can persuade Kathy, or whoever it is, to meet him in a public place. I prefer not to risk exposure, you see."

"Are they violent, the Ouroboros?" asked Brad.

"Other cults certainly are, I've had a few close shaves with unpleasant people. Matt is a bit more clued-up on security matters, though."

As they watched, another message appeared.

'They hacked me it's not me don't go!'

Marcus and Brad looked at each other, then Marcus picked up a phone from the desk.

"With a bit of luck, we can head him off," he said. But his tone was not optimistic.

Jesus, thought Brad, hearing the fear in the man's voice as he tried to call the detective. What have I gotten myself into? Who are these people?

"It went to voice mail," said Marcus. "I'll keep trying."

"Try his office," suggested Brad. "Maybe they can help."

Matt Arnold passed the Diana Memorial Fountain, being careful to take yet another selfie, all the while looking around for a likely contact. After walking around the Serpentine for ten minutes, he had seen no young women on their own. Then, when he was wondering if he should give up, he saw a black-clad figure emerge from the dense woodland up ahead.

Could that be her?

The figure raised a hand in a distinctive gesture and his phone buzzed. Another text.

'I see you! Check your map. Old gazebo.'

When he looked up, the figure had vanished. He did as instructed and saw that the gazebo was inside the woods. It was just visible, in fact. But then he saw a red-striped warning sign. CLOSED! UNSAFE STRUCTURE. Beyond it was a partly-overgrown footpath.

Glancing around, Matt saw no one nearby, and simply dodged around the sign. As he did so, his phone vibrated. He quelled the urge to answer, let it go to voicemail.

No distractions permitted now.

It took him about ten minutes to reach the gazebo by the winding footpath, which stood in a small clearing. There was some scaffolding around the structure, but no sign of any workmen. The woman in black was waiting inside, leaning on one of the wooden pillars that held up a domed roof. Her face was in shadow. He had seen a poor-quality image of Kathy Hopkirk from her now-defunct Twitter account, and this young woman could be her. She had the same blonde hair and heart-shaped face. But something about the set-up made him uneasy.

"Hello!" called the woman, sounding friendly.

And maybe a bit too confident, he thought. Not the kind of jittery state of mind you'd expect.

He stopped about five yards away and asked, "Kathy?"

"Kathy couldn't come. Sorry! Will I do?"

The stranger stepped forward out of the shadows and Matt took an involuntary step back. Though she was only about five feet tall, he was suddenly very aware that he was alone with her. The meet-in-a-public-place rule had been for Kathy's benefit. But now he wished he had stuck to it for his own sake.

"Look, I don't know who you are," he said, as she came closer. "But I'm just going to walk away now, unless you can offer me useful information."

"I am known as Salome. And I can offer you more than boring information, Matt," she said, stepping close and looking up into his face. "I can offer you truth, peace, kinship. A place in a bright new future."

Her eyes, they're so green. Piercing. As if they're reflecting the sunlight.

"I'm here to put a proposition to you," she said, reaching up to touch the side of his face. He tried to disengage her hand, but struggled to move it.

"Don't struggle," she said. "Just listen. Listen to my voice."

Her words seemed to echo inside his head. He felt his will starting to ebb away.

"We'd like you to be on our side, Matt," she said, her voice silky, seductive. "Wouldn't you like to be on my side? Wouldn't it be so much easier?"

My God, she's trying to hypnotize me. Almost succeeding.

He made a huge effort and forced her hand away from his cheek.

Salome tilted her head to one side.

"My, you're quite a rarity, Matt. One in a million, perhaps. We've hardly ever found someone who can't be won over."

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said, trying not to sound as rattled as he felt. He backed away a few steps then turned to leave. He strode purposefully along the footpath, trying to ignore the itching sensation between his shoulder blades.

"Think again, Matt," said Salome. "You're running out of options."

Something about her voice had changed. It was not echoing in his mind now, but seemed oddly slurred, as if she had some sort of speech impediment. He paused and looked back, then started to run. What he had seen was impossible to his rational mind. But his instincts had taken over, and adrenaline was coursing through his system.

Can't be true, it's a trick, he thought. Maybe more hypnosis, making me see things.

He looked back again as he left the clearing and saw nothing except the heap of clothes on the ground by the gazebo steps.

She was stripping off her tee-shirt, he thought. Her skin, her face, all changing.

He stumbled over a tree root, recovered, and went back onto the path.

It was all a hallucination. Nobody can elongate their body, nobody can change the shape of their head.

Matt slowed, glanced back yet again, and saw no sign of pursuit.

Is she running around naked?

Confused, he slowed to a walk, starting to doubt everything that had just happened.

So I go back to Steiger and explain that, having failed to mesmerize me, a cultist did a shape-shift and left her jogging pants behind in the park. Then he'll pay my fee with a smile.

A swishing and rustling in the undergrowth to his left sent his heart racing in panic. He would withdraw, regroup, and maybe drop the case.

"I need a holiday," he said to himself. "A long vacation. Maybe a cruise."

There was a loud hiss that was a little like a humorless laugh. He looked down and saw huge, green eyes in a wedge-shaped head. The serpent reared up as Matt recoiled, screaming in primal fear, he tripped and fell flat on his backside. He reached behind him and felt a tube of scaly muscle writhing, tightening. Coils wrapped themselves around him as he struggled to stand. He tore at the huge reptile with frantic strength as it wrapped itself round his chest.

As the constriction began, the hideous face came close to his. As he blacked out, the last thing he was aware of was a forked tongue caressing his face.

After some discussion, Matt Arnold's PA informed Marcus Valentine that the detective's phone contained a tracker that could not be turned off. It was at the rendezvous point where he had been due to meet Kathy Hopkirk. And no, the PA could not contact her boss, but that was not strange when he was working a case.

Marcus ended the call and looked at Brad.

"We could call the police, I suppose," said the Englishman.

"And tell them what?" asked Brad. "That a private detective is doing his job? All we have is a bit of web traffic that might be a hoax."

"All right," said Marcus, scooping a bunch of car keys from his desk. "We can damn well go and check things out ourselves!"

"I like your style, Mister Valentine," grinned Brad as he got up, glad to be taking some kind of action.

It took them nearly an hour to get to Hyde Park from Camden, thanks to central London's notorious traffic. More time was wasted finding a parking space, and by the time they got to Hyde Park, it was nearly two hours since the ominous message. As they drew near the park's main gate, Marcus pointed out an ambulance parked by the Serpentine lake. People in uniforms, police and paramedics, seemed to be busy in the area.

"That's not a good sign," observed Brad.

When they arrived at the police cordon, they saw the paramedics carrying a covered body out of the woodland. Uniformed police were talking to a couple of teenagers.

"What could have done that to him?" the distraught girl was saying, while her boyfriend tried to comfort her.

"Three guesses as to who found the body," said Brad. "Should we make ourselves known?"

"We're honest citizens," said Marcus. "What choice do we have?"

Half an hour later, they were in an office at New Scotland Yard talking to Detective Sergeant Declan Healy. Brad was initially skeptical about the officer, given his earlier experiences with the Metropolitan police. But Healy came across as warm and perceptive. It was a long, involved conversation but eventually they produced formal statements that Brad and Marcus signed.

"And now we've got the paperwork sorted," said Healy, "maybe we can have an informal discussion? Because I don't mind saying, this is a weird one."

"Anything we can do to help," said Marcus. "Though I realize you can't disclose too many details to us."

"True," said Healy, "but I don't mind disclosing stuff the papers will get by tomorrow anyway. Preliminary findings are that Mister Arnold was crushed to death."

"Crushed?" asked Brad. "Something fell on him, or he was run over by a vehicle?"

"That's what I thought," replied Healy, "especially as he was found near a building closed off because it was unsafe. But the poor bloke's ribcage was cracked by pressure from all around his body. Something literally squeezed the life out of him."

"Like a boa constrictor?"

Healy looked at Brad, clearly puzzled by the suggestion.

"I suppose so, but we don't get many of those running amok at this time of year."

"But you couldn't rule it out?" insisted Brad.

"We'll leave that to the forensic team," said Healy, turning to his computer screen. "Now, on to the issue of your daughter, Mister Steiger. I see you tried to report her as a missing person?"

This led to a discussion of Kelly's background, and her involvement with Ouroboros.

"New one on me," said Healy. "But these weird groups spring up like weeds in a city like London."

"Ouroboros is a low-key outfit," said Brad, "nobody seems to know much about it."

"But this Kathy Hopkirk promised to spill the beans, eh?" said Healy. "I think I can legitimately look into her background. She's involved in this case, perhaps a material witness. In the meantime, I will list your daughter as missing, Mister Steiger. I think in the circumstances, she could be at risk."

"What does that mean in practice?" demanded Brad. "That she's on some database with ten thousand other names?"

"I'll make it a national priority and involve Interpol, if my superior approves," promised Healy. "Will that do?"

Brad nodded, pleased that his initial impression of Healy was correct.

"In the meantime," the officer went on, "I have to ask, are either of you gentlemen at risk?"

"Yes, I'm afraid we may be," said Marcus. "Ouroboros may claim to be peace-loving, but I've had some near misses with fanatics over the years. I'd put nothing past them."

"Unfortunately, I can't allocate any officers to protect you," said Healy. "You won't be surprised to hear our budget simply won't stretch to that. But I would advise you both to be very careful in the future. And get out of London. Take a holiday, Mister Valentine. And you, Mister Steiger, would be well advised to go back to the States."

"Sorry, but I think I have to stick around," said Brad. "I can't just abandon my daughter."

"And I can't just throw everything up and leave," put in Marcus.

Healy sighed.

"Thought so. For what it's worth, you can contact me directly if you suspect you're being followed, or if you receive any threats. In the meantime, I'll try to keep you informed as far as I'm able."

With that, the interview was over, and Healy was left alone to write up his own preliminary report. He made a point of mentioning Ouroboros in the Hyde Park case, and in his missing person file on Kelly Steiger. He then immersed himself in work on another one of his half dozen active cases. At five O' clock, he was interrupted by a junior officer bearing a cup of coffee.

"Just in time, the disgusting instant caffeinated brew that energizes the lonely sleuth," said Healy.

"Yes, sir," said Constable Knapton. "And a rumor from on high has it that the Deputy Commissioner wants your guts for garters."

"Again?" asked Healy. "It's only Tuesday."

"Yes, sir," continued Knapton. "Apparently you've violated protocol and such like."

"Aren't I the little reprobate," returned Healy, blowing on the steaming coffee. "You couldn't manage a doughnut or a cupcake or something to go with this muck?"

"I'll do my best, sir," said Knapton, but before he could leave, the Deputy Commissioner himself appeared, blocking the doorway.

"Don't get up, Healy," began the senior officer. "Just a flying visit. About this missing person thing."

The Deputy Commissioner barged past Knapton as if the latter did not exist.

"We can't squander resources on every American who decides she doesn't like her dad anymore. I've blocked your request to list the Steiger girl as missing."

"Sir," began Healy, "I felt that the cult involvement merited—"

The Deputy Commissioner silenced the detective with an impatient gesture.

"If the girl is in any kind trouble, that's a problem for the local force to deal with," he barked. "Just leave it, it's not our concern. Focus on the actual evidence, not your usual speculation and touchy-feely stuff."

Without waiting for Healy to respond, the senior officer left without bothering to close the office door.

"That's me told, eh?" said the detective.

"Yes, sir," said Knapton, apparently unruffled.

"You want to get out of uniform one day, lad?" asked Healy.

"Yes, sir," returned Knapton, now sounding wary.

"Well, put your keen intellect to work and tell me what was wrong with that conversation."

"Don't get you, sir," admitted the constable. "I think you just got the usual bollocking for overstepping the mark."

Healy sighed, leaned back in his chair.

"You fail to bring me doughnuts, or elementary deductive powers. Think, what did the old bugger actually say?"

Knapton frowned, then enlightenment dawned.

"He said it was for the local force to deal with! But that means he knows she's not in London anymore."

"And almost certainly knows where she is," added Healy.

The two officers stared at each other for a few moments.

"Feel free to just walk out, closing the door behind you," said Healy, eventually.

Knapton walked to the door, closed it, and then leaned against it.

"I might not be the brightest, sir, but I don't like crooked coppers."

"Me neither," said Healy. "Let's see if we can find out exactly what this particular one is trying to hide."

Chapter 3

West of Ireland, May 1994.

Jonathan Clay woke in a cramped bunk bed on a cold, damp morning. It was spring in Ireland, but since his team had arrived at the site, it had rained every day. It made work difficult and unpleasant. He looked out of the window of the trailer, and saw no break in the lowering ceiling of gray cloud.

But if you don't want to get your hands dirty and your socks wet, he thought, *don't be a professional archaeologist.*

Clay was sharing a trailer with Dermot Kavanagh, a student from Dublin University. A separate, smaller trailer was occupied by Olivia Ballard, his other student. They had been forced to rent the trailers to live at the site of their dig instead of taking accommodation in the nearby village of Ballymahan. Even though Clay had started hunting for rooms months in advance, the locals had claimed that all the B&Bs were booked. At the time, he had believed them. Now he was not so sure.

"Wakey, wakey, Sam," he said loudly. There was a groan from the upper bunk.

"What time did you get back from the pub, young man?" demanded Clay.

Dermot's round face appeared, bleary-eyed and unshaven.

"Let's just say it was late, boss," said Dermot. "Sorry."

Something about Dermot's expression told Clay that the student was concerned about something more than a hangover.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Not more superstitious nonsense?"

Dermot swung his legs over the edge of the bunk, groaned, held his head in his hands. He was a gangling, red-headed young man who Clay often thought looked like a parody of an Irishman. The one exception to the stereotype was that the lad could not hold his drink.

"I'm afraid so, boss," Dermot said. "We've lost Kieran. He won't be coming up today. Or any day."

"What? But Kieran was our last volunteer!" protested Clay. "We'll never get the work done now!"

"I know," moaned Dermot. "It's a bloody disgrace. I reckon the priest got to him. And maybe some of the old biddies. He was ashamed of himself, I could tell. But it's hard to go against the grain when you live in a little village. I know that myself."

Clay grunted noncommittally. They had begun their excavation at Ballymahan's stone circle with no less than a dozen volunteers, mostly young men and women, a few kids, and a couple of keen retired folks. But one by one, they had dropped out. Some had apologized and offered fairly lame excuses, but most had simply stopped showing up.

Before he could question Dermot further, there was a loud banging on the trailer door.

"Morning, boys! If you're not decent, tough luck, I'm coming in anyway!"

Olivia climbed into the trailer, carrying her usual morning burden of fresh eggs and milk from the farmer whose land they were camped on.

"Why the long faces, chaps?" she asked when they greeted her with desultory Hellos.

Clay explained that they would be working without help.

"Bloody hell," she erupted. "What is wrong with these people? You'd think it was the Dark Ages, not the twentieth century."

Olivia was just a shade over five feet tall, but Clay often thought that she had enough energy for two full-grown men. He had had to effectively bar her from visiting the village pub because of her propensity to get into arguments with the locals about the Nine Sisters, as they called the standing stones near Ballymahan.

"There's no point in complaining," said Clay, trying to mollify her. "Let's just have breakfast and try to work out what we're going to do."

A few minutes later, they were sitting in the cramped 'living room' of the trailer eating scrambled eggs, washed down with mugs of coffee. The discussion of their plight had gone in circles. It seemed inevitable. The dig would have to be abandoned.

"It's just so bloody infuriating!" erupted Olivia. "We're so close to making a genuinely worthwhile discovery. It would put this place on the map, probably boost tourism. Don't these Irish yokels know a good thing when they see it?"

Clay noticed Dermot bristling slightly at the Englishwoman's remark about the villagers, and said, "Look, we don't know for sure that it's superstition. It might simply be that people have better things to do. Paid work on the farms around here, for a start."

"I suspect the real reason is approaching right now," said Olivia, looking out of the window at the dirt road to the village. Clay and Dermot half-stood to look past her. Heading up towards them was a battered Fiat that they all recognized at once.

"Father Quigley," Clay said, resignedly.

"Come to gloat, the arrogant bugger," fumed Olivia.

"I'd better talk to him, you two check those geophysical results for me."

The two students exchanged a glance but said nothing. It was obvious to them that Clay was creating make-work for them, keeping them busy to try and shore up morale. The archaeologist felt ashamed at the failure of this, his first big project, and a growing anger that the young people's careers should be blighted. He got up and went out to face the priest.

"Good morning, Doctor Clay," said Father Quigley, slamming his car door. He was a youngish man with thin, sandy hair and freckled features.

"Not really," replied Clay. "As I'm sure you're aware, we've lost our last volunteer. And I daresay no more will be forthcoming. You must be pleased."

The priest shook his head.

"You misjudge me, Jonathan," he said. "I don't bear you any ill-will. I merely speak for the community. People simply don't want you here."

Quigley gestured at the stone circle known as the Nine Sisters. Legend had it that the stones were evil witches who were petrified by Saint Patrick. As if on cue, a rent in the clouds permitted a shaft of sunlight to fall onto the ancient monument.

"Walk with me, Father," said Clay to the priest. "Come and meet the Sister and tell me just what you find so disturbing about archaeology."

"I've nothing against science," replied Quigley, falling in step beside Clay. "I just think there are other forms of knowledge, other paths to truth. And that scientists,

like yourself, have uncovered some terrible truths that are better left alone. The events of this century prove that, I think."

"That didn't take long," said Clay, with a wry smile. "From folk stories about a Neolithic monument to Hiroshima in one giant leap."

Quigley laughed.

"I'm not suggesting some terrible catastrophe would arise if you excavated the Sisters," he said. "I'm just saying the locals don't like it and sometimes you have to go with the flow. There's genuine fear among these people. They come to me, and I see it in their faces, hear it in their voices. How can I ignore that?"

Frustrated, Clay pointed at the stones.

"We've done no damage, not even touched one of the Sisters!" he pointed out. "All we've done is put a trench across the center of the circle. We've found some pottery, arrowheads, the usual stuff."

"Yes," admitted Quigley, "but the legend says that digging anywhere around the circle is blasphemous."

"How can it be blasphemy to disturb a pagan monument?" protested Clay. "This circle pre-dates the arrival of Christianity in Ireland by at least a thousand years!"

They had just passed into the circle and Quigley stopped to look at the nearest stone. Like all the Sisters, it was about waist-height, an unremarkable lump of unworried granite. Irish stone circles tended to be much more modest than their British counterparts.

"Legends have their own logic," said the priest. "Locals believe that my namesake, Saint Patrick, drove all the snakes out of Ireland by overcoming the witches who worshiped the serpent. He turned them to stone, and their weight somehow pins down their great snake-deity that lies beneath our feet."

Clay looked down at the green Irish turf before he could stop himself, smiled at his response to such nonsense.

"There were no snakes in Ireland in the first place," he pointed out. "Not a shred of scientific evidence. Not a single skull, bone, or scrap of reptile skin has been found in any part of the Emerald Isle. You know that; you're an educated man."

"As I said," replied the priest patiently, "it is a legend. Not susceptible to scientific logic, but it conveys a truth of its own. Good conquered Evil, the Good Lord was victorious over the serpent."

"Do you want to hear my theory?" asked Clay. "Not the garbled version your parishioners might have got down the pub from Dermot and Olivia."

"As I understand it," said Quigley, in measured tones, "you think some kind of serpent cult lies behind ancient monuments? All across Europe and Asia, from India to Ireland?"

Clay nodded.

"Not just stone circles, but also the Stone Age obsession with spirals and circular labyrinths, which are found in hundreds of places. I think snake-worship was overthrown by new faiths, and its adherents condemned as evil. The story of the snake tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden is an echo of that conflict."

Quigley shook his head.

"That's just the sort of talk to get the locals riled up. And before you condemn them as ignorant peasants, let me tell you, I've seen some things out here. Nothing

too definite, I admit. Could be it was just my imagination. But I would never go near the Nine Sisters by night."

Clay took a breath, then said, "Look, come and see what we're actually doing. Nothing remotely blasphemous. Nothing remotely interesting, either, to the average person. We're just digging up rocks and bones to test a theory about a culture that's three thousand years dead."

The two men walked over to the trench. It was some four feet deep, three feet wide, and about twelve feet long. A small excavator stood next to it.

"We had hoped to put in at least three more trenches and in around the circle," explained Clay. "But with just the three of us working it would be pointless."

Quigley looked puzzled, and glanced at the digger.

"We only use machinery," said Clay, "to go down a couple of feet. That's going back just a few hundred years, time-wise. If we used the digger to go deeper, we'd smash all the stuff we're looking for. Most finds are quite fragile."

Clay helped the priest down into the trench and then started indicating areas where finds had been unearthed. Quigley listened attentively and asked thoughtful questions. Not for the first time, Clay wished he could somehow recruit the priest as an ally, a respected figure in the community who could win the villagers over. He said as much, but Quigley shook his head.

"You don't understand, Jonathan," he said. "I'm on their side. In all conscience, I cannot help you."

Quigley seemed about to say more, but then he frowned and looked down into the mud at the bottom of the trench. Following the priest's gaze, Clay saw a buried object with a straight edge, the sure sign of an artifact.

"How in the name of God did we miss that?" he exclaimed, crouching down to gently ease the dirt away from the object.

"Maybe you didn't," said the priest, as if to himself.

"What do you mean?" asked the scientist, but Quigley said no more and simply looked on, frowning slightly. When Clay freed it from the soil, the object proved to be a flat stone, roughly worked, with some kind of engraving on it. It was hard to make out the badly-corroded pattern, but it was circular.

"What do you make of that, Father?" he asked, holding up the stone to the sunlight. "A circle in the circle, yes?"

Clay held out the plaque to Quigley, but the priest made no move to take it. Instead, he looked at the object with distaste.

"You've got it bad, haven't you?" said Clay.

"Why didn't you find it earlier?" asked Quigley. "Did it somehow work its way to the surface overnight?"

The question stumped Clay for a moment.

We were all in the trench yesterday, he thought. None of us noticed it. But we did finish when it was already getting dark. We were tired. But still...

A terrible suspicion began to form in his mind. He thought of notorious scientific hoaxes, such as the so-called Piltdown Man discovered in England before the First World War. In that case, someone had faked the bones of a supposed 'ape man' and planted them at an archaeological dig site.

"No," Clay said aloud, "none of us would plant evidence to back our theories. But someone else might, to try and discredit us."

He stared accusingly at the priest, who shrugged.

"I'm accusing nobody of fraud, Doctor Clay," he said, starting to clamber out of the trench. "If only it was merely a matter of human perfidy. But if you won't listen to me, I will leave you to your work. I only hope you're right, and that there's nothing here to unearth but the works of dead men."

Clay stood and watched the priest making his way out of the circle.

