



AndrasHill

PETER HILTZ

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Introduction

This novella is cosy fantasy slice of life - no action, no violence, great stakes, spice or chosen one.

On the cusp of the English civil war, amid a climate of witch hunts, the remote village of Andras Hill is forced to admit there is a hillside spirit deep in the neighbouring hills. The villagers try to understand the benefits and dangers of having a supernatural neighbour and how that impacts their own relationships within the village. Some struggle more than others to define their relationship with that reality. For a few, it is an Outside Context Problem for their world view. For others, it is Tuesday.

Each chapter is told from the perspective of one or more of the people in the village with the exception of the ballad *Song of Anthracyda*, reproduced after the Epilogue in modern english with chords. The ballad recounts the story of a shepherd meeting the small god (or hillside spirit if you choose) Anthracyda in a blizzard on Winter Solstice, December 21, 1641. It is told from the shepherd's point of view in the *Shepherd's Tale* in the Prologue.

Thank you to my sisters Patty and Erin for their interest, reading, editing and research, without whom this would not have been written. Also thanks to my daughter Colleen for her pointers on psychological drivers for some of the characters. Finally, thanks to my wife Shirley Worth for keeping me sane.

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Chapter 1

Prologue

Duncane Lyfelde December 21-22, 1641

My name is Duncane Lyfelde. My tale begins in December, in the year of Our Lord 1641. It was still early winter with no snow on the ground. I took my flock over Andras Hill two days ago to graze before the winter storms would cover the last of the grass.

Cold it was, but the sun was shining, the sheep were content, and I'd seen no sign of wolves. All was right with the world and my mind slipped off to think about Hannah, of the downcast eyes and sideways smile. Her father being a fisherman, would he allow her to cross the line twixt farm and fish? The village is small. Its not like I'd be taking her away.

I pull out my pipe and play a little tune for the sheep. In this dell it echoes well, and you can get a little call and response, though that is wasted on the sheep. Suddenly, a whisper joins the melody. The sheep look up as a shadow crosses the sun and I see the clouds begin to build to the west. Dark and heavy with snow, well before I expected it.

Time for home. I whistle, and Fire and Frost look up. Another whistle and they are racing out to bring the sheep together. Good boys, the best a shepherd could hope for.

The first flakes started falling as we finally got the sheep turned towards home. We just get over the fourth crest and start down when the snow decides to declare war on all below. We're not going to make the third crest. My stomach twists as the Standing Stones start to loom out of the driving white flakes. We're a little north of the normal path. Even Frost and

Fire won't be able to keep the sheep together in the storm if we keep going. I tell myself the pagan gods are dead and we can shelter in the shadow of the Stones for the night without fear.

A final whistle, almost leaden in the quiet snow, and Fire and Frost turn the flock towards the Stones. Dumb animals, they never heard the stories of the past. Pagans sacrificing babies to their false gods. The stories we told each other when we were young of the ghosts that haunted the Stones. 9 or 10 feet tall they were, and though we sometimes dared each other, none of us as children tried to climb them. We could use their bulk as windbreaks and start again in the morning, after the storm had passed. I chose one stone and let the sheep choose their own. As I sat down, back against the stone, Fire and Frost lay down and pressed close beside me. At the speed the snow continued to fall, we'd all be buried by morning.

Even if I tell myself there are no such things as ghosts, I can feel myself praying that I don't die tonight. If I die, I'm not sure the Vicar would allow me to be buried in the churchyard. I think of Hannah, and how it would feel to be in her arms. To hold and be held. The warmth of her body next to mine. The ...

"Hello"

The word came with no sound. Just in my mind. From everywhere in my mind. Not loud, but very careful, like one talking to a lost child lest the speaker scare the child.

I looked left and right, but could see no one. I scrambled to my feet, away from the stone, startling Frost and Fire, and they sniffed the air. Sheep looked around, trying to decide whether to flee into the dark.

"Don't be frightened"

Again, the words seemed to sound in my mind, bypassing my ears. This time I tried to control my breath. If this wasn't a ghost or demon, I couldn't afford to lose the sheep.

"Who's there?" I choked out.

"You may call me 'Anthracyda'. I can hear your thoughts, you don't need to say them out loud."

"Are you a ghost or demon?" I tried to say it inside my head. Not all of my trembling was because of the cold, but I

also didn't want to offend.

"I am what I am. You might call me the god of Andras Hill. The hill, not your village. Or just call me a hillside spirit."

"There is only one God! The God of all."

"If you say so. Have you spoken?"

"I pray every day, he will protect me."

"Did he respond? Protect you against what? The cold?"

"Yes, against the cold."

"Why do you say 'he'?"

"He is our father."

"How can he be a father without a mother?"

"What?"

"Your creator God. How can you have a father without a mother? You're a shepherd. You do understand how babies and lambs are made? You need two parents."

"What?" I'm now cold and confused rather than scared. I've never heard tales of ghosts or demons that talked like this. Suddenly, Frost and Fire stand up and start circling the sheep. The sheep in turn stumble to their feet and crowd together, passing into the centre of the stone circle, and then lie down again. When did the snow in the circle disappear?

"You can't take my sheep!" I cry at the stones. Are they going to be sacrificed and eaten right in front of me?

"I'm not taking 'your' sheep. I've made it warmer inside the circle and they, at least, have the sense to move toward the warmth. If you want to stand outside and freeze to death, be my guest."

"Are you Fae?"

A chuckle sounded inside my head. *"No. You will not be trapped within the circle and I will not offer food and drink that you mustn't eat. You can return to your village in the morning and only the night will have passed. Those stories aren't real."*

I looked at Fire and Frost. They were now inside the circle of stones and settling down on the grass. The light was failing. I decided to trust their instincts and stepped past a standing stone. It was warmer here. The grass was even dry. How? Why?

"You may sleep in safety."

I wrapped my coat around me and laid my head against Frost's side.

Frost awakened me, heaving himself up and stretching in the morning light. I sat up and looked around. The sheep were starting to stand. As far as I could tell, they were all here. Outside the stone circle, the snow was a foot deep, two feet deep in places where the wind blew it into drifts. Inside the circle, just dry grass except where the centre stone sat buried. It would be tiring to get home through the snow, but was certainly possible.

"So, little shepherd, will you tell a tale about the haunted stones that protected you from the blizzard or was this all a dream?" The voice appeared in my head, both curious and amused.

"Have you dealt with humans before?"

"Yes. Long ago as you count, but a short time as I count, there was a farming village near where yours is now. They would dance around the stones in the spring and at harvest. They sang and thanked me for good harvests, whether I had anything to do with it or not. New parents would introduce their children and the children would introduce their puppies. Lovers would ask for blessings and the elderly for a quiet passage."

"Then your people came and killed them all in the name of a loving god. That was just an excuse of course. No one ever thinks of themselves as the villain of their own story. It has been some time since I talked to anyone other than the birds, trees and animals."

"T'would be safer to think it a dream, but I owe you thanks, for my life and my flock."

"Return then in the spring and play me some tunes on your pipe. I will count that as recompense."

