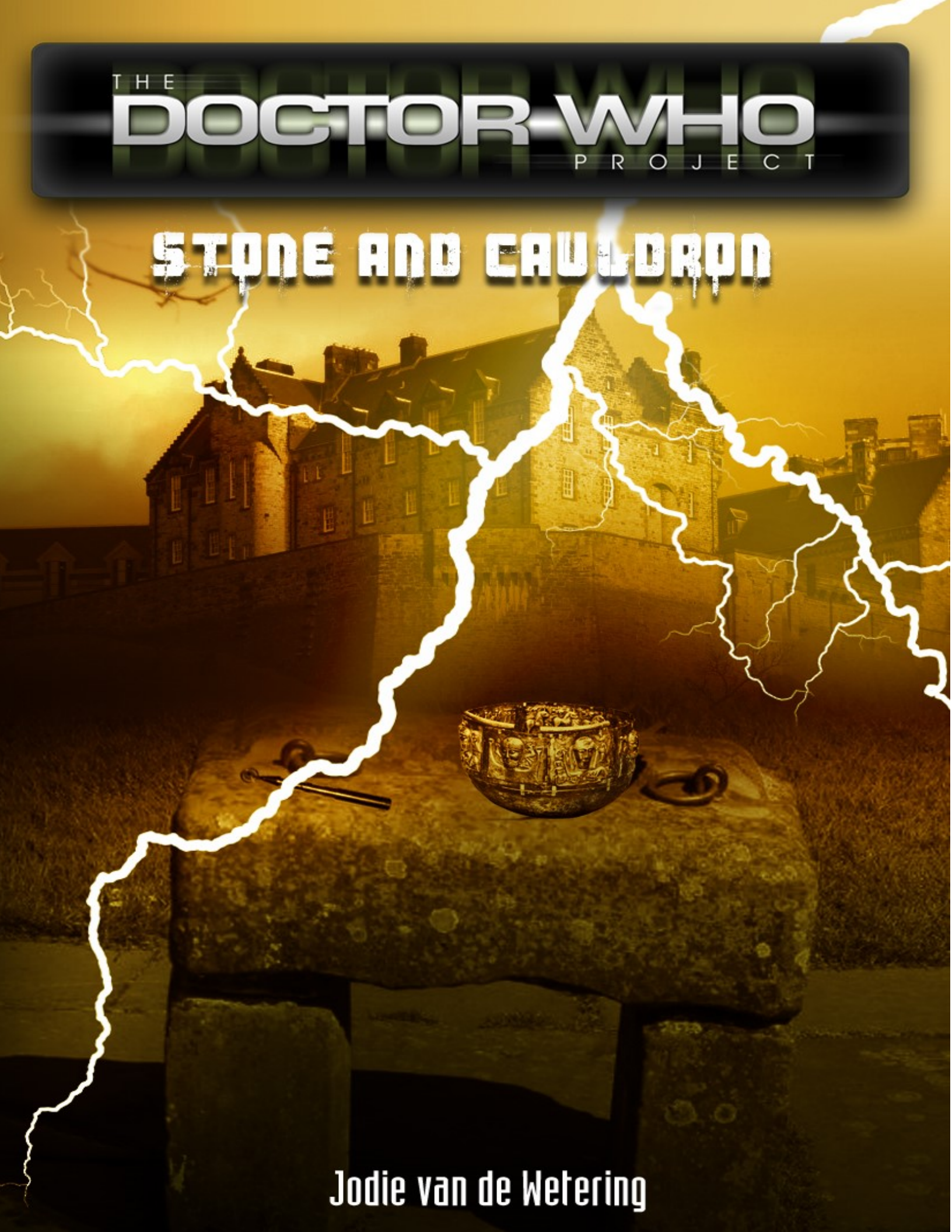


THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

STONE AND CAULDRON



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Episode One: Stone

“Early Christian era, most of it - absolutely fascinating stuff...”

Tamara Scott picked her way gracefully across a plank bridge spanning a shallow, muddy hole, and tried very hard to be fascinated. Tamara didn't like Scotland; it was cold, it was wet, and it brought back bad memories of that all-nighter at the festival back in her student days. She shook an icy droplet from the back of her neck, pondering the effect of the rain on her calfskin jacket.

The Doctor seemed to have the looking-fascinated thing down pat. He was way ahead of her, crouching over a semi-excavated archaeological widget, stroking his beard thoughtfully. His usual eyewear perched precariously on top of his head, despite the natural lighting calling for something closer to a miner's light than sunglasses. He looked taller beside the short, slightly rounded figure of their guide. Angus himself was still chuntering on about the dig, sloshing about in the wet like the quarter-acre of churned up muck was his own personal kingdom.

“Isn't this great?” Tamara nearly lost her balance as Grae bounded up behind her. The two women clung together, wobbling to and fro to avoid toppling into the two inches of mud in the bottom of the shallow pit. Tamara made a noncommittal noise.

“I guess it is if you like this sort of thing. I prefer my corpse's dead less than a thousand years before the investigation starts, myself.”

“It seems so strange, digging through the ground to find out about the past. On Gallifrey, a trip to the Records Room will tell you anything about our past, right back to the Old Times.”

“Our modern stuff is recorded like that. I think our Old Times were just a bit more recent than yours.”

Grae nodded thoughtfully. She leapt across the rest of the pit like a cat, landing with a squelch on terra firma. The young Timelord stuck out her tongue, tasting the raindrops. Then she closed her mouth and screwed up her nose.

“Ugh. I'd forgotten about the pollution in this time zone.”

“If you think this is bad, come back in a few years, just before Kyoto Three gets ratified.”

Tamara watched Grae standing in the rain, face turned skyward, soaking up the miserable weather like the rarest of wines. Grae opened her arms, spinning on the spot, her long red hair whirling behind her like a Catherine wheel.

It was Grae who'd asked the Doctor a few days ago about how he received mail. Tamara felt her eyes cross as he explained loftily about trans-temporal vortices, wormholes, and the effect of Universal Expansion on the automated Martian Exploder timetable. Finally, sensing Tamara's impending cranial explosion, he got to the point.

"There's always the post box in Bundaberg."

Which was how Tamara and Grae found themselves lugging big grey cardboard boxes back to the TARDIS, trying not to spill letters, parcels, or slightly more advanced things that had probably baffled the Bundaberg Post Office staff? Still, the Doctor's cover story was that the box belonged to a regional outpost of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, so they probably assumed the reader chips; DVDCs and data wafers were just the latest in country music recording. The TARDIS was parked on a slightly askew angle in the gardens separating the post office from the art gallery. Nobody seemed to notice, but then Tamara guessed the art gallery probably didn't get a lot of local traffic. She rested the box on one hip, trying to give her arms a rest. The travellers waited for two Swiss backpackers to finish taking pictures of their space/time vehicle before piling inside. Tamara finally lost control of her box, mail cascading and sliding across the floor. The Doctor had the good grace to look sheepish.

"You don't check that box very often, do you, Doctor?"

* * * * *

"It's not like we just bowled up and started digging, Doctor. You wouldn't believe the hoops a person has to jump through these days, even for a tiny excavation like this one. Public consultation, environmental impact statements, funding applications - we dotted all the i's, we greased all the palms, and now this lot want us to just pack up and go home!"

The Doctor nodded gently. He knew Angus would be easier to talk to once he'd vented his spleen. It took the Doctor back to old days, simpler days. It was so easy to get caught up in the action and excitement of his time in exile on this little blue planet, but it really wasn't like that. Looking back, the Timelord's fondest memories weren't of the Autons, the dinosaurs, the Venusian aikido and the fancy vehicles, but the quiet, simple pleasures of immersing himself in an alien culture. Whitewashing Nissan huts with Sergeant Benton, picking blackberries with Jo; and going on simple, non-spectacular archaeological digs with Angus Maloney. It wasn't so much a friendship as an acquaintance based on mutual respect. The Doctor dragged himself out of the past, into the present; aware Angus was coming to the end of his spiel.

"Most of what we know about ancient society and religion comes from work like what we're doing here. Yet these people, who you'd think would be the first ones to want more information about the past, are the first ones to cause trouble."

"I don't think this pagan group is trying to disrupt your work. It's more likely they just want to know what's going on. They're probably expecting bulldozers and fences and dozens of people digging up the whole common. The simplest things seem high-flown and outlandish to

someone who's never been exposed to them. Just look at the reactions the TARDIS gets sometimes." The Doctor paused to wring some moisture out of his hair.

"I'm sure we can all sit down - you, me, this woman from the Firewolves - have a nice cup of tea and sort something out."

Angus leaned back. "You make it sound so easy, Doctor. But maybe you're right. I hope so." He made to stand up. "About that other thing. Come and have a look at this."

* * * * *

Brooke tried to ignore Max as the man did something most distracting with his tongue piercing. She'd known him and his partner Cecily about two months now, and she was yet to figure out exactly what it was he did to make it bob up and down like that. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"No, Max. I'm sorry, but this really isn't going to achieve anything. I'm sorry." She turned around slowly, deliberately making eye contact with every Firewolf in the group. Everybody was here, from the dozen long-term pagans who'd been with her since the beginning, to the newcomers like Max and Cecily. Most of them looked relieved.

"We're trying to get ourselves taken seriously here. You know some people consider us in the same league as alien-chasers and people who beg on street corners. We're trying to change that. We're trying to show we're rational, mature adults, and the fact that we belong to a minority religion doesn't make us some kind of lunatic brigade." The tall woman held up her hand to silence Max's protests. "Massing at the ritual site and causing trouble at the... developments... there is only going to make us look like rabble. Maloney will take out a restraining order against us, someone will end up injured or arrested, and the press can have a field day with the wacky weirdo Satan-worshipping loonies. Is that what you want?"

"So what are we going to do?" Max demanded loudly. Brooke flinched, hoping the pub was crowded enough that nobody would pay attention to Max's tone. She wished he wouldn't be so... obvious. Out There, as he described it. Brooke had nothing against piercings, wherever they were, and the cloak was the nicest she'd seen, much better than she could afford. But it really didn't help when you're trying to get your beliefs out of the Wacky World column and taken seriously.

Brooke leaned forwards over the table, avoiding the sticky mug-rings. She rested her chin on her hands, long raven-dark hair curtaining her face.

"We talk to Doctor Maloney again. We sit down and have a coffee and talk about why he needs to dig up an area we consider religiously important. If that doesn't work, we approach the local media. And we do it," she flashed a look at Max and Cecily, "rationally."