"Oh, to hell with the lot of them," he said in disgust, and stared at the stone plaque. Then he examined the small hole from which he had removed it. Had the plaque been covering something, maybe protecting it? That would make sense. He squatted to examine the hole more closely, worked at the sides to enlarge it. There was something odd about the pattern of soil around the hole. But it did not suggest that someone had buried the plaque.

No, he thought, *it almost looks as if something had pushed the thing up from below, like Quigley said. But what could have done that?*

Clay heard a stir, a small amount of earth shifting. Something glistened in the darkness beneath him, and he stood up and took a step back. He was suddenly aware of being alone, and of the absence of birdsong.

Again, there was movement in the dark, then two bright objects appeared. They were golden-green orbs about six inches apart. Clay bent down to look more closely.

Clay felt an odd crawling sensation, as if something was slithering into his mind. It was repellent and seductive at the same time. He shuddered as a mind that was as cold and inhuman as it was powerful wrapped itself around him, caressed his very soul. A tiny part of him remained unaffected and began to panic. But his body remained frozen, crouching over the dark pit where the huge eyes gleamed.

'I am dying.'

The voice was gentle but insistent. When the words sounded in his head, they drove all other thoughts away.

'For so many seasons I have lain in the dark, a captive. How I longed to return to the world of warmth and light, and revel once more in the delights of all fleshly things.'

Clay felt the being's pain and frustration, its yearning for freedom. It was a huge, monstrous emotion. A single tear rolled down his cheek.

'I need a vessel to carry what remains of my power, to let my essence flourish in the world once more.'

"I will be your vessel," said Clay, possessed by a desire to be of use.

'No, you will not suffice. Be a loyal messenger instead, and send me another. The young female. She has great energy and will be a worthy avatar.'

Clay felt a pang of rejection at being found unworthy by such a great entity. But he understood his task. Never taking his eyes off the hole, he climbed out of the trench, and was just standing upright again when he felt a sharp stinging sensation in his left calf.

What just happened?

Confusion reigned for a moment in Clay's mind as he rolled up the leg of his jeans. Two small, angry red marks showed on his flesh. But there was no pain anymore, just a vague numbness in his calf.

There are no snakes in Ireland. Everybody knows that.

Trying to ignore the weird sensation in his leg, Clay set off towards the trailers clutching the plaque. His memory of what had just happened was vague, swathed in clouds of confusion. He recalled arguing with the priest. Then he had found the plaque, Quigley had gone away, and after that, Clay had climbed out of the trench.

Why do I get the feeling that there's something else? Something important?

Clay shrugged off the weird sensation. The plaque was the most important thing for him, an artifact that could make his name in archaeological circles. As he left the circle of the Nine Sisters, his heart rate slowed to something near normal, and he found the courage to laugh at himself.

Getting spooked by Quigley's stories. Probably just an insect of some kind. Best get it looked at by the doctor in the village, though.

He was so excited by his find that by the time he got back to their camp he had quite forgotten the insect bites, or whatever they were. The numbness in his leg was oddly comfortable, as if the limb were swaddled in warm cotton wool. And Dermot and Olivia were so excited by the find that he finally set aside his initial reservations about it.

"Ouroboros," said Olivia, cleaning soil away from the plaque's engraved side with a camel-hair brush. "See? The serpent with its tail in its mouth."

"No one has ever seen anything like that in Ireland," said Dermot, eyes wide. "Do you think it was imported, maybe by Phoenician traders?"

"Oh, don't talk bollocks!" snorted Olivia. "It's clearly more Celtic in style than anything else, look at the flowing lines."

"Let's not speculate too wildly, you two," cautioned Clay. "The important thing is to get some pictures of the site for provenance. You can do that now Olivia. And we need to inform the lab back in Dublin, tell them to prepare for a major job."

Olivia and Dermot continued to half-discuss, half-bicker over the plaque. But as he sat opposite the youngsters, Clay found himself increasingly unable to follow what they were saying. The numbness had spread from his leg to his whole lower body.

"I don't feel too well," he managed to say. His words were slurred, his mouth uncooperative.

"Oh, Jonathan," exclaimed Olivia. "You do look very pale and tired! All this stress has taken it out of you!"

"You'd better lie down," said Dermot, helping Clay over to the bottom bunk. "A good rest will see you right."

"I'll go down the village and call the lab," Dermot said to Olivia.

"Good idea," she said. "I'll go up to the Sisters and take a few pictures of the actual location."

No! Don't go up there, thought Clay, but the numbness had developed into an immense tiredness. He heard the two students leave the trailer just before he lapsed into unconsciousness. The sleep that followed was almost dreamless except for a sensation of being constricted. He felt himself wrapped in something like coils of rope but thicker. And alive.

"Jonathan? Can you hear me, Jonathan?"

Clay slowly surfaced into consciousness to see Olivia's smiling face looking down at him.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"I found the Great One," she said. "Just as you did. The difference is that you were a little too old to be transformed. Or exalted, maybe that's the better term."

"Olivia?" he whispered, not understanding.

He tried to sit up, but she put a small hand on his chest and pushed him back onto the bunk.

"Rest," she said. "And listen up. The Great One is dead, now. She used the last of her strength to imbue us with her spirit. We found her just in time. It must have been fated from the start, don't you think?"

Memories of the being in the trench came flooding back.

The thing clouded my mind, somehow. Hypnotized me into doing its will unconsciously. Doing her will, rather.

"You were bitten, too?" Clay managed to say.

Olivia nodded.

"And the Great One's power, or what remained of it, passed on to me! Isn't that amazing?"

Clay shook his head, confused, still only half-believing what had happened. He noticed from the light streaming into the trailer that the sun had shifted. It was mid-afternoon.

"How long have I been out?" he asked. "Where's Dermot?"

Olivia smiled, shook her head.

"When he came back from the village, I offered him the chance to join us. He refused. Instead he threatened to reveal our secret."

She stood up and stepped away from the bed. Looking past Olivia, he saw Dermot's body on the floor. His face was contorted in death-agony and two angry red marks showed on his neck.

"When you feel a little better you can help me bury him in the circle. None of the locals will dare dig there. We can report him missing later. A little mystery, and our secret."

Again, Clay tried to rise. He was angry and afraid. Once more Olivia shoved him back, seemingly without effort. Then she leaned close, her face a few inches from his. Her tongue flickered along her lips.

"Don't fight it, Jonathan," she said. And now her words echoed in his mind in an insidious, seductive way that was all too familiar. "Just obey me without question. It's so much easier for both of us if you accept your fate."

"Your eyes," he managed to say. "They were brown?"

"And now they're green," she said. "Just one of several wonderful transformations! And there's so much still to come."

Chapter 4

Bite Marks.

After their interview with Detective Sergeant Healy, Brad and Marcus returned to the latter's apartment in Camden. There they found more messages

purportedly from Kathy Hopkirk. She claimed that she had thwarted the hacking attempt by Ouroboros and would like to meet up.

"I'm getting a little paranoid," admitted Brad. "I mean, you can never be sure of anyone's identity online, right?"

"True enough, so I think this time we should arrange to meet her together, and in a very crowded public place," said Marcus.

Wednesday morning they entered the huge complex of buildings that was the British Museum. Brad, who had only ever made brief working visits to London before, was surprised to find the original Victorian structure inside a futuristic dome. The original circular building with its famous reading room was in the center of a vast quadrangle with long galleries on all four sides.

"The enormous sci-fi roof protects the museum from our miserable London weather, not to mention the pollution," explained Marcus, as they threaded their way through the crowd. "Nice and public. Eye witnesses from the four corners of the earth."

"So where is this cafe we're meeting her at?" asked Brad.

Marcus gestured at a distant corner of the enclosure.

"It's between North America and the Enlightenment," he replied. "I'm sure there's a joke there somewhere."

The Court Cafe was thronged with people talking in half a dozen languages, and at first, they saw no one who might be Kathy Hopkirk. Then Marcus drew Brad's attention to a slim young woman standing near the entrance, looking around furtively.

"Could be her," Brad agreed, and took out the Ouroboros leaflet. He held it so that the cover was clearly visible as they walked over to the young woman. She gave them both a searching stare before she spoke.

"You Kelly's dad?" she asked Brad. "You look a bit like her. Around the eyes."

Introductions were made, then they debated where to go.

"I'd like to keep walking, where there's crowds," said Kathy. "Nowhere too quiet."

They settled for the North American gallery, and were soon ambling through a display of Aztec artifacts. The centerpiece was a beautifully-crafted double-headed serpent, made from turquoise. Seeing Brad looking at it, Kathy gave a thin smile.

"It's hard to get away from them, isn't it? Once you start seeing them, they're everywhere."

"You have nightmares, too?" asked Brad.

She nodded.

"End of the world stuff, the Earth cracking open? Like an egg hatching?"

"Yeah," said Brad, "but Kelly is in them, trying to reassure me, somehow."

Kathy shook her head.

"Mine involve nobody I know," she said. "Just global disaster. I feel a bit jealous."

Marcus looked puzzled by the exchange, so Brad explained as best he could the nature of his nightmares.

"I'm normally skeptical about this sort of thing," said the Englishman, dubiously.

Kathy gave a humorless laugh.

"They rely on that," she said. "If you don't believe something can happen, you've

got no defenses prepared when it does.”

“So what happened to you?” asked Brad.

Kathy looked around quickly. There was nobody nearby. She rolled a sleeve of her hooded jacket, revealing dozens of old scars on her arm before quickly covering them again.

“I never knew my dad. My mum couldn't cope, so I went through a long line of foster families. Nobody wanted me, I was too much trouble. I ended up in a care home. It's an old story. I got into trouble, self-harmed, did some drugs. Other things I'm not proud of to get drugs.”

“And then someone offered you a new start in life?” said Marcus.

She looked at him, gave a mirthless smile. Brad could not help noticing that, even for a Brit, she had very bad teeth.

“Yeah,” said Kathy, “Last spring I was living in a squat down in Whitechapel and trying to avoid some very brutal people when I met a girl my own age, or a bit older. Told me it was the system, exploitation, greed, cruelty. That there was a better way, and people who'd be a real family to me.”

“And you joined Ouroboros?” asked Brad,

“No, I told her to sod off!” exclaimed Kathy, “I'm not a bloody idiot!”

Some people browsing the exhibition turned to look, and Kathy lowered her voice.

“Sorry,” she said. “But it took them weeks to wear me down, they're so persistent. This girl, she called herself Salome, she acted like a big sis, kind of. Putting up with my lip, acting sensible, being kind, buying me burgers and stuff. So one day, when I'd not been fast enough and one of my customers had beaten me up quite badly, I went with her.”

Kathy sniffled, wiped away a tear. Marcus offered a handkerchief.

“Thanks, you're a nice bloke,” she said, blowing her nose. “I couldn't even pronounce Ouroboros then, didn't know anything about it except that it was a kind of religion. They gave me some First Aid, a proper meal, a place to sleep. It was in this nice house up the West End, Knightsbridge I think.”

“Did you see this guy, Clay?” asked Brad.

“Yeah, the Herald, they called him. He was nice, not a perv or anything. Like a kindly old uncle to me and the other girls. But then it got weird. One morning, I found these.”

Kathy fell silent, then she pulled down the top of her shirt. At the base of her neck, just above her collar bone, were two tiny red marks edged in white.

“Mark of the vampire, eh?” she said, with another grin. “But after that I got all confused. I mean, even more than before. I reckon I was hypnotized or something.”

“Brainwashing can feel like hypnosis,” said Marcus. “The principles are much the same. Repetition, loss of self-control.”

Kathy shook her head.

“No, it was more than that. They had ceremonies and stuff, but it was the private meetings with Olivia that really did my head in. We all had to do those, all the novices.”

“Olivia Ballard?” said Brad.

Kathy nodded.

“She's this tall, really beautiful woman, but she's so scary. The way she talks,

like she's pretending to be friendly but really, she's mocking you. And her eyes. When I was with her, I never really remembered what she said. I just got all fuzzy."

"When did you meet Kelly?" asked Brad, unable to hold the question in.

"About a week before I did a runner," said Kathy. "I didn't talk to her much, but she seemed happy enough. I know the leaders were really excited about her. One of my duties was general cleaning. I wasn't much good at anything else, I suppose. I was outside Clay's office door when I overheard them talking about this new girl, how much potential she had."

"What sort of potential?" asked Brad. "What did they mean?"

Kathy shrugged.

"Dunno. Then they mentioned me. Olivia said I was too badly-damaged to be a true convert. Because of the drugs and stuff, I suppose she meant. Clay sounded upset by this, but the big bitch kept saying I had to be 'disposed of', that they couldn't let me go. I did a runner right then, just grabbed some cash, and went. I'd heard people talk like that before. Pimps, dealers."

"You really think they were going to kill you?" asked Marcus, sounding incredulous.

"They killed that bloke in Hyde Park," she shot back.

"Yes, but how?" asked Brad. "He was crushed to death."

Kathy shrugged.

"Maybe they've got a trained snake. That would explain those rats." Seeing the men's bafflement she went on, "Every week, they'd take a delivery of half a dozen white rats in a big cage. They'd be taken upstairs to Olivia's room. And every week, the empty cage would be sent back to the supply firm for another batch. So she must have been keeping one of them big snakes, right?"

"Piglets?" said Mickey Garvin, incredulously.

"Live piglets," corrected Bill Stroud.

"You're making this up," scoffed Garvin, the younger and more garrulous man.

They were in the bar room of the Lamb and Flag, the only public house in Wychmere. Talk, as it usually did, had turned to the financial problems faced by farmers. Garvin, the local handyman, had asked Stroud, the pig farmer, how things were going. The latter had then revealed his new sideline.

"So you take a piglet up to Garlock House every week," said Garvin, "and they pay you fifty quid for it?"

"That's right," said Stroud. "Cash on the nail. Not a word to the bloody Inland Revenue, either."

Garvin pondered this a minute, then asked, "But what do they do with them?"

"I don't bloody know!" replied Stroud. "Kill 'em and eat 'em, I suppose."

"Well, that's downright strange," mused Garvin. "But I suppose they are from London. Or foreigners, maybe?"

Stroud shrugged.

"I only see the bald bloke, Clay. I drive up in the van, drop off the piglet, he takes it and gives me the money."

"How many of them live up there, anyway?" asked the landlord, who had been eavesdropping from the other side of the bar.

"No idea," said Stroud. "I catch glimpses of faces at the windows now and again."

And I did see this real peach of a girl a few weeks ago, waiting for Clay when he took the piglet inside. Fine big filly, she was."

To underline his point, Stroud outlined voluptuous curves in the air.

"Well," said Garvin, downing the last of his pint and climbing off his bar stool, "I'll soon find out. I'm going up there this afternoon."

"What for?" demanded the landlord.

"This Clay bloke rang me this morning, wants me to take a look at their central heating boiler," explained Garvin. "Hope he pays me in cash, too. See you later, fellas!"

"See if you can find out what they do with them piglets," called Stroud as the handyman left.

An hour later, Garvin was shaking his head as he replaced a panel on a boiler in the cellar of Garlock House.

"Sorry, Mister Clay," he said, "I can't find anything wrong with it. Apart from it being very old, of course, but I dare say, you don't want to replace it?"

Clay, who had looked on during Garvin's inspection, put his hands together as if in prayer.

"If we have to, we will," he said, "but perhaps the problem with the erratic heating lies not in the boiler but the pipework?"

"Could be," said Garvin. "Maybe an air lock. Did you drain the radiators?"

Clay looked puzzled.

"Ah, that's probably it," Garvin went on.

"Would that explain why one particular room is not heated adequately?" asked Clay.

"Yeah, sure," said Garvin, picking up his toolbox. "Just let me take a look at it. Probably a five minute job."

"Oh, good," responded Clay, "it's just upstairs. Let me show you."

Clay let the handyman back up into the hall, then up the impressive main staircase. Garvin took his jacket off and loosened his shirt collar.

Shouldn't have had that pint at lunchtime, he thought. But bloody hell, they keep it hot in here. Must cost them a fortune.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Clay ushered Garvin along a corridor to an oak-paneled door.

"This is the room," said Clay, and opened the door. A rush of hot air scented with a flowery odor came rushing out. The interior of the room was dark.

"Seems warm enough to me," said Garvin dubiously.

"Oh no, it's very erratic," said Clay. "Please, take a look."

Still Garvin hesitated, waiting for Clay to step inside. Then someone spoke from inside the room.

"Is that the handyman from the village?"

Now that, thought Garvin, is a sexy voice.

"Do go in," said Clay, "Olivia will show you what to do."

"My pleasure," said Garvin, and strode into the darkened room. "Do you mind if we have some light, though, miss? I need to see to work."

The door closed behind him, cutting off the light from the corridor.

"Of course," said the husky, feminine voice. "Just a moment."

A match flared and he saw a red candle being lit. He caught a glimpse of pale

flesh, an arm, the curve of a breast. Then the woman retreated from the light. The candle cast just enough of a glow to show that it stood on a small table against the wall. Everything else was still in shadow.

"That's not nearly enough," Garvin said, "couldn't you just open the curtains?"

"I much prefer the dark," came the reply. "I have very sensitive eyes."

Garvin remembered everything he had heard about the outsiders who had taken Garlock House.

Bunch of weirdos, he thought. Best play along if I want my money.

"Do you mind if I use my torch?" he asked, already searching in his toolkit.

Instead of answering the question the unseen woman asked, "What's your name?"

"Mickey. Mickey Garvin."

"Mickey," purred the voice. "I'm Olivia. I understand you're here to examine my plumbing?"

Mickey tried not to laugh.

"Erm, yes, I'd like to look at your radiator, miss."

He switched on the torch and swept the beam around the room. It was big, as he'd guessed from the echo, and luxuriously furnished. There was a huge four-poster bed opposite the door, its diaphanous curtains half-open. And on the bed was a half-naked woman. She was unclothed from the waist up. Her lower half, so far as he could see, was encased in some sort of sleeping bag.

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Garvin, staring.

"Don't be alarmed, Mickey," said Olivia. "I prefer to feel the air on my skin. Don't you?"

"I don't know what you're playing at," he said, "but I'm not here to play any kinky games."

"Oh, that's a pity," she pouted. "I so wanted us to get better acquainted."

Sod this, thought Garvin, *these people really are nutters.*

He reached behind him for the doorknob. It wouldn't budge. He was locked in. He began to feel panic on top of his confusion. He turned, dropping his torch, to try and move the knob with both hands. But it was obviously locked. He heard a surge of movement behind him.

"Surely you don't want to go so soon?" asked Olivia, from close behind him.

Garvin turned, and saw the looming figure of the woman. She was a good head taller than his six feet two inches. He flinched, felt his back press against the oak panels of the door.

How did she move so fast? And how come I didn't hear any footsteps?

He looked down and saw that she was still half-inside her sleeping bag. Then he realized that it was nothing of the sort; her human form ended at the waist, and below it was a tubular body, scaly and muscled.

"Don't be scared, Mickey," she said, leaning down. Her eyes were suddenly bright, glowing in the murk. Their pupils were slits.

She's a monster! And she's moved on from piglets!

"Leave me alone!" he shouted, striking out in fear. Olivia, moving with lightning speed, grabbed his hand in hers and made a soothing noise.

"It's all right, I won't hurt you. I just want to give you a present."

With her other hand she grabbed him and, as he wriggled in futile terror,

pressed her mouth against his neck. The sting of her bite produced a strangled scream, then he felt something course through his veins, robbing him of will-power.

Again, she looked into his eyes, and this time he did not find her terrifying.

"I'm so beautiful, aren't I, Mickey?"

"Yes, so beautiful," he agreed.

"You want to be my friend, don't you? And help me and my friends?"

"Oh, yes please."

Mickey listened, smiling in numb delight, as Olivia explained his task to him.

"You can't remember anything else, any detail that might help?" asked Brad.

"It's a blur," said Kathy, shaking her head. "Like they fogged up my mind. Every time I try to focus on details I get confused."

"There is something we could try to reach suppressed memories," said Marcus. "But it's risky."

"You don't mean drugs or anything?" asked Kathy, her voice panicky.

"No, I mean hypnotic regression," explained the Englishman. "Just a kind of relaxation, really, letting your unconscious mind get at things your conscious mind can't access."

"Have you done it before?" asked Brad.

"Yes," replied Marcus. "A few times. It's a way of overcoming traumatic experiences as well as recovering memories. But there are no guarantees it will work."

Kathy looked from one man to the other.

"So two middle-aged blokes are asking me to come to their place so they can make me lose all self-control? Well, I've had worse offers."

Seeing their expressions, she laughed.

"Only joking, guys," she said. "Now, are you going to buy me lunch before you start poking around in my mind?"

An hour later, the three were in the Englishman's living room in his Camden apartment, preparing for the experiment. Kathy, nursing a cup of tea, sat in a comfortable armchair. Marcus closed the heavy curtains against the afternoon sunshine, so that the only light came from his desk lamp. A microphone stood on the desk, pointed at Kathy, its cable connected to the PC.

"You sure you want to go through with this?" asked Brad.

Kathy nodded. She looked tense but determined.

God, she's so thin and pale, thought Brad. *That lunch must have been the first proper meal she's had in days.*

"I want to know what happened to me," she said, "and I want to help you. Let's go for it. Just so long as my head doesn't spin all the way round or anything."

She handed her teacup to Marcus, then settled herself in the chair.

"What do I do?" she asked.

"Try to think of a happy place, like a tropical island, or somewhere nice from your childhood," suggested Marcus, tapping a key to start recording the session.

"Don't you dangle a watch in front of me or something?" she asked.

"Not quite," said Marcus, sitting down to face her. He took out a silver fountain

pen and held it about six inches in front of the young woman's face.

"Focus on the light reflected from the pen," he said, his voice quiet, gentle. "Hear only my voice. And keep thinking of a good place, a safe place, the place where you're happy."

Marcus kept talking for about a minute, making the same suggestions over and over. Focus on the light, the happy place, his soothing voice. Brad had expected some sudden change in Kathy's expression, but she simply looked blank. Then Marcus paused in his monologue and put the pen back into his pocket.

"Can you still hear me, Kathy?"

"Yes," she replied in a flat voice.

Her voice is normal, thought Brad, slightly disappointed. *Like they're having a regular conversation. Nothing like the movies.*

"Cast your mind back to last year," said Marcus gently. "Do you remember your time with Ouroboros, Kathy?"

"Yes," came the reply, in the same emotionless tone.

"Do you remember them talking about their new home, the place they were going to relocate to?"

Kathy was silent for a moment, her face blank. Then she spoke again.

"Litch-weir. Hitch-mere. I can't hear it properly. They never mention it when I'm around. I just catch things, as I'm coming into the room, or passing by outside."

"Try, Kathy," urged Marcus. "You're doing very well."

The young woman's face contorted in terror. She gave a strangled cry.