I nodded and whistled to Fire and Frost to start the sheep toward home.

Hannah Malison December 1641 - Spring 1642

December 1641

We'd heard no pipe.

My father watched me pace, stove to table to door and back.

Night had fallen, the wind and snow whistled outside, but we were safe and warm inside. Normally I'd be sitting at the table, mending or making, but today ...

"Hannah, Duncane's a good man for all that he's shepherd and not a fisherman. He'll wrap himself in the flock and be covered in wool. Does your mother pace this much when I'm at sea in a storm?"

"Sometimes." came the soft reply from my mother at the table. "You're just not here to see it."

I whirled around to face my father.

"I thought you didn't approve."

He looked down at the fish lines in his hand, sighed, and looked back up.

"I know he won't help me on the boat when I get old. But I remember when I knew your mother was the one. And I see that in you now. Oswyn will do."

My younger brother Oswyn snorted as he sat on a bench mending a piece of net.

My mother hid a smile and looked down at her knitting. "Maybe she'll knit you a net."

"The damn thing would be too heavy to lift as soon as it got wet."

Have you ever thought of your parents being your age and falling in love? I never heard a single story from them about growing up. Life was just one chore after the next. If something broke, you figured out how to fix it or do without, or maybe traded something with a neighbour. The only stories I remember were stories from the Bible as Oswyn, Clarice and I learned to read. It never entered my mind that they had been children at one time, let alone courted.

Now I had been distracted twice. First at the thought that my father would even countenance Duncane courting me, and then at the thought of my parents being my age. When I climbed into bed with Clarice in the loft later that night, I was still wondering about my parents as children. I didn't think till later to wonder why the stories we read at home from the Bible never seemed to be the stories we heard in the Vicar's sermons. Or

why, unlike some of our neighbours, our parents never beat us. We dutifully went to church on Sundays, but apparently whatever fire and brimstone the Vicar shouted went in one ear and out the other of both of my parents. Were they listening or just going through the motions?

1.1 Duncane's Return

It was late the next day when I heard Duncane's pipe in the distance. Part of me wanted to sing with the music, but that would probably be frowned upon by the Vicar. I knew Duncane was safe and that was enough. He'd be turning the sheep into their winter pens and I had to help my mother salting fish. Maybe I'd see him tomorrow.

At noon the following day, my father and Oswyn were working at the boat. I heard a little pipe tune. Hastily looking out the door, I saw Duncane's figure, lithe even in his winter coat, turn the corner, tramping through the half foot of snow that had fallen two days before.

"Go out or come in and shut the door." said my mother. "You're not a cat."

I grabbed my coat and tied on my overshoes, walked out on the porch and closed the door. Duncane came over, but, as was proper, did not step up on the porch.

"I had the strangest dream up on the mountain." Duncane started. "The sheep bedded down next to the Standing Stones and Fire and Frost couldn't get them to move."

"What happened?"

"Something talked to me. It kept the ground within the Standing Stones warm in exchange for my promise to return in the spring and play some tunes on my pipe."

"That doesn't sound like something a devil or demon would do."

"No, and it denied being Fae. It didn't say what it was, just that I could sleep in safety."

"And this all happened in a dream?"

"Yes, but when I woke up, there really was no snow inside

the circle and two feet of snow outside the circle.”

“I don’t think you should mention this to anyone.”

“I almost didn’t mention it to you.”

“And you’re not going back to the Stones without me in the spring.”

Spring 1642

Finally, spring came around. Duncane talked to my father down at the boats. I think he wanted it to be man to man and not have me around if the answer was no. As he promised the night of the snow that caught Duncane on the mountain, my father gave permission for Duncane to court me. That meant, at least for me, that we could go on unsupervised walks together on the mountain. And that meant maybe meeting the ghost or whatever it was from Duncane’s dream.

I could barely contain my excitement. Even if Duncane’s dream wasn’t real, the thought of going to the Stones felt like planning to steal a sweet. They were not explicitly forbidden, you just knew that the Vicar would frown and denounce you if discovered.

Lambing season had just ended and Duncane’s brother Avery had agreed to watch the flock with Frost and Fire, Duncane’s dogs. If we had the sheep, we would never be able to get to the Stones and back to the village in daylight. Even my parents would not accept that.

By the time we reached the Stones three hours later, I was out of breath. Duncane, of course, was fine. He wanders up and down the hills with the flock constantly, but I don’t. I stopped at a distance, suddenly a bit nervous. Duncane took my hand and smiled. I gathered my courage and stepped towards the Stones.

Nothing happened. Duncane and I reached out with our free hands and touched a stone. It was just a cool stone, planted in the hillside by some barbarian tribe hundreds of years ago. I realized I was holding my breath and finally let it out and turned to Duncane.

“I guess it was just a dream.” Duncane said.

“Hello Little Ones”

I gasped and sat down suddenly on the grass. The voice

was inside my head. Not loud, not soft, just there.

Duncane bent over me, a look of concern on his face. I waved him away.

“It talks”

“Have you come here to play for me?”

Duncane apparently heard the voice in his head as well and replied “Yes. I promised to return and pay my debt.”

He sat down, pulled out his pipe and began to play a little jig tune. Somehow I could feel the voice’s attention on the tune and the voice’s attention on me and the voice’s attention on some butterflies and ...

“Yes, I can hear your thoughts, and give you some of mine in return.”

“You’re real!”

The voice seemed amused. *“That depends on what you think is real.”*

“Thank you for protecting Duncane.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Are you a demon?”

Now the voice seemed to sigh sadly.

“What is a demon, little one?”

“Something evil, pretending to help us and then stealing our souls.”

The voice in my head seemed to chuckle.

“Think about your question, little one. If I was a demon, I would not admit it, so I would say ‘No’. If I wasn’t a demon, I would also say ‘No’. It sounds like a witch finder question - no matter the answer, the woman is always a witch. Am I right?”

I turned the question over in my mind. It was true the only answer would be ‘No’.

“How am I to know if you are evil?”

“Let me tell you a story. Long ago, as you count time, there was another village here. They didn’t speak your language or worship your god. They were the ones who set up the Stones here to mark where we would meet on the hill.

We would talk, and they would gather, play music and dance. Sometimes to celebrate the changing of the seasons, sometimes

to thank me for what little I might have done to help them in their harvest or protect them from storms.

Then one day a new people arrived, with swords and spears, killing the villagers because they worshipped the wrong gods. I have some ability to influence the weather around this hill, but the village was beyond my reach and I couldn't save them from other humans.

Who is evil in this story?"

"Obviously the viking raiders!"

"What viking raiders? The murderers were the people who settled your village here."

"But we're Christians!"

"And yet, in the name of a 'loving god', your ancestors slaughtered a village that had done no harm to them."

I suddenly realized that Duncane was still playing his pipe and was not included in the conversation in my mind. I knew what the Vicar would say. He would repeat the command that "Thou shalt not place any other gods before me" and that those who deal with spirits should be killed. But the voice had saved Duncane and kept him warm in the blizzard. It wasn't asking for worship; We were not placing it before God. It only asked him to play some music in return for keeping him safe.