* * * * *

"...with my little eye, something beginning with... M."

"Mud."

"Your go."

Grae stood in a sudden flurry of energy and red hair. "This is silly. There's a whole world here we could be looking at, and we're sitting in the rain playing Ice Pie."

Tamara smiled, her funk lifting. "That's 'I Spy'. How long does it take the Doctor to look at a whatsit, anyway?"

Grae pulled her long coat a bit closer around her. "Well, it *should* be Ice Pie. What's a whatsit, anyway?"

"Same as a thingo, a doo-dad, a thingummybob, a whim-wham for a goose's bridle - it's just a random phrase to cover the fact I don't know what this thing is any more than you do. It's like when the Doctor starts talking about interstitial vortices and subspace particles. Sometimes I don't think half the things that come out of his mouth mean anything."

Grae nodded sagely. She'd noticed the phenomenon herself, and it was by no means unique to the Doctor. Before her training in the Celestial Intervention Agency, she'd studied temporal theory under Pandak the Seventh, an aging academic with a penchant for turning words into Siamese twins; she would spend hours waffling on about transtemporalinflation phenomena and warp speed reliance variables. Meanwhile, the hall would be filled with the rustling of students thumbing through the course notes glossary, trying to figure out what the grand old lady was talking about. Grae swept through the final exam with ninety-eight percent by the simple expedience of quoting memorised bits of lectures back on the exam paper. "I think I'm starting to get the hang of this."

"Don't get the hang too well, you're going on a trip!"

The two women jumped; neither had heard the Doctor coming up behind them. Tamara cringed inwardly, wondering how long he'd been standing there.

"Angus has uncovered something interesting, very interesting; singularly interesting, even. It's not a singular, however; it appears to be a multiple, which is the most singular thing about the whole situation." The Doctor flashed the girls a brilliant grin. "I think a little field research might be in order."

The Doctor squinted in the general direction of the sky, checked his watch, licked his finger and held it up to check the wind direction, and scrawled some co-ordinates on the back of an envelope. Tamara beamed as he handed it to her; even with another Timelord around, he trusted her to pilot the TARDIS. She checked out the co-ordinates, her pride diminishing slightly as she realised they were only travelling a few hours and miles.

"Why are we going to Edinburgh castle, anyway?"

* * * * *

"This place reminds me of Gallifrey."

Grae automatically hushed her voice within the castle. She looked around, soaking up the history nearly bleeding from the walls. "How old would this place be, Tamara?"

"Trust you to ask. It'd be about a thousand years old. Well, give or take a few decades, we're a bit before my time."

Grae rubbed her hand across the rough wall, shaking her head. "Where I come from, a thousand years is within living memory. This place feels so much older. Ancient places at home would be ten million years old to feel like this. You can feel the history trapped in the walls,"

Grae paused, her hand still pressed against the wall, her eyes turning to inspect the high, vaulted ceiling, "it's like a living thing, a presence."

Tamara watched Grae closely. Surrounded by the trappings of human history, it was easier to believe she was an alien from a highly advanced race far in Tamara's subjective future. It was in her bearing, her manner. Tamara tried to look at her companion without actually watching her, not wanting to make Grae uncomfortable. The girl was in one of her rare, introspective moods. Alien moods; Tamara had seen the Doctor moving through that particular emotional state himself; like the calm before some unseen inner storm. It disturbed Tamara, made her feel she was a cute and occasionally clever pet rather than a person on the same level as her friends.

Grae shook her head, breaking the mood, shaking the cobwebs of old thoughts from her mind. Her long coil of hair nearly connected with a suit or armour, causing Tamara to cringe in alarm, Grae to giggle nervously, and a nearby guard to clear his throat in a most pointed manner. As they moved off she asked, "Do you know what this thing is we're looking for?"

"It's a rock."

"Och, lassie, tha's no 'rock' yon keking at!" Tamara replied in her best Rab C Nesbitt accent. "Tha' there's the Stoon of Scoone!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Stone of Scone, Stone of Destiny," said Tamara in a more normal tone. "They used to crown Scottish kings on it."

"What do they crown them on now?"

"They share a monarch with England these days."

Grae was about to make a thoughtful comment about this proactive drive towards rationalisation in government when a soft bleeping from her pocket interrupted her. It continued to get louder as Grae fished in her pocket for the offending device. Tamara looked around guiltily.

"I thought you turned your phone off in the lobby?"

Grae had by now reset the device into silent mode. It continued to vibrate and convulse, a stream of data playing across its screen. It was roughly the size and shape of one of the older mobile phones, but there all similarity ended.

"There's something funny about the stone. Energy readings."

"What kind of energy?"

"Nothing obvious. It hasn't been exposed to nuclear blast or anything like that." Grae leaned forward to look closely at the Stone. There were metal loops at each end, as if it were designed to be carried. Grae pointed the tracer at the metal, then the stone, then in the general direction of the exhibit.

"It's strong enough for something like that, but it's a different kind of energy. I'm not sure what it is - the Doctor will know."

* * * * *

The Doctor rubbed his hands gently over the stone, jutting from the churned-up mud of the dig site. An energy tracer, similar to Grae's, lay discarded nearby. He didn't need it. He could feel

the power surging through the rock with his bare hands. It didn't look special, just a largish piece of rock, roughly rectangular, shaped by hand at some stage in the dim past. The top and sides were deeply scored with straight carved lines, but the metal loops were long gone, had they ever been there at all. "There's definitely something strange about it."

"What's strange about it, Doctor, is that it's in a blooming castle fifteen miles away. I know what the Stone of Scone looks like, I was there when it came home, back in 'ninety-six."

The Doctor stroked his beard. He abandoned the stone and turned his attention to a mug of sweet tea rapidly cooling on the ground beside him. He took a long swig.

"Tamara and Grae should be back soo--"

He was cut off by the familiar arthritic mechanical gasping signalling the TARDIS had arrived. Sure enough, the two girls barrelled around the corner a few moments later, both in high spirits.

"Doctor, it registered nearly point twelve on the Bocca scale," Grae launched into an edited rendition of their time at the castle, "there's a definite build-up of energy surrounding the stone. There's nothing in its chemical or structural composition that could cause something like that - the whole course of evolution would have been altered over the site where the stone was formed. It must have been exposed to something, but it's not something obvious, there's not one sort of energy present, but several related emissions..."

Grae broke off as she saw the identical stone at the Doctor's feet.

"I didn't know they came in pairs."

* * * * *

The next morning broke heavy and dark over the dig. The Doctor had been scurrying around for hours when Tamara poked her nose out of the TARDIS. Wrapping her slightly spotted calfskin jacket around her shoulders, Tamara tracked down the Timelord. He was grinning with delight, tea in hand, as Angus finished a call on his mobile and hunted for the button to press to hang up. The grizzled archaeologist shook his head and gave the pair a wry smile.

"Meeting at ten, Doctor. I wouldn't have believed it, but we're apparently going to sit down and talk about this pagan business."

The Doctor shrugged. "Most people aren't bad, Angus. They're not out to get you, or on the make. They're just ill informed, or too wrapped up in their own concerns to look at the other point of view. Or they don't even know the other point of view exists." He clapped his hands. "And this is the way to change all that. Now then, we have an hour. Where's the kettle?"

"Why does the Doctor get to stay, then?" Grae petulantly prodded an unresponsive lump of sod with her toe. She threw a glance in the direction of the site office, a slightly tipsy demountable parked on a corner of the field beside the porta-loos. Tamara sighed.

"It's not personal. It's not that he doesn't trust us, or anything like that. It's just that he's an old friend of Mahoney's, and we're not. Hey, I've hardly had five words with the man since we got here. Besides, I think we'd upset the balance."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, there's Angus, the pro-dig person, obviously, since this is all his baby. Then there's the black-haired woman, she's the anti-dig lobby, apparently. And the Doctor's neutral, so he's the mediator. But three neutrals might be pushing it a bit."

"I suppose so. I just feel like I've spent the whole trip thus far ignored or sent on silly side-errands."

Tamara nodded. Grae was voicing a little hurt of her own, that now the Doctor had an old pal to knock around with, his current companions were the third and fourth wheels on the metaphorical bicycle.

"I don't think he means it." Tamara hoped she sounded like she meant it.

Grae wasn't listening; she was peering with some interest at developments at the far entrance to the dig.

"What are all those people doing?"

* * * * *

Angus drank deeply from his cooling tea. The damn woman was making sense. In the first instance, he'd expected some sort of apparition in black velvet and unusually coloured hair, or maybe something with lots of sequins and glitter on her eyelids. But Brooke Daley defied stereotype to turn up in a smart grey business suit with a pale blue blouse. She'd even tucked her pentacle necklace beneath her clothes. Her hip-length obsidian hair was coiled carefully into a bun, held in place with a jade clasp. She looked like she'd dropped in from her job in a solicitor's office, possibly because she had.

"How has the dig progressed so far, Doctor Maloney?"

Brooke's question jolted Angus from his meandering thoughts back to the matter in hand.

"Well, it's a very low-key excavation, remember. We're not expecting to find the next Gundestup Cauldron..."

"Have you found the Stone yet?"

Angus nearly dropped his mug. Across the table, the Doctor merely raised an eyebrow a fraction of an inch, nodding thoughtfully to himself. The archaeologist spluttered. "Have you been trespassing in the dig site? How the hell could you possibly know.."

The Doctor held up a hand. "That'll do, Doctor Maloney. We checked the dig site this morning, we both know perfectly well there was nobody here last night."

"Then how..."

Brooke explained. "Our records - not official records; personal diaries, oral history, 'I-heard-it-from-my-gran' type records - tell us one of the copies of the Lia Fail was buried here almost four hundred years ago. It was one of the reasons some of my group was reluctant to have the site excavated."

Angus snorted. "Ha! In case it wasn't there! Hang on, what do you mean, 'copies'? Exactly how many do you think there are running around the countryside?"

Brooke leaned forwards, rested her elbows on the table, steepling her fingers. "It's the relic's importance as a focus for energy that matters. Whether it really is the stone Jacob used as a pillow a squillion years ago is irrelevant. Whether Jacob ever used any Stone, or whether there

even was a Jacob to use it, is irrelevant. What's important is what people think, how they see it. The energy they pour into it."

Angus looked sceptical. "So you're saying a forgery's as good as the real thing."