"No!" she said, in a small voice. "They've found me! They can see me! And you!"

"What the hell?" asked Brad. "Maybe you should snap her out of it."

For the first time, Marcus looked uncertain.

"Kathy," he said, "speak to me."

Kathy's expression changed again. The fear vanished, replaced by a confident smile. She turned her head to look directly over at Brad, sitting in the shadows on the couch. Something about her expression seemed familiar to him.

"Hi, Dad," she said in what sounded like Kelly Steiger's voice, all trace of British accent gone. "How's it going?"

"You've got the flu?" asked Leanne. "In the middle of April?"

Mickey Garvin groaned, and turned over in bed.

"I just need to rest up for a bit," he said.

Leanne stood, hands on hips, in the doorway of the cottage bedroom. She was skeptical about her on and off boyfriend's condition.

"This isn't an alcohol-induced flu by any chance?" she demanded.

"No," Garvin moaned from under the duvet. "It came on sudden, like. After I did that job up at the big house."

"Well, that explains it," she sniffed. "Bunch of weirdos, they are. Come from all over the place. Foreigners bringing diseases into the country, I shouldn't wonder. I'll get you some chicken soup. You need to keep your strength up."

Leanne was in the small kitchen heating up the Heinz soup in a saucepan when her boyfriend emerged, wrapped in a threadbare dressing gown.

"Feeling better, love?" she asked, glancing round.

"Yes, I'm much better," Garvin replied, sitting down at the table.

Leanne was not so sure.

He looks like a ruddy zombie, she thought. All pale and lifeless. Maybe he really is ill.

She poured the soup into a bowl and set it on the table in front of him. He looked down at it, as if trying to work out what it was. Then he smiled, picked up his spoon, and began to eat.

"So how did it go up at the big house, anyway?" she asked, sitting down opposite him. "You get their boiler sorted?"

"It was fine," he said. "Very nice people. Paid me in cash. Wish they were all that straightforward."

Garvin looked up from his soup.

"They've got a job for you as well, darling," he said. "Regular work. Nice little earner."

Leanne, who ran a one-woman mobile hairdressing and manicure business, was surprised.

"I'd have thought those posh folk wouldn't want any dealings with me," she said. "Wouldn't they go into Hereford to get their hair done and that?"

"No," explained Garvin, "they really want to see you. I told them about you, see? And they said, yes, you send her up to us."

He smiled again, returned to his soup.

Well, she thought, their money is as good as anybody else's.

"All right," she said, "I'm going up that way tomorrow. I'll drop by and see what they want."

"Sooner the better," he commented. "There's one lady who's very eager to see you."

"How come they're so keen to meet the locals all of a sudden?" she asked. "They've been all standoffish for months. What did they say to you, exactly?"

Garvin looked confused, and with his free hand, he tugged absentmindedly at the collar of his pajama jacket. Leanne saw an angry red mark just above his collar bone. She looked more closely and saw a second mark just visible under the first.

"Here, is that a love bite?" she said, jokingly.

"No," he said, looking down again. "Not a love bite."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you had fleas, this place is so scruffy," she said.

She did not give the marks any more thought until it was too late, and she had acquired some of her own.

Chapter 5

Signs and Wonders.

"Kelly?" said Brad, startled into responding.

Marcus made an impatient gesture. He had asked Brad not to speak during the session.

"Kathy?" said Marcus. "Listen to me. I want you to wake up."

"Forget it, Svengali," said Kelly's voice, "I'm catching up with my old man."

"What is this?" exclaimed Brad. "Some kind of trick?"

"No tricks, Dad! It's all for real. That's what I discovered. Once you're in the circle, everything becomes clear." Kathy's face was serious now.

"That's how I can see you now, Dad. We all do. Kathy left us, but we didn't leave her. The circle is unbroken. We can see through her eyes. And that's just *one* of our powers!"

"Kelly, why can't you just meet me face to face?" demanded Brad. "If it's all so wonderful, why won't they let you see me?"

"Like I said," replied Brad's daughter, "I see you now. I'm not a prisoner, Dad. For the first time in my life, I really belong. You should join us too!"

"I just want to see you, hon," said Brad, "I just want to meet you, in person, to be sure you're okay."

Kathy's expression changed again, her eyes narrowed. This time her voice was harsh, deeper, and had a cold, inhuman quality.

"If you value your lives, do not interfere."

"Kathy, if you can hear me, I'm going to count down from ten, and by the time I reach one, you'll be awake," said Marcus, firmly.

As Marcus began his count, Kathy's eyes rolled back into her head and she slumped to one side. A fleck of foam appeared at the corner of her mouth.

"She's having some kind of fit," said Marcus. "Help me, Brad, in case she swallows her tongue."

A minute later, a baffled Kathy was sipping from a small glass of Scotch. She remembered nothing after being told to focus on the fountain pen.

"Did I help you at all?" she asked Brad.

"Kind of," he said. "But you also raised some more questions."

Marcus had been quiet since Kathy had recovered from her seizure.

"You should get medical help," he said. "But I have a feeling you won't."

Kathy shook her head.

"Don't like hospitals," she said firmly. "Anything official, I'm keeping away from it."

She got up ready to leave.

"Got to be going, gents. Things to do, people to see. And even more people to avoid."

"You never told us where you're staying," said Brad.

Kathy gave a thin smile.

"That's right, I didn't. Let's just say it's not luxury accommodation, but it's rent free."

"You do know the police want to talk to you about Matt Arnold's death?" asked Marcus, getting up to open the door for her.

She shrugged.

"I don't want to talk to them," she replied.

"How will we get in touch with you?" asked Brad.

"I'll get in touch with you," she said. "Thanks for the tea and booze, Marcus."

Just as she was leaving, Kathy stopped, realization dawning on her pallid face.

"Bloody hell, there is something else," she said. "Maybe you did churn up a lost memory or something. It's a bit daft, but I should tell you. About that book."

"What book?" asked Brad.

"Clay's book," she said. "He wrote it years ago, he said. Anyway, we were all told that if we ever saw a copy, we had to buy it, and bring it back so they could destroy it. Stop it getting into the hands of unbelievers."

"What was it called?" asked Marcus.

"Some boring title, like a schoolbook," she said. "Something like *Theories About Stones And Circles*. Anyway, it's the only one Clay wrote, so it shouldn't be hard to find it. See you around, fellas!"

It took Marcus five minutes online to find that Clay's book was entitled *A New Theory of Stone Circles*. It had been published by a small academic press in 1993, when Clay was still a respected archaeologist. Copies were indeed rare, but Marcus found one on eBay and ordered it at once.

"This could be a major breakthrough," said Marcus. "Fingers crossed."

"Because Clay wanted them destroyed?" asked Brad.

Marcus nodded.

"If it wasn't important, why worry about the likes of us reading it? Clearly there's something in it, however marginal or obscure, that he wants to keep secret."

"It doesn't bring us any closer to Kelly, though," observed Brad. "What do you make of that performance, or whatever it was?"

Marcus shrugged.

"I've seen some strange things," he said. "But I'm going to reserve judgment on that. There was one thing Kathy said, though. A clue that might help us find Clay and his cult."

He turned to the computer again.

"Clay was obsessed with stone circles," explained Marcus. "And there are only so many of those. The name Kathy half-remembered might just coincide with one, or a place near to one."

"Worth a try," agreed Brad.

Marcus opened the audio file and found the phrases Kathy had recalled.

"Litch-weir," he said, "or Hitch-mere. Let's find a list of stone circles and compare the names."

"Sounds like a one man job," said Brad, standing up. "I really need to get some air and do some thinking."

"We've no reason to believe that was Kelly," Marcus pointed out. "Hypnosis isn't magic, and I don't believe it triggered some sort of telepathic link to the cult."

"You think it was just Kathy's subconscious being playful?" asked Brad.

Marcus nodded.

"That's the reasonable explanation. She's been through a lot. So-called multiple personalities, like we've just seen, are a kind of play-acting, the subconscious trying out different roles."

"I'd like to believe it," said Brad. "But my dreams keep telling me something weird is going on. And that voice, it really did sound like Kelly. The sassy way she usually talks to me. When she talks to me at all."

"I'm not saying you're wrong," said Marcus, obviously choosing his words carefully. "Let's just suspend judgment for now."

"Agreed," said Brad. "Let me know if you find anything."

A few moments later, Brad was in the bustle of Camden Market, surrounded by people of all ages, races, and degrees of wealth. He began half-heartedly browsing the various stalls while his mind raced.

Was that really Kelly? How could Kathy have faked her voice so well? Or was it all down to a convincing American accent plus wishful thinking on my part?

"Five-ninety-nine, that one dearie," said a female stallholder. "But if you don't want to buy it, don't muck it about."

Brad realized that he had picked up a tee-shirt decorated with a circular image. It was the Ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail.

"Do you sell a lot of these?" he asked.

The woman frowned.

"Doing a survey, are you? Yes, there's been a lot of demand for 'em lately. Question is, do you want that one?"

"No, no thanks," said Brad, putting the garment back. The woman turned away, muttering something about tourists.

He looked around at the other clothing stalls, then at the people thronging the market. In a matter of seconds, he saw a middle-aged woman wearing an Ouroboros tee-shirt. Then he noticed a girl in her teens with a bag bearing the same distinctive logo. After a few minutes of walking up and down the aisles between stalls, Brad had seen the circular image half a dozen times.

Just a fashion thing, he thought. Surely, it can't be more significant than that?

He could not quite convince himself.

Returning to his hotel on the Underground, he saw the sign of Ouroboros three more times. After a while, he tried not to look. Leaving the station at Russell Square, he glimpsed a crude graffiti image. It was too badly faded to be sure what it represented. But it was circular.

On Tuesday night, Brad's dream was even more bizarre and disturbing.

Again, he found himself face to face with Kelly in an ordinary coffee shop. This time, when he looked out the window, he saw the turning Earth below. Again, he watched cracks appear in the planet's crust. Great eruptions of smoke and flame obscure the familiar continents, tarnish the blue of the oceans.

"Kelly," he said, turning to his daughter. "You can't want this to happen. This is evil, insane."

"Dad," she sighed, with familiar exasperation, "don't be so damn literal. Maybe it's a metaphor? Maybe the old world needs to be destroyed to bring about something new, something better?"

The vista of the planet in chaos was replaced by a new horror. Outside the coffee shop, hordes of people were milling about, confused and afraid. Then they started pointing, screaming, running. A vast reptilian head appeared, its jaw gaping beneath huge slit-eyes. The colossal serpent writhed down the street, darting back and forth, grabbing individuals, and gulping them down whole. For every one it consumed, it must have crushed a dozen people. Brad heard faint cries of terror from the tiny fleeing humans before they vanished under the scaly coils.

"You call this something better?" Brad yelled at Kelly. "This monster? This carnage?"

She shook her head in pity.

"Metaphor again, Dad," she chided. "Death and rebirth. People fear change. They run away from it, rather than face it."

She reached out her hand for his, gripping his fingers with surprising strength. He tried to pull away but failed.

"Come on, Dad," said Kelly, in her most persuasive voice. "Come and join us. Don't be left behind when the big changes come."

Outside, the huge serpent cast its shadow over them, a great wall of scaly flesh hurtling through the wrecked city.

"No!" he shouted, looking back to see his daughter's face transformed by a snarl. Long fangs protruded below her upper lip. The table between them rocked and was overturned. A long, scaly body writhed from under it.

Brad woke to find himself tangled in sweaty sheets. What had become a familiar routine kicked in. He got up, made coffee, tried to work a little, then gave up. He checked his emails and ensured that things were okay with his company. Brad emailed his boss and asked if he might have another couple of weeks leave, unpaid. He was calling in a lot of favors. But he had the growing conviction that this was his one and only chance to find Kelly. He found a message from Marcus Valentine, sent late the previous evening, saying that he had located the most likely place for the cult's new base.

'That's great,' he typed back. 'Let's meet up at my hotel, lunch maybe?'

Brad sat back and pondered the new elements of his nightmare.

Would she really want me to come and join them? Am I in some kind of telepathic contact with her? Does that explain what happened when Kathy was hypnotized?

He gave up in frustration, accepting that he simply did not have enough data to draw any conclusions. To clear his head, he got dressed and went out for a walk, taking in the sights and sounds of London waking up to a new day. It was just after six, and Brad decided to have an early breakfast.

Brad chose a greasy spoon diner and ordered 'the full English,' a lavish breakfast of eggs, bacon, sausages, and other artery-hardening ingredients. The place was full of shift workers and the like. It reminded Brad of his days in the field as an oil geologist, and he felt himself relaxing as he sipped instant coffee.

"Look out, lads, we're being ogled."

The remark came from one of a group of truckers at the next table. Heads turned to face the window, and when Brad looked around, he saw a young woman gazing in, looking straight at him. As soon as he caught her eye, she smiled, turned, and walked off.

"Aw, I'd have offered her a nice bacon buttty!" said the trucker, to general amusement.

Brad continued to stare after the woman had vanished from sight. There was something about the way she had moved that bothered him. She had been a little too sinuous, languid, self-consciously slinky. And her expression had been peculiar, as if she were taunting him to follow her.

In every movie I've seen where this happens, the guy jumps up and rushes after the mystery girl, Brad thought. *So screw that. I'm not playing anyone else's game.*

A few moments later, his breakfast arrived, a steaming carnivore's feast.

Later, on Wednesday morning at New Scotland Yard, Detective Sergeant Declan Healy opened his dossier on Deputy Commissioner Sir Nigel Faversham. It gave him a thrill to know that, if it were discovered, he would be in deep trouble. And yet the dossier had only one entry so far. It read, 'Links to Ouroboros? Kelly Steiger – knows whereabouts?' He added 'Arrogant bastard, treats subordinates like dirt,' then deleted it.

"Not exactly a cast iron case," he muttered to himself.

Healy looked at his phone lying on the desk. He was conflicted about the Arnold case. Preliminary findings from the medical examiner had confirmed that the private detective had died from constriction. The air had literally been squeezed out of his lungs. The best the expert could come up with as a murder weapon was 'some kind of mechanical device, possibly pneumatic in nature, involving a steel cable.'

Which tells us nothing while sounding impressive, thought Healy. *And surely, somebody would have noticed a gadget like that being carted around Hyde Park at lunchtime?*

What bothered him more than the odd nature of the crime, though, was Faversham's attitude. That stuck in Healy's craw. He picked up his phone and called Brad Steiger, offering to meet up.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I can't talk about this in detail over the phone. All I can say is I've not been permitted to list Kelly as a missing person. No, I agree Mister Steiger, and I'm going to find a workaround if I can. But let's talk about this face to face. Lunchtime? Sure. See you at your hotel, about one pm."

After hanging up, Healy rejiggered the file on the Matt Arnold killing. He added Kelly Steiger as a possible witness. It was a deliberate abuse of procedure but one that would flag up her name on the national police computer. He would be informed if she were arrested, had hospital treatment, or otherwise came to the attention of the authorities.

Now for Ouroboros, he thought. *Let's see just how naughty they are.*

Faversham had not expressly forbidden Healy from investigating the cult. It took him a few minutes to find that there had been several complaints about the cult over the years. All were from relatives of converts. None had been followed up on. The reports stated that no evidence of coercion could be found. But the files did reveal an address for the cult's headquarters, albeit in a report that was two years old. It was a large town house in Berkeley Square, in the pricey Mayfair district.

Worth checking out. Well, why not? Let's see what these nutcases are up close, maybe put a scare into 'em.

Healy put on his jacket and summoned Knapton.

"Your lucky day, Constable," he said. "We're going to visit a fringe religious group that apparently worships reptiles."

"Yes, sir," said Knapton, unworried. "Looks like rain, I'll bring my brolly."

An hour later, Healy parked their unmarked car outside Number 50, Berkeley Square. After a moment's thought, Healy sent Knapton to talk to the neighbors on either side.

"What am I supposed to ask them, Sarge?"

"Tell them you've had a complaint about noise, or something like that," replied Healy, "if people have any complaints about the cult, it might give us some extra

leverage. Also, you never know when a snippet of information might prove valuable.”

“Okay. What are you going to do?” asked Knapton.

“I’m going to walk up to the front door and ring the bell,” replied Healy. “It usually works.”

In this case, though, it failed. There was no reply, and on closer examination, it seemed as if the house was not in use. Knapton confirmed this, returning from a chat with a neighbor.

“They say all the weird people left last autumn, Sarge.”

“So the house is empty?” asked Healy.

“Seems so.”

“Hard to believe,” said Healy, looking up at the house’s impressive frontage. “This is a posh neighborhood. Properties like this aren’t just left empty.”

“What do we do now, Sarge?” asked Knapton.

“We check doors and windows carefully,” said Healy. “Just in case there’s any evidence of burglary. Whoever owns this place would thank us for it, don’t you think?”

Knapton followed his boss around the block and into the alleyway behind the luxurious town houses. The back door of Number 50 was secure. But a broken basement window caught Healy’s eye.

“Now that’s an obvious invitation to the criminal element,” said Healy. “Wouldn’t you say, Constable?”

Knapton sighed, knowing what was going to happen next.

“I feel we have grounds to investigate the premises,” Healy went on, “just in case some hapless citizen is all trussed up while villains ransack the place.”

“Yes, sir,” said Knapton. “Do you want me to go first?”

“No,” said Healy, “I’ve got this.”

Wrapping his arm in his jacket Healy reached through the broken pane and opened the window. Then he managed to squeeze through the narrow gap to find himself in a basement room. It was full of old furniture and other junk. Healy caught his foot in the springs of an old mattress and managed to tear the cuff of his pants while freeing himself.

“Bloody hell, this place is a death trap! Go round the front and I’ll let you in,” ordered Healy.

The detective clambered over the junk and found the door unlocked. He made his way up a narrow stairway into a large kitchen. The place was clean but had an abandoned air. Checking cupboards, he found no food. The refrigerator was also empty. A large black garbage bag stood against the back door. He opened it to find a rolled up piece of fabric, light brown in color. It was like a roll of old wallpaper, but felt more like hardened skin to the touch. Grimacing in distaste, he closed the bag, dismissing the odd material as irrelevant.

Rubbish could have been there for weeks, anyway. Place is obviously not in use, he thought. The crackpots have long since moved on.

Healy left the kitchen and worked his way along a corridor, opening doors and checking rooms. The first two contained nothing but objects covered in dustsheets. In one, there was a circular design on the tiled floor. It had been nearly erased so that Healy could not quite make out what it represented. The

third room was different. In one corner, there was a sleeping bag, a small heap of brightly-colored clothes, and some kind of cage. Entering, Healy went closer to the cage and saw it was occupied by half a dozen hamsters. The animals' small, pink muzzles pointed toward him, black button eyes shining with curiosity.

"Hello, fellas," he said, bending down to examine the cage. "What are you doing here? Claiming squatters' rights?"

Suddenly the little animals ran to the far side of the cage, squeaking in evident terror.

"I might ask you the same question," said voice behind him.

Healy turned around to see a woman's face looking through the door. She was young, with large dark eyes and an abundance of black hair. She had a dark complexion, or was deeply tanned.

"Sorry, miss," he said, reaching for his ID, "but I thought this property was abandoned."

"No," she said, "I'm the caretaker. Is that a police identity card?"

"Yes," he replied, walking toward her. "Please, take a closer look. Detective Sergeant Declan Healy, New Scotland Yard. And you are?"

The woman smiled.

"You can call me Cleo," she said, and walked into the room. He could see now that she was indeed dark all over because she was completely naked. Healy stopped, lost for words, then took a step backward. He was vaguely aware of the hamsters becoming even more agitated behind him.

"I'm afraid you caught me while I was changing," said Cleo, walking up to him. A powerful fragrance filled the air.

"Oh, erm, sorry," Healy stammered. "Look, miss, perhaps you'd better put some clothes on? This is hardly proper."

"I'm quite secure in my own skin," she replied, putting her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes were level with his. "How about you, Declan? Feeling uncomfortable? Try to relax."

Healy gulped, again lost for words. The woman's eyes seemed to be getting larger, expanding to overwhelm everything in his field of vision. Cleo was still talking, but her words were going deeper in his conscious mind, seeming to echo in his skull.

"Relax, let's get to know each other," she said, "I'm always keen to help our boys in blue. And I'm sure you can be a great help to me."

"Help," he said weakly, feeling his consciousness ebbing away. "Help."

A loud knocking noise broke in on her silky words. A distant voice shouted. He felt Cleo's concentration waver. Her eyes flickered uncertainly.

"You all right, boss?" A voice echoed along empty corridors. "Can you let me in?"

Knapton, Healy thought, focusing on his job, his duty. He summoned all his willpower and broke free of the woman, shoving her hands away as he staggered backward.

"Don't fight it, Declan," Cleo said, stepping forward, smiling. "This was meant to be."

He kept backing away, collided with the window sill, then dodged around her and headed for the door. He felt cool fingers brush his neck, heard a throaty giggle.

I'm running away from a naked woman, he thought. They'll never believe this back at headquarters.

He raced along the corridor and found himself in a large hall. Fists were hammering at the front door. Healy quickly unbolted the door and rushed out into the street, almost knocking down the startled Knapton.

"You okay, boss?" asked the young officer.

Healy took a moment to compose himself before replying.

"Just had an interesting experience, Constable," he said, hesitantly. "Keep it to yourself, but I may be going a bit bonkers."

"I see," said Knapton, looking into the hall. "Is there anyone in there?"

"Possibly a young woman," replied Healy. "I—I thought I saw someone inside. But let's go and check. Together, not splitting up."

"Yes, sir."

After twenty minutes, they had searched every room in the house, and found no living things other than the hamsters. The back door was still bolted from the inside.

"If there was someone here, where might they be hiding?" asked Knapton. "Unless this woman climbed out through that broken window."

And ran through the streets in her birthday suit, thought Healy. Not very likely.

They went down to check the cellar. It was clear that, while Healy had been able to scramble in, no normal person could have climbed up and out without a ladder.

"It's a mystery all right," said Healy.

His encounter with the enigmatic Cleo now seemed unreal, like a fading memory of an intense dream. And yet he could still smell the strong perfume she wore. Then he realized it was in the air again.

"Patchouli," he said. "Can you smell that, Knapton?"

The junior officer nodded, and walked around the cellar, sniffing.

"Seems to be strongest over here, sir," he said, pointing at a dark rectangle set low on the wall. "Some kind of ventilator grille."

The policemen examined the outlet. It was roughly eight inches high and a foot across.

"No way an adult human being could squeeze through a gap that small," said Knapton, decisively.

"No," agreed Healy. "I suppose not."

He crouched down to examine the grille more closely. It was evidently secured from the other side. Healy tugged at it, but it didn't budge. The scent of patchouli was strong, but now it masked another odor. An acrid smell, quite unpleasant. Peering through the wire mesh, he thought he saw a glimmer of yellow in the darkness.