The voice seemed to withdraw a little and return to listening to Duncane's music. I looked around for the butterflies, but they seemed to have left the circle. I wrapped my arms around my knees and listened to Duncane's pipe. He was now playing some air that I hadn't heard before. In my imagination, the air around the Stones seemed to sparkle with the rhythm and melody, as if to play with him.

Finally, Duncane put down his pipe and the sparkles stilled.

"Thank you" said the voice. "And now I'll give you a gift in return."

Duncane and I looked at each other, wondering what that could be. Suddenly I felt like I could see colours shining in an aura around him. I put my hand to my mouth and was about to scream when the voice said, "No, children. Just watch." Duncane had started as well.

“You’re glowing!”

“You’re glowing too!”

The colours seemed to expand until they touched and there were sparkles everywhere in the circle and then the colours slowly faded away.

“You will both be good for each other.” said the voice with a sense of satisfaction. *“Be an example to others in your village about respect and kindness and support. If you climb the hill again, I will respond to you.”*

“What do I call you? I can’t just call you the Voice in Stones.”

“You may call me Anthracyda. Now return home in peace.”

The sense of presence of the voice was gone. We looked at each other and breathed, “It wasn’t a dream.”

Elspet Mar Malison

Evening was falling as I saw Hannah and Duncane top the rise and started down towards the village hand in hand. Dauy and I knew where they had gone. An all day courting walk on the path they had taken would bring them close to the Stones. While some in the village told stories of the “haunted” Stones to scare children, Dauy and I knew better.

Looking at Hannah and Duncane now, as they came closer, there was just that something that made me know. They knew what Dauy and I knew. Up the mountain, there was still a hillside spirit.

As they came close to the house, I said “You look like you’ve had good news.”

They started, and looked at each other as if they had something to hide.

“Don’t bother trying to pretend. You are both bad liars. I can just look at you and know you’ve been to the Stones.”

“Mother,” Hannah started, “we..”

“You’ve talked to Anthracyda.”

“You know about it?”

“Yes. There are a few families in the village who know, but we don’t spread it about. The Vicar would be calling for a Witch Finder and we’d all be dead.”

"What is it? It said it was a hillside spirit."

"How should I know? In the old stories, 'gods' wanted to be worshipped. It doesn't seem to want that."

Duncane spoke up for the first time. "The night I spent on the hillside with the sheep on Winter Solstice in the blizzard, it warmed the stones. It didn't ask for payment, but said that if I returned in the spring and played my pipes, that would be recompense."

"And so the two of you walked all the way to the Stones to repay the gift?"

"Yes." they both replied.

"I can tell something else happened."

Hannah said: "It made us glow and everything sparkled."

"So it blessed you and your future marriage?"

"It didn't 'bless' us. It just said that we will be good for each other and talked about kindness and respect."

I harrumphed. "That's how you know it's not our God. When was the last sermon you heard from the Vicar on kindness and respect?"

I continued. "Your father and I met it just before we married. Close enough our parents let us walk where we would. I think your father wanted to have a last walk on the hill before the sea took him forever."

At this point, Dauby appeared in the doorway and looked at me in askance.

"They've been to the Stones. They've been approved."

"Ah."

Hannah said, "What do you mean 'approved'?"

Dauby responded, "It doesn't give you a blessing that goes with you and can protect you later. But Anthracyda can show you whether your hearts match."

I added, "That was when everything sparkled. I don't know what happens if your hearts don't match."

I looked fondly at Dauby. "It certainly sparkled for us" and he smiled back.

Hannah looked around and said, "What do I tell Oswyn and Clarice?"

“Your brother and sister will find out on their own, when the time is right. Don’t say anything that will get to the ears of the Vicar.”

Chapter 2

Fiona Rede and Alastair Cullane May 1642

Alastair

It was a fine late spring evening. We were coming up on my 27th summer, I had my own house, I was a journeyman cooper, and it was time to take a wife. It is with no small amount of pride that I do claim to be the handsomest man in the village. Therefore, it makes sense to me that I should marry the most beautiful woman in the village.

Fiona Rede, daughter of the baker, would clearly be that. At only 15 years of age, she was barely of age, but that also meant that I would be able to enjoy her beauty that much longer. Her youth also meant that I would be able to take her in hand before she developed any strong wills of her own.

All this told me that I should strike a deal with her father now, before any of the other young men made their play.

I expected her father to spend a short time in the evening at the village inn, and it was at that door I stood today. Opening the rough-hewn door, there, as I hoped, Brice Rede was sitting at an ale stained plank table with two of the village hunters, Philip Ruderfurd and Hume Valcar.

I heard a smack on the other side of the room and turned my head. A man with a reddening cheek was starting up from his bench and trying to grab Marion Blexham, the innkeeper's wife. There was a sudden roar and a crack as Gilbert, the innkeeper, slammed a huge cudgel on the bar, then pointed it at the man.

The man sullenly started to sit down, but Gilbert pointed to the door with the cudgel and, head down, the man stalked past me and out the door.

I stepped up to Rede.

“A moment of your time, sir”.

Rede looked up, clearly surprised to see me, but not in an objectionable way.

“Good evening. Donnan’s son isn’t it?”

“I will not beat around the bush, sir. I am asking for your daughter Fiona’s hand.”

“Oh? My daughter has spoken nowt of this or you.”

“I have not spoken to her, thinking this was something that could be arranged man to man.”

Rede looked around at Ruderfurd and Valcar, laughed and looked back at me.

“My daughter is not a loaf of bread, lad, to be sold quickly. I know Donnan and Cicilia, but I don’t know you.”

I was a perfect choice, so in my mind he would have agreed readily. However, I knew I would need to set out the advantages of such a match.

“Sir, I have my own house and I am properly recognized as a cooper. If needs be, if you give me permission to walk and talk with her, I believe that I could quickly convince your daughter of my suitability.”

Rede looked down at his hands, spread on the table, toughened and strengthened from kneading bread every morning for the last thirty years. After a minute, he looked up at me.

“Lad. I’ll give you permission to walk Fiona to the Standing Stones and back. Then we can talk again.”

What? Normally, if one must court, the first conversations are at the girl’s house, with her mother watching over you. Only later is permission given for walks together. I thought I was pushing it a bit to immediately jump to the walks. But all the way to the Standing Stones? That is supposed to be a three-hour hill walk with three crests to cross just to get to them. I’d never been that far up into the hills myself. That would give me a lot more liberty than I expected.

We were told stories as children that a demon lived in the Stones, but that was a fairy tale I no longer believed.

“The Stones are a three-hour walk. I’m certain we will be in agreement by the time we return.”

Rede looked at Valcar and raised an eyebrow. Valcar’s weathered face gave a fractional nod in return. Rede turned back to me.

“And lad, you will be shadowed. One hand on Fiona while you walk and I will be expressing my condolences to Donnan and Cicilia.”

With that final comment, Rede turned back to Ruderfurd and Valcar to resume some discussion about venison for pies.