Brooke nodded. "For our purposes, yes. Of course pretending a thirteenth-century skull belonged to Jesus Christ is silly from an archaeologist's point of view. But for what we're doing, from a ritual perspective, it doesn't matter whether carbon dating backs us up or not; as long as we *believe* it is what we say it is, it *is*."

"Faith healing."

"Yes, basically."

"Good!" The Doctor broke in. He kept talking before Angus could butt in. "I'm glad we cleared that up. Now about these copies..."

Brooke took a deep breath. "We know several copies were made of the Stone at various stages in history before it was seized by the English. Some served as focus points for the Scottish population's energy. Maybe the one in the castle's the original Lia Fail, maybe it's a copy. Some say what Edward the First carried off was actually a Scottish cess-pit covering, and the real Stone never left Ireland."

The Doctor looked at Maloney. The man resignedly chugged the last of his icy tea. "A week ago I would have thought this was the biggest load of hocus-pocus I'd ever sat through. But there's three hundred pound of rock sitting out there that tells me you're telling the truth. I can't ignore what the facts tell me. But more to the point, what do we do now?"

The Doctor made to speak when hammering at the door interrupted him. He carefully made his way through the tiny space in the demountable to get the door without knocking anything over. Outside stood Tamara, breathless and sweating from the run.

"Whatever you're negotiating for, forget it. We have trouble out here."

The Doctor, Angus and Brooke piled outside. Brooke put her head in her hands and stifled a sob. About twenty people dressed in robes were making their way determinedly across the dig, waving flaming torches. Angus turned furiously to Brooke, about to unleash a torrent when he realised the woman was crying.

"These people aren't Firewolves. I've never seen most of them in my life. The only person I even recognise is him." She indicated Max, standing in full regalia with a torch in one hand, speaking to a heavily made-up little woman beside a television camera.

The Doctor took a deep breath and pulled out the mobile phone. "Angus, ring the police. Tell them we have protesters trespassing on the site. Tamara, keep an eye on things. Grae... Where's Grae?"

Grae was running towards them, waving her energy tracer. "Doctor," she gasped, "I've been checking the second Stone... It's getting stronger. Energy levels are up exponentially. It's as though whatever's going on here, the Stone's feeding on it."

The Doctor held her firmly by the shoulders, looked into her eyes. "Go back, keep monitoring it." He almost pushed Grae to one side and turned his attention to the mob. Tamara glanced at him. "Fourth on the left has a bottle of some sort, potential Molotov cocktail or weapon. Three at the back wearing swords. Ornamental things, badly balanced, probably not even sharp. The wearers don't have the upper arm muscle development to use them properly

anyway. Nobody else packing heat unless it's well concealed. If they are, they're not going to get at it quickly in those robes."

The Doctor walked calmly out in front of the crowd, removed his sunglasses and cast them to one side. He gave them a steely glance, and spoke, quietly, his voice somehow carrying across the field.

"There will be no battle here."

The crowd kept coming.

Part Two: Cauldron

The mob advanced slowly, flaming torches licking through the misty air. Tamara shifted slightly, unconsciously readying herself for action. The Doctor took off his sunglasses, and faced down the approaching protesters. His voice was quiet, but somehow reached to the furthest corners of the churned-up field.

“There will be no battle here.”

The crowd kept coming.

Tamara moved a bit closer to her companion. ‘I don’t think putting the ‘fluence on them is going to work this time.’”

“You’re right,” he agreed, distractedly chewing the wing of his glasses. He gave the nearest protesters a beady look. “I wonder if somebody’s beaten us to it?”

“Doctor!” Tamara jumped as Grae raced over, still waving the energy tracer. The young woman skidded to a halt on the wet grass, scattering mud. “There’s something very funny about that stone Angus uncovered. The energy levels are still climbing.” Her voice dropped. “Like it’s growing. Feeding. Lapping up all this.”

“Hmm,” the Doctor concurred, “not usual behaviour for a stone by any means. But I think we have a more immediate concern on our hands right now, my dear.”

Grae looked up and for the first time noticed the approaching crowd of robed protesters. She turned to face them, squared her shoulders and casually raised her rose-tinted spectacles until they were balanced on her forehead. Grae tilted her head slightly to one side like a schoolgirl concentrating on a difficult maths problem. The young Timelord took a deep breath, and slowly exhaled, her brow furrowing in concentration. Across the field, protesters were stopping, looking around as though waking from a dream. Soon only Max, the ringleader, was still advancing. Realising he was suddenly very much exposed, Max turned around to address his private army.

“What’s the matter with youse lot, then? You’re not scared of some piece of posh totty, are you?” He spun around, addressing the backs of the retreating protesters.

"Isn't this what we're after? A bit of confrontation?" He flung down his flaming torch in disgust. Tamara darted forward and squashed it into the mud before it could set fire to anything. Max turned and stormed off after his fellows.

"You're all useless!"

Grae nodded her head sharply, and her spectacles fell neatly back into place.

* * * * *

Angus Maloney ran his hands gently over the stone, a copy of the Stone of Scone with the audacity to turn up in the middle of his archaeological dig. He pulled his hands away and shuddered in distaste.

"It's not natural."

"I'm not so sure." The Doctor gave it a gentle caress with the energy tracer. The machine burst into life, a complex series of figures playing over the screen.

"That's a funny thing." The Doctor observed. Angus raised an eyebrow.

"I personally find the funny thing to be that there's an unrecorded copy of the Stone of Destiny in an otherwise quite unremarkable little archaeological dig, and the damn thing seems to be plugged in to the mains!"

"But those readings, those readings," the Doctor shook the energy tracer distractedly. It gave a huffy-sounding bleep as the batteries died. The Timelord threw it to one side in disgust. "If the stone was emitting one form of energy, then it would be easy enough to figure out why. But it isn't, it's a collection of about two-dozen related emissions, and most of them..."

Angus met his eye. "Most of them?"

"Most of them aren't the kind of thing you can create artificially. I hope you know what I mean, because I'm not sure I do. We need more information. Where's Brooke?"

"Who? Oh, that pagan woman. She's made herself scarce; she had to go back to work. She's invited me out to lunch." His voice lowered. "She claims she knew nothing about that tribe of flame-wielding weirdoes."

The Doctor looked calmly into Angus' burning eyes. "I believe her."

"What? You think a bunch of Satan-worshippers can spring up without the knowledge of the local pagan princess?"

"Angus. Stop it. That's not fair and you know it. And it's nothing to do with the Stone."

Angus didn't look convinced. The Doctor tried again. "All that sound and fury wasn't about the Stone. They probably wouldn't even recognise the Stone if they saw it, fake or not. It's about that bald gentleman with the fetching septum piercing staking a leadership challenge against Brooke for control of the Firewolves."

"And we're stuck in the middle of it."

"I'd vacate the dig for this afternoon," the Doctor suggested. "Until things blow over. I doubt there'll be another performance like that one though." He stood and brushed the grass and mud from his trousers. "And Angus..."

"Yes, Doctor."

"I'd take her up on that luncheon invitation, if I were you. And take Tamara. She comes in very handy in a scrape."

* * * * *

“What! No! Forget it, I’m not hanging around doing your babysitting!”

The Doctor held his companion gently by the shoulders. “Tamara, please. Somebody needs to stay here and keep an eye on the dig until we get back.”

Tamara thumped the side of the TARDIS in disgust. “This, this *thing*, is a time machine. We can all go and all get back two seconds after we left.” She crossed her arms. “You just want the monkey out of the road so you can do big-important Timelord things without worrying that a mere mortal will louse it up.”

“No, Tamara, no no no, I promise.” He drew her closer, threw a surreptitious glance towards the open TARDIS door. Grae was already inside, checking co-ordinates. “It’s quite the opposite, actually.”

“How so?”

“I’m not sure I can trust Grae to stay on alone. I know she’ll do her best, but she doesn’t have your training, your experience. I’m not entirely sure it would be safe. I trust you, that’s why I’m asking you. As for being back two seconds after we go...”

“Yes?”

“That depends entirely on what we find at the other end.”

* * * * *

Grae lifted her nose skywards, eyes closed, savouring the atmosphere.

“Ooh, that’s much better. No dirty smog. Where are we?”

The Doctor followed her out of the ship; a dull green waterproof jacket slung over one shoulder. He blended easily into the tangled green of the forest. Grae’s brilliant hair was the only patch of colour, her black turtleneck sweater and jeans blending into the gathering twilight. The older Timelord removed his sunglasses, stashed them in one of the jacket’s capacious pockets.

“We haven’t moved geographically, except to account for continental drift. We’re still on the site of Angus Maloney’s dig.”

“When?”

“The events Angus is uncovering are happening as we speak. Human archaeologist would describe it as the height of the Iron Age. Somewhere out there,” the Timelord gave a vague shrug in the general direction of Italy, “Roman forces are gathering. They won’t reach Celtic Britain for.... Am I boring you, Graekatziasa’asterus?”

Grae jumped up from her inspection of a thistle. “No! I’m sorry Doctor, but, well, are you sure this is the same place as we just left?”

The Doctor pulled himself to his full somewhat average height and made to grasp his lapels. He’d forgotten his jacket was still slung over one shoulder, so hastily changed the movement to brush an imaginary speck from his star-emblazoned waistcoat. “Are you questioning my ability to pilot the TARDIS?”

“No, no. But, Doctor, things are so different. The topography has changed. This area’s so heavily wooded, the flora’s completely different. And that stream wasn’t there before, I mean

it won't be there later; I mean when we left the future there wasn't a stream there. You know what I mean."

"Many things will change between now and the future we just visited, Grae. This land will be invaded at least twice. Vast tracts will be developed as the population grows, then developed again as the Industrial Revolution arrives; the countryside will change with the warming climate. Trust me, this is the same place."

"All these changes in so small a time."

"Hundreds of lifetimes for a human."

"And yet living memory for us."

The Doctor flashed her a brilliant grin. "That rather depends on who 'us' is, doesn't it?"

* * * * *

The café was nice in an unremarkable, café-ish kind of way. Tamara scanned the room surreptitiously over the top of her menu, checking for unusual activity; loiterers, recurring passers-by, the usual clumsy methods of amateur surveillance. Robed weirdoes with flambeaux; another clumsy method, but of what Tamara wasn't sure. Yet. The café was nearly deserted in the three o'clock no-man's-land between the lunchtime crowd and the after-school milkshakes. The tension between Angus and Brooke could be cut with a plastic butter-knife. Brooke was tracing circles on the plastic tablecloth with a bitten fingernail.