I'm in too deep with this malarkey, thought Healy. This is no ordinary case. I need to regroup, rethink the problem.

"We've done everything we can here," he said, standing up. "I've got to get to Russell Square, have a word with that Steiger bloke. Oh, and call the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals about those poor bloody hamsters."

As he left the cellar, Healy thought he heard a husky laugh echoing somewhere behind him.

Chapter 6

Connections.

Marcus Valentine arrived at the Russell Hotel to find Brad Steiger waiting in the lunchroom. The Englishman ordered a light meal and a pot of Earl Grey tea before producing a file containing a sheaf of printouts.

"I've made some progress on the possible location of the cult's new base," he explained, spreading out some sheets on the table. "In fact, there's only one place in this country it could be."

Brad picked up one of the printouts, which showed a map of a rural area.

"Wychmere?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "They named a village after witches?"

"Nothing so exciting," replied Marcus, with a smile. "A 'mere' is a pond or small lake, and the first part of the name refers to a type of elm tree. You can see that the village is clustered around a body of water."

"Ah," said Brad, slightly disappointed. "But there is something special about this place?"

"Oh yes," said Marcus. "Look more closely."

Examining the map, Brad noticed an irregular dotted line forming a circle. The village, a few dozen homes, was mostly within the circle. A small legend indicated that the dots constituted a 'prehistoric structure'.

"One of those temples to their snake-god?" he asked, putting down the sheet.

Marcus shrugged, and passed over some more printouts.

"So it would seem. The thirteen stones of the circle are known as the Dancers, and they're quite famous in antiquarian circles. And the locals are quite fond of them, too, as you can see."

Brad looked at a sepia photo labeled 'Wychmere, May Day 1908'. It showed a smiling family in old-fashioned clothes standing under a great irregular slab of granite. The stone had been decorated with garlands of flowers.

"So they have a big celebration of some lumps of rock?" asked Brad.

"One of our many quaint British customs," said Marcus. "Harmless, in this case. May Day is an ancient festival celebrating the arrival of spring. And yet, when I made some discreet inquiries this morning, I found that Jonathan Clay's been trying to rent a large property in the area for over a year."

"I take it he's finally got one?" asked Brad.

Marcus nodded, handing over another sheet.

"Garlock House, a stately home, less than half a mile from the village."

Brad looked at the picture, read the brief history of the house.

Is this where Kelly is staying now? Brainwashed, maybe even held captive?

"We can't be sure she's there," said Marcus, as if reading Brad's mind. "But obviously you want to go and see for yourself."

Brad nodded.

"Will you come with me?" he asked Marcus. "I'd be willing to pay you for your trouble."

"No trouble," replied Marcus, "but there is someone I'd like to talk to first. A priest who's been at a Catholic retirement home in Sussex for a while now."

Before he could explain further, Detective Sergeant Healy arrived, ordered a large brandy, and sat down at their table after taking a large gulp.

"Difficult morning?" asked Marcus.

"You could say that," replied the detective. "And no, I don't normally drink while on duty. But I just had the strangest experience. I have a feeling you two might know something about it."

Healy described the abortive search at Berkeley Square.

"A naked woman tried to hypnotize you?" asked Brad.

"A naked woman with a cage of hamsters," Marcus pointed out. "Remember what Kathy said about rats being delivered to the cult."

"I don't like where this is going," said Healy.

"I wouldn't normally countenance tales of shape-shifting and the like," said Marcus in measured tones, "but there are some very well-attested cases."

"You're telling me this woman was some sort of were-snake?" demanded Healy.

Marcus shrugged.

"I don't quite believe it either," said Brad. "But it would explain Matt Arnold being crushed to death."

"But has anybody actually seen this happen?" asked Healy.

"Someone may have," said Marcus. "I was going to tell you about this, Brad. I dug up some old newspaper references to incidents involving Jonathan Clay. There's one name that crops up twice. An Irish priest named Quigley."

"He witnessed the cult's ceremonies, or whatever?" asked Brad.

"He seems," said Marcus, "to have been present when a ceremony went terribly wrong. Whatever he witnessed left him badly shocked, and he's still mentally fragile."

"Poor guy," said Brad. "Do you think he might talk to us?"

Marcus looked doubtful.

"He's in the care of an order of nuns. I called them up, asking about Father Quigley, and the lady I spoke to seemed reluctant to let me 'bother the poor man,' as she put it."

"I've an idea," said Healy. "This man could, at a stretch, be involved in my investigation of Arnold's death. So I could go along, give it an official veneer?"

They agreed this would be helpful. But Brad was also be eager to go to Wychmere straight away, to try and speak to Kelly.

"Suppose I get over there pronto while you guys follow up this lead?"

"Sounds like a plan," said Healy. "Normally, I wouldn't conduct an investigation like this, involving civilians. But what with this morning's weirdness and obstruction from my superiors, I feel justified."

"You could get into a hell of a lot of trouble," Marcus pointed out.

"True," said the detective. "But I resent being told not to do my job. Against that, I'd very much like to keep my job. It's a bit of a bind to be in. Which is why I'm going to have another brandy."

On Tuesday night, Kathy Hopkirk tossed and turned on a narrow bed in a Whitechapel hostel for the homeless. Her dreams, while often troubled, had

never been so strange. She found herself walking through a big, expensive-looking house she had never seen before. It was nighttime, judging by the fact that the lights were all on. She entered a book-lined room and Jonathan Clay got up from a writing desk. As she got closer, Kathy had the odd sensation of looking down at him. She recalled that in life, he was half a head taller than she was. Now he looked like a little boy trying to behave like a grown-up.

He looks worried, she thought. Or is he scared of me, whoever I am?

"You wanted to see me?" said a voice. Kathy realized she was seeing things from the speaker's point of view.

"Killing the private detective was a mistake," Clay said. "And trying to convert a Scotland Yard officer! You must see how reckless that was?"

"Don't be silly, Jonathan," Kathy heard herself saying. "These people are mere nuisances."

"It's drawing too much attention!" protested Clay. "We are so close to our objective!"

"Don't weaken, Jonathan," she said. "This evocation must not fail, and nothing can stand in our way. Last time your nerve failed, remember, and it was bungled."

"That wasn't my fault," said Clay. "We chose the wrong place, the wrong time. Here there is a deep-rooted tradition, a spiritual energy we can exploit."

"I hope you're right," she said, moving closer to Clay, who flinched slightly. "We do not want any more failures."

Without waiting for a response, the speaker turned on her heel and walked out of the room. She entered a passageway and as she passed a mirror, she saw herself for the first time.

Olivia!

She was seeing the world through the woman's eyes. Olivia came to an entrance hall and went up a grand staircase to what was evidently her bedroom. Kathy realized that she was not just seeing through the big woman's eyes but also feeling some of her sensations. The house was cool, even a little chilly, and the lights a shade too bright. Olivia shut the bedroom door and at first total darkness engulfed her. Then Kathy found shapes forming in the blackness. One shape in particular, a small object that moved.

It's like one of those cameras they use to film wildlife at night, she thought.

Olivia crossed the room, and as she got closer to the glowing thing, it squealed. Kathy made out the shape of a piglet inside a small cage. Olivia stooped down and the animal became frantic, clearly sensing peril.

Oh God no, this can't be happening.

Olivia easily caught the wriggling piglet and lifted it out of the cage. Then she let it go, whereupon it ran under the nearby bed. Olivia laughed, and dropped on all fours.

No, not all fours. All threes. All zeros.

Kathy felt the body, in which her mind was a passenger, transform itself into a lithe tube of steel-taut muscle and sinew. Her night-vision became more intense, and her flickering black tongue was now an organ of taste and smell. The odor of the piglet was intoxicating to this transmuted body. She glided, limbless, towards her terrified prey, which tried to rush past her. She struck, sank fangs into the plump, quivering body. Then she withdrew for a moment, unhinged her jaw, and

began to swallow her prey whole.

Oh God! I can't stand this.

Kathy awoke, staring at the dim-lit ceiling, still feeling a sickening mixture of pleasure and revulsion. She ran her tongue along her upper teeth, found no fangs. They had been so real a moment before.

That Marcus did a number on me, she thought. He never said this might happen. I need him to put it right. If he can.

It was not just the disgust and horror of being in Olivia's mind that disturbed her. In the fraction of a second, before the link had been broken she had felt something cold and inhuman brush against her thoughts. A reptilian mind had reached out and tried to catch her. Or sink its metaphorical fangs into her.

Did she know I was there? Could she find me? What might she do to me?

As she waited for the dawn to arrive, Kathy tried hard not to think about the piglet. Confused and afraid, she could not decide whether to contact Marcus Valentine again.

On Wednesday evening, Wychmere Parish Council held its weekly meeting at the church hall. Bill Stroud, the Chairman, noticed that some of the members seemed distracted.

Or drunk, he thought, uncharitably.

"Well, let's begin with the inevitable preparations for May Day and the dressing of the stones," he said.

There was a murmur of agreement. Stroud braced himself for controversy as he asked the customary question.

"Do we have any candidates for Queen of the May?"

The effect was startling. The other four members of the council all looked at him and smiled. It was an eerie effect, especially as Stroud was expecting a dispute.

"Now I know," he continued, "that this often causes friction between rival families and so on. There will always be differences of opinion over which young lady is suitable."

"Not this time," said the parish priest. "I think we have reached an ideal solution."

"Okay," said Stroud cautiously. "Let's hear it."

The priest looked round at the others, who nodded.

God, they look even more stupid than usual, thought Stroud. What's gotten into them? Or been taken out?

"In previous years," the priest said, "we have disagreed over which local lass should be crowned as May Queen and take pride of place at the center of the circle. This year, I think we can avoid all such controversy by having an honored guest as monarch for the day."

Puzzled, Stroud asked, "What honored guest? A celebrity, you mean, like a BBC weathergirl? Because it's far too late to start organizing something like that! These people are booked up months in advance."

The priest shook his head.

"No, not at all Mister Chairman," he said. "I mean one of our visitors currently residing at Garlock House."

"What?" exclaimed Stroud. "They're a bunch of crackpots, complete outsiders."

They're not part of the community. We can't just throw our centuries-old traditions out of the window like that!"

"I think we all understand your reservations, Bill," said the priest, to murmurs of agreement from the other three councilmen. "But if you go up to the house and speak to Mister Clay about it, I'm sure you'll change your mind."

"I'm not changing my bloody mind!" declared Stroud. "And this matter is not settled! I'd rather put on a frock and do it myself."

The others exchanged glances that seemed more pitying than angry.

"We've all been won over by Mister Clay," said the priest. "I'm sure the American girl would make a fine May Queen."

"American?" exclaimed Stroud. "Not even British? Some shrieking moron with capped teeth and a fat arse? No, thank you. That's a big slap in the face for tradition."

The meeting broke up with the majority still blandly insisting on their choice. Stroud drove back to his pig farm seething with annoyance at the others bizarre fixation. He had seen his business arrangement with Clay as a good, if minor, source of tax-free income. Now he felt vaguely soiled by it, as if he had committed an act of treachery against the spirit of Wychmere. He took a stubborn pride in having rejected Clay's repeated invitations to go inside the house for a drink.

Sod them, he thought, as he got out of his Land Rover. *They can go elsewhere for their livestock.*

Stroud did his usual rounds of the small farm, ensuring that the pigs had plenty of feed. He had a whiskey as a nightcap and turned in early, as he usually did. But first, he went around the farmhouse and checked doors and windows. The out-of-kilter feel of the parish council meeting had unnerved him.

It was just before one in the morning when the squealing of the pigs woke Stroud. They were unlikely to make a fuss if a fox or badger was sniffing around. He looked out of the window towards the sheds where the pigs slept. There was nothing out of the ordinary. There had been a heavy shower that evening. Now a bright April moon was shining on the muddy farmyard. It was, as always, rutted with tire tracks.

There's something wrong, he thought. *What is it? I'll take a closer look.*

Stroud got dressed, picked up a baseball bat he kept by his bed, then went downstairs and out into the yard. The pigs had quieted down but when he went over to check on them they seemed nervous.

As if they sense a predator. But there are no large predators in England.

Again, he examined the tire tracks in the yard, wondering what was bugging him about them. Then he noticed the anomaly. The marks left by his Land Rover were clear enough, fresh. But there was another track crossing over them. A single trail over a foot across led along the yard towards the house.

Something being dragged, thought Stroud. *But if so, why no footprints?*

Stroud followed the trail to the wall of the house, then followed it around a corner. The mud gave way to concrete and the trail petered out. In front of him was the barn where some old machinery was stored. Stroud hesitated, then hefted his bat and went into the building. He groped for the light switch, flicked it on.

There was nothing out of the ordinary. He walked around the place, checking under tarpaulins, satisfying himself that the barn was empty.

I'm going barmy, he concluded, returning to the entrance. Just as he turned off the light, he heard a giggle. He spun round, turning the light back on, but at the ready. Again, he saw nobody in front of him.

"Who's there?" he said, feeling foolish. "Play games with me, you'll regret it."

He raised the bat in a two-handed grip, advanced a step. Again, there was a giggle, and this time Stroud could tell where it was coming from. He looked up, heart racing, and a woman's face descended towards his. Her hair cascaded about his face as a strong hand grabbed the bat and easily plucked it away. Above her, he could make out muscular coils wrapped around a roof beam.

"Hello again, Mister Stroud," said Olivia. "I just thought I'd drop in and see if I could change your mind."

On Thursday morning, Brad set out for Wychmere, while a parcel arrived for Marcus Valentine. The parcel contained a battered hardback without a dust-jacket. A *New Theory of Stone Circles* by Jonathan Clay, Ph.D, Fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries. At first glance, it seemed dry and scholarly; hardly the work of a fanatic. But as Marcus skimmed through it, he noticed a subtle change come over the tone as well as the content.

The early chapters were couched in the sober, careful phrases of the professional academic. There were plenty of references to learned publications, nods to esteemed colleagues. But towards the middle of the book, the academic style gave way to a more insistent, almost crazed tone. What had been suggestions became assertions, and there *were no more scholarly references*. Clay had begun by proposing a hypothesis, but ended up asserting a belief.

And what a belief, thought Marcus.

According to Clay, all the stone circles in Britain and beyond had been temples to a universal snake-deity. Clay dubbed this hypothetical god 'Ouroboros' and seemed to believe that it represented some kind of primal force of nature. All subsequent gods, Clay asserted, were creations of human superstition and credulity. Only Ouroboros was real.

So why, wondered Marcus, *isn't the Snakey One still in charge?*

Here, Clay's theorizing became vague and contradictory. But one thing was clear. Clay believed that some kind of cosmic cycle was coming to its climax, and that this would herald the return of the 'Great Old One,' as he called Ouroboros. The book ended with an exhortation for all 'true believers' to prepare the way for the return of the world's true god.

"Crackers," said Marcus, slamming the book shut. "But obviously sincere."

In his years of investigating cults, he had encountered plenty of scam artists, eager to exploit their followers financially and sexually. Clay seemed to belong to a different category.

Declan Healy arrived just before midday to drive them to Sussex and the Catholic rest home. Marcus gave him a synopsis of the book, trying to sum up its peculiar blend of scholarship and mysticism.

"How useful is it to us, do you think?" asked Healy.

"You never know," replied Marcus. "Knowledge is power. I think Clay is sincere, which arguably makes him more dangerous than a mere charlatan. And the violent death of Matt Arnold is a fact, however it was done. We should tread

carefully.”

“Too right,” said Healy. “I still can't quite remember what happened to me yesterday. I keep getting flashes of this naked woman.”

Marcus tried to suppress a smile.

“Not nearly as pleasant as it sounds,” said Healy. “Now, what's the best route to this rest home?”

An hour later, they arrived at the gates of Saint Benedict's Retreat for Retired Clergy. They were met by a formidable Irish nun who introduced herself as Sister Mary Assumpta. Healy, who had called ahead, introduced Marcus as 'an expert consultant,' and insisted that Father Quigley might have vital information in a murder inquiry. The nun looked skeptical, but led them into the rambling Victorian building, all the while warning them not to over-excite the priest.

“The poor man's had a few rough days lately,” she explained, “what with the nightmares and all.”

“Nightmares?” asked Marcus.

“Yes, he's been screaming about demons and pagans and the like,” said the nun. “He has his good days, but they've been precious few lately. So don't expect him to be too coherent.”

Sister Mary showed them into a wing of the house that had been converted into some self-contained apartments. They stopped outside a green door marked Father Patrick Quigley. The nun knocked and called, “Father? I have some visitors to see you.”

There was a brief pause before a nervous, high-pitched voice said, “Who are they?”

“One is a policeman,” she explained. “The other seems a nice enough gentleman. Are you decent, now? We don't want a repeat of the incident with the plumber, now do we?”

“Yes, woman, I'm fully dressed!” came the exasperated reply.

A chain rattled, the door was flung open, and a man of about sixty looked out. Father Quigley was dressed in clerical garb, but his hair was untidy and he hadn't shaved for several days.

“Men are all right,” he said, staring at Marcus, then at Healy. “No strange females allowed in here, that's the rule.”

“Yes, Father,” sighed Sister Mary, waving the visitors past her.

Quigley slammed the door and chained it behind Marcus and Healy.

“Got to be careful,” he said. “Security, you know! Now, let me put the kettle on.”

The priest bustled into his tiny kitchen. Following, Healy introduced himself and explained that he was working on a case linked to Ouroboros. Marcus lingered in the living room, noting the bookshelves stacked two deep with books on a wide range of topics. Most seemed to be about religion, paganism, and related matters. Something else caught the Englishman's eye. He went over to the window to check. It was sealed shut with heavy masking tape. Then he noticed that the pleasant ornamental fireplace had been bricked up.

“Security,” said Quigley, emerging from the kitchen. “You can't be too careful. They can wriggle in through the smallest crevice.”

Healy looked thoughtful at that.

“I found your name in some old news reports, Father,” said Marcus, deciding to

get to the point. "I thought you might be able to enlighten us about Jonathan Clay and his followers?"

"Followers?" echoed the priest. "Ah, who's following who? I thought he was the leader, but now I'm not so sure. No, no, it's not so clear at all."

Further questioning produced a garbled account of the incident in Ireland.

"I was sure Clay had murdered that poor lad," said Quigley. "But I was wrong. It was worse than that. But I must get your tea."

When the priest was out of sight, Marcus and Healy discussed him in low tones.

"I've seen some unreliable witnesses in my time, but this one takes the biscuit," said the detective.

"I don't think he could stand up to cross-examination in a courtroom," agreed Marcus, "but we could still learn something useful."

Quigley returned with tea and biscuits, and before either visitor could speak, he had resumed his rambling narrative.

"You see, it took me years to track Clay down," he explained. "I was a parish priest, I had duties, and the church is not happy when a clergyman goes rogue, so to speak. I became an embarrassment. Started to lose my grip a little, I dare say."

Quigley paused, then looked at Marcus.

"You've seen something of evil."

The Englishman looked uncomfortable.

"When I was young, a student at Oxford, I dabbled in the occult. It was my way of rebelling. Things went wrong. Someone died."

Marcus looked over at Brad.

"That's why I try to help, I suppose. To make amends."

The priest nodded.

"I sought to do what was right. I sought them out after that dark business at Ballymahan. But I didn't realize quite how dangerous it was, not really."

With a little prompting from Marcus, Quigley began to tell them his story.

Chapter 7

Southern England, June 2005.

"Oh yes," said the barman, "they're camped up on top of the earthwork. I saw their campfire last night. Been there for a few days now."

Father Patrick Quigley followed the man's pointing finger. Out of the wide front window of the pub he could make out the great prehistoric structure known as Hampton Round. This early in the morning the Sussex village of Lesser Hampton literally lay in the shadow of the grassy mound. The earthwork was a vast artificial hill, flat-topped, and surrounded by a deep ditch. Its purpose had been a mystery since the beginning of recorded history.

"And does anybody know what they're doing up there?" asked the priest.

The barman shrugged.

"I've heard they dance about at night, singing, doing some kind of ritual," he said. "But that's nothing new. All kinds of folk come down here. There are

scientists, pagans, psychics, Wiccans, and ghost hunters. Their money's all equally good, as far as we're concerned. Got to make a living, after all."

"Do they come in here?" asked Quigley. "The people up there now?"

"They stopped off for a drink on the way," replied the barman. "Nice chap seemed to be a sort of leader. Had quite a harem of pretty, young ladies. Nice work if you can get it, leading these cults, eh?"

"Quite," said Quigley. "So they didn't tell you why they came here?"

"No," conceded the barman, "but he was very interested in the name of the pub."

"He asked about the Hampton Worm?" asked Quigley.

"Yes, very keen to know all the folklore. Of course, it's just a load of nonsense for the tourists, and I told him that. All that stuff about monsters, it's just for kids, isn't it?"

The barman gestured at a plaque on the wall behind him.

"Old folk song," he explained.

Quigley read the verses that referred to 'the Hampton Worm' that supposedly once terrorized the area. It had, according to the song, emerged from the prehistoric mound at the behest of a sorceress. The worm had possessed 'great big jaws and great big teeth, and great big goggly eyes.' Fortunately, after eating all the local sheep and cattle, plus quite a few peasants, the fearsome beast was slain by the brave Lord Hampton. Similar stories of enormous 'worms' were found throughout England. They were dismissed as folk legends by most experts. The priest was not so sure.

"If only real evil could be dealt with so simply," Quigley murmured.

The priest thanked the barman for his help, finished his beer, and left the pub. His rental car was parked in the one street of Lesser Hampton, which had only a few dozen residents.

I can't be sure it's them, Quigley thought. So many years spent searching, so many false leads. But I have to know. And the legend of the worm is just the sort of thing to draw the cult.

He drove out of the village and took the winding dirt track to Hampton Round. The earthwork grew more imposing as he neared it. The priest struggled to suppress a sense of looming evil about the mound.

It's just a great work of men long dead, he told himself. Deluded men, denied the true faith. If they worshiped a false god, so much the worse for them. If anyone seeks to revive such worship, I have a duty to denounce it.

The makeshift road petered out at a turning place where two cars were already parked. The whole area was overgrown with grass and wild flowers. Quigley saw that a winding track to Hampton Round had been made by people passing to and from the vehicles. It led to a rudimentary footbridge over the ditch, and then around the conical hill in a spiral path.

Sighing, Quigley set off to hike up the slope in the bright morning sun. By the time he reached the top, he was perspiring, jacket slung over his shoulder. Sure enough, when he breasted the rise at the top of the Mound, he saw a cluster of three tents. A half dozen people turned to look at him as he came into view. One he recognized at once.

Jonathan Clay, he thought. Older and plumper, limping a little, but unmistakably

the man. Found you at last!

"Father Quigley!" said Clay, recognizing the priest at the same moment. "This is an unexpected pleasure. What brings you to this obscure little corner of Sussex?"