Yes, I was irritated. He just dismissed me as if I was not one of the village men. I was a man, an equal and should be treated as such. I straightened and walked out the door. Once married, I would be a full householder. For the moment, I had none to kick but my dog, but that would soon change.

Fiona

My father came back from the tavern in the early evening and called my mother and me to the table.

“Donnan Cullane’s son Alastair has asked to court you. Although actually he asked for your hand without even the pretence of courting. Do you know him?”

I said “No. He’s the popinjay that flirts with everyone, right?”

My father laughed. “He’s certainly a popinjay. I didn’t think you were old enough to pay attention to the flirting, so I haven’t paid attention to what the young folks have been up to.”

My mother said, “Well, apparently it’s time we paid attention. He’s a journeyman cooper. I suppose he would be useful when we need new barrels for flour. What did you say to him?”

“I told him that he could make his case to Fiona, then we would talk.”

I sighed. “I suppose I will need to get used to this sort of thing, I just didn’t expect it to be this soon. I assume Mother will be here to ensure proper behaviour.”

My father looked at my mother with a bit of a grin that

I found a little unnerving. “Actually, I had a better idea. To ensure that he have sufficient time to plead his case, I told him he could walk you to the Stones and back.”

“What! Six hours of walking up and down hills listening to someone twice my age tell me why I should marry him? I hope someone is going to accompany us?”

“Philip Ruderfurd and your uncle Hume Valcar.”

“Ah.” I had known Mr Ruderfurd and Uncle Valcar and their families my entire life. They were the village’s two hunters and the best protection I could have. And Uncle Valcar was my mother’s brother.

“But why all the way to the Stones? Can’t he make his case on a shorter walk?”

My mother chimed in. “I think your father has a very good idea. Have you ever actually been to the Stones?”

“No. One day, Oswyn and Clarice Malison and I talked about stealing away to actually see them, but there’s never a full day to do it.”

My mother laughed. “All the village knows they are there beyond the third crest, but seldom does anyone tread the path to see them. If you are ever going to tell stories about them to your children, you really should go and see them for yourself. It helps the story telling. And having Hume and Philip Ruderfurd along is as good as you could ask to avoid straying from the path and protection from wandering hands.”

I thought back to stories that my parents told us about the Stones around the fireplace. Other families told stories about stones haunted with the ghosts of Druid sacrifices. My parents’ stories, on the other hand, told about an invisible dance master teaching the stones to do village dances. The stories made us laugh at the thought of 9 foot standing stones trying to curtsy and bow while a woodpecker drummed the beat.

My father spoke up again. “I want you to promise us that you will go all the way to the Stones, even if Alastair refuses. I want you to look hard at them, then come back and tell us your own story about the Stones.”

I didn’t know why this was so important to my parents, but

I did trust Mr Ruderfurd and Uncle Hume to watch out for me, so I consented. **The Hill Walk**

Fiona

Finally, the agreed day arrived. I took my parent's advice and wore a dress and cloak suitable for walking the hills. If the wind came up it would get cold, and I wasn't going to wear Sunday go to church clothes for a 6-hour hill walk.

Alastair, on the other hand, choose his Sunday best rather than be sensible. He looked a bit surprised that I wore practical clothes, but quickly turned his frown to a smile and turned the smile towards my mother. She motioned down the street. Alastair's smile turned tight-lipped when he saw Uncle Hume waiting for us to set off. I didn't see Mr Ruderfurd, but I had the impression that we wouldn't see him unless he wanted us to see him.

We started up the path that led over the crests above the town.

Alastair

It was the day agreed for my courtship walk with Fiona Rede. I put on my best clothes. When I arrived at the Rede house, Fiona surprised me by wearing a worn dress and cloak clearly intended for travel. We were courting. Her father should have ordered her to wear a dress fit for the occasion. He was still not taking me seriously.

Fiona's mother caught my eye and nodded down the lane. I took a gander that direction. Hume Valcar, the hunter, ugly as sin but tougher than nails, stood 20 yards away and tipped his cap to me. Clearly Fiona's father was taking serious precautions against any suggestions I might make to Fiona that might lead to a delay in returning home.

Fiona ventured "My father says that you would like to court me."

"Yes. As the two most attractive people in the village, we should be matched."

"Oh? You sound like a farmer breeding cattle."

Evidently she needed to be taught about proper authority. I looked around. Valcar was not in sight, but that didn't mean

anything. He would be out there somewhere, watching.

I motioned towards the path and we set off.

“I have my own house.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“You won’t find anyone in the village as handsome.”

“Ah, back to looks.”

“What is with you?”

The path led upward and I began to realize the value of travel clothes for this walk rather than courting clothes. It was not yet the heat of summer, but I was already starting to flush, though the conversation again not going to plan could have been the cause as much as the hill walk.

“Alastair, can you read?”

“What? I don’t need to read to be a cooper. Besides, the Bible is all I need to know and the Vicar will tell me what is important.”

“You listen to the Vicar blindly?”

“The village needs a strong leader.”

The conversation continued like this, on and off for hours as we made our way to the Stones. Every so often, I would glance around and might see a glimpse of Valcar pacing us. One time, I thought I also saw another of the village hunters pacing us. Well, I suppose I do have a reputation with the ladies.

I could not, however, understand Fiona. Compliments about her looks just got swatted away. Promises that I could provide firm guidance for her caused her to laugh and question whether I would try to offer guidance in cooking and sewing. She kept sending the conversation on one frustrating diversion then another.

We finally cleared the third crest and saw the meadow with the standing stones a little ways off the path to the left. I was getting increasing tired with both the walk and Fiona. Beauty in form must be matched by beauty in being a wife. I was beginning to believe that Fiona was too hard-hearted to be acceptable. Unless I did something to break her spirit. But that would not happen with Valcar and whoever else was watching us.

We agreed that we should pause for a rest. Fiona insisted

that her parents had told her to walk to the Stones, so I reluctantly agreed and sauntered that direction behind her.

9 feet tall and massive, standing upright in a circle at the end of a small meadow, no one knew how long they had stood or how some barbarian tribe had managed to get them up here. Everyone knew they were here, but I don't know how many of the villagers had actually made the hill walk to see them, or even why they should. The Stones were a relic of centuries gone by. When we were children, it was a place of tales and ghost stories, magic and wonder, but I had grown beyond those fairy tales.

Fiona sat down suddenly so I sat down as well, placed my back against one of the stones and closed my eyes.

Fiona

"Hello little one." There was suddenly a sense of presence around the Stones.

I sat down suddenly as the voice sounded in my head. Alastair looked strangely at me, then looked around, then back at me, and finally sat down with his back against one of the stones and seemed to doze off.

"You're real."

"Yes. You can just think what you want to say; you don't have to speak aloud. I see you are not impressed by the man courting you."

"No, not at all."

"You are right to think so. Now watch."

I could suddenly see colours glowing around me and Alastair. Mine were light greens and yellows with flashes of red. Alastair's aura was sullen, like a deep bruise. The auras expanded until they touched at which point mine started to dull and become lifeless, bruised itself.

"That's enough" said the voice.

"Who are you? What are you?" I asked.

"You may call me Anthracyda. I am just a small hillside god or spirit if you prefer."