"Doctor Maloney, I can't apologise enough for what happened earlier today. I've never seen anything like that before..."

"One generally doesn't expect to be accosted by flame-wielding Satanists in deepest, darkest Scotland."

"They weren't members of my group."

"So you say."

"There were too many of them for a start!" Brooke gave a bitter, self-depreciating laugh. "We only have eight members on a good day. There must have been about twenty at the dig site. The only one I recognised was Max."

"One of yours?"

"Our most recent member. Max and Cecily joined our group about two months ago. I'm not sure they're serious about it..."

"So why let them in?"

"We're not a closed society. We let anyone in if they want to learn about paganism. We only have one concrete rule about members' behaviour."

"And that is?"

"Harm none. I'll have to sit down for a nice long talk with Max very soon."

The look on Brooke's face told Tamara she wasn't looking forward to it.

* * * * *

The Doctor rifled through his pockets, turning up handfuls of wires, used theatre tickets, a roll of sticking plaster and a clockwork quark. But no AA batteries. Grae pulled out her own still-

functioning energy tracer and tentatively cast around, looking for signs of anything unusual. Or anything at all.

"Nothing, Doctor. Not a sausage. The only things registering at all are background cosmic radiation and the TARDIS."

"Good."

"Good?"

"I'm working on a theory. It's not much at this stage, but let's just say that minimal energy readings in this time zone fit in nicely. We shouldn't be picking up anything too specific, the means to generate it simply don't exist yet..."

Grae continued to turn in a slow circle, tracer outstretched. It suddenly gave a lively bleep and a series of figures scrolled across the screen. The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

"Oh well, you know what they say about the best-laid plans. Lead on, Grae!"

* * * * *

Tamara suddenly wished she'd kept her mouth shut. It had sounded like a really good suggestion while it was still rattling around inside her cranium, but exposed to the open air, the idea suddenly became slightly pathetic. Brooke seemed about to speak when Angus cut in.

"I think this group has had quite enough involvement in the dig already, thank you very much."

"Don't you use volunteers in archaeological work?"

"Of course, for some of the less delicate work. We always need fetchers and carriers. But I'm sure we can keep the dig staffed without..."

"I think it's a wonderful idea, Tamara." Brooke looked close to tears. Tamara wondered just how much the events of the last few hours had affected her. Angus raised a bristling eyebrow.

"The reason all this happened in the first place is ignorance," Brooke stared hard at the flowers on the tablecloth, not raising her eyes. "Our ignorance of what Doctor Maloney is doing on the site. Doctor Maloney's... misconceptions... about our religious practices. A few Firewolf volunteers on the dig site could educate us, and hopefully convince Doctor Maloney we're not all rat-bags."

"I can't keep an eye on all of you. It's very delicate work; it's not a free-for-all. And I want people to stay away from the stone."

"But extra volunteers would be useful to you on the site, Doctor Maloney?"

Angus contemplated for a moment. "Yes. If you're people are actually going to help, and not run around causing more trouble."

"Agreed."

* * * * *

Grae pushed branches out of her face as she and the Doctor fought on through the thickening undergrowth. Twigs caught at her long hair, undoing the elaborate bun and leaving it tangled at the nape of her neck. The Doctor, forging along behind her, letting out a muffled grunt every so

often as Grae let of a stick that swung back and connected with him. She stopped suddenly as the Doctor grabbed the back of her sweater.

"Listen."

"Running water."

"We've been moving parallel to that stream for a while now. It must be widening out."

Grae took a further few steps through the wild vegetation, and found herself tumbling out into a sudden clearing. A near-perfect circle of deep green grass broke the endless cover of forest, the stream thickening into a river as it wound through the centre. Grae looked around.

"The tracer levels are up. They're still rising."

The Doctor stroked his beard. "I think we're getting close."

"Maybe if – what's that?"

Through the forest, a white shape was approaching. The Doctor and Grae struggled back into the undergrowth as a small pony strolled, apparently effortlessly, into the clearing. The tiny horse, barely the size of a large dog, bore a slender, dark-haired woman. Her rough robe was, like the pony, a muddy white, her hair flowed loose around her face. She carried an air of calm with her, as though somehow slightly divorced from the world around her. She also carried a large dish of some sort.

"Doctor, how'd that animal get through the forest? I didn't see a path there."

The Doctor was watching the woman closely as she dismounted in an easy, fluid movement. "Local knowledge is a valuable thing."

The woman looked up, stared straight at Grae and the Doctor, apparently without seeing them.

"Down!" The Doctor grabbed Grae's shoulder and pushed her down, out of sight.

Grae wrinkled her nose as it came in close proximity to a small, heavily perfumed flower. The Doctor looked at her in alarm.

"Please don't sneeze."

* * * * *

Abhainn Beag gracefully slid from her mount. The pony instantly put his head down, munching on the soft green grass of the clearing. The woman knelt at the side of the stream, gently scooped a little water into the dish. The Doctor peered closely from his cover, trying to get a closer look. The dish was finely made, a masterpiece even by Timelord standards. It seemed to be made of silver, finely shaped into a graceful parabolic dish about a foot across. Both outer and inner surfaces were covered in designs the Doctor couldn't make out. Abhainn Beag swirled the water around the dish three times, then poured it reverently back into the river. She repeated the process again. And again.

"What's she doing, Doctor? Nobody puts that much effort into washing up."

"That bowl is the wrong shape to be practical. It might be some sort of religious ritual. I wish I knew a bit more about this time zone."

"Not one of your favourites?"

"Not one I've had a great deal to do with. Plus there's very little writing from this era, so the bits we do know have been pieced together by people like Angus. Hello, she's on the move."

Abhainn Beag scooped the silver dish full of water, and stood carefully. She called out to her pony in a low, guttural tongue. The obedient little animal trotted over, and stood patiently as Abhainn Beag expertly mounted without spilling a drop from the dish. She murmured again and scratched the pony's ears, and they moved slowly away along the same invisible path that led then to the clearing.

* * * * *

As the woman left the clearing, the Doctor stood and disentangled himself from the bushes.

"Quick Grae, what are the levels doing?"

"Up. Up a lot. The highest we've recorded here."

"Good. Follow her."

The Doctor set off across the clearing. The path was well hidden by the spreading base of a tree, but once the pair found it, it wound easily through the forest. The ground was bare and hard, compacted by generations of feet and hooves. The Doctor and Grae were able to easily follow the pony without being heard.

The path widened out abruptly into another clearing. This one had no stream, and the grass was thin and well trodden by heavy traffic. The air was still and cool, a mist hanging low over the trees. Grae shivered, as much from the atmosphere as the temperature. It felt familiar somehow. Suddenly Grae realised she felt the same frisson of age and history at Edinburgh Castle, earlier that day and two thousand years into the future. The twilight had by now deepened into evening, a heavy full moon hung low and yellow in the sky.

The woman dismounted her pony, again keeping the bowl perfectly level. She gave the pony a short, sharp command, and the little animal trotted away, trailing its hand-braided reins. Abhainn Beag knelt in the centre of the clearing. She adjusted her position until the silver bowl before her was filled by the reflection of the full moon. She threw back her head, and a piercing cry filled the air. She sustained a high, shrill note, making Grae wince. The Doctor put an arm around his companion, drew her back into the darkness of the path. Grae looked around. Around the clearing, figures were appearing. Heavily robed figures, carrying flaming torches.

* * * * *

Tamara looked into the deepening twilight.

"I wonder where they've got themselves to?"

Brooke followed her gaze. "Your friends?"

"They've gone to, ah, do some off-site investigation. But I was expecting them back a long time ago. I hope nothing's happened to them."

"Where have they gone? There's nowhere that hazardous around here, except perhaps Max and Cecily's kitchen."

"It's a long story."

Brooke gave a wry smile. "Aren't they all?"

* * * * *

The Doctor and Grae lay in the undergrowth, breathing quietly as the ceremony began. The clearing was ringed with burning torches, illuminating the figures, moving gracefully beneath their heavy robes. Like the woman, they were dressed in white, but their robes were heavy and stiff, unlike her thin, form-fitting gown. Her singing continued, the original piercing note blending imperceptibly into a slow, complex song. Changes in her singing matched the figures movements as they described a circle, then moved in more closely for more detailed work.

* * * * *

Grae rubbed her nose against her sleeve. The Doctor cast her a concerned glance.

"My nose tickles."

"It's the pollen. Breathe through your mouth."

"I think I'm going to sneeze."

The Doctor felt his companion take a deep breath, and reached out to clap a hand over her mouth and nose. He didn't move fast enough.

"Ah-Choo!" Grae's sneeze echoed around the clearing. The young Timelord gave a sheepish snuffle.

* * * * *

Around the clearing, the figures stopped and turned towards the source of the sneeze. Torches were pulled from the ground and thrust forwards into the darkness, until Grae and the Doctor were in plain view, crouching exposed on the ground.

A sound scraped through the night. It sounded hauntingly like the scrape of sword on scabbard. Grae pulled a little closer to the Doctor. The Doctor looked up as a ring of sharp daggers surrounded them.

"Ah-Choo!" Grae's sneeze echoed around the clearing. The young Timelord gave a sheepish snuffle. Around the clearing, the robed figures stopped and turned towards the source of the noise. A sound scraped through the night. It sounded hauntingly like the scrape of sword on scabbard. Grae pulled a little closer to the Doctor. The Doctor looked up as a ring of sharp daggers surrounded them.

Part 3: Spear

Somewhere in the distance, on the edge of Grae's hearing, a drum was beating. It told a slow, double-time rhythm, rapidly gaining pace. Grae backed away from the dagger points, found herself pressed against the Doctor, who was doing some backing away of his own. Grae realised the drum was her own heartbeat. She raised her hand to her rose-tinted spectacles, readying her mind for a little light crowd hypnosis. The Doctor slapped her sharply on the wrist, and Grae dropped her hand in surprise.

"I believe it's my turn to calm the unruly mob, my dear."

The Doctor straightened his waistcoat and cleared his throat. Ignoring the approaching blades, he turned towards the woman, still sitting delicately in the middle of the moonlit grove, holding the silver bowl carefully on her lap. She hadn't moved, barely seemed to register their presence. The men tried to stop him, but the Doctor neatly sidestepped them and bowed low before her.