"I think you know," replied Quigley, walking up to Clay and studying the renegade scientist. "It's a matter of simple right and wrong."

"Ah, an ethical question," said Clay. He gestured at a path that circled the summit of the Hampton Round. "You can see the English Channel from here, on a clear day like this."

Quigley fell into step beside Clay, glanced at the distant glimmer of the sea.

"I'm not here for the view, Jonathan, and I don't think you are, either," he said. "I want to know what happened to your student. Young Dermot Kavanagh. His family have a right to know the truth."

"The local police concluded that he must have fallen into the bog," Clay pointed out. "A tragic accident. What more can I say?"

Quigley grabbed Clay by the arm and spun him round.

"In the name of all that's decent, man," he shouted. "What did you do to the poor lad? What part did he play in your unholy antics? And what are you planning to do here?"

Clay looked down at the priest's hand gripping him until Quigley let go.

"I don't mean to be inhospitable, Patrick," he said, all trace of friendliness gone. "But we have the landowner's permission to be here, and you do not."

"And that's another thing," said Quigley, "how come you've suddenly got all these rich and influential friends? Why are you so hard to find? What are you all up to, here?"

"We are pursuing our path to spiritual enlightenment," said a new voice. "It may not be yours, priest. But the days when your sort could suppress other faiths are long gone."

A woman had walked up behind Quigley. She was tall, nearly six feet, and seemed vaguely familiar. Her expression, while not hostile, was calculating. The priest felt he was being sized up and found wanting.

"No need for unpleasantness, Olivia," said Clay, with a touch of nervousness. "Father Quigley just dropped in to say hello."

"I'm sure he has someplace he has to be," said Olivia. "Very soon."

"Olivia?" said Quigley, staring at the woman. "The little student? That's impossible. You haven't aged a day in over ten years, and you've grown eight inches. More!"

Olivia laughed. Clay looked uncomfortable.

"You should be careful, Father," said the woman. "Go around talking like that and people might get the impression you're a trifle unhinged."

"What happened to Dermot Kavanagh?" demanded Quigley.

"His physical body is no more, his soul is united with Ouroboros," replied Olivia, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"That's a lot of nonsense!" shouted the priest.

"Whereas believing a god impregnated a virgin is rational?" asked the woman. "You're on rather thin ice, Father."

"You can blaspheme all you like," said Quigley. "But I will go on until the truth is told about your nasty little cabal."

"You are trespassing," said Olivia, in a condescending tone. "We could call the police to have you removed. It would probably feature in the local paper. Would that go down well with your bishop?"

The priest retreated in confusion, stumbling down the hill and back to his car. He sat for nearly half an hour, pondering the impossibility of an adult growing in stature by such a huge amount.

No normal human being could do that, he thought. Something strange and blasphemous is at work here.

Quigley drove back to Lesser Hampton to make a few more discreet inquiries. He learned from the village's sole shopkeeper that the Ouroboros cult had reserved the site until the following night.

"Apparently," his informant told him, "it's about this thing called the solar system."

Puzzled, Quigley went back to his accommodation at the pub. It took him several hours to work out what the woman had meant. Inspiration came around midnight, when he took out his diary. Sure enough, the following day was marked 'Summer Solstice'

The shortest night of the year, he thought. A significant time for pagans. But what are they going to do?

Lying on his bed, still fully dressed, Quigley went through his sparse collection of material published by Ouroboros. There was nothing about Hampton Round, but then there were only general references to circular prehistoric monuments. He fell into a fitful doze that lasted until morning.

As he ate breakfast in the dining room of the Hampton Worm, Father Quigley saw a steady stream of cars pass through the village. They were heading for the great artificial hill. The barman, doubling as waiter in the morning, noticed too.

"Never seen such a turnout for Midsummer Eve," he remarked. "Quite the festival they're going to have."

A thought struck Quigley.

"Will any locals be going up to the Round this evening?" he asked.

The barman hesitated, then laughed.

"Nobody round here's got any time for that nonsense," he said cheerfully.

I saw fear, if only for a moment, thought Quigley. There is something about that earthwork, some lingering trace of pagan power. People here sense it, and know to avoid it on certain days.

Quigley spent much of the day trying to contact his bishop. He had made a nuisance of himself with the church authorities for years, claiming that a murderous pagan cult was rising. He knew that he was considered a joke by some, an embarrassment by others, but not a serious figure. After his fourth attempt to contact his superior was rebuffed by an underling, he gave up.

No help from on high, he thought. Or at least, not from any earthly power. No point in contacting the Sussex police. They'll file me under 'crackpot', just like they did in Ireland.

After lunch, Quigley went up to his room and checked what he thought of as his Holy War kit. It consisted of a bag containing bottles of holy water, a large crucifix, and an old prayer book containing the rite of exorcism.

"I am acting like a lunatic," he said to himself. "But when reason and

moderation fail, what else is there but madness of some sort? And someone should speak out against evil, at the very least. Perhaps even strike a blow for what is right.”

The long June day eventually drew to a close. The setting sun was casting a blood-red shadow on Hampton Mound when Quigley set out. He drove to the parking spot, noted more than a dozen cars, and then slung his bag over his shoulder and set out for the earthwork. As he neared the lower slope, he heard chanting from above.

The sunset, he thought. The dying of the Good Lord's daylight must mark the start of the ritual, the blasphemy.

By the time he had hiked to the top of the hill, the chanting had become louder. And there was something in the air. Quigley felt the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

A static charge, he told himself. Foreshadows an electrical storm. Summer lightning.

The priest did not quite believe his own rationalization, but as he reached the top, the sight drove all other thoughts from his mind.

A large fire burned in the middle of the round space, and dozens of people were circling it, hands joined. Looking more closely, Quigley realized that there were two circles. The outermost consisted of around two dozen people of both sexes, all well-dressed and seemingly prosperous. The inner circle was composed of eight or nine young women, and they were all naked. As the priest watched, one broke free of the inner circle and jumped over the fire to general cheers.

Sky-clad witches, thought Quigley. A stupid, pornographic fantasy of medieval paganism.

At first, the priest could not make out the words that were being chanted, but as he crept closer he picked out a few phrases. 'Ouroboros will rise again' was repeated, as was 'the Great Old One' and something like 'the closing of the circle'.

More mystical mumbo-jumbo, he thought. They can't even be bothered to chant it in Latin.

But as he edged closer to the group, he felt the electric charge in the air intensify. There was an undeniable power about the ceremony, no matter how much contempt Quigley felt about Clay's beliefs. And, if he was right about the Kavanagh boy, these people would even stoop to murder.

The priest set down his bag and took out a large crucifix and the prayer book. He had memorized the ceremony of exorcism, anticipating near-total darkness. But the last light of the sun was still bright enough to make out the words. He began to intone the ancient ritual as loudly as he could, and heads turned as people in the outer circle heard him.

“Most glorious Prince of the Heavenly Armies,” he chanted, “Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in our battle against principalities and powers, against the rulers of this world of darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places.”

“Stop him!” shouted a voice that might have been Clay's.

Continuing the rite, Quigley raised up the cross. He heard angry voices, and mocking laughter. A couple of men were coming towards him, their faces angry. The priest had a sudden conviction that he was going to be thrown off the mound.

They would call it an accident, he thought, as he continued to intone the rite.

But before the men could get to him, there was a sudden rumbling noise, so deep that it was felt rather than heard. The ground seemed to shift under Quigley and he almost fell. There were exclamations of surprise, tinged with fear, from the circle of dancers. The last of the sun dipped below the horizon.

"Do not be afraid!"

It was Olivia's voice, loud and confident. Quigley saw her standing close by the fire, arms upraised, the flickering light playing over her naked form.

"Continue the ritual!" she commanded. "The Great Old One is starting to awaken!"

Clay rushed up to her, seemed to protest, gesturing at Quigley.

"Ignore the holy man," she said, her voice dripping with scorn. "Let him chant his magic spell. He will bear witness to the rebirth of a deity."

The group began to circle the fire again, hesitantly at first, then with more confidence. The chant was resumed. Then another earth tremor shook the summit. A glow began to form above the top of Hampton Round. It was like a sinuous cloud of luminous vapor, weaving in the air above the cultists. It formed a spiral, began to descend towards the summit.

"See!" cried Olivia. "The Great Old One, the child of Lilith, manifests herself!"

Quigley raised his cross like a shield and continued the rite of exorcism.

"I adjure you, ancient serpent, by the judge of the living and the dead—"

If the words were having any effect on the phenomenon, it was not apparent. The glowing cloud encircled them, and started to become more clearly defined. Greenish scales flashed, a great triangular head formed, huge red eyes gazed balefully on the tiny creatures within the creature's coils.

"It's going to eat us!" someone screamed.

"No, no, don't panic! We are here to pay homage!" shouted Clay. But his voice betrayed his fear.

This is not what he had in mind, thought Quigley.

"Surrender to her, to ancient Lilith, the first true mother!" cried Olivia, her voice triumphant now. "Let her consume your souls!"

Quigley almost laughed at the effect the woman's words had on the cultists. He remembered a playful remark from one of his theology lecturers.

The last thing any pagan needs is for his god to actually turn up in person. It would be embarrassing, at the very least.

The priest reached down into his bag and took out the vials of holy water. Well aware that the gesture was a cliché, but lacking a better idea, he opened one small bottle and hurled it at the glowing serpent. There was a brief flash of greenish light as the liquid entered the nebulous being, and another subsonic roar shook the mound.

"That hurt didn't it, you big scaly bastard?" yelled Quigley. "Have another!"

He hurled two more vials at the serpent-being, then was shoved hard in the back and sprawled on the trodden grass. He twisted around to see Olivia standing over him, her face contorted with fury.

"She will consume your pious soul!"

In the uncertain light, Quigley could not be sure, but he thought he could see scales begin to form on Olivia's naked flesh. Her face seemed misshapen, her eyes

grown huge with vertical slits for pupils. One of the people from the outer circle barged into Olivia and she fell, writhing.

Her legs, they're merging together, thought the priest. *A monstrous transmutation.*

The worshipers, or most of them, were fleeing. Quigley saw the huge spectral head of the glowing monster descend upon one elderly man. The man cowered, holding up his hands as if to fend off the serpent. Quigley groped for his last vial, threw it, splashing the holy water over the hapless cultist. There was another, much louder roar, so intense that the priest clamped his hands over his ears. He was buffeted and kicked by running figures. In the unearthly light from above, he caught a glimpse of Olivia, her lower body now pure serpent, raising her arms in supplication to the glowing behemoth.

"Fill me with your power, Great One!" she cried, voice rising above the screams of panic and dismay.

The huge serpent seemed to hesitate, gazing down at the snake-woman. Quigley unsteadily got to his feet, brandishing his cross and babbling what parts of the exorcism rite he could still remember.

"Go back to hell!" he shouted. "Get ye gone, old deceiver!"

Another fleeing cultist collided with him and knocked the crucifix out of his hand. He scrambled for it, wincing as another shadowy figure stepped on his fingers. He felt bones crack, wept tears of pain and fear. Looking up, he saw the baleful gaze of the false god, its huge fanged jaw opening to engulf him. A terrible pain shot through him as he clasped the crucifix, held it close to his chest. Darkness overwhelmed him.

The next thing he saw was a pulsing light. He was lying on his back, floating through space. A young, beautiful face appeared directly above him. The face was framed by golden hair and illuminated by blue flashes. A cool hand rested briefly on his forehead, brushed back his hair.

"Don't be afraid," said the face. "You're quite safe."

Lightning, he thought. *An angel of the lord appearing midst heavenly fire.*

He heard a different voice saying, "This one's alive, but he's been through the wringer."

Quigley realized he was being carried toward an ambulance on a stretcher. A plastic mask was put over his nose and mouth. He turned his head to look sideways at the scene where the ambulance was parked. There were police cars, too, and officers were apparently taking statements. There was also a body covered in a sheet.

"Could have been worse," said the young paramedic he had taken for an angel. "Only one dead."

"Heart failure, I reckon," said the second voice from near Quigley's feet. "God knows what they were doing up there."

He does indeed, thought Quigley.

A familiar face appeared in the crowd by the vehicles. It was Jonathan Clay, talking to a police officer. A senior officer, judging by the man's uniform. As the paramedics carried Quigley past them, the two glanced at the priest then resumed their discussion.

"I'm sure we can keep this discreet," Clay was saying. "Nobody wants a

scandal.”

Yes, we bloody well do, thought Quigley. He tried to shout but the oxygen mask silenced him.

“How is he?” said another familiar voice.

Olivia was bending over the stretcher, feigning concern.

“He’ll be okay, but we’d better get him to the emergency unit,” said the angelic young woman.

Quigley began to shake his head and protest loudly as Olivia reached out and patted his shoulder. She acted the part of the concerned friend with conviction, but her smile did not reach her eyes.

“Hang in there, Patrick,” the big woman said, soothingly. Her tongue flickered along her lower lip. “You’re in good hands. And when you’re feeling better, we’ll all come and visit you. That’s a promise!”

After that, Quigley became so agitated that the paramedics had to sedate him.

Chapter 8

Westward.

It took a while for Marcus and Declan to calm Father Quigley down.

“I’m sorry,” said the priest. “I do get a bit worked up, you know? But it’s not surprising.”

He took Marcus by the arm with both hands and looked beseechingly into the Englishman’s face.

“None of them will help me,” said Quigley. “The church, the police, the government. I’ve written to them all, campaigned for years. The press is even worse, making me out to be a lunatic. Now I have to hide away here. I hear slithering in the night, stealthy noises in the loft, under the floorboards. I don’t even know if the sounds are real or in my head.”

Marcus made soothing noises. Healy, who had plenty of experience of fearful and disturbed individuals, intervened.

“Father,” he said, “I can assure you that Scotland Yard will not rest until this case is solved. It’s a murder inquiry, and I have no intention of letting it drop. You have my word.”

Quigley looked back and forth between the two men, then shook his head in resignation. He sank back into his chair, staring blankly at the tea service on the table before him.

“They are too powerful and there are too many of them,” he said. “You don’t know what it feels like. The sidelong glances, the snatches of conversations overheard. Going into a room and knowing that everyone else is in on the secret, the conspiracy. Facing a brick wall of lies and equivocation at every turn.”

“Father,” asked Marcus, “have you ever heard of a place called Wychmere?”

The priest did not look up when he replied, “Yes, it was one of the places I thought Clay might be interested in. He wasn’t there, of course.”

“I think,” said Healy, “we’ve taken up enough of your time, Father.”

They discussed Quigley's incredible story on the drive back to London.

"How much of that can we believe?" asked Healy. "I mean, I was okay with it until he started talking about giant glowing snakes. I tend to see these things in terms of official reports, and there's no category for that one. But drug-induced hallucinations, that's another matter."

"I've no idea how accurate his account is," admitted Marcus. "He's clearly been under a lot of pressure. But there is one rather mundane point that I find believable. Most cults have hierarchies, and it seems Ouroboros is no exception."

Healy frowned, then asked, "You mean the inner and outer circles, during the ritual? So the naked ones leaping over the fire are the upper echelon?"

"Exactly," said Marcus. "It seems the inner circle is exclusively female, which raises another question. Is Jonathan Clay really in charge?"

Healy drove on without speaking for a few minutes, then said, "All that stuff about the woman turning into a snake, and the monster appearing. Hallucinations, right? Symptoms of mental illness?"

"I sincerely hope so," replied Marcus. "Because if even part of it is true, we really are up against something very powerful, and very dangerous. Oh, and I did check all the press reports of what happened back in June, 2005. And you may be interested to know that, for the first time in recorded history, on that night there was a small earthquake in the county of Sussex."

"Quite a coincidence, if that's what it was," agreed Healy. "When we get back to London, I'm going to do some digging in our files from around the time. If anything significant was covered up, there'll be traces. I'm an old hand at finding them."

"I'd be careful if I were you," warned Marcus. "Matt Arnold was killed."

"By a snake-woman?" asked Healy, raising an eyebrow.

"By someone or something," returned Marcus. "And he was lured into a trap."

"Point taken," said the detective. "Seductive reptilian ladies to be avoided at all costs."

Brad hired a car and set out for Herefordshire determined to speak to Kelly face to face. As he drove westward from London, he ran possible scenarios in his mind. Over and over again, he came to the same basic questions.

What if she won't talk to me? What if she does and it turns into another blazing row?

Brad had never ventured far from London before on his visits to England. He had never had to, as he had only ever been concerned with work matters. Now he found himself on a 'motorway,' as the British called their freeways. It was an unusual road, curving in great arcs left and right through verdant countryside. At first, he found this irritating. Then he recalled someone telling him that motorways were deliberately made that way so drivers did not fall asleep at the wheel. He had to admit that it worked.

It was when he was about an hour into his journey that he noticed the silver Lexus.

Brad's job in the oil industry had taken him to some dangerous places. He had received a lot of training in security matters. Apart from the threat of terrorism, foreigners were sometimes ideal kidnap targets. So he had been taught to recognize when he was being followed. He was not sure when the suspect car had

first appeared, but he soon became suspicious of its pattern of behavior.

The silver Lexus was always two or three vehicles behind him, never right behind. He slowed down at one point to give following cars a reason to overtake. Two did, but the Lexus fell back and let a red Toyota tuck in behind Brad's rental BMW.

Could be a coincidence, he thought.

Brad decided to try another experiment. Every few miles there were 'motorway services,' essentially mini-malls with burger joints, coffee shops and the like. When the turnoff to the next one appeared, Brad took it, and waited to see if the Lexus followed. Sure enough, the silver car appeared in his rear-view mirror, still keeping its distance.

Okay guys, let's take a look at you.

Brad parked some distance from the entrance to the mini-mall and waited to see where the Lexus ended up. Sure enough, it slid into a parking slot some rows behind him. He waited, but no one got out of the silver car. In the April sunshine, he could not make out anything through the tinted window of the Lexus.

"Well, I could use a coffee," he said, and got out.

He did his best to saunter casually into the mall, wondering how fake he looked. He bought a coffee to go and a newspaper, then went back outside. There were plenty of people around, but none seemed to pay him any attention. He looked around for his car, and for a few moments struggled to find it among the dozens parked. That gave him an idea.

Yeah, he thought. Dumb tourist just forgot where he parked his rental car. Gosh, I wonder where it might be?

Brad put on what he hoped was a puzzled expression and set off across the car park towards the silver car. As he got within five yards of the Lexus, he could make out someone in the driver's seat.

Okay, genius, what's the plan now? Just saunter past it, I guess.

There was a sudden movement and the door of the silver car opened. A young woman got out, and for a second, Brad thought it was Kathy Hopkirk. The impression only lasted a second, as this young woman was healthier looking, less thin, and much more confident.

"Hi, Brad!" she said, smiling. "How's the coffee?"

"As bad as usual," he replied, for a moment off balance. "Why have you been following me?"

"Because you're headed in an interesting direction," said the woman, walking up to him. "I'm guessing Herefordshire?"

"I'm told it's a beautiful part of the world," said Brad. "And somebody I care about might be living there. Who are you, by the way?"

"Salome," she said, as if it were the most normal name in the world.

"As in the Bible?" he asked. "Girl who got a prophet's head cut off?"

She shrugged.

"I chose it when I converted. It's a way of saying, 'I'm starting a new life.'"

"Has Kelly changed her name?" he asked bluntly, hoping to catch her off balance.

"No," she said, "but she might do so soon. A lot of things are going to change. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll get myself a cup of tea and a jam scone."

She walked away without looking back.

As if she had just had a nice chat with a casual acquaintance, he thought. Whereas in fact she's informed me that they know exactly what I'm doing, and I don't scare them.

He went back to his car and set off immediately. After about twenty minutes, the silver Lexus appeared, just visible, two cars behind.

Declan Healy dropped off Marcus at his Camden apartment. The cult expert was taking out his door-key when Kathy Hopkirk appeared out of the bookshop doorway.

"I need help, Mister Valentine," she said, gripping his sleeve. "I need you to stop them getting into my head. I'll go barmy if this goes on."

Five minutes later, she was sprawled on the sofa in Marcus' living room. He listened while she explained the way her dreams had become a conduit into the not-quite-human mind of Olivia Ballard.

"You have to put me under again, break the link somehow," she insisted. "I can't stand it much longer."

Marcus noted her red-rimmed eyes, her face even paler and more gaunt than before.

She's been through the wringer, he thought. And I'm responsible as much as anyone.

"I'll do anything I can to help," he said, "but there are no guarantees."

Kathy leaned forward, resting her face on her hands.

"If this goes on I'll do myself in," she mumbled from behind a screen of mousy hair.

"Okay," said Marcus. "I will hypnotize you again and try to block Ouroboros in some way. Would you like a cup of tea first?"

Kathy laughed, looked up.

"And they say there are no more English gentlemen. How about some more of that Scotch?"

"Maybe afterwards," he said. "And I'll probably join you."

Marcus made the same preparations as before, dimming the light and setting up a microphone. Kathy's tiredness made it easier than the first time. Soon she was sitting, eyes closed, responding to his every suggestion.

"Where are you now?" he asked.

"The big house," she said. "The big house in my dreams."

Marcus was about to ask another question when Kathy went on, "I'm in the village, at the shop. No, in the pub. No, I'm on a farm, working."

Kathy continued to describe a series of different people engaged in different tasks; dozens in all. Puzzled, Marcus sat back, wondering how to proceed.

Is she just fantasizing? he wondered. Or could it be some kind of multiple personality disorder? Or something else?

"What are you doing at this moment, Kathy?"

"Pulling pints," she replied, her voice expressionless. "Mucking out the pigs. Watching telly. Lots of things."

"You can't do all those things at once," Marcus said, then bit his lip. The trite words had come out before he could stop himself.

"We're in lots of places at once," she said, and for the first time she smiled. "All through the village, all across the parish. We are the people now."

Baffled, Marcus changed tack.

"Are you all in Wychmere?"

She nodded, her face, once more, expressionless.

"Why are you there? What are you planning to do? What is going to happen?"

Kathy tilted her head to one side, and seemed to ponder.

"We're going to bring the Old One back," she said, hesitantly, as if trying to recall something only half-remembered. "The lines, the lines that feed the circle will awaken her. Then she will be made flesh again, and all will be filled with wonder and awe."

"What lines?" asked Marcus. "How will the Old One be made flesh?"

Kathy's face suddenly twisted in pain.

"No, she's found me again! I can feel her in my mind! She's too strong."

"Kathy," said Marcus firmly, "wake up now. Open your eyes."

The young woman's eyes opened. Marcus reeled back in his chair, putting up a hand in instinctive revulsion. Kathy's eyes were yellow, the pupils vertical slits.

"Your second warning, Marcus," she said, in a voice far louder and deeper than before. "There won't be a third."