"What was that I saw?"

"That was your aura and Alastair's aura. It is like seeing the colours of your spirit," said the voice."

“Your parents met me when they decided to handfast. Unlike what you just saw, your parents’ colours matched and made each other’s colours brighter. Yours and Alastairs do not.”

“My parents met you? Did they know this was going to happen?”

“Yes. I think they assumed I would like to meet their daughter.”

“Are you a demon?”

“No” the voice chuckled. *“Although your vicar would probably say differently.”*

“Am I going to go to hell for talking to you? Some other girls tell stories.”

“No. And neither are your parents. There is no hell, other than what you make on earth.”

“What happens now?”

“You call your watchers to take you home. You may return, and we can talk whenever you want.”

I looked at Alastair, still sleeping.

“What about him?”

“He will remember your arguments on the way here and be annoyed that he wasted his time. He’ll decide that your village is really too small for someone of his looks and talents. He will want to find a bigger town which will complement (and compliment) his talents and self-importance. Maybe he’ll want to test himself against “better competition”. And maybe he will learn humility. In any case, he won’t stay in your village long.”

“Fiona, I will leave you with this. Measure your self-worth against yourself. Comparing yourself to others has value only if you are trying to learn to better yourself. If, like Alastair, you determine your self-worth by comparing yourself to others, it often leads to cruelty towards those you think lesser and envy towards those you think better.”

The sense of presence was suddenly gone. I looked around, pushed myself up off the grass and raised my arm. Uncle Hume stepped out from behind a tree some thirty yards away and started walking towards me. Mr Ruderfurd also materialized from around some brush a little farther away.

"I think I'd like to go home now. Did you just see or hear anything strange?"

Uncle Hume responded. "I can guess what happened since Alastair looks like a statue. I felt that Anthracyda was here and talking to you. You have just met the god of these hillsides. No matter what the Vicar said, not all spirits of the hills are demons. And, whatever you do, don't talk about it to anyone other than your parents. Anthracyda somehow gives us some protection against Border Reivers from the North and East, and we do not want the Church up here."

"My parents knew."

"Yes."

"And never told me."

"You didn't believe stories about invisible dance masters?"

"Not any more than I believed other parents' stories about ghosts of druid sacrifices. How did they know? How do you know about it?" I had heard occasional stories about how adventurous my parents and Uncle Valcar and his wife Lucy had been when they were younger and was beginning to guess.

By this point Mr Ruderfurd had joined us and responded. "You can't hunt on the hills without coming close to the Stones at some point. Anthracyda chooses who it wants to talk to. Sometimes it decides to talk to a hunter."

At this point I remembered that Aunt Lucy Valcar was Mr Ruderfurd's sister.

"What does it talk to hunters about?"

"Weather. If an animal is not cleanly killed and is dying in pain."

"Huh. So it suggests you put the animal out of agony?"

"Yes."

With that, Uncle Hume and Mr Ruderfurd turned partway towards town, then fell into step beside me as we started the long walk home. I was going to have a long talk with my parents when we got home.

Alastair

I jerked awake, remembering a dream about leaving Andras Hill and going to Carlisle where the women were much more

beautiful. Certainly Carlisle, more than ten times the size of Andras Hill, would provide me with more opportunities than staying where I was, and I would find a better match.

I noticed that Fiona was up and talking to Valcar and Ruderfurd about heading home. She might be of age, but she was still a child, a petulant one at that, and not worth my attention. Carlisle awaits. I let them start off and gave them five minutes, then started for home myself.

Chapter 3

The Well (May 23, 1642)

Fiona Rede

It was early afternoon the next day and we needed water from the village well. I could see Clarice Malison and Sussana Beckworth there already, girls about my own age. They knew yesterday's walk was going to happen. They were taking their time getting their own buckets full, hoping I would show up and tell the story. Clarice I knew well. Her father was a fisherman. Sussana was a couple of years older than I. She had been apprenticed to Old Mother Burgess, the village healer, until she died two years ago.

Obviously my tale would not include Anthracysda.

"So, what happened?" Clarice and Sussana blurted out almost together.

"We know you returned home with your escorts and Alastair came back later, so it did not go well" added Clarice.

"Actually it went about as you might expect. It would have been a match made in Hell."

"Then why did your parents agree to let him court you?" Sussana wondered.

"Maybe to start me off with something they knew was easy to see would not work? Someone very handsome, so maybe I would be thinking past good looks when there is someone I like? They do things like that."

"He is not only good looking. He has a trade and a house!" Sussana objected.

“Yes, and is twice as old as I am and one of us would be dead within a year. Alastair is likely to be a wife beater and he has to sleep sometime.”

“Umm.” Both Clarice and Sussana looked down at that.

“Yes.” I set my bucket down on the ground and rotated the lever pole and well bucket over the middle of the well, then released the bolt on the windlass. The bucket disappeared and a few seconds later smacked into the water far below.

All three of us grabbed the windlass handle and started to winch back up the heavy well bucket, with its iron ball and chain to make it sink. In our village, the unspoken toll for gossip at the well was helping with the winch.

Once we got the well bucket up and used it to fill my bucket, they both turned back to me expectantly.

“And so...” began Sussana.

“So he is an idiot and only concerned with looks. I fear his buckets will be pretty and leak. ”

“Pretty boy, empty head?” offered Clarice.

“Yes. He wants to give me guidance on baking and sewing and running a household because he is the man. A wife must be beautiful, silent and obedient.”

Clarice snickered, but Sussana twisted her hands. “That is normally how it is done.”

“Maybe in your house. Both your parents sew clothes and weave cloth. You do all the gardening and cooking. My parents both bake and cook. They understand each other. I’m not going to be a cooper and won’t pretend to give him guidance in his craft. Alastair will never know what I already know about cooking or baking or sewing. I don’t care that he is the man. ”

“Besides, you only meet one requirement. Can’t you just bask in his beauty? Or maybe he should just bask in your beauty. I’m sure a journeyman cooper can afford servants to do all your household work.” said Clarice.

She and I laughed.

Sussana looked away. “Maybe I would feel different if I had finished my apprenticeship with Old Mother Burgess. I just don’t know.”

She looked back at us. "I know you two think you can talk back and have your own opinions, but I've seen the black eyes and broken bones of wives who aren't obedient."

"You don't have to settle for a wife beater. Choose someone who values you." offered Clarice. "I wonder who Alastair will set his cap for next?"

"I have the impression he thinks he is too pretty for our village. He mentioned something about going to Carlisle where he would be more appreciated."

"Oh no! We will all swoon from our loss!" Clarice put the back of her hand against her forehead and pretended to faint. Sussana pretended to catch her and eased her to the ground.

Clarice looked up, shading her face from the sun. "Did Mr. Valcar or Mr. Hume have to threaten him?"

"No. I think Alastair got tired of me after awhile and stopped trying to convince me that all other men were mere shadows compared to him."

Sussana changed the subject "Is it true that you went to the Stones?"

"Yes."

"So no demon!"

"None that I saw." This wasn't a lie. I don't think Anthracyna is a demon and I certainly didn't see him.