"Cre a leacht duit."

The woman smiled; a languid, catlike movement. "Cre a leacht a neamh duit, stranger."

Grae's brow furrowed in confusion. Never before had the TARDIS refused to translate for her. She had a vague impression the exchange had something to do with sea and sky, and was some sort of ritual greeting. Grae wasn't sure what was going on. It was a novel experience for the logical young Timelord, and she didn't like it. The Doctor and the woman looked at each other closely for a few moments, without speaking. The hooded men shifted nervously, blades ready. Then Abhainn Beag abruptly waved her hand and called to her followers.

"They're friends. Let them go."

The drum in Grae's ears was only slightly quietened as she and the Doctor sat on the edge of the circle, watching the ceremony. The Doctor was bent over the energy tracer. It was running in silent mode now - the Doctor wasn't sure how far he could stretch his personal charm - and spewing a series of figures across the screen. As the figures dipped and weaved closer and closer to Abhainn Beag, even the Doctor's eyes couldn't keep up with the readings. He didn't have to, the very speed of the figures told him what he needed to know. The ritual was raising some sort

of energy. But not the simple, one-source energy the Doctor was expecting. It had seemed a nice, simple little case of lost-space-traveller-drains-power-from-primitive-natives, but the figures just weren't stacking up. Grae leaned across, whispered in his ear.

"Well, what do we know now?"

"My dear, we know now that we know a great deal less than before."

* * * * *

On the eastern horizon, a sickly ribbon of yellow light was struggling through the trees. Grae sat on the dewy grass, pulling her sodden coat a bit more snugly around her shoulders. The young Timelord was bored. The Doctor sat nearby, hunched over the tracer, ignoring his companion. He hadn't moved for about six hours. Grae was beginning to wonder whether he'd ossified. Her head nodded forwards, her eyelids drooping.

The Doctor stood up sharply. His knees creaked with the sudden movement after so many hours of stillness, and he looked down in alarm. Grae raised a sleepy eyebrow.

"Getting stiff in your old age, Doctor."

"My dear, I have the constitution of a hundred- and twenty-five-year-old. And I'll have you know... Ah!"

Grae looked up in alarm. The Doctor was standing bent over, grimacing slightly. Gingerly he reached around to his lower back, gave a sharp push, straightening painfully. He regarded Grae with a look of affronted dignity.

"As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted by a rogue lumbar vertebrae, I'll have you know there's a particularly interesting strain of energy registering."

Grae leapt to her feet as the Doctor took off, following the tracer. The Timelords traced a path through the gathering day, threading through the forest, never leaving the stream far behind. Grae leaned into her companion, her voice instinctively dropping to a whisper.

"Is it just my imagination, or do we seem to be following that watercourse?"

The Doctor nodded, distracted. "The water may be acting as a conduit for whatever we're looking for. It's getting stronger, we must be getting closer to the source."

"And what do we do when we find it?"

"My dear that depends very much on what we find."

From ahead came a voice, and a loud splash.

"Or what finds us, of course."

* * * * *

Tamara sat on a tarpaulin, nursing a plastic cup of coffee and silently cursing the Doctor. Work had been underway at the dig for almost two hours, and so far a spectacular amount of nothing had been achieved. From the two-dozen rioters who had stormed the site only a few days ago, only seven Firewolves had taken up the offer to work on the excavation. Most seemed unused to getting up with the sparrows, and dragged themselves around with varying degrees of tiredness and lethargy.

Boredom was beginning to set in as well as they realised archaeology wasn't all Lara Croft and Benny Summerfield after all. Most were young, and struck Tamara as the earnest, student type. Full of big ideas and Nietzsche. Certain their generation would be the one to change the world forever, not realising within a few years they too would have turned into their parents. They reminded Tamara a lot of herself when she was younger. A lifetime ago, before she'd joined the agency. Before a big blue box had turned up and offered her the one-way trip of a lifetime.

Max and Cecily didn't remind Tamara or herself when she was younger. They didn't remind Tamara of anyone she'd had much to do with, either, although she'd met a few shady characters at the Fringe one year who rang a few bells. Max was one of those incredibly tall young men, still waiting for the final touches of adulthood to fill out his gangly form. His shaven head gave him the vaguely sinister look of a bird of prey. It was Max, resplendent in his black velvet robe, which Tamara had marked as a troublemaker at the riot. He looked much less foreboding this morning, bleary-eyed and anoraked, with a Manchester United beanie protecting his naked scalp from the elements. Cecily stuck to his side like a limpet, and the man behind the dig, Doctor Angus Maloney, had obviously come to the conclusion that as a team they were almost as much use as one normal person.

Tamara tipped the last of her cooling tea out onto the grass and stood up, trying to swill her black mood away with the liquid. She shouldn't be complaining. It was a nice easy job. All she had to do was keep an eye on the dig, make sure everybody was where Angus told them to be and nobody caused any trouble. It didn't help to think of the Doctor and Grae, off in the midst of the action while she helped dig the fossilised remains of the action out of the ground. Tamara cast around for an interesting group to join. Max and Cecily had abandoned their trowels and were bent over something in their trench, looking almost lively. Tamara ambled over for a closer look.

* * * * *

The water was full of jewels. Abhainn Beag stood in the stream, gently rinsing the gleaming parabolic dish, ignoring the intricately hand-wrought jewellery and vast mounds of crude foreign coins beneath her feet. In places the smooth stones and mud of the stream bed couldn't be seen for the dull gleam of tarnishing metal. There were bigger pieces, too, sections of armour, bowls and goblets. The woman moved carefully through this section of the stream; there were sharper things below the water as well, swords and daggers left as offerings for the more bloodthirsty aspect of the Goddess who dwelt in the water. Abhainn Beag picked her way to the boulder which jutted roughly from the middle of the stream. Trails of white foam traced across the surface where it interrupted the flow of the water. At the foot of the stone, beneath the water, was a shallow ditch shaped to house the silver dish. Abhainn Beag carefully tucked the bowl away, safe until next time.

* * * * *

Grae pushed her spectacles back onto her forehead and rubbed the tense spot between her eyebrows. The young Timelord envied Tamara, back at the dig where interesting things were

happening, rather than following the Doctor through a forest which even in the midmorning light was less than welcoming. The Doctor stopped suddenly. Grae, still mid eyebrow-massage, didn't notice and ran straight into his back. The Doctor turned around and raised an eyebrow. He opened his mouth to make a witty remark when he noticed Grae's expression.

"You're not fed up?"

"Doctor, words cannot express how rapidly my fed-upness threshold is approaching. Another half hour wandering through the woods and I may not be responsible for my actions."

"Then it's just as well we're here."

"Here where?"

The Doctor indicated the stream ahead of them. A boulder protruded roughly from the water. "The strongest readings seem to be coming from the vicinity of that stone."

Grae looked at the Doctor and the Doctor looked at Grae. Together they pushed through the bushes and onto the stream bank.

* * * * *

"Good morning!" The Doctor gave Abhainn Beag a cheery wave as he strolled through the undergrowth to the edge of the stream. He tried not to notice that she was standing knee-deep in the water, her pale robe sodden and swirling around her ankles in the current. She pulled herself acrobatically onto the boulder, gave the Doctor a coy smile.

"Good morning, traveller. Have you found what you're looking for?"

The Doctor sneaked a quick glance at the tracer. The readings were too high for the device to unravel, a flat line at the top of the screen.

"I believe I'm getting closer. Do you mind if I join you?"

Grae emerged from the bushes in time to see the Doctor wading out into the water with the dignity of a gentleman out for a stroll on a country estate. He stood, casually leaning against the boulder Abhainn Beag was sitting on, feeling slightly damp and more than slightly ridiculous.

"Can you tell me more about what lives in the water?"

Abhainn Beag gave him a beady look. "In the water? Trout, salmon, a few cockles and plenty of reeds..."

The Doctor shook his head. "You know what I mean."

"Ahh, the Good People. They don't live in the water, it's just a doorway. Where there's water, or fire, or hills; that's where the worlds meet and travellers pass between them."

"Does that happen often?"

Abhainn Beag looked away at the far bank, flicked her dark hair over her shoulder. Her face was pensive, drawn. The Doctor wondered which nerve he'd managed to touch.

"No." There was a look in her eye which told the Doctor that was her final word on the subject.

* * * * *

Grae was crouched on the bank of the stream, letting the Doctor pump the woman for information. Grae traced a hand gingerly through the water, fascinated by the ripples of light playing over the offerings on the bottom. The water wasn't deep, Grae was able to reach in and touch the metal and jewels which lined the bed. She reached out towards an intricately worked piece of jewellery, a fine filigree of silver strands interwoven to form a metallic lace that became more complex the longer Grae's eyes followed the endless pattern. The water was warmer than she expected, almost pleasant as she reached gently through the water towards the store...

Grae pulled her hand back with a scream. She blew on her burnt fingertips, wondering what had just attacked her. An electrical current? No, she would have felt it as soon as she touched the water. Some aquatic stinging animal? No, the water was shallow and deserted this close to the bank. She looked up to see Abhainn Beag striding through the water towards her. The human woman sat on the bank, holding Grae's still-aching fingertips gently between the thumb and middle finger of her left hand. Abhainn Beag inhaled sharply, then slowly breathed out, dipping her feet back into the water and wiggling her toes. Grae flexed her fingers in amazement; the pain was gone. Not just gone, it felt like the sensation had been sucked out with a vacuum cleaner. There was only the faintest trace of redness to remind her of the experience. She was still flexing her fingers when Abhainn Beag spoke.

"I should have warned you, little one. The trinkets in the stream are offerings for the Good People, or our ancestors, or anyone from the other worlds who deserve our respect. And once those offerings have been made, they don't like their gifts disturbed."

"But what generated that charge? A jolt like that should be enough to wipe out all the aquatic life in this stretch of water."

"Ah, but the fish have more important things to concern themselves with than pretty stones and bent swords."

Grae nodded, gazing down into the water lapping around her ankles. That made more sense than a lot of things the Doctor said with the same level of conviction. Grae looked up, then around in surprise. Abhainn Beag was gone.

* * * * *

The Doctor sloshed over to his companion, still sitting in confusion in the stream. It was warmer in the water than out, so the pair stayed there to compare notes. While Grae had been lightly char-grilling her fingertips, the Doctor was engaged prodding around the boulder, taking readings.