The young woman's back arched, her eyes closed again. Marcus rushed over as Kathy's body went limp and she began to slide off the sofa. He tried to make her comfortable and checked that she had not swallowed her tongue, then got his phone. But before he could make the call, she was awake again. This time her eyes were normal.

"Hey, I told you no doctors, no police, none of that," she said muzzily, trying to stand up.

"You need the kind of help I can't give you," he argued, hesitating. "At least think about it."

"What happened?" she asked. "And where's that booze you promised?"

Rather than risk her running out on him, Marcus put the phone down, then got a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

"Come on, spill the beans," she said as he poured out the Scotch. "What did I say?"

Marcus replayed the digital recording of the session.

"Bloody hell," she said, after taking a gulp of Scotch. "I sound, well, bonkers."

Marcus realized she was putting a brave face on a disturbing experience.

"You did say one thing that might be very significant."

He stood up and, after searching for a few moments, took a book from an unsteady heap piled in the corner by his desk.

"I was re-reading this a while ago," said Marcus. He handed her a battered paperback with the title *The Old Straight Track*.

Kathy looked at the volume dubiously.

"A book about roads by a bloke called Watkins?"

"Not exactly," said Marcus. "It's a highly speculative work about prehistoric sites and the links between them. It dates from the 1920s. The author was condemned for his unscientific approach and is almost forgotten, but I've always felt he had a point."

"So what's it about, then?" she asked, flipping through the book, pausing to peer at illustrations.

"Ever heard of ley lines?" he asked. When Kathy shook her head he went on, "The idea is that mystical lines of paranormal energy run across country and converge at sacred sites."

"Like Stonehenge?" said Kathy.

"Among many other places, yes," explained Marcus. "Watkins thought our ancestors laid out a network across the whole island thousands of years ago. But traces were obscured when the old pagan religion died out."

"And Wychmere is part of this network?" she asked, flicking through the dog-eared pages.

"Not just part of it, but a very important focal point," said Marcus.

He turned to his computer and opened a file. It showed red lines spread out across England and Wales, intersecting at a few dozen places.

"Now, if we just look at the lines that intersect at Wychmere," said Marcus, clicking with the mouse.

Dozens of red lines radiated from a single point near the Welsh border.

"Okay, there are lots of these magic lines," said Kathy. "But what does it mean?" Marcus shrugged.

"Maybe nothing, but 'the lines that feed the circle' is what you said. It could mean that energy, in some form, is being channeled into Wychmere and that the cult intend to tap it somehow."

"And revive this Old One? How?"

Marcus shrugged.

"I think they've already failed once, bungled the job at Hampton Round in Sussex. Not surprising, as they're trying to revive a spiritual power that's been dormant for thousands of years."

"So they hope it'll be second time lucky?" Kathy asked. "And then what? I never did understand that bit. Maybe I'm not very bright."

"Perhaps they don't know themselves," suggested Marcus. "It could be that they're all being used, Clay, Olivia, all of the cult. While they think they're manipulating others."

Kathy stared into her whiskey glass.

"Don't want to sound selfish or anything," she said, "but I'd be happy to forget all this stuff and try to get on with my life. But that's not an option, is it? They've got their hooks into me. Or their fangs."

Marcus felt uncomfortable, unsure how to respond.

"I think that if we can thwart their plans," he said, "there's a good chance whatever influence they have over you could disappear."

"A good chance, eh? Not very reassuring," Kathy laughed. "Is this a clever way to get me to fight the good fight?"

"You're the only person who's been part of Ouroboros and escaped, went your own way," he pointed out. "That means you beat them. And I need all the help I can get, as at the moment I've no idea how to do it."

Kathy shrugged.

"Okay, Mister Valentine," she said, "I'll think about it. Anything that keeps those bastards from crawling around in my brain is worth a try."

Declan Healy returned to his office at New Scotland Yard to find a backlog of internal emails and plenty of paperwork. He struggled to focus on normal police bureaucracy for the rest of the afternoon as he pondered what he had heard from the old priest. Eventually, he opened his file on Deputy Commissioner Faversham and added a few thoughts.

'Ouroboros—cultists capable of hypnosis? Questionable, never known it was used by criminals. Drugs? Father Q.—not reliable, mental issues. But could be core of truth somewhere.'

Healy thought back to the house in Berkeley Square, and the mysterious Cleo. He had no resources to put any kind of surveillance on the house. He had no surname or other details to try and identify Cleo.

"Probably not her real name," he said to himself.

On impulse, he called the RSPCA to find that the animal welfare charity had recovered the hamsters from the premises.

"We're looking for people to take them as pets, might you be interested?" asked a bright young volunteer.

"No thanks, we have a cat," replied Healy. "But when your people were at the house, did they find anything else? Signs of anyone living there, for instance?"

"No," replied the charity worker, "they said the place was deserted. Though it was strange that someone had been keeping the hamsters fed and watered. They had fresh lettuce, apparently."

There was a knock at the office door and Healy quickly thanked the woman and hung up.

"Come in!" he shouted, and Knapton entered, closing the door behind him.

"Oh, it's you," said Healy., "We need a special knock if we're going to do this cloak and dagger stuff."

"Yes, boss," said Knapton. "I just wanted to tell you I've been reassigned for a couple of days."

"What?" exclaimed Healy. "Why?"

"Some sort of training course," explained Knapton. "It's called 'Improving Community Awareness,' whatever that means."

Healy sighed, and rolled his eyes in resignation.

"We've never been so highly trained. It's amazing that any criminals can avoid capture, really."

"Yes, boss," said Knapton. "So I won't be back until Monday."

"I'll struggle to survive without your help, Constable," said Healy. "But we all have our crosses to bear. Is it time for coffee yet?"

"Always time for coffee, boss," came the response, as Knapton left, grinning.

Healy was about to return to routine form-filling, when a thought struck him. He logged on to the police intranet and checked training courses for his section. Sure enough, Knapton's course was listed and everything seemed above board.

But still, thought Healy. Old Quigley said there was a conspiracy. Whispers in corridors and all that. What if this is part of it? Taking away my only ally?

"Got some cupcakes, boss," said Knapton, returning with a tray. "One of the

admin ladies has been baking again.”

“Great,” said Healy.

The detective picked up a cupcake, sniffed it. It was chocolate flavored, decorated with pink icing and multi-colored.

“Knapton,” he went on, “suppose this apparently innocent cupcake was spiked with a powerful hallucinogenic drug that would make me putty in the hands of an evil conspiracy?”

“Not very likely, sir,” replied Knapton. “I’ve had Mina’s cakes before, she’s quite traditional with ingredients.”

Healy took a bite of the cake, and paused for a few moments.

“You’re right,” he said, “no ill effects. The point is, once you get paranoid you can’t trust anyone or anything.”

“Very true, sir,” said Knapton, taking a bite of his own cake as he leaned on his superior’s desk. “Of course, just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.”

“Exactly. So when you go for this training course,” Healy said, “watch your back. And whatever you do, don’t end up alone with a naked woman.”

“I’ll do my level best,” replied Knapton, with a grin.

Chapter 9

Encounters and Deceptions.

Brad arrived in the city of Hereford late on Thursday afternoon. After navigating the typical maze of confusing streets, he found his hotel and checked in. For the last few miles, he had lost sight of the silver Lexus. But he felt sure that she, and her fellow cultists, knew where he was staying.

He was in the middle of unpacking when his phone rang. He glanced at the screen, then stared. It was apparently a call from Kelly’s number.

“Hello?” he said, not really believing his daughter wanted to speak to him.

“Dad?”

“Kelly? That really you?”

“Large as life. Look out the window.”

Not understanding, he looked out at the roof-scape of the ancient city. Then he looked down and he saw Kelly, across the street. She had a phone in one hand while she waved up at him with the other. She looked like her usual self. She was even smiling.

“I’m coming over, meet you in the lobby,” Kelly said, and ended the call.

Brad watched her looking for a gap in the traffic.

Don’t just stand there, you idiot, he thought.

Brad was halfway down the stairs when he wondered if it might be some sort of trick. He slowed his descent, trying to work out how Kelly’s presence could be used against him. Then he caught sight of her standing in the small lobby, talking to the receptionist.

“Here he is now,” she said, nodding towards Brad.

Kelly walked over to Brad and hugged him as if they had been parted for a few days. He clutched her more fiercely than he had intended.

"Hey," she said, "easy on the ribs."

"I just can't believe you're here!" Brad exclaimed.

"Where else would I be? You came all the way to England to see me, after all."

Kelly glanced behind her at the receptionist, who was scrutinizing her computer screen.

"There's a cute little park near the cathedral," she said. "Let's go and take a walk there; it's a nice day."

She took his hand and led him out into the busy street. Pointing at the cathedral, she started to tell him about its long history, chatting as if they'd never been estranged. They crossed a bridge over the river.

"This is the Bishop's Green," explained Kelly, as they entered a small park. "Once it was fenced off so only the bishop and his guests could use it."

"God, this is so normal," said Brad, half to himself.

"No, Dad," said Kelly, looking up at him. "It's not. It's really weird, and I wish it could be different. But I had to come here and deliver one simple message."

"And what message is that?" said Brad, suspecting he already knew.

"Leave me alone," she said. "I'm a big girl now and I have my own life. You don't like my new friends? Well, that's nothing new. But I'm happy, and you're not the boss of me, are you?"

Brad felt a familiar frustration, and tried to hold it down.

Don't get angry, that's the way to lose her.

"Okay," he said, "I can't tell you what to do. That's a fact. But I can't stop caring about you. I love you, and you worry about people you love."

"I know, Dad," said Kelly. "But ask yourself who's being conned here?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Your new friends," she said. "What do you really know about them?"

Brad was baffled for a moment, then retorted, "If you mean Marcus Valentine, he's an expert on cults like Ouroboros, so I don't imagine they like him very much. And Kathy ran away from them, so she's a traitor, right?"

Kelly shook her head.

"Dad, you're a rich man," she said. "Sure, you don't think of yourself as rich, but wealthy people rarely do. Has it ever occurred to you that when a rich man asks for help, fakers and con-artists start queuing around the block?"

"Marcus and Kathy are on the level," he declared. "Neither of them asked me for a single red cent."

"So far," replied Kelly. "I'm just saying, you've decided to believe a lot of stuff on zero evidence."

"I heard your voice come out of Kathy's mouth," Brad said. "Do you deny that happened?"

"No," she replied, "but doesn't that prove that Ouroboros taps into something real? That it's not the kind of cult Marcus claims?"

We're not going to agree, Brad thought. But how can she be so obtuse about this? Has she been brainwashed?

"So what's the solution?" he asked. "I just disappear out of your life?"

"It wouldn't be the first time," she shot back. Then, seeing his wounded expression, she went on, "Sorry, but you did kind of ask for that. Why not come and see for yourself? You trust your own judgment, right?"

"You want me to come and meet this Clay guy?" asked Brad. "Right now?"

"Anytime you like," said Kelly. "But why not now?"

"You do realize this sounds like a trap?" he asked.

"Why not meet on neutral ground?" returned Kelly. "At the village pub, for instance?"

Brad considered for a moment, then said, "Okay, but not straight away. I want some thinking time and I've got stuff to do. Make it tomorrow morning?"

"It's a date." Kelly surprised him by giving him a kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you around midday?"

Brad watched her walk out of the small park and cross the street, where she got into a silver Lexus. The car pulled out and he watched it weave its way into the small city's traffic until it disappeared from view. Then he took out his phone and called a number he had used several times that week.

"Yeah, it's me," he said. "I do need that stuff we talked about. Yes, carefully packaged. No, not a large amount. Standard seismic kit. No, not at the hotel. I'll meet you at this place, Bishop's Green. You won't have any trouble finding it, it's pretty central."

The conversation continued for another minute as Brad finalized some technical details and then authorized payment for the goods he needed. As he finished the call, he wondered what Kelly would make of his behavior.

She wouldn't be surprised by this at all, he thought. Maybe she does understand me all too well.

Sister Mary Assumpta brought Father Quigley his dinner at the usual time, and set the tray down outside the priest's door. She knocked. There was no response.

"I've got your evening meal, father," she said. "It's spaghetti Bolognese, your favorite!"

Again, Quigley did not reply. The nun sighed and was about to leave when she noticed that the door was not quite closed. She gave it a tentative push and it opened a few inches.

Not like the old fella, she thought, to fail to lock his door.

It suddenly occurred to her that the old man might be ill. Mary put her head through the door to see if Quigley was unconscious, or worse. But he was not there. She set off back to the main entrance of the retreat, only to meet another nun hurrying toward her.

"Sister Mary," said the breathless novice. "Somebody's been in the office and taken all the petty cash!"

"Lord, bless us and save us. The daft old bugger's only gone and run away!" exclaimed Mary. "Did that policeman leave his card?"

On Thursday afternoon, Declan Healy started to do some more digging on the Ouroboros affair. He had already identified some odd patterns of behavior among influential people linked to Deputy Commissioner Faversham. There was

nothing especially damning about the data, not yet. But Healy, who never ignored his hunches, felt sure there was a hidden network. Perhaps a conspiracy reaching to the very top of the British establishment, and beyond.

Technically, he told himself, I'm still looking into Matt Arnold's death. Just not in the way Faversham wants me to.

He would have continued to build his file on Ouroboros, but a case he had been assigned a few months earlier intervened. A low-level drug dealer and pimp called Wayne Dotrice had knifed a social worker, then vanished. The suspect had been carefully avoiding his usual haunts and the case seemed to be going nowhere. But this morning, a report reached Healy that Dotrice was hiding in an old warehouse by the Thames. Wishing he could call on Knapton, Healy set off for London's East End to join up with two local beat officers, Higgins and Clark.

The red brick warehouse at Jamaica Wharf proved to be a huge building that had been almost converted into yuppie apartments before the money ran out. There were signs of vandalism, and it was an obvious place to hide out.

"A big place for just three of us to search," mused Healy. "How reliable is your informer, Constable?"

Clark, the older of the two uniforms, shrugged.

"Not too bad, but all they told me was that a nasty piece of work was living here, and he answers your description of Dotrice."

"Okay," said Healy. "It's a big place to search, just the three of us. Plenty of escape routes, probably. But we can give it a try."

Inside the Jamaica Wharf building was a labyrinth of hanging plastic sheeting and incomplete building work.

"Tell you what," said Higgins, "let's split up. We know Dotrice is a spineless toe-rag, and we've got our tasers."

"Yeah," added Clark, "it looks like a bust, anyway, and we don't want to waste hours on this."

Reluctantly, Healy agreed. He was the outsider, and did not want to appear timid in front of junior officers. While the two uniforms went upstairs, he began to work his way through the unfinished apartments on the ground floor. There was, he soon realized, no sign that anyone had been living there.

Clark's probably right, he thought. If Dotrice was ever here, he's long gone now.

Then he saw something that puzzled him. The bare floorboards were covered with a layer of plaster dust, and in it, he saw footprints. Healy put his own foot next to one and judged that it belonged to a flat-soled shoe worn by a woman or a smallish man. He followed them through a series of corridors, towards the back of the building. Then the prints seemed to stop in an area where the dust had been swept away.

This feels wrong, thought Healy. The old Spider-sense is tingling.

He spoke into his radio, asking Clark and Higgins if they had found anything upstairs. There was no reply. He heard stealthy movement, a plastic sheet being lifted. Before he could turn around, his right arm was gripped and twisted behind his back. Another arm locked across his windpipe, pulling his head back. His radio clattered onto the floor.

"We meet again," said Cleo, from behind him. "And this time, we won't be interrupted."

Healy felt her breath on his neck. He groped for his taser with his free hand as the woman nuzzled at his neck in a disturbing parody of affection. He felt a slight scratch as he found his weapon and jabbed with it blindly while pushing the button. The distinctive buzzing of the taser was almost drowned by the woman's shriek. Her hold relaxed and he broke free.

"You bastard!" she shouted, her face contorted with anger.

Fully clothed this time, he thought. And not nearly so friendly.

"Don't try anything," he warned, brandishing the taser. "You are under arrest. Turn around so I can put the cuffs on. Don't make this difficult."

Cleo lunged at him, trying to knock the taser out of his hand. She was fast, but he managed to jump back out of her grasp and then jabbed the weapon into her forearm. She screamed in rage, and Healy was taken off guard by the two prominent fangs in her upper jaw.

Plastic teeth? She must be barmy!

The tall woman spat at him, not emitting a gob of spittle, but two jets of dark fluid. Startled, Healy twisted his head, crouched, and put an arm across his face. A few droplets of the liquid hit bare skin on his hand and face and he felt a sharp, stinging sensation. Cleo sprang forward and grabbed his wrist. They struggled for the taser, and Healy felt himself losing. He tried to break free but lost his footing on some of the ubiquitous plastic sheeting and fell backwards.

The accident was a stroke of luck. Taken off balance, the woman hit her head on the door jamb. Healy recovered first and handcuffed the moaning Cleo just as Higgins and Clark appeared at the other end of the corridor.

"Did you get him?" shouted Clark.

"Yeah, only the him is a her," replied Healy. "She must have followed me here."

He expected questions from the uniforms but they said nothing as they advanced towards him.

Hang on, Healy thought. Why would she follow me and then attack me with two other coppers nearby?

He switched the taser to his left hand, took out his telescopic baton with his right.

"Don't come any closer, lads," he said to Higgins and Clark. "As you can see, your friend here didn't get me. Now suppose you tell me what this is about."

"Let me go!" shouted Cleo. Healy glanced around, saw her trying to struggle to her feet. When he looked back, he saw his brief moment of inattention had let Clark and Higgins split up. They had been shoulder to shoulder, now they were about three feet apart, and just out of reach of Healy's baton.

"Let's be reasonable, now," said Higgins.

"That's how we talk to criminals, mate," responded Healy, feinting with the baton. Higgins flinched. Predictably, Clark made a move, and Healy's taser connected with the man's overhanging beer gut. Clark crumpled, swearing.

"I thought you were the stupid one," said Healy, turning to hit the off-balance Higgins on the elbow. "I'm told that really hurts."

Healy secured both officers with their own handcuffs and felt pretty good about it.

"Came for one scumbag, got three," he said, bending over Clark. "Why did you do it? Faversham's orders? Part of his little conspiracy, are you?"

"Piss off," snarled Clark. "You've no idea how high this goes, you wanker."

"Tell me," said Healy, picking up his radio, "just how high? Because when I call this one in, a lot of people will be going down."

Healy paused, unsure exactly how to call in the arrest of two colleagues. He decided to play it straight and made a straightforward request for assistance. He was told to wait five to ten minutes for a unit to respond.

"Right," he said, squatting beside Higgins. "Let's try you. Is it money, sex, drugs? Do they have something on you?"

Higgins said nothing, did not even meet Healy's eye. Instead, he stared past Healy, eyes wide.

"You'll find out," whispered Higgins. "It's a great privilege. Don't struggle."

Suspecting a trick, Healy got up and stepped away from the two men. Then he heard an odd groaning noise behind him. It was coupled with a series of sharp cracking sounds, like someone snapping their fingers. Healy took a quick glance over his shoulder, then spun round, baton raised. The handcuffs were lying on the floor, still locked. The cuffs lay beside a small heap of clothes and a pair of shoes. The last vestiges of a woman's face disappeared as Healy looked on, immobilized by shock.

A huge golden-brown serpent, jaws agape, reared up until its head was in level with Healy's face. He started to back off, forgetting the bound men directly behind him. He tripped over Higgins and sprawled on the dusty floor just as the creature made its move. The scaly body landed on top of him, and its nightmare head spat black venom into his eyes, blinding him. Screaming in pain and fear, Healy jabbed the taser into the scaly flank of the monster.

Marcus Valentine and Kathy Hopkirk set out from London after lunch on Thursday. It had not taken either of them much time to pack. Marcus believed in traveling light, and all Kathy's possessions amounted to two bagfuls.

"You got a plan?" asked Kathy.

Marcus glanced over at the pale young woman. They had just left London's sprawling outer suburbs and were passing into rich farmland. Kathy was staring out at black-and-white dairy cattle. He wondered if she'd ever been out of the city before in her young life.

"I've got some ideas," he said. "All of them a bit vague. For a start, Clay's book offers a few clues."

"About what?" she asked.

"I think about Clay's conversion, whatever it was, took place when he was halfway through writing his book," Marcus explained. "He had obviously prepared a lot of scholarly notes and other material, but had only actually written the first few chapters. That's why it begins in such a reasonable tone."

"And then it goes a bit bonkers in the middle?" she suggested.

"Pretty much," laughed Marcus. "Towards the end of the book, he becomes obsessed with the idea of traditional festivals as the half-remembered rituals of Ouroboros. So to him, May Day, which is coming up, would qualify."

"But people have been doing these things for hundreds of years," Kathy objected. "May Day, Halloween, loads of others. None of them have raised up some ancient god. Not as far as I know, anyway."

"True," said Marcus, "but Clay's argument is that the rituals have degenerated. People don't focus on Ouroboros. Invoke the name and the concept. If they did, according to Clay, there's a chance the summoning would work."

"So why did it go wrong back in Sussex?" she asked. "Like that priest told you." Marcus shrugged.

"Clay and his acolytes might have chosen the wrong place, or the wrong time. They went for Midsummer's Eve, the solstice. But if the core of the Ouroboros cult is a belief in renewal and regeneration, a spring festival might make more sense."

Kathy fell silent for a minute or so, then said, "So how do you stop them from doing this?"

"There are a few possibilities," said Marcus. "One is simply to get the police involved and say that an illegal gathering is taking place. I could throw in a claim that the cultists are vandalizing a historic site, the stone circle."

"You don't sound very sure," she said. "Will that copper you know help out?"

"Unfortunately, Detective Sergeant Healy seems to be incommunicado," he replied. Then, seeing her puzzlement, he added, "He's not answering his phone at the moment."

Kathy snorted. "Police. When you actually need 'em they're never around."

"As I said, there are other possibilities," Marcus pointed out. "Such as putting a spanner in the works during the actual ceremony."

"Wouldn't that just lead to a big fight? With us badly outnumbered?"

"Let's hope we can avoid any violence," he said.

Again, Kathy snorted.

"You're an optimist."

"From everything you've told me," Marcus went on, "there may be some kind of gestalt entity involved here."

"Try me in English, professor?" she said, irritably.

"*Gestalt* a German term for a kind of linked consciousness," he explained. "Your and Brad's dreams suggest some kind of telepathic linkage between cultists. It could be that one strong personality is dominating all the others in this way."

"You mean Olivia?" she asked.

Marcus made a noncommittal sound.

"It could be her," he conceded, "or it could be something working through her; Ouroboros itself, a being that is both one and many."

Kathy looked baffled.

"It's just a theory, of course," added Marcus.