"Another childhood nightmare broken. Are the Stones as big as they say?"

"They are huge. Half again as tall as my father and almost as wide as he is tall."

Clarice chimed in "Hannah (her sister) and Duncane (Hannah's husband) said the same thing. They said it is peaceful up there."

"Yes. They're in a small meadow. But it is an long walk and I do have duties in the bakery and at home."

"Don't we all." grimaced Clarice. "I have some fish traps to mend before they can be used again. I will see you later."

Susanna added "And I have weeding to do. Actually, I always have weeding to do. When I get to heaven, Saint Peter had better not hand me a rake.

We picked up our water buckets and started towards our respective homes.

Chapter 4

Vicar's Tale June 1642

June 8, Year of Our Lord 1642.

"It has come to our attention..." I began. Suddenly, every eye and ear in every pew was focused on me. I savoured those words. With just those few words, I, the Vicar of Andras Hill, was once again in my appointed post as the leader of the village.

"... that a certain young woman of our parish has been seen going to the Stones to perform love spells to turn the eye of a young man of the village unwillingly towards her."

I loved young people and their petty rivalries and denunciations.

"Sussana Beckworth. Stand forth!" I thundered.

The girl, trembling, stood up.

"Do you deny that last Tuesday you went to the stones to consort with the demon there and cast a love spell?"

"I did no such thing."

"That is a lie, for you were witnessed doing so!"

"Who is the witness? She has a right to face her accuser!"

This shout came from one of the fishermen, Dauby Malison.

"Laetitia Forgell. Stand." I commanded.

I expected that girl to jump up, but she clearly did not expect to have to make her accusation in public and was almost as nervous as the accused.

I was further surprised when Cait Rede, the baker's wife, stood and faced Laetitia.

"When did this happen? Last Tuesday I sold you bread at noon and sold bread to Sussana and her mother at mid-afternoon. It is a three-hour walk to the stones and another

three back. You couldn't have seen what you told the Vicar."

I needed to take back the control of the situation. Clearly the child had been too stupid to think through her story. For my part, I had been hasty, but there were multiple paths I could still take for what I intended.

"Laetitia Forgell. Do you stand by your witnessing to me?"

Her parents stood, shocked and staring at her. "What have you said?"

The girl broke down in tears and collapsed back into the pew, hands covering her face.

In all honesty, it didn't really matter what happened in this little morality play. It was merely the entry point to take down the Stones. I could still use it.

"I see the witness has recanted. But while the Stones stand, they are an enticement to both those who would consort with Satan and those who make false witness against others. I require the men of the village to join me tomorrow to go up to the Stones and throw them down."

Hume Valcar, one of the hunters stood. "Are you going to exorcise it first?"

"That's right! I'm not going near the Stones until they've been exorcised." came a shout from another hunter.

I should have expected the superstitious dolts to be nervous. They are the ones most often on the hill and shy away from the Stones. Exchanging letters with the Bishop to get an exorcist here would take months, much longer than I wanted to have those damned things sitting in the back of people's minds.

"I will go and exorcise the Stones tomorrow. Then, Saturday next, I will require all the men of the village to join me and throw down the Stones."

June 9

In the morning I wrapped my bible, bell, crucifix and flask of holy water into a pack, along with a bottle of water, bread, cheese and a piece of chicken for myself.

While I had never actually been to the Stones myself, the directions were clear and the paths were not muddy. First one crest, then another, finally a third. There, off to the left was

a flat meadow on the hillside, in the centre was a ring of giant standing stones surrounding a giant black stone, probably the altar.

I carefully unpacked and walked around the ring, splashing holy water on the upright stones. Then holding aloft my bible and crucifix, I stepped between two of the stones and approached the altar. Once there I had to juggle the bible and crucifix in my right hand while using my left to empty the remaining holy water on the altar.

Nothing happened. The circle was dead and, presumably, so was the demon. If it ever existed other than in small minds.

I suddenly had a feeling of someone looking over my shoulder, inspecting my work.

"What did you expect to happen?"

The words just sounded in my mind, without having been spoken into the wind. I looked around wildly, but there was no one there.

I dropped the flask of holy water and raised bible and crucifix in both hands. "In the name of God the Father and his son Jesus Christ I abjure thee to leave this place."

"I could have said 'Welcome to my parlour said the spider to the fly'" said the mental voice disapprovingly. "But I try to be nice. What have I ever done to you?"

"Begone foul fiend, spawn of Satan. I am proof against your evil."

"I am a child of the EverChangingIs, not 'spawn' of a figment of your imagination."

"Get out of my head and show yourself!"

There was a mental laugh. *"It doesn't work that way."*

This was like no demon I had ever heard of.

"I will summon the army to pull down your stones!"

"Which will have as much effect as the water you spilled on them" responded the voice in a tone which sounded half amused, half disappointed at my answer.

Two stones on opposite sides of the meadow from me suddenly fell over, out of the circle. Just as suddenly, they stood back in place.

"*See, just stones.*"

"In the name of Jesus Christ, leave my people alone!"

"*Another figment of your imagination. And since when are they 'your' people?*"

I stepped outside the circle.

"*Still here.*"

Obviously the demon was much more powerful than I expected. It was just toying with me. I will have to plead for assistance from the bishop. With a sob, I grabbed my pack and started running. The voice did not follow.

I was exhausted as I stumbled into the village. The few folk in view gathered round in askance.

"It was too strong for me. I'll have to write to the Bishop." I gasped. One took my pack and two others helped me back to the Vicarage.

"Did it hurt you?"

"No, I was too strong for that and God's word defended me, but I could not banish it."

"Did it attack you?"

"No, but it would have if it could. Everyone needs to stay away from the Stones for fear of losing their immortal souls."

As they filed out of the house, I heard one say "I don't think anyone is going to pull down the stones anytime soon."

This should have been so easy. What had I done wrong?

I sat down at my little writing table, pulled out a piece of foolscap and reached for my pen. The Bishop would need to know a description of the demon, but it never appeared other than speaking in my head. It did make the stones fly around the meadow. Well, fall down and stand up. But it never made any threats, so confident it was. It did not give a name, but called both Jesus Christ and Satan "figments of my imagination." It was the last that truly puzzled me. What kind of demon would not recognize either Christ or Satan as Lord? I would have to carefully word the letter.

And now some in the village knew that I had failed. Everyone would know by morning. It would take a powerful sermon on Sunday to ensure they stayed faithful. God is more power-

ful than his preacher and his is the power of eternal damnation. Fire and brimstone it would be.

June 11

Yesterday I rested. Today, walking in the village, everyone gave me strange looks. The innkeeper, Gilbert Blexham, told me in a whisper that the village no longer believes me.

I had made mistakes. First, calling out the girl Sussana Beckworth on false testimony. Then, claiming that the demon of the stones would have attacked me if it could.

The village has had no problem with the Stones in two hundred years. More than one person told Gilbert “If the Vicar went up the hill and tried to kick a dog in its own house, the Vicar should expect the dog to bite back.”

June 16

I have heard more rumours that the village council will try to make peace with the demon if I have angered it.