"We can't prove anything, of course, but it's the same geological structure, it's big enough and the top's roughly the right shape... Grae, I wouldn't be at all surprised if the copy Stone of Destiny back at the dig was carved from that rock."

"And the energy levels?"

"Too high to even register properly. About a dozen different forms of energy went off the scale when you were zapped."

"So why aren't we surrounded by comatose fish?"

"And why haven't we both been electrocuted sitting in the water? No, it's more subtle than that. More..." the Doctor fished for the right word, "...focussed."

"Focused? Like with a lens?"

The Doctor shook his head. "Like there's an active intelligence behind it. Something that's still a few steps ahead of us."

* * * * *

Abhainn Beag twisted her hair into a long, tight spiral. She curled it up onto her head in a fluid movement and secured it in place with a wooden clasp. She knelt on the dirt floor of her hut; the low, windowless room dark even now in the daylight. The priestess had changed into a dry robe, a simple knee-length dress woven in patterns of brown and green. The weave told the world who she was; her status in the clan, her ancestry and prospects. Only the silver amulet around her neck, gleaming dully in the gloom, told her other story. Now dressed and tidy, she stood and turned to her companion.

"No."

He looked crestfallen. He was a few years her junior, taller with a blocky stance built more for endurance than speed. His trousers carried a weave similar to her own clothing, similar enough for them to be close clan members, but not similar enough to signal a blood relationship. He was naked from the waist up, a silver band around his upper arm mirroring the amulet around Abhainn Beag's throat. His looks would have had Tamara weak at the knees. At the moment he was more concerned with Abhainn Beag's look, which would have chilled the blood of a less stout-hearted man.

"Oenghis, I thought you understood. We've had this discussion before. We have a handful of days until the moon changes, and when it does, we must have a sacrifice. A proper sacrifice, with warm blood. And now it's obvious where that should come from."

"I'll kill a deer. A white hind, if I need to. I'll slay an eagle. I'll slay the wind itself if you give me the word."

"Stop it." She moved closer, placed her hands tenderly on his shoulders, looking up into his eyes.

"There are changes coming. I've seen them. All our ways and the ways of the Lia Fail will be swept away like sand on the tide. With a sacrifice - the sacrifice I've suggested - the Good People will be happy. Maybe these things can be avoided, maybe they can't. But we will have tried."

"And if we fail?"

Abhainn Beag smiled her catlike smile, and stroked the dagger at his belt. "Your arm is strong. We cannot fail."

* * * * *

Max and Cecily were bent over something half-buried in the mud, poking and prodding and discussing in whispered tones. Tamara had already decided she'd like to keep Max on her side. For as long as possible, anyway. Consciously putting away every scrap of spy training, the lithe woman ambled over nonchalantly, calling out as she approached.

"How's it going, guys?"

The pair spun around slightly too quickly. Cecily smiled slightly too broadly, Max contented himself with the usual scowl. "Nothin'."

"Oh," Tamara forced herself to ignore the obvious, "from over there you looked like you'd found something."

Max shifted, a nervous gesture that somehow managed to look aggressive. "Maybe."

"Well that's fantastic! That's what this is all in aid of, isn't it? How about we get Angus over to tell us a bit about it?"

"No."

Tamara dropped her smiley-happy-people facade in disgust, and gave Max a cold look. She didn't have Max's raw, boiling anger; Tamara's eyes were the glacier to Max's volcano. And like a glacier, it quietly and patiently ground Max's volcano to dust. The boy shifted uneasily. Cecily finally spoke up.

"We'll give it Doctor Maloney tomorrow - promise. It's only a tiny thing, a little bit of twisted metal. It might not even be that old - we'd only be wasting Doctor Maloney's time if we called him over and it turned out to be an old ring-pull or something. Max and I only need it for one night."

"What for?"

"A ritual."

"The Firewolves plan to use a genuine relic in one of their rituals?"

"Yes. No. Not the whole group. Just us two." She held Max fondly. "A bonding ritual. A Handfasting. It's like a wedding but without the whole church thing."

* * * * *

Tamara inwardly shook her head. No wonder the girl seemed out of her head half the time. She wasn't on drugs, it was something much more insidious, potentially much more dangerous. She was in love.

"Listen you two. We never had this conversation. I never saw you. You take your whatsit and do your thing. But first light tomorrow that thing's back here, in the ground, and we hand it over to Maloney. Understood?"

The pair nodded. Cecily smiled up at Max, utterly devoted. Tamara noted the look in Max's eyes. She couldn't quite place it, but it didn't look like any kind of love Tamara was familiar with.

* * * * *

Dusk. Work on the dig was winding down, tarpaulins neatly pinned down over the more interesting areas, tools stashed and various workers and volunteers drifting slowly away. It had been a long day, and Tamara had the distinct impression that even with extra manpower, nothing particularly interesting had been achieved. She felt slightly sick.. What if Max and Cecily's trinket was the most exciting thing to happen to British archaeology in a decade? It was carefully stashed in Cecily's tiny pink backpack, wrapped in four layers of toilet paper and a red and white beanie. Tamara followed the backpack at a discreet distance, leaving a few people between her

and her target. Strange how, even after all this time, the agency mindset came back so quickly. Within a heartbeat, Tamara, Max and Cecily and every passer-by weren't people, they were Agent, Target and White Noise. Black and White.

* * * * *

The Doctor switched the tracer off to conserve the dwindling batteries, shaking his head. "Practically nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Not a sausage. The background levels are a whisper higher than you'd expect, but whatever was emitting that energy, it's stopped."

"Have you found that bowl? It looked like it could be significant."

"A perfectly formed metal parabola in a culture that's barely developed metalwork, let alone mathematics? It certainly is significant. But no joy there either, Grae." From their seat on the riverbank, the Doctor nodded in the direction of the boulder. "It's stored near the Stone. I thought one would be contaminating the other.." He paused for a moment as he put his nearly-dry socks back on, rescuing his shoes from their spot in the dwindling sunlight and started tying up the laces.

Grae wiggled her toes. "It's as if they're both being influenced by something else..."

At the same instant the same thought crossed both the Timelords' minds.

"Or *someone* else."

"Abhainn Beag."

* * * * *

The Targets looked around nervously, looking like a three-dimensional textbook diagram of Guilt Perp Behaviour. They ducked inside a small, darkly-windowed shop. Tamara groaned as she saw the three balls hanging above the door. Why, just once, couldn't dodgy deeds be done in a nice part of town, over a latte at a chic little cafe, preferably one with a range of sticky things covered in dark chocolate to soothe the jaded agent's palate? Tamara lingered three doors down from the pawnshop, apparently engrossed in the window display for the Cut Above Hair Salon and Nail Boutique.

* * * * *

Mick didn't know the girl, but the boy looked familiar. He was one of those young hoods Mick was sure lifted the occasional CD from the racks, but unless you caught them red-handed the coppers didn't want to know. Mick had seen some funny goods through the shop in his time, from his vantage point behind the wire mesh screen to protect him from the great unwashed. These days it was mainly just the usual tat, scooters and amplifiers and hunting knives, the occasional spotting scope from a down-and-out birder. You didn't see much of the weird stuff anymore, Mick reflected; lava lamps and sexy foreign books and once, a big jade bong in the

shape of a fat naked woman. Mind you, Mick had never seen anything half as odd as the lump of rubbish this hood was trying to pass off onto him now.

"Sorry kiddo, no good to me. What was it before it got run over?"

Max puffed himself out and tried to sound impressive. "This is an authentic piece of stone-age Celtic jewellery. Hundreds of years old. Dug up not far from here."

Mick gave the boy a look. "So how'd you get it?" He glanced towards the door for a moment as the bell chimed. A smartly dressed black woman was checking out the washing machines - he might make some money today after all. If he could get rid of this pair.

"Look, I'm not interested. I don't care what it's supposed to be, I'm not taking it. If it really is some ancient mummy's treasure, take it to a museum or something. And if it isn't, chuck it back in whatever ditch you found it, because I'm not paying good money for that thing."

Nobody noticed Tamara moving closer, apparently engrossed in a shelf of tatty paperbacks. She positioned herself for a confrontation, behind Max and slightly to his weaker side. She cleared her throat.

Max swung around, nervous. He did an almost comic double-take when he saw Tamara.

"Do you people often get married in hock-shops?"

Max's mouth worked noiselessly, his face and scalp turning red. Tamara raised an eyebrow and held out her hand.

"I'll have that back, if you don't mind?"

Max took a step backwards, colliding with Mick's metal screen. He grabbed Cecily, pulled off her backpack and pushed her away. He rummaged in the small bag as Tamara moved closer. Mick stood silent, watching the in-house entertainment, his toe hovering a fraction above the duress alarm that would instantly let the security company and the coppers know there was a problem. Max found what he was looking for, and threw the still-open bag at Tamara, showering the floor with coins, tampons and old receipts. Tamara neatly sidestepped the missile without appearing to move, more concerned with whatever Max was holding against his chest.

"The amulet, Max. Now. Hand it over and we'll all go home. It won't go any further." Tamara was tempted to add 'don't be silly' when she realised what the boy was holding. Never tell an angry kid with a harpy blade not to be silly. The harpy was a beautiful piece of weaponry, shaped into a delicate hawk's bill, the hooked tip designed to catch and hold whatever it was cutting. It was less than three inches long, but Tamara knew in the right hands it had a hold-and-tear action that could do more damage than a longer straight blade. For a moment all eyes were focussed on the light flashing along the delicately curved surface.

Then the moment was over. Max screamed, a wordless sound full of rage. Behind his screen, Mick stamped down on the duress alarm. Hard. And again. The harpy described a silver whisper through the air as it flashed towards Tamara.

Mick's foot hovered an inch above the duress button on the floor. It would instantly alert the coppers and the security people to any funny business in the shop. But he didn't want to hit it just yet. Not only was the call-out fee an arm and a leg, but this was looking interesting. The boy was still yelling insults at the black woman, his shaven head turning an interesting shade of red as his rage mounted.

Max threw the backpack at Tamara, showering the floor with receipts and condoms and old lunch wrappers. The former agent neatly sidestepped the pathetic missile. He was holding something Tamara couldn't make out.

Then she saw it. She'd been expecting maybe some kind of blunt object, a makeshift weapon snatched from the shelves of the pawnshop. Maybe a cheap flick-knife. But this was a harpy blade, small but finely tooled, just as deadly as its namesake.

Max screamed a wordless scream, his face contorted as the blade flashed down towards Tamara.