Kathy did not reply, and they drove on in without speaking for half an hour. Then she said, "I can feel them."

"The cult? You sense their presence?" asked Marcus.

"Ahead of us, still some way off," she explained. "It's the same feeling I get in my nightmares. Being part of somebody else's mind, one piece in this bigger thing."

"If it gets unbearable, let me know and we'll stop. I can find you a hotel while I go on."

She looked at him, her eyes narrowed with anger.

"For a clever man, you can be a really stupid bastard," she said. "Don't you get it? I want to do them some damage. I want to get back at them! I can't do that in some random motel room."

Marcus struggled to think of something to say.

"I hate them so much," Kathy went on. "Don't you see? The one time in my life I was part of something, the only time I've ever belonged. And they rejected me. I wasn't good enough, I was a dirty junkie, a streetwalker. Just like all the others, all the people who've treated me like shit!

Marcus started to protest but she cut him off.

"Yeah, I know they're probably killers and bonkers with it, but some of us can't be all cool and rational like you."

She was crying now, with anger and frustration. Marcus reached into the glove-box and handed her some tissues.

"Thanks," she said, after blowing her nose. "I needed that. Got to let it out sometimes. And I'm sorry I called you a stupid bastard. You're not. Well, not all the time."

"That's all right," he said. "I should have realized. Okay, we'll continue on to Hereford and see how you feel then."

Kathy did not reply, and he glanced over to see her close her eyes. Her brow was furrowed with concentration. Perhaps, also, with pain.

Chapter 10

Plans and Observations.

Brad met up with Marcus and Kathy for dinner that evening. He brought them up to speed about his encounter with Kelly.

"Well, at least you know she's in good health," said Marcus. "But I smell a trap."

"Could they grab me in broad daylight?" asked Brad. "We'll be in a public place."

Marcus agreed that it was unlikely.

"Besides," he added, "Clay might let something slip about their May Day games."

Brad noticed that, while Marcus was his usual buoyant self, Kathy seemed even more withdrawn and unhappy than before. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and her hands shook as she handled her cutlery. She saw his concern and explained that getting closer to the cultists was affecting her mind.

"You mean you can see into their minds?" Brad asked.

Kathy shook her head.

"It's not like that, not when I'm awake. It's like hearing somebody whispering all the time, only with thoughts instead of sounds."

"Any particular thoughts?" asked Marcus. "Any clue what they're planning?"

Kathy frowned, seemed to concentrate.

"It's all about May Day and the ring of stones," she said slowly. "I keep getting images of snakes, circles. There is something else, more of a flavor than a thought. An emotion, maybe. Hard to put it into words."

"Try," said Marcus, reaching out to put his hand on hers. "If you can."

Kathy closed her eyes, oblivious to stares from diners at nearby tables. She started to breathe heavily, rocking back and forth.

"Wake her up, she's going under!" said Brad urgently.

But before the men could react, Kathy opened her eyes and gave a crooked smile.

"No need to slap me, guys," she said. "But you won't like this."

She looked over at Brad.

"Especially you. This image, or feeling, I keep receiving. The nearest I can get to it in words is 'sacrifice.'"

Brad and Marcus stared at her.

"You're sure about this?" asked Brad.

Kathy nodded.

"It's all bound up with the idea of purity, loss, rebirth. But sacrifice is in there, somewhere."

"Perhaps it's a symbolic sacrifice," suggested Marcus.

"How likely is that?" asked Brad.

The Englishman pondered for a moment, then said, "It's a fact that lambs used to be sacrificed for May Day. And some think that it went further than that in ancient times."

"That's something you can tell the cops, surely?" asked Brad.

"I can try," agreed Marcus. "Unfortunately, Healy has gone quiet, I can't reach him at all. He's probably too busy with other matters, so I'll try the local police force. But they might just file me under 'crank.' It's happened before."

"I've been studying maps of this stone circle, the Dancers," said Brad. "And these so-called ley-lines. It's a bit like an electrical circuit, isn't it?"

Marcus looked surprised.

"I suppose so," he conceded. "But I don't see how that helps."

"Just that," said Brad, "whatever they're planning relies on a continuous flow of some sort of earth-energy?"

"Yes," said Marcus, "the stone circle collects and focuses it, that's the theory. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, just spit-balling," replied Brad. "Trying to get things clear in my mind."

Brad turned to Kathy.

"The million dollar question," he said. "Do you really believe these people turn themselves into snakes or whatever? Or do they just believe they're shapeshifters?"

Kathy gazed levelly back across the table.

"They can do it. I'm sure. And I don't think that's all they can do. I can't put it into words, but in my gut, I just know that what they're planning at Wychmere is far stranger, and far more dangerous."

That night, Brad's dream of Kelly was very different to the ones that had haunted him for months.

He found himself lying in a forest glade, with small birds hopping close by. A gentle breeze rustled the wild grass and ferns, swayed the leaves of ancient oaks. It was an idyllic scene that reminded him of books he had read as a child, stories that always ended with the hero safe and sound after his adventures.

"Come on, Dad," said Kelly, kneeling beside him. She was wearing a white robe, sandals, with flowers in her hair. "Get up, sleepyhead!"

Brad stood up and let his daughter lead him through the forest, then out onto a sunlit plain. Rolling grasslands stretched in front of them, and a small village nestled by a stream. The village was inside a stone circle, and he felt sure that these were the Dancers of Wychmere.

"Come on, we'll be late!" urged Kelly, tugging at his hand. They set off towards the village. The scene had a timeless quality. As they got closer, he noticed that the fields were being worked not with machines, but by men, women, and children in homespun clothes. They came to a road that was not a tarmac highway but a cart track. The village, he could see now, consisted of white, half-timbered cottages. There was no sign of telephone poles, satellite dishes, or any modern technology.

"So," he said, "this is what happens after the really big god-snake smashes up the old world order? The survivors grow organic kale and sing folk songs by candlelight?"

"Isn't it peaceful?" said Kelly. "So beautiful and serene."

"A Golden Age," Brad said, "so long as you don't start thinking about stuff like clean water, antibiotics, and criminals appearing over the horizon. Oh, and high infant mortality, that'll help keep the population down."

"You're so cynical, Dad. Has it ever occurred to you that people can live simply, and in harmony with nature? That there needn't be criminals if everyone learns to just get along? And that most of the illnesses we suffer from are down to a crazy, artificial lifestyle?"

Brad looked at her, baffled by her obvious sincerity.

"There was a time you'd have called all this cheesy and boring," he said. "This isn't you, Kelly. You like traveling, loud music, a bit of booze, and quite a bit of other stuff I shouldn't know about. You'd go crazy living as some kind of hippie peasant in the middle of nowhere."

"Oh, Dad," said Kelly, shaking her head, "you don't really know me at all. But that can change. Now, though, let's listen in on your new friends."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Kelly's reply was to put a finger to her lips and lead him to the nearest cottage. The window was shuttered but through the slats, Brad could see into Marcus Valentine's living room. The Englishman was sitting opposite Kathy Hopkirk. And another figure had their back to Brad.

That's me, he thought. This is the hypnotism session.

He heard Marcus begin the process, setting Kathy at ease and then putting her under. But then things departed from Brad's memory. Instead of questioning the girl, Marcus said, "Okay, you can stop pretending."

"Is he under?" asked Kathy, looking over at Brad on the couch.

"Oh yes, he's quite suggestible," replied Marcus. "Anything I tell him now he'll believe. But we'd better not go too far. Just soften him up a bit, so he'll follow my advice."

Kathy stood up, walked over to Brad on the couch.

"What do you reckon he's worth?" she asked.

"He might be good for a few hundred thousand," said Marcus, smiling. "But let's not be greedy. You've got to give the fish a bit of play on the line before reeling him in."

Brad pulled away from the shuttered window.

"That didn't happen!" he protested angrily. "It's just another bullshit mind trick!"

"How do you know?" asked Kelly. "You think I'm being manipulated, yes? Maybe it's you who's the real victim here."

"That's a load of crap!" Brad said. "You're being manipulated by a death cult, don't you realize that? Haven't they told you about the sacrifice?"

Again, she shook her head pityingly.

"These things are symbolic, Dad," she said. "But even if they weren't, I'd give my life to make a better world. Wouldn't you?"

Brad could not answer, and as he struggled to find the right reply, the sky darkened.

"Or would you like to stick with your world? Because we can do that?" said Kelly.

The spring sunshine was blotted out by clouds. The rolling rural landscape faded to be replaced by a gray wilderness, a dust-bowl. On the horizon, a line of black oil derricks topped by gas flares belched smoke. The quaint village and cultivated fields were gone, replaced by the ruins of a nameless city, a concrete hell of ruined and damaged buildings. People clad in ragged clothes picked their way through rubble while camouflage-clad men with assault rifles stood watch over them.

"What is this?" Brad demanded.

"This is the real great little world you want to keep," his daughter replied. "The world made by the practical men, businessmen, people like you. Driven by oil, and money, fear, and death."

As if on cue, sirens wailed and a squadron of military jets screamed over the horizon. Brad ducked instinctively as explosions erupted around them. Gunfire blazed across the leaden sky. Brad saw a screaming woman clutching a child to her breast as a wall collapsed onto them. All around, people ran for cover as a firestorm engulfed the area. Brad could almost feel the heat from the flames.

"Yeah, Dad," said Kelly, looking at the vista of misery and devastation, "we can just carry on pretending it's all great. Or we can do something about it. However crazy it might sound, Ouroboros is all about doing that something."

"This is horrific, but it can't ever be stopped, not really," he insisted. "You can't change human nature!"

Kelly looked him in the eye, unblinking.

"Wrong. Because that's exactly what we aim to do."

Brad woke in the dawn light, still tasting the smoke and dust of the bombed-out city.

I'm sure you're wrong, Kelly, he thought. But God, I never could tell you that and not feel like a total asshole.

It was just before six. Brad got up and splashed some water on his face, then got dressed. He would just have time for breakfast. He had an appointment with a courier at Bishop's Green at seven sharp. The kind of person Brad was dealing with did not like to be kept waiting.

After the deal was concluded, Brad put the package into the trunk of his car. Then he checked in with Marcus and explained that he was going to Wychmere to

meet Clay. Brad felt a slight pang of guilt at not sharing everything he knew with the Englishman, but reasoned that the fewer people knew his plans, the better.

Brad's car crested the gentle rise to the east of the village. Though he had seen pictures of Wychmere online, he was still impressed by the ancient monument. The ring of thirteen stones known as the Dancers was about half a mile across, and surrounded by a large ditch about six feet wide and three feet deep. The village was small, picturesque, and sleepy in the warm April sunshine.

The stones give it a weird, timeless vibe, he thought. But it looks harmless enough.

The neat road passed over the ditch. Brad stopped his car and got out to walk over to one of the stones. It was a granite slab, about eight feet high. He put out a hand and after briefly hesitating, put his palm onto the moss-covered stone.

Nothing, he thought. No weird jolt of energy, no visions of prehistoric times. Just a big lump of rock somebody brought here thousands of years ago.

Then his hand encountered something different to the roughness of un-worked stone. He stooped to look more closely at the granite. It was barely perceptible to the eye, but his fingertips traced out a circular pattern.

The Ouroboros. Must have cut it pretty deep for it to still be apparent today. Or they renew the design every few centuries.

Brad continued to walk around the stone, examining every square inch of rock. He found signs of weathering, some graffiti scratched in decades or centuries earlier. He began to wonder if he would have to move on to the next stone, and how much unwanted attention that might bring. But then he found what he was looking for.

Just above ground level, he thought, and nice and deep. I could seal it up with turf and grass easily enough. Nobody would notice if they didn't know what they were looking for.

Satisfied with his examination, Brad went back to his car and drove into Wychmere. The pub was not hard to find. The sign of the George and Dragon puzzled him, as it showed a knight on horseback slaying what was essentially a winged serpent. St. George was putting his lance through the dragon's neck. The creature was vainly trying to bite through the warrior's shield, which was decorated with a red cross.

As Brad gazed up at the sign, someone spoke behind him.

"It signifies the triumph of the new religion over the old."

A bald man, dressed in a sober business suit, walked over from the pub doorway. Brad recognized the face from old photos of Jonathan Clay, though the archaeologist had clearly put on some weight and lost what little hair he had had in the Nineties. Brad noticed the plump little man was limping slightly. It made Clay seem even more inoffensive, vulnerable. Hardly a conventional image of a cult leader.

"So Christianity defeated the serpent?" asked Brad. "And now you're planning a rematch?"

Clay smiled benignly.

"Christianity is all about progress from A to Z, from original sin to judgment day and the end of the world," he said. "It does not take cycles of recurrence into

account. We see things differently.”

“I know a bit about your beliefs,” Brad cut in. “I agreed to talk to you. But you can't convert me, so don't bother trying.”

“Walk with me a ways,” said Clay. “Up this road.”

Brad fell in beside the bald man. As they walked through the village, people smiled and greeted Clay as if he were an old friend. Clay, for his part, returned their hellos and engaged in a little village gossip. One theme kept recurring. Saturday was May Day, and a big celebration was being planned. Clay and his cultists seemed to be central to the big event.

“They seem to have taken you to their hearts,” said Brad, sourly. “How did you do it?”

“No doubt Mister Valentine would say we brainwashed them all, very rapidly,” smiled Clay. “An entire English village. Not very likely, is it?”

Brad did not reply.

He's right, he thought. It's a crazy notion, like something out of a comic strip. But how else could the cult suddenly be so popular round here?

“What we really did,” Clay went on, “was reveal the truth about the May Day ceremony these people have performed for centuries. Their focus on the stones, the spring ritual of rebirth. They were in possession of half the truth. We brought the other half, the truth about the deity that lies sleeping here. And in many similar places.”

“So what is Ouroboros, really?” demanded Brad. “An ancient god, or goddess? Some kind of primal force out of the earth? A kind of ancestral memory lurking in the subconscious?”

“Well done!” said Clay, without apparent sarcasm. “You've done some research. Ouroboros is all those things and more. Ouroboros is unity, a sense of oneness that we lost long ago and constantly seek to rediscover. And the day after tomorrow, with luck, we will.”

By now, they had reached their destination. Clay gestured at two stones standing very close together. Both had been crudely fashioned into points.

“These are sometimes called the Fangs,” said Clay. “For obvious reasons. Look more closely.”

Brad examined the stones. On one, he noticed the circular Ouroboros symbol of the snake biting its tail. On the other, the snake was contorted into a figure eight.

“How old are these carvings?” he asked.

“About five thousand years, according to most authorities,” replied Clay. “They are the oldest religious images in the British Isles.”

Brad ran his fingers over the carvings. Again, he got no sense of any unusual power.

Just two big old rocks, he thought.

“You are apparently immune to their influence,” said Clay, as if reading Brad's mind. “Most people get a jolt of spiritual energy from the Dancers.”

“Why call them the Dancers?” asked Brad. “Seems to me thirteen lumps of rock couldn't be more static.”

Clay smiled, and gestured at the broad arc of the stone circle.

“The stones have attracted all sorts of nicknames down the centuries, and they seem rather fanciful. The one at the entrance to the village, for instance, is the

Warden. We have just passed Mother Grindle, said to resemble a stooped old lady. But to answer your question, some say pagan dancers were struck by the wrath of God and turned to stone," he explained. "Or is possible that a ritual dance was held here in prehistoric times."

"And you're going to recreate that dance?" asked Brad. "With Kelly playing the leading role?"

Clay wagged his finger in reproof.

"That would be telling," he said. "You'll have to wait and see."

"I won't let you put her at risk," warned Brad, moving closer to the plump little man. "Tell me what you're planning. Is it as risky as the stunt you pulled at Hampton Round?"

The barb struck home. Clay looked confused, as if struggling to remember something.

"No," he said, hesitantly, "nothing happened at Hampton Round."

"Someone died!" insisted Brad. "A priest was driven insane. There was an actual earthquake. That's not nothing!"

Clay put a hand to his forehead.

"No, nothing really happened," he said, his eyes oddly unfocused. "You're mistaken. It was a non-event. We simply timed it wrong. There was a silly accident, not my fault."

"That's enough. It's time for Jonathan to come home."

Brad turned to see a tall woman clad in black appear between the Fangs.

"You must be Olivia," he said. "Keeping an eye on the Herald of Ouroboros? Afraid he'll say the wrong thing?"

The woman ignored Brad, striding past him to take Clay by one arm. None too gently, she began to steer him back towards the village.

"Are you the high priestess?" Brad shouted after them. "The real leader of this crazy outfit?"

Olivia did not pause, but called back over her shoulder.

"There are no leaders, Mister Steiger. There will be no need for leaders ever again, when all are followers."

Brad could think of no answer to that. He watched the tall woman guide Clay to a car that then drove off.

Presumably to Garlock House, he thought. Where Kelly is either a captive, in some sense, or a willing resident.

Brad walked back to the center of the village and went into the pub. It was a small, snug place, evidently a centuries-old tavern. A sign by the door read 'Original Coaching Inn'. A sprinkling of patrons sat around on benches. A TV screen above the bar was showing a soccer match with the sound set low.

"What can I get you, sir?" said a friendly-looking barman.

Brad explained that he was driving and ordered a diet soda.

"Very sensible, sir," replied the barman, fetching a glass. "Are you here for the ceremony?"

"May Day, you mean?" asked Brad.

"Of course!" The barman grinned. "Our only claim to fame, apart from the Dancers. Looks like fine weather for May Day, too."

"So what happens on this big occasion, anyway?" asked Brad as he paid for his

soda.

"Well, there's a parade," said the barman. "A bit of a sing song, with the parish brass band, and the May Queen is crowned."

"All to welcome in the spring?"

For a moment, the barman looked hesitant.

"Yes," he said, "it's a time of renewal. Everybody knows that."

"And Mister Clay and his friends, they're taking part?" asked Brad.

"Oh yes, they've been helping prepare things," agreed the man.

"Odd, isn't it, for so many outsiders to just roll up and take over a local event?"

The barman's broad smile faded, a hint of puzzlement crossed his face.

"No, sir, quite the opposite. We're all one now, after all. I thought everyone knew that."

Brad felt a slight but definite change in the atmosphere. He noticed that some of the other drinkers were no longer looking at the soccer match, but at him. It reminded him of a few similar occasions in less law-abiding countries. He downed his soda and left.

The time to get out of Dodge, he mused, is well before anyone actually tells you to get out of Dodge.

As Brad drove out of Wychmere, he looked at the village receding in his rear-view mirror. The old cottages still looked quaint and inviting. But now the dark stones loomed over the whitewashed homes like malign sentinels.

Brad took careful note of landmarks along the way, and found a good place where he could park his car that night. He concluded that he would have to approach Wychmere without headlights to ensure he was not seen. It would be touch-and-go.

But I need insurance, he thought. Never go into a hazardous situation without a Plan B.

Chapter 11

Flesh and Stone.

Brad got back to the hotel to find Marcus and Kathy waiting for him. The Englishman had disappointing news.

"The local police were very skeptical, bordering on derisive," Marcus admitted. "It doesn't help that I couldn't really spell out what the danger to the public was."

"Did you tell them Kelly was listed as a missing person by Scotland Yard?" asked Brad.

"She isn't," said Marcus, bluntly. "It seems Detective Sergeant Healy is, to use the American phrase, full of it."

"You can never trust the filth," said Kathy.

"Maybe they got to him," pointed out Brad.

"Maybe," admitted Marcus, "but I had to think fast. So I suggested that the cultists might damage the stones in their ritual. A bit feeble, I know, but it might prompt them to send a car on Saturday morning. These ancient monuments have

a complex legal status, it's quite fascinating.”

Brad quickly changed the subject and told them about his encounter with Clay, Olivia, and the villagers.

“Sounds like they've got the place sewn up,” commented Kathy. She raised a hand to the faded bite marks near her throat. “Small place like that, wouldn't be too difficult.”

“But they can't hold an entire village in thrall indefinitely!” protested Marcus. “Outsiders would notice, for a start.”

“They only need to be in control for a few days,” Brad pointed out. “They probably left the takeover as late as possible.”

Marcus thought that over.

“It would make sense to involve the villagers if they want to pervert the familiar May Day ritual to their ends. If only we knew exactly what they're planning.”

“Sacrifice,” said Brad. “That's all I need to know. If it's symbolic, fine. But if not, we need to be ready to grab Kelly and get her out of there. I know it's a rough and ready approach, but at least it's simple.”

“I'm with you, of course,” declared Marcus. “For what it's worth.”

Yeah, you're on the level, but you're no action hero, Brad thought. *Which brings me to the tricky part.*

“Guys,” he said, “I need your help tonight. I have to go to Garlock House. And I want you both to monitor Ouroboros, if you can. Make sure they don't spot me, maybe run some interference on my behalf.”

“What are you going to do?” demanded Kathy.

“You're not going to try and snatch Kelly?” asked Marcus. “That would be most unwise for several reasons.”

“I can't tell you,” said Brad. “I'd like to, but the way I see it, if I did, I'd be doomed to fail from the get-go.”

“You don't trust us?” said Kathy, accusingly.

“If I've got this right,” said Brad, “you're linked to the rest of the cult, telepathically? So they could know what you know?”

Kathy reluctantly agreed.

“So your plan can't be shared with Kathy,” said Marcus, slowly. “But what about me?”

“What if they take you over somehow between now and tomorrow morning?” asked Brad. “I don't like doing this, but I'm used to working alone and being self-reliant. Sorry, but if this is my show, it has to go by my rules.”

Marcus shrugged, unwilling to argue further. There was a marked coolness as the three had lunch and then worked out what Brad needed. Kathy was unhappy about being put under by Marcus for the third time, but was eventually won over. It was agreed that the hypnotism session would take place at midnight, when Brad reckoned he would be arriving on the outskirts of the village. More than that, he refused to tell them.

“What do you think he's doing?” asked Kathy, as she settled back on the sofa. They were back at the hotel room where Marcus and Kathy were staying.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” replied Marcus. “I only met him a few days ago. He's a bit of a dark horse, really.”

"Plenty of money, I reckon," she said. "He hired a private detective, and you. And he paid for our rooms."

"He's not short of a few bob," agreed Marcus. "He works in the oil industry, some kind of geologist, I believe."

"Loads of money," murmured Kathy. "But she still hates him. That's a laugh, isn't it? Some people can have the whole world on a plate and they turn it away."

"I don't think his daughter hates him," objected Marcus, moving a chair to sit facing her a couple of feet away. "Most families have rough patches, especially with adolescent offspring. What cuts do is drive a wedge into a gap that might otherwise close up naturally."

Kathy looked bored by his theorizing.

"Is it time yet?"

"Nearly," said Marcus, checking his watch. "You know the drill by now."

With a thin smile, the young woman closed her eyes and Marcus began the process of suggestion. After a few minutes, Kathy's eyelids began to flicker, like those of a sleeper having troubling dreams.