You do not make peace with demons. Making a pact with Satan was an offence against the Witchcraft Act on penalty of death. I cannot allow such an attempt by the village council, but making a charge against them would be serious.

To head this off, I have sent a letter to the Bishop, both demanding an exorcist to deal with the demon and charging the village council with trying to make a pact with Satan.

June 27

A messenger arrived from the Bishop today. I’ve been summoned to Carlisle to explain myself. Apparently, the village council had sent a complaint to the Bishop before he received my letter. I don’t know the basis of the complaint at this point, but the messenger is insistent that I pack and leave immediately.

I asked the messenger to get Gilbert Blexham, the innkeeper. He might be able to tell me what was in the complaint. The messenger returned without the publican, but with an answer.

The council has formally stated that they think I have lost my mind. To this end, they cite:

- That I made baseless accusations about witchcraft against young women in the village that have been proven false simply to expand my authority as vicar;

- That I have falsely claimed there is a demon in the stones that tried to attack me. Everyone knows the standing stones up in the hills are just stones from the false religions of barbarian tribes of long ago, with no evidence of witchcraft;
- That in the hundreds of years of the village's existence there have never been any instances of dealing with Satan, either in the village or at the stones;
- Finally, that I am making baseless accusations against the council itself to try to expand my authority in the village, claiming the council is making a pact with a demon in the stones. There is no demon, and everyone in the village will testify that the members of the council have not left the village in the last three weeks.

The bald faced lies made me apoplectic. I'm afraid I screamed at the messenger. That won't help my case with the Bishop.

I've been told I must leave tomorrow.

Epilogue - Editor's Note

There were no further diary entries in this diary. The Vicar's story continues in the Vicar Returns in July of 1643.

Chapter 5

Elspet and Cait (June 10, 1642)

June 10, 1642 Morning (Elspet Mar Malison) This morning I went to the baker after Dauy went out fishing. Cait Rede looked up as I opened the door and said "Have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Yesterday the Vicar went up into the hills to exorcise the Standing Stones. It didn't work. Apparently he came back last night terrified out of his mind." Cait said with a bit of a sneer on her face.

I wasn't surprised that Cait is not a fan of the Vicar. She had no qualms about confronting his supposed witness Laetitia Forgell in front of him last Sunday about the claim that young Sussana Beckworth was practicing witchcraft.

"So there is a spirit at the Stones?" I asked. Obviously I knew, but I didn't know whether Cait knew. She could have known. She and her husband Brice and the hunters Hume and Lucy Valcar had wandered the hills when they were young, just as Dauy and I had but our paths had never really crossed. Still, Clarice and Oswyn had noted that they had never beaten their daughter Fiona, just like Dauy and I had never beaten them. That made both our families unusual in the village.

"Apparently. He's not hurt, just very scared." Cait bit her lip, looking like she wanted to add something, then deciding not to.

I decided to approach the subject sideways. Scared vicars are dangerous vicars.

“I want to compliment you on defending Sussana Beckworth last Sunday. The Vicar should have know better than to take Laetitia’s word for anything. And to accuse Sussana? As far as I know, she was a dutiful healer’s apprentice. We may some day need her skills even if Old Mother Burgess died before finishing her training.”

Cait smiled “The Vicar is an ass and we both know it.”

“Yes. By the way, I’ve heard some gossip that a few families think you and I are spoiling our children with not enough discipline.”

Cait looked at the open door, walked over and glanced outside, then shut the door. “You and Daury used to walk the hills until you got married and Daury turned to fishing.”

“That’s right.”

“So did Brice and I. I think there is something calming and peaceful about the hills that stayed with us. How about you two?”

I simply smiled and nodded. Cait nodded back, then, as the door opened, she said “The rye is good today. Will you have some?”

June 10, 1642 Evening (Elspet Mar Malison) Daury came back from the boat in the evening. As usual his shoulders were tired from hauling nets and traps, but he brought back a load that we would need to gut and salt within the next couple of hours.

“The village gossip is that the Vicar tried to exorcise Anthracyda yesterday.”

“Oh? Tried?” His eyebrows rose as he looked at me, then turned back to his next fish.

“Yes. Tried. Obviously failed. I haven’t talked to Clarice or Oswyn about it yet. I thought we should decide what we want to tell them, if anything yet. Hannah and Duncane have kept their mouths closed as well. I’m also pretty sure that Cait and Brice Rede know about Anthracyda, but they are keeping their mouths closed as well.”

Daury shrugged his shoulders a few times trying to get kinks out, then looked to me and said “Then I guess the safest thing

is to keep quiet until or unless Oswyn or Clarice have their own encounter.”

I responded “I’m not exactly happy to keep secrets from our children, but I agree that it is the safest thing to do right now.”

Chapter 6

The Vicar Returns July 10-27, 1643

July 10, 1643

My leg itches. Where my leg used to be itches. Scratching my peg leg doesn't help, and I want to scream at the uncaring heavens. The mule cart bounces me to and fro as it slowly makes its way along the rutted tracks in the earth. The Bishop's servant Fulke is as stolid, and possibly as intelligent, as the mule he is walking beside. This is the start of the fifth day, however, and I should reach the end of the journey by midday.

Damn politics! There I was in the Carlisle market haggling over supplies for the Cathedral when two mobs of Royalists and Roundheads start fighting. Someone fires a musket and the ball glances off a stone and carries away my left knee. Two weeks later, a surgeon has cut off half my leg to save me from gangrene. Now I must ride in a mule cart, tossed back and forth, rather than riding the mule itself in slightly more comfort.

I still have fevers from time to time, but at the moment I am filled with purpose. I carefully played on the Bishop's sympathy and got him to approve my return to my home village. I doubt he would have approved my return to the village of Andras Hill, but he doesn't know that I told Fulke the destination had changed. I know he would have thrown me in chains if he knew that I had stolen the holy relic from the cathedral and replaced it with a finger bone I had found at the surgery. But needs must, and I have a score to settle in the hills above Andras Hill.

It has been a year since I left the ungrateful village, sum-

moned by the Bishop over a complaint about my position as vicar of the church there. A complaint by the "Village Council". As if a village of 120 needs a council. They had me as vicar!

But they were too cowardly to support me against the shadow of Satan that loomed over them from the hillside. A circle of standing stones not three hours walk away was a gateway to Hell, infecting their minds. I tried to exorcise the demon with Bible, bell, holy water and crucifix, but was not strong enough and the demon threw me down. This time I will return to the stones with the holy relic and the demon will not be able to stand against me.

Finally, we arrive. Those folk who are about stare as Fulke leads the mule cart up to the Vicarage next to the church. One of the women, Mathilda, the petty school teacher, bustles over and helps Fulke get me out of the cart. Balanced on my crutch, I hobble up to the Vicarage door, which Mathilda opens. Fulke follows behind with my case of belongings. The Vicarage seems untouched in the year since I left.

"Have you cleaned?"

"Yes, weekly. We had no idea when you would return and did not receive a message that you were returning now."

"Well, I'm back. Is Gilbert Blexham still at the inn?"