Mick stamped down hard on the duress button on the floor under the counter. Twice.

Episode Four: Sword

Tamara shrugged off her calfskin jacket in a quick, fluid motion. In a subtle change of posture, Tamara was different. It was an almost imperceptible change, the way a sleeping face changes with the dawn. But suddenly, Tamara was a professional.

She stepped forwards towards Max, welcoming the knife. In a lithe, fishlike movement she stepped to the side of the knife's trajectory, her arm gently looped around Max's upraised knife arm. The boy was wild with rage, unbalanced, and Tamara easily pulled him forwards, his own feral momentum carrying him until he lay on the floor, his eyes an inch from the sticky carpet.

Tamara folded his arms neatly behind his back while he was still stunned from the fall, and sat on top of him, waiting for his somewhat limited senses to return. She was still congratulating herself on a job well done when the sirens started.

* * * * *

In the cool, clear daylight, the village had none of the foreboding gloom that leaked from torch lit corners in the depths of night. Low stone huts, neatly round and topped with thatch, dotted the clearing in a rough circle. Here and there open fires warmed the misty air as the inhabitants began their day. The Doctor strolled through the village, nodding good morrow at the locals as he passed.

Grae trailed a few paces behind, trying to keep up, physically and mentally.

"Doctor!"

"Hmm? The Doctor looked up from his scrutiny of the breakfast being cooked over a stone hearth. The development of rolled oats really wasn't set to radically alter until the arrival of the microwave in two thousand years' time.

"Is this wise?"

"We've established that Abhainn Beag is the source of the energy disturbances we've found, yes? She's the only link between the odd readings we found at the stone, the stream and that singularly striking silver dish. I think tracking her down for a cup of tea and a chat's about the only option we have."

"But shouldn't we have more of a plan? We can't just barge in and say 'Hey, we know you're up to something,' and expect her to tell us."

"My dear Grae, why ever not? I'm sure I don't know where you've picked up this cynical attitude - you really should try to cultivate faith in people's nature."

Grae bit her lip about exactly where she might have picked up such an attitude, and followed the Doctor as he continued his slow march towards Abhainn Beag's hut.

* * * * *

Angus was standing outside when the police arrived. He had the slightly stunned expression of a parent whose child has just come home with their first piercing. He merely pointed towards the door, mouth working soundlessly, and three police shouldered their way inside, one staying outside in case things got interesting.

* * * * *

"Good morning! I'm the Doctor and this is my friend, Grae."

"The morning is fair enough. Sup with me, fair visitors?"

Grae was about to turn down her third plate of porridge of the morning, when the Doctor trod heavily on her foot. Remembering the laws of hospitality, she warmly received the plate of lumpy oats thrust at her. It wasn't bad, and the dried berries dotted though were an improvement on the last batch she'd eaten back at the old woman's hut. It had come with nothing but gluggy oats boiled in water, and Grae had struggled to plough through her bowl while the Doctor and the aged matron discussed flowers, hand-to-hand combat strategy, last winter, and indeed everything except what they were looking for.

About halfway through the bowl, the Doctor made his move.

"Oh, by the way, you don't know where Abhainn Beag is this morning, do you?"

"Who?"

"That remarkable young dark-haired woman who looks after the stream and the treasures within it."

"Oh, that Abhainn Beag. She comes and she goes between this world and others and none can say where is, or when, or if indeed she was ever here."

Grae groaned inwardly as she chewed on a berry. It had been the same wherever they asked. The laws of hospitality made them welcome at every hut they passed, invited in for breakfast and a chat over the fire. But as soon as the conversation drifted around to the keeper of the stream, the chat dried up. Nobody knew where she was; nobody knew when she'd be back. A few people were reluctant to concede she existed at all. One thing was obvious: everybody knew where she was. And nobody was telling.

"Thank you so much for that delicious meal." The Doctor was in thanks-for-the-memories mode now, and Grae gulped down the last of her porridge and stood to join him.

"Can we help with the washing up?"

Their host looked at them oddly before placing the used bowls on the ground outside the hut. A small horse, the size of a Shetland pony but lithe like a greyhound, came nosing through the clay dishes, licking out the last of the cooked oats.

"Truly you come from afar. Your ways are strange."

* * * * *

"Angus, how can I ever repay you?"

"A hundred and forty-five quid in six easy instalments, interest payable monthly."

Tamara blanched for a moment, before a twinkle crept into Angus' eye. He wasn't the sort to laugh out loud at his own jokes or others'. Most of his humour was of the complicated talking-shop type that only made sense to other academics. But as Angus and Tamara made their way down the redbrick steps of the police station, they both dissolved into fits of laughter.

There were still marks on Tamara's wrists from the handcuffs. The police had been more than a little surprised to find, instead of the expected armed hold up, that a woman had apparently gone mad in the shop and wasted another customer with her bare hands. The harpy, who had skittered underneath a display case full of carnival glass during the fight, nearly went overlooked until Tamara nodded towards it and suggested it might be of interest to the investigation.

* * * * *

The officer who took possession of the Harpy blade blanched slightly then she saw it. She covered it well, and nobody else noticed her expression, but to another professional, like Tamara, her thoughts were written across her face like time on a clock. It was like finding out a dictator from a small country in the South Pacific had the nuclear firepower to end civilisation. The harpy wasn't the sort of thing you picked up off the back of a truck, or at tacky guns'n'ammo stores. It was neat. Short and well tooled, the curved double blade caught the light like crystal. The groove down the flat of the blade may well have been more for decoration than to allow the blood to flow freely, but the delicate curves of the blade had a hold-and-tear action that made it more deadly than a straight blade twice its length. Not to mention easier to conceal. In the right hands, it was a quick, whispering death. Fortunately, in Max's hands it was little more than a water pistol.

* * * * *

Tamara and Angus stood on the footpath. Around them, the twilight shoppers were heading home with their bargains. The night was closing in.

"I feel such a heel," Tamara explained as they headed back towards town, "We came here to help you with a funny looking rock, and now we've managed to let one of your artefacts be stolen, the Doctor and Grae have gone sideways on some mission of their own, and I've caused three hundred quids worth of damage at a hock shop, and called you to bail me out of jail."

Angus nodded slowly. "It's been an interesting few days. But we did get the pendant back, that's the main thing."

Tamara felt a twinge of guilt. It was her bright idea to let Max and Cecily take their find from the dig site. They'd told her they needed it for a pagan ritual. She should have known better.

Angus caught her expression and made a harrumphing noise in his throat.

"I don't suppose you remember where in the dig it was found?"

Tamara smiled. "I'm not totally useless - ten metres south of the main donga you'll find a coral lip liner sticking out of the ground. You can still see the impression of the pendant in the ground there."

"We'll go back and have a look before the rain has chance to interfere with the site."

Tamara nodded. With the TARDIS still *in absentia*, she might as well follow Angus around. The alternative was looking for a hotel in a strange town with no luggage, not much money and plastic that, as she'd discovered to her deep embarrassment in the police station, didn't actually work in this year. She'd have a word with the Doctor about his 'instant acceptance anywhere' Bank of Thal debit card when she saw him next. When he came back. Because he was coming back. He just wasn't here yet. Why he was keeping her waiting when he had a time machine Tamara didn't really want to think about. But he was coming back.

* * * * *

Brooke was an early riser. The downside was that the leader of the Firewolves was also an early sleeper. It was a little after nine and Brooke stood in front of the bathroom mirror, combing her long, jet-black hair and checking for regrowth. She squirted a blob of moisturiser into her hand and spread it liberally about her face. She'd found her first wrinkle - well, it looked like a wrinkle to her - just a few days ago, and she was engaging in a little post-equine aperture closure. She was tired. The Firewolves crap was really getting to her. In front of the group she tried to appear calm and serene and in-control like a good High Priestess, but she was jack of it. She dreamed of telling them all to go and drown themselves in their own cauldrons; the limpets who'd clung to her since the idea of setting up a coven had first been mooted, the blow-ins who came to one ritual in ten and whinged when they didn't know what was going on, the pond scum like Max and Cecily who were just trying to screw enough knowledge out her to summon the devil and become all powerful rulers of the known cosmos.

Brooke had just come to the noble but self-sacrificing conclusion that she'd hang in for another nine months when the phone rang. She wandered out into the kitchen in her nightie, moisturiser in her hair, plastering more chamomile-scented goo onto the receiver as she picked up.

"Hello?"

"Yo Brookster! Hey it's Max. There's been some trouble and I need you to..."

"Who is this?"

"It's Max. The hot guy from the coven."

"Max, it's late. I've already told you. After that performance at the dig site I need you to just leave me alone for a while."

"But Brooke, there's been some trouble, see, and I want..."

"What sort of trouble, Max? What've you done this time?"

"It was for the greater good of the coven an' all, right? So Cec' and I found a bit of goods on the dig site and we lifted it, but now that black bitch got the cops on us and--"

"You did what?" Maybe six months would be enough.

"It was for the good of the coven. A focus-thing, you know. A real old bit of goods and we..."

"And Tamara has called in the police?" Brooke wearily rested her head against the wall. She mentally revised her staying-time down to three months.

"Yeh, and I need some of the kitty for bail, see, 'cause--"

"No, Max." Six weeks.

"There's loads of money in the account now, I only need five--"

"No. I am not using coven money to fund your stupidity, and your childishness, and your criminal games and your *bloody* ego."

"But Brookster--"

"Rot in hell, Max."

Brooke hung up the phone, then thought again and took it off the hook. Then she unplugged it from the wall and double-checked all the doors and windows were bolted. She unwrapped her athame from the velvet pouch it usually inhabited and put it on the bedside table. The blade might be kept deliberately dull, but it made her feel safer. She'd disband the Firewolves tomorrow.

* * * * *

The Doctor turned the energy tracer off, shook it hard and turned it back on. The batteries were nearly exhausted; the last few days chasing wildly fluctuating energy streams through the forest had taken its toll. Grae balanced her tinted glasses on her forehead and leaned over the Doctor's shoulder to inspect the device.

"We could just go back to the TARDIS and get some fresh batteries?"

The Doctor shook his head. "Until we know what's behind the energy leaks, I don't want to risk it. There's something not quite right around here, Grae, and I don't want whatever's causing it to know we're on to them. Let's just leave the TARDIS drifting in her holding pattern for now, hmm?"