"Can you see them?" asked Marcus. "Ouroboros, the villagers, are they there?"

"Some of us are asleep," she replied in a voice just above whisper. "You would find our dreams so strange. Beautiful, but strange. When the earth is cleared off, it will be wonderful. So clean and peaceful."

"Cleared off?" he asked.

"The detritus of a failed and decadent culture must be swept away," said a voice much clearer than Kathy's. "The process has to begin somewhere. The awakening of Nature's guardians will be the start."

"Who is this?" demanded Marcus.

"I think you know, Mister Valentine," came the reply. "Your little parlor tricks are becoming very wearisome."

Kathy's blank expression gave way to a condescending smile.

"Olivia Ballard?" asked Marcus.

"My human name, for now," said Olivia. "Soon we will move beyond such limitations as individuality."

"Then you'll lose your humanity!" exclaimed Marcus, almost forgetting the purpose of the session.

I must keep her talking, he thought.

"Being human is vastly overrated," said the condescending voice. "A pity you are so negative in your attitudes. You would have made a useful ally."

"Ally, or tool?" he asked. "You seem to leave converts no real choice in the matter."

"If you saw a child crawling towards an open fire you would snatch them away, regardless of their desire to play with the pretty flames," returned Olivia.

The verbal jousting went on for several minutes. But then Kathy's brow wrinkled in concentration.

"Why did you pester me tonight of all nights, Mister Valentine?"

The directness of the question threw Marcus off balance for a moment.

"We, that is, I, wanted to glean more information," he said. "You can't block us out, so don't bother trying!"

"No, that's not it!" said Olivia. "I'm sensing something else here, in this poor

stupid girl's muddled mind. Secrets. Plans."

Damn, thought Marcus, *this is happening too quickly*.

"I'm going to bring you out of it, Kathy," he began.

"Too late, little man!" said Olivia's voice, sneering in triumph. "It seems Brad is trying to play the hero. Well, that will simplify things considerably. A touching reunion of father and daughter, all differences settled at last."

Kathy slumped forward, groaning. Drool trickled thinly onto her lap. Marcus did his best to make her comfortable then tried to phone Brad. It seemed the American was out of cell phone range. While he waited for Kathy to come to, he kept calling and texting. Eventually, sometime after one pm, he got a reply.

"For God's sake, man, what happened?"

"Nothing unpleasant," replied Brad. "It all went smoothly, thanks to you two."

"But they found out that you were trying to break in!" exclaimed Marcus.

"No, they found out that you both thought I was targeting Garlock House," said Brad.

It took a moment for the truth to sink in.

"You cunning bastard," said Marcus. "You guessed they'd probably read her mind so you lied to us. That was the distraction."

"Don't knock it, it worked," replied Brad. "Tell Kathy I'm sorry. And apologies to you, too."

"Not at all," said Marcus wryly, "it was textbook stuff. I just hope whatever you got up to was worth it."

The next morning, Kathy did not come down to breakfast. Marcus figured that she deserved some rest and could hardly be expected to come any closer to the cultists.

"When this is over," said Brad, "I'd like to try and do something for her. Is she still taking drugs?"

"I don't think so," replied Marcus. "I've seen none of the obvious signs. But she's still a lost soul."

"If I can get her some help, I will," Brad declared. "She's suffered a lot for my sake."

"Our sakes," corrected Marcus. "Ouroboros may be a threat to all of us. What I heard last night might have been grandiose propaganda. But if it were even partly true, the cult really does want to bring the whole of modern civilization crashing down."

Brad thought about his dreams of Kelly.

"Idealism can do even more harm than greed or cynicism, can't it?"

Marcus paused in buttering a slice of toast.

"All the most violent and destructive forces in history seem to be driven by pure ideals rather than everyday greed."

"And that's the problem," said Brad. "Kelly always was drawn to ideals, Utopias, clean and simple solutions to complex problems."

"It's a common fault of the young," agreed Marcus. "But let's look on the bright side. Ouroboros may simply fail again."

"That might be our best bet," said Brad. "Otherwise I'll just try to grab her and see how it goes."

It was about half an hour after dawn on May Day when they arrived at Wychmere. The village still looked quaintly picturesque, but was definitely not sleepy.

All the villagers were lined up along the edge of the great ditch. They looked zoned-out to Brad, who had walked up to the circle unnoticed. All the locals were facing inward with beatific smiles. All except a handful of younger children, who seemed confused and frightened. He wondered if children were impossible to control, or had simply been ignored as irrelevant by the cultists. People seemed to be in their Sunday best on this Saturday morning; women in print dresses, men in suits. There was even a brass band on a small platform beyond the Fangs. But Brad noticed that everyone from the village or neighborhood was outside the circle on his side of the ditch.

About a dozen followers of Ouroboros were walking slowly in a circle within the ring of Dancers. In white hooded robes with garlands of wildflowers around their necks, they did not look particularly sinister. In fact, the procession had a touch of Woodstock about it. Brad thought of barefoot Flower Children in the morning sunshine. Kelly, also in white and crowned with flowers, was at the head of the procession, flanked by Salome and Olivia. She looked happy, beautiful, utterly sure of herself.

At first, Brad couldn't see Clay, the so-called Herald of Ouroboros. Then he noticed a short, plump figure at the back of the procession. Brad made out Clay's face under the hood. The supposed leader looked out of place, as if his inclusion was an afterthought. Clay caught Brad's eye as he went past and his blank expression changed for a moment.

Is he panicking? He seems confused, maybe scared. This isn't what he signed up for, clearly. But he has no way of breaking free.

A hoarse voice broke in on Brad's thoughts. Father Quigley burst through the ring of villagers, stumbled down into the ditch, then clambered out. Disheveled and red-faced, his pants caked with mud and grass stains, the old man was wild-eyed and ranting.

"Whores of Babylon!" he cried. "Devotees of Satan, the Old Serpent!"

Some of the onlookers laughed, a few seemed annoyed by the interruption. But none of the villagers moved to interfere as Quigley ran forward, brandishing a crucifix. The priestesses did hesitate, but then Olivia gestured for them to continue. As they walked on, the tall woman interposed herself between Quigley and the cultists.

"You're making a fool of yourself, priest," she said. "And April Fool's Day has come and gone. This is a very different festival."

The old man stopped and looked up at Olivia's impassive features. Then he tried to push the cross into her face. She frowned in distaste and grabbed the priest's wrist, easily forcing the crucifix away. Quigley winced in pain and fell to his knees.

"No," he moaned. "Lord, give me strength!"

"There are no lords here, old man," said Olivia, raising her voice to reach the nearest villagers. "Only the great goddess. It is *her* time now."

Salome waved to someone and the brass band on the other side of the circle struck up a tune. The onlookers started to sing. The sheer normality of it took Brad by surprise. The tune was cheerful with a folksy feel, while the words seemed

to be in archaic English. He made out 'summer is a-comin' in,' and a reference to a cuckoo. As the cheerful voices soared, Olivia wrenched the crucifix from Quigley's hand and pressed it to her forehead. Brad could not hear what she said to the priest then, but he could guess the tone from her scornful smile.

She's showing him how powerless he is, how little the symbols of his faith matter.

Something caught his eye, then, a brief flurry of movement near the rear of the procession. Brad could not make out what had happened, except that one of the white-clad women was slight apart from the rest. Clay was holding her by the arm, apparently in some kind of discussion. Nobody else was paying attention, though. Olivia was rounding off her impromptu drama by releasing Quigley and going back to rejoin Kelly, who was still smiling benignly.

She's under their influence, brainwashed, Brad told himself. But he still could not be sure.

The parade continued towards the Fangs. Brad shadowed it, moving behind the chain of singing onlookers. He wondered what would happen if he crossed the ditch. He had no idea what he could accomplish if he did. Tearing Kelly away from the cult by force was clearly a non-starter. He had tried talking to her. He felt impotent rage and despair at being reduced to a mere onlooker. The feeling was made worse by his uncertainty as to what was going to happen next. Brad had the sickening conviction that something very real and profoundly evil was about to happen.

The white-clad cultists were now spacing themselves out in a line along the ditch, leading away from the Fangs. Some kind of wooden seat covered in spring flowers had been set up between the pointed stones, and Kelly took her place on it. Brad realized this was the enthroning of the May Queen; the ancient pagan ritual that Marcus had described. Kelly looked serene and happy. She glanced in her father's direction but gave no sign of having seen him. The singing died down. There was a sense of anticipation. Clay stepped forward, raised his arms. Brad could just make out what he was saying.

"For thousands of years, the Ancient One has slept, dreaming of the day when we would rediscover the eternal truth. That all Nature is one, and that we are one with Nature. And that this great oneness is Ouroboros, the eternal truth that is reborn today."

Brad expected some kind of response to what sounded like a prayer, but instead Clay shuffled off to one side. Olivia stepped forward, and raised her arms.

Now for the real leader, thought Brad. *Clay's just the warm-up man.*

"This is the time of transformation!" proclaimed Olivia. "Do not be afraid, brothers and sisters. For the first time in fifty centuries or more, Ouroboros will become flesh."

Brad expected Olivia to continue, but instead the woman simply turned and walked to the nearest stone. The other white-clad cultists did the same, and Brad realized that there was one follower per Dancer. No, he was wrong, there was one person left over, a smallish figure with her head bowed standing by the Fangs.

A spare wheel at the big party, thought Brad. *Do they keep one in reserve or something?*

He was distracted from such thoughts by Olivia removing her robe. There was a sharp intake of breath from some onlookers as they realized she was naked. The

other cultists did the same. Brad saw one mother cover her small son's eyes, but other parents gazed on benignly.

"Yes, different levels of influence," said Marcus Valentine. "Some are simply less susceptible than others."

Brad had not noticed the Englishman sneaking up.

"I think most of them are well under control, though," Marcus continued.

"What kept you?" asked Brad.

"I had to rent a car. Kathy stole mine," replied Marcus. "Have you seen her?"

"No," said Brad.

Another wave of exclamations came from the crowd, a mixture of awe and excitement. Brad looked back at the cultists. Olivia was writhing on the damp grass by the stone.

"Possibly having some sort of fit," said Marcus, uncertainly.

Then the woman's pale skin began to darken under the morning sunlight. It took on a greenish-gold tinge, and as it altered, her limbs began to change shape. Her arms grew shorter, shrank to tiny flippers, then disappeared entirely.

This can't be happening, Brad told himself. *It's a trick, some kind of mass hypnosis.*

Despite his strenuous attempt to deny it was real, Olivia's transformation continued. Her long, dark hair seemed to withdraw into her skull as her forehead shrank, while her nose and mouth merged to form a kind of muzzle. Even more extreme was the blending of her legs into one tapering mass of flesh. Soon all semblance of humanity was gone, and Olivia had become a snake, ten feet long.

"Oh my God," breathed Marcus. "It's not just a metaphor. They really are lamias, or shape-shifters!"

A gleaming serpent now reared up on its thick coils where Olivia had stood. Along the inner edge of the ditch, the other cultists had chucked off their robes and were changing, too. Someone screamed, and a young woman in a pink frock pulled away from the ring of onlookers. She began to run away across the field beyond the Fangs. Nobody tried to stop her.

Brad looked over at Kelly. Her face was astonished, awe-struck, but not horrified.

"I think she was expecting this," said Marcus, his voice breaking. "She's been prepared for these changes."

"But why, what comes next?" whispered Brad. "Or is this it?"

"No," said Marcus, "this is not what they mean by renewal, I think. Remarkable, though it is."

The huge serpents began to move sinuously around the circle of stones. Brad stared into the red, slit-eye of one monster and felt a very human intelligence looking back at him. Another scream from the crowd, and this time a middle-aged woman and a small child broke away. But, as before, the remaining villagers stared on, some smiling contentedly, others blank-faced as zombies.

"Come on," said Brad, not checking to see if Marcus was following. He set off to get round behind the Fangs. He had a vague idea that, if Kelly was threatened in some way, he would swoop in and save her. Details eluded him. As he ran past the crowd, he caught glimpses of the lamias. The snake-beings were now forming up in front of the Fangs, circling nose-to-tail in a kind of grotesque parade. Then the

largest creature, the thing called Olivia in human form, opened her huge jaws and gripped the tail of the monster in front of her. The other lamias followed suit.

"Ouroboros!" gasped Marcus, catching up with Brad as they neared the Fangs. "A circle within the circle. Look at the ditch!"

Brad looked and saw what seemed to be coils of morning mist forming in the shadowed depression. But instead of drifting away, the vapor grew denser, began to form into a definite shape. He remembered what Quigley had told them at the first, failed ritual in Sussex. As he watched, the gray-white vapor lifted like a smoke ring and hovered for a few heartbeats. There was dead silence from everyone, crowd and cultists. Then the weird cloud shrank, growing even denser, and stopped a few feet above the ring of lamias.

"This is how it happens, the renewal," whispered Marcus. "The spirit of the Old Serpent entering new flesh."

As he spoke, the cloud descended, merged with the ring of monstrous beings. The reptilian bodies shuddered, then began to change again. Scaly flesh flowed like viscous liquid. It was even more bizarre than the first transformation, so strange that at first Brad was unsure what was happening.

Oh God, he realized. They're merging into one.

Head and tails flowed together, the cultists blending into one huge being. Only Olivia's head remained distinct, growing larger and releasing the tail from its jaws. All trace of the vapor had gone, now. The vast serpent writhed and then reared up, its gleaming eyes some twenty feet above the ground.

"Ouroboros!" gasped Marcus. "The ultimate merging of the deity with her followers. The union of mind is followed by that of the flesh."

It is awe-inspiring, thought Brad. I can see how people could worship that thing. We're witnessing a kind of evil miracle.

Brad saw Kelly stand up, and raise her arms towards the monster. Her face was ecstatic, radiant with joy. The huge jaws opened, revealing fangs over a foot long, as the vast serpent reared up over her white-clad form. A terrible certainty gripped him.

She is a sacrifice. She can't really want this!

Brad started to run forward, not knowing what to do, only that he had to somehow save Kelly from an appalling fate. He heard Marcus shout a warning. Brad had forgotten the ditch, and tumbled into it, wrenching his knee. He was scrambling frantically up the other side when a white-robed figure dashed forward, between Kelly and the serpent. There was a flash of metal, and a roaring sound so deep that he felt it in his bones.

It was Kathy Hopkirk. She held a large knife in both hands and was stabbing into the huge mass of scaly tissue. The serpent reacted predictably, rearing up and then descending, jaws agape. Brad had a sudden flashback to the time he'd seen a snake devour a mouse.

"No!" Kelly was standing up, shouting. "This is wrong, don't take her!"

It was too late. The monster, reacting with the instinct of a goaded predator, had already devoured Kathy. Brad saw a bulge moving down the creature's body. As he looked up, the creature seemed to see him for the first time, and opened its vast maw with a hiss.

That's it, he thought, reaching for the device in his pocket. Game over.

Brad took out a specialized radio transmitter, jabbed at a red button, listened for the explosion. Nothing happened. The small gelignite charge he had planted at the base of the Warden failed to detonate. Then he realized that, in his near-panic, he had failed to turn on the unit's power. He flicked the switch just as the shadow of Ouroboros fell across him. He pushed the red button again, and there was a loud crack followed by screams of shock and confusion.

Too damn late! Probably didn't even topple the goddamn stone. Too rough-and-ready, no finesse.

As he dropped the radio unit, the monster's jaw began to engulf Brad, a black forked tongue as thick as his arm wrapped itself around him. Cold slime covered his face. Fetid carrion breath filled his lungs and he started to choke. Far away, he heard Kelly's voice, desperate, pleading with her goddess.

Brad closed his eyes, bracing himself for a terrible death in the belly of the beast. He felt a sudden rush of energy like an electric shock, and blacked out.

Epilogue

Spring 2017.

"Thought we'd lost you there," said Marcus, helping Brad limp away from the Fangs. "We'd better get out of here before the police arrive."

"Kelly?" asked Brad, barely able to utter the one word.

"I was a bit confused for a while back there," admitted Marcus, "like most people. When I got my bearings, she had gone. So had Clay. Probably to Garlock House to do some hasty packing."

"What about Ouroboros?" croaked Brad, trying to look over his shoulder.

"Not pleasant," said Marcus. "A horrific mish-mash of tissue, some of it recognizably human. Some not. God knows how the authorities will explain it. Or cover it up."

"Kathy's dead, then?"

Marcus did not reply. The two struggled over the uneven ground to where the Warden no longer stood, but lay diagonally across the road surrounded by rock fragments. Scorch marks around the base of the stone showed where Brad's charge had blasted a chunk out of it along a natural fault line, felling the Warden much as a lumberjack fells a sequoia.

"A very professional job, I'm sure," said Marcus, "but that means you're the only living person here who's actually committed a crime. Another reason to make ourselves scarce."

"Yeah," gasped Brad, head pounding, "but it sure did a number on their magic power system, didn't it?"

"Not denying that," said Marcus.

The Englishman was driving Brad away from Wychmere at a careful forty miles per hour when flashing blue lights appeared in the distance.

"Do you think they'll find her?" asked Brad.

"Kelly? I doubt it. She's rather good at staying lost," said Marcus.

"So we're back to square one?" Brad could hardly believe that he had done so much, risked so much, for nothing.

"Look at it this way," said Marcus. "If we can take Ouroboros at their word, you may have just saved the world from near-total obliteration. But I wouldn't put that on your resume just yet."

"What can I do?" Brad was thinking aloud now, but Marcus had a ready reply.

"You can dream," he said. "Because your dreams have linked you to Kelly since this started."

"How do we know that link will still be there?" asked Brad.

"I suppose we'll know tomorrow morning," said the Englishman.

Amid the chaos that followed the explosion, some villagers had come to their senses and called in the emergency services. Ambulances arrived to find what they initially thought was a vast heap of organic remains. Then one paramedic noticed that some parts of the bizarre corpse were still breathing. The police, equally baffled, decided to seal off the area near the Fangs and wait for what senior officers termed 'special contingency units.'

The units in question arrived in four unmarked helicopters that landed in a meadow half a mile from Wychmere. Soldiers wearing respirators pushed aside protesting police officers, dragged the remains of Ouroboros into the ditch, then proceeded to incinerate it. A few weak screams were heard from the ditch, but were soon lost amid the roar of the flames. As this process neared its end, a convoy of unmarked vehicles appeared and men in white biohazard suits emerged. The charred remnants of the snake-being were loaded into special containers and the ditch sprayed with a series of chemical agents. Senior police officers asked for more detailed information about the process, and were told nothing.

While the anomalous creature was being dealt with, men and women in medical coveralls went among the villagers administering what were termed vaccinations. After being vaccinated, each villager was taken aside for an 'interview' with a gentleman introduced as 'Mister Jones from the Home Office.' When discussing events of that May Day later, the people of Wychmere agreed that Mister Jones had made a very strong case for 'discretion about the whole unpleasant business.'

A press release from the Ministry of Health announced that a chemical leak had occurred in the village after a truck had taken a detour and collided with one of the ancient standing stones. This, said the officials, had caused widespread headaches, vomiting, and even some hallucinations. But there were no long-term problems.

Within twenty-four hours, a number of conspiracy theory websites were referring to the Wychmere Incident, variously linking it to UFOs, chemical trails, parallel universes, and a host of other paranormal phenomena. The man known as Mister Jones, who supervised such disinformation, was pleased to note that it never lost its effectiveness.

Constable Knapton arrived at New Scotland Yard on Monday morning. Most of the country was enjoying the May bank holiday, so traffic was light and he arrived earlier than usual. But he still found Detective Sergeant Healy in his office, apparently deep in thought.

"Morning, boss," said Knapton. "I'm back. Got you some coffee from that place over the road."

"Thanks," said Healy. "You enjoyed that, err, thing. A training course, wasn't it?"

"Yes," replied Knapton. "I wasn't tempted by any naked lovelies, worse luck."

Healy looked puzzled. To fill the awkward pause, Knapton went on, "I hear you nearly nabbed that bugger Dotrice while I was away, sir?"

Healy's face lost its confused look.

"Oh, that. Another wild goose chase, the little sod was long gone. If he was ever there."

"Well, he can't stay lost forever," remarked Knapton, taking the lid off his latte.

"I wouldn't bet on it," said Healy. "Some cases just don't get solved. Like this Matt Arnold thing. We're going nowhere fast with that."

Knapton was so surprised that it took him a moment to respond.

"I thought we had a sort of lead, sir?"

Healy shook his head decisively.

"Nah," he said, "I'm going try and pass it off onto someone else. Complete waste of time."

Knapton, who had been leaning on the side of Healy's desk, straightened up slowly.

"I see, sir. Well, that'll certainly reduce our caseload."

Later, after discussing their other cases, Knapton went to the washroom. After checking that the stalls were all empty, he made a phone call.

"Yes, you were right. Looks like they got him. Pity, he was a good man. Maybe he will be again. No, I don't think so; he seems to buy the whole training course thing."

The entry of two detectives loudly discussing their weekend exploits put an end to the call. The incomers ignored Knapton, a low-ranking uniformed officer. And that was fine with him.

"Would I have died, Jonathan?" asked Kelly, looking out over the stern of the fishing boat. "Would she have consumed me?"

The coast of England was almost out of sight, a black smear silhouetted against the setting sun.

Clay hesitated, torn between his own judgment and the persistent voice in his head.

We failed again, he thought. But we must persist. What else is there? How can we turn back now?

"I don't know," he said finally. "But I have always believed that there is something beyond death, something wonderful."

"Dying would be an awfully big adventure," murmured Kelly. "That's what Peter Pan said. I always loved that movie as a kid."

"Let's not be morbid," said Cleo, striding onto the after-deck. "We've got a long journey ahead of us. Lots to do. No point in dwelling on the past."

Kelly looked up at the dark woman, and for a moment, Clay feared that she was about to challenge Cleo for dominance. He had no idea which side he would take in the event of a struggle. Or whether his opinion would count for anything.

"Where are we going?" asked Kelly. "No one can overhear us now that Kathy is dead. Along with the rest."

"Olivia was over-confident," retorted Cleo. "She misjudged her enemies. I won't make that mistake."

"They won't give up," said Clay. "The American and that self-styled expert. They'll try to find us, no matter how many obstacles our allies put in their way."

Kelly nodded in agreement.

"Dad won't give up; he's not made that way. But I don't want him harmed, do you understand? There's been enough violence."

Cleo smiled, then.

"It's a big world," she said. "And Brad has no idea where we are going. By the time he finds out, if he does, Plan B will be underway."

Kelly looked uncertain, and asked, "Is it really worth all the suffering? The deaths?"

Cleo leaned on the stern rail of the boat, gazing out at the wake spreading over the dark water.

"You haven't slept for nearly two days, Kelly," she said. "Maybe you should go below and get some rest."