The Doctor took out the batteries, gave them an individual shake, licked the contact points, blew on them and replaced them. Nothing. The tracer was dead. Grae took the tiny machine from him and slipped the battery hatch open again. She turned the batteries over so the positive terminals were pointing towards the little plus sign engraved in the case, and snapped the cover back on. The Doctor smiled sheepishly as the tracer stuttered to life.

* * * * *

Tamara looked at herself in the mirror. She didn't look too bad after her all-nighter on the dig site, all things considered. She upended her toiletries bag and freshened herself up. The naff little tartan bag had been a gift from the Doctor, and while it might look like something her granny would keep hankies in, its dimensional transcending capabilities cam in mighty handy. The

inside of the bag was slightly more than three times the size of the demountable loo on the dig site. A hair band, a clean outfit and a brisk latte later, Tamara was ready for anything.

* * * * *

Grae thought she'd remembered the way to the stream. Past the gnarled oak, past the relics of a long-dead fire, through the silver birch and the clear water should have been gurgling straight ahead of them. She turned to the Doctor.

"We're not lost. We're just a bit further upstream than before. This way we can travel downstream towards that rock Abhainn Beag hangs around, and maybe we'll sneak up on her."

The Doctor nodded. "A clever ploy."

Grae nodded proudly, then gave a self-depreciating grin as the Doctor continued. "It would of course be easier to sneak up on someone if it didn't involve either splashing through the middle of a respectably sized watercourse or thrashing through four-foot reeds, but it's a good plan."

Grae shrugged. "It's the best plan we've got unless you can remember the way. I'm afraid one ancient, gnarled oak is starting to look much like another."

The Doctor straightened, liked his finger and held it up to the breeze. Apparently puzzled, he held his finger to his ear and shook it, stuck out his tongue, crossed his eyes, blinked deliberately and spun in a slow circle.

"Splashing or thrashing?"

* * * * *

Brooke carefully described swirls in the froth of her coffee with her spoon. She reached for the no-fat, no-calories, no-taste sweetener, then decisively shoved it aside and gleefully tipped in three spoonful's of sugar. Tamara raised an eyebrow. The women were back in the cafe from their last meeting. Was it really only two days ago? It felt like a lifetime. Brooke had rung up the office and, amid calls that she was usually so reliable and they didn't know what they were going to do without her, simply told them she wouldn't be in today for personal reasons and that was that. She wasn't sure why she'd sought out Tamara, but it had something to do with being taken seriously. Brooke took her spirituality seriously, and found it hard to confide in people in case they asked her where she'd parked her broomstick. But something told her Tamara had seen much stranger things. Tamara was making good progress on her second coffee of the morning as she broke the ice.

"So how goes the coven business?"

"It doesn't, at the moment. I think I need a rest."

"So how does the Firewolves group work? It's not something I've had a lot to do with."

"We're not really that structured. It started as just a few friends, starting out on the pagan thing. We got together and learned, compared notes, tested theories. We got a bit older, a bit wiser, started celebrating the sabbats and performing the occasional ritual. Gradually word of mouth got around, and we ended up with new people seeking us out. We didn't want to look like some sort of "secret knowledge not for the uninitiated" turnout, so we pretty much included

anyone who turned up and looked like they were going to take it seriously." Brooke looked into the middle distance for a moment. "That was the mistake."

"That's how you ended up with yahoos like Max involved?"

Brooke snorted into her cappuccino, "Oh, don't ask me where he popped up from." She looked serious for a moment. "Look, about the stolen amulet..."

Tamara waved her into silence. "Forget about it. Max and his little friend spun me a line, but I didn't fall for it. Call it personal curiosity; I wanted to see what they'd do with it.

Brooke massaged her temples "I've never been so embarrassed."

"You have to admit it's pretty funny though - they went to tall the trouble of nicking it and couldn't even persuade the fence to take it!"

Brooke gave a small, humourless laugh. "I'm glad it happened, in a way. I'm disbanding the Wolves. She looked up decisively. I'm going back to solitary practice. The rest of the group," she shrugged, "they can either reform without me, or go their separate ways. But it's just..." She groped for words.

"Been hijacked?"

"Yes, hijacked by ratbags."

The girls finished their coffee in silence. Outside children yelled though the morning as the weekday warmed up, streams of people heading towards schools and offices. In the distance a jackhammer started up, pounding an unfortunate slice of bitumen.

Tamara finally broke the silence. "So what are your plans for today?"

"None, at this stage. Doing a great deal of nothing."

"Do you want to come back to the dig? Have another look at that funny stone?"

Brooke hesitated. Her plans had so far involved doing some washing and ringing her mother.

"Sure, why not?"

* * * * *

The Doctor and Grae were approaching a more familiar stretch of water. Grae realised they were just around a bend from the stone. She was about to call out for the Doctor when the air was pierced with a strangled scream. A man's cry. Grae whipped around. The Doctor came up behind her, sprinting as best he could through two feet of water.

"Grae! That noise!"

"It's coming from down there, Doctor.

Together the Timelords struggled through the water. As they neared the bend, they heard a second cry, quieter, more a moan than a scream. Together the Doctor and Grae rounded the bend.

* * * * *

Abhainn Beag knelt in the water. She was wearing her white robe, the wet fabric translucent against her skin. Her dark hair was tangled, playing over her shoulder and dangling unheeded in the water. Around her feet the water swirled red, slashes of colour across her robe and arms.

She cradled her lover in her arms. Oenghis was the clan champion, strong of arm, powerful in battle, and fair of face. His face was still now, his tongue silent. A dark gash across his throat told the tale of Abhainn Beag's blade. A goodly sacrifice. She held him close, keening a high, unearthly wail as the light left his dark eyes.

She looked up in terror as the Doctor and Grae arrived. Grae went to dart forwards towards the injured man, but the Doctor grabbed her and held her back.

"No Grae. There's nothing we can do."

"She killed him! Doctor! We have to..." the young Timelord struggled to get out of the Doctor's grip, to lunge towards the murderess in the stream. The woman stood unsteadily, gently raised the silver cauldron. It was full, this time full not of clear water but dark, warm blood.

Abhainn Beag waded through the water towards the stone the jutted from the middle of the stream. Grae fell silent. The Doctor let go of her jacket and let her sink to her knees in the water, watching the scene. He retrieved the tracer from his pocket and shook it. It sputtered to life, confirming what the Doctor's fear. Confirming the evidence that raced through his bombarded mind as energy levels skyrocketed. Oenghis' death had triggered something, something raw and primal.

* * * * *

Abhainn Beag gracefully tipped the cauldron over the stone, allowing her slain lover's blood to coat the boulder. As the blood ran free, Grae could make out delicate carvings on the stone's surface, the rock glittering in the sickly sunlight. She was roused from her reverie as the Doctor gently shook her shoulder. She looked up as though waking from a trance. The Doctor passed her the tracer. She looked at it at it, but the results were meaningless. All it told her was that there was a lot of something going on, and her own eyes could tell her that.

* * * * *

The sacrifice was begun, but not yet ended. Abhainn Beag steadied herself against the stone, her bloodied fingers tracing the ancient marks across its surface. She prayed to the ancestors to give her courage. Then she retrieved her blade and in a quick, fluid movement, slit her own throat.

She didn't collapse straight away. The woman leaned forwards, holding the stone like a drunkard leaning on a lamppost. Gently she lowered herself into the stream. She was still conscious when the waters claimed her.

* * * * *

On the tent at the churned-up dig site, Brooke ran her hands gently over the Stone. It shouldn't be here, yet here it was. A perfect facsimile of the Stone of Destiny, the Lia Fail, uncovered in a muddy Scottish field. Tamara rubbed her eyes. The sleepless night was obviously getting to her. For a moment, Brooke looked, well, different. Her carefully styled dark hair seemed to hang long and tangled about her face. Her smart teal suit seemed to be replaced by some sort of flowing

dress, wet and filthy and streaked with blood. Her hands played over the stone as though she were in a daze, in some private rapture.

* * * * *

The Doctor and Grae splashed as quietly as they could towards the bodies. They reached Oenghis first, lying cold in the stream. The Doctor gently closed his eyes, indicated wordlessly to Grae that they should move his body up onto the bank. The Timelord grasped the human's shoulders, carefully supporting the lolling head. Grae gingerly lifted his legs, and between them they lifted the body out of the water. Grae shuddered, and tried to find some water that wasn't tinted with red to wash her hands.

"Doctor, what's happening?"

"A sacrifice, Grae. Human sacrifice."

The Doctor took out the tracer. The energy levels were dropping quickly. Within a few minutes, they were barely higher than normal background radiation. The current of the stream had carried most of the blood away, and where the Doctor and Grae stood was clear as crystal once more.

Grae looked at the Doctor as though to ask another question, but the Doctor shook his head.

"Don't ask, Grae. I can't answer. And perhaps it's best not to know."

The Doctor waded out further into the water, towards the stone still slick with blood. With a start Grae remembered there was still another body to shift.

"Hullo?" The Doctor sounded confused. "That's odd."

There was nothing in the stream but rocks and the occasional trout. Of Abhainn Beag's body there was no sign.

"Could she have crawled away?"

The Doctor shook his head. "With a wound like that? She wouldn't get far. There's no sign of blood on the bank. And we'd have heard her splashing around. No, she hasn't crawled away. She's gone... Elsewhere."

The Doctor remembered his conversation with Abhainn Beag just a few days earlier.

"Can you tell me more about what lives in the water?"

"In the water? Trout, salmon, a few cockles and plenty of reeds..."

The Doctor shook his head. "You know what I mean."

"Ahh, the Good People. They don't live in the water, it's just a doorway. Where there's water, or fire, or hills; that's where the worlds meet, and travellers pass between them."

"A doorway," the Doctor mused.

* * * * *

Tamara shook her head and the vision was gone. There was a dreamy look in Brooke's eyes, as if she'd experienced it too. The mood was broken by a wheezing, trumpeting noise outside.

Brooke looked up in alarm.

"Take care of yourself," Tamara said. "I have to go - that's my ride."

A woman, a man, a stone and a problem.

The Doctor comes to the aid of an old friend,
an archaeologist who's found something improbable in a muddy field.

The local pagan community might be the only people who can shed light on the discovery,
but they're facing problems of their own as newer,
more radical elements rise through the ranks.

But a side-trip back in time to the source of the problem
brings more questions than answers, as the Doctor uncovers...
A woman, a man, a stone and a problem.

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