"Yes"

"Tell him I need him. And get the hunters. Philip Ruderfurd and Hume Valcar."

"Yes Vicar"

"Fulke, thank you. You are released and can return home."

"Thank you, Vicar."

"And Fulke, just tell anyone who asks that you returned me to my home village. You need not tell them where."

"Yes, Vicar."

After an hour or two, Gilbert Blexham knocked on the door and was admitted by Mathilda.

"It will take a while to find Ruderfurd and Valcar, but they should be in the inn this evening."

He looked at my leg, but decided not to ask about it.

"What are you planning?"

“I want you to accompany me to the Standing Stones and those two to help me get there.”

“I thought you said the demon was too strong for you last time you opposed it.”

“Yes. But this time I brought the holy relic of Saint Thomas from the Cathedral. The Demon will not be proof against that.”

“You have the holy relic? Here?”

He started to ask one more question, then decided he did not want to know the answer and looked aside. Then said “Why do you want me to climb up there? I’m not like the hunters. I don’t walk the hills.”

“Because you are my best ally in the village. I need you to tell everyone how I bested the demon, and you will need to see it with your own eyes.”

He started to say something else, then changed his mind and looked around again.

“Assuming I see them tonight, I’ll bring them over in the morning. From the looks of your leg, they’ll have to take turns supporting you up the hill.”

He then turned and left.

Tomorrow morning. Yes, best strike as soon as possible. Despite having a bit of a fever, I can’t risk that someone in village warns the demon that I’m back.

July 11, 1643

All three arrived early the next morning. Ruderfurd and Valcar were as laconic as I remembered them. Blexham was irritated, but tried to hide it. Valcar took my pack. I clumped along up the trail into the hills as best I could. From time to time Ruderfurd or Valcar would take my crutch and put their arm under my shoulder to bear my weight and we would hobble further. I’m not sure who was actually slower, me or Blexham, but what should have been a three-hour hike into the hills took five. Fortunately this was midsummer and the days were long. Still it would be getting dark by the time we were home.

Finally, we topped the third crest and there it was. Twelve standing stones surrounding a black boulder in a small meadow maybe a hundred yards off the trail. The last time I was here,

two of the stones had fallen, knocked over by the demon in a show of force and then replaced. All of them were still standing.

I told Valcar to give me my pack and carefully unwrapped the relic, a finger bone of St Thomas. Blexham went down on his knees and blessed himself. Ruderfurd and Valcar merely looked at each other, at the stones, then back at me.

I took my crutch and hobbled through the grass and, coming up to the stones, held the relic aloft in my right hand. Blexham got back up and all three trailed further behind.

There was a sudden feeling that we were not alone in this place. I looked around, but there was nothing but the stones, still and silent.

I walked around the circle, touching the relic to each stone in turn, saying:

“In the name of Jesus Christ and St. Thomas his holy apostle, by the power of the Holy Spirit and this holy relic, I command you to leave this place.”

I walked into the circle and touched the relic to the black boulder in the centre.

“In the name of Jesus Christ and St. Thomas his holy apostle, by the power of the Holy Spirit and this holy relic, I command you to leave this place.”

“*Why?*”

Just like last time, the words just sounded in my mind.

“Creature of Lucifer, you are subject to the power of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This holy relic gives me the power to banish you to the netherhells from which you came!”

I pressed the relic against my own forehead to burn its presence out of my mind, but there was no sense of change. The vague sense that we were not alone remained. The other three had remained outside the circle. Valcar and Ruderfurd had apparently decided to sit down and rest while I dealt with the demon. Blexham was back on his knees praying furiously.

“I told you last time, I am a child of the EverChangingIs. You can make up as many names as you want, you have no ability to make me do anything.”

“What is the *EverChangingIs*?”

“It is all that is; all the parallel realities. It has always existed, will always exist, and is always changing.”

“You lie. You are a child of Satan, the Father of Lies. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. That is the truth. There are no ‘parallel realities’ or an *EverChangingIs*.”

“Believe what you want. I’ve been here in this local reality for the last 110 million years. Why do you think you have possessory rights?”

“God gives me the authority as his vicar to order his local affairs.”

“You’ll have to introduce me to this ‘God’ sometime so we can have a chat about that.”

Suddenly a crow dropped out of the sky, snatched the relic out of my hands, and flapped to the top of one of the stones.

“Finger bones of dead humans don’t have any power over anything. And your Bishop might be interested in your theft.”

“That is a relic of St. Thomas. Give it back!” I screamed.

The voice in my head chuckled. The crow spread its wings and glided down towards the other three, then dropped the finger bone in front of Blexham, who frantically scrambled backward. Valcar sighed, took a handkerchief out of his pocket, stood up, walked over to where the finger bone had fallen, picked it out of the grass and held it up towards me.

I hobbled as rapidly as I could to him and took the relic, covering it with its original cloth. Was the relic a fake? Could someone else have stolen the real relic and I had stolen a fake and left another fake in its place?

I turned back to the stones. “Maybe I can’t drive you from here, but I order you to stay away from the village.”

“Did someone drop you on your head when you were a child?”

I think my face was starting to turn red. I gritted my teeth. “I will not let you goad me.”

“I think you don’t have much more ability to control yourself than you have to control me.”

“Demon, I will destroy you if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Not a demon. Show me a single evil thing I’ve done.”

“You would lead the villagers away from the true God. You want worshippers. Our God says ‘You shall have no other gods before me.’”

“I’m not your god and have no desire to be your god. Why would I want to listen to your complaints all day? I’m also self-sustaining. I don’t need nor am I looking for worshippers. Keep worshipping your imaginary God or worship what you want. It’s all the same to me.”

“You must bow down to the Son of the Most High.”

“I don’t have to do anything. And if you don’t give up this nonsense pretty soon, you’re not going to get back to the village before dark.”

At that point Valcar said “It’s right. At the speed you and Blexham travel, we need to start back now.”

I realized, to my horror, that the others had heard everything the voice in my mind had said as well as I did. Ruderfurd got up and offered his hand to Blexham, who took it and was assisted to stand. Mentally screaming, I turned my back on the stones, put the relic in my bag and started through the grass towards the path.

The voice cut through my mental screaming. *“Different is not evil. Before you start telling stories about me being an evil demon, I suggest you think hard on your own commandment to not bear false witness about your neighbour. And I am a neighbour.”*

With that, the sense of presence disappeared.

I screamed at the stones. “You are not a neighbour. Nothing that is not human can be a neighbour.”

We finally stumbled into the village just after dark. Valcar and Ruderfurd had carried me on their backs most of the way.

July 12, 1643

I thought hard about what my next move should be. I couldn’t admit to the Bishop that I had stolen the relic, but since it was ignored by the demon, it must be a fake and not the real holy relic.

The exertion of yesterday left me exhausted, and I stayed in

bed most of the day, which of course meant no Sunday service in the church. Blexham was sure to have told the whole story over ale last night with everyone in the inn. What to do?

July 13, 1643

My fever and chills have gotten worse. I can't get out of bed. At least Mathilda brings me food from the inn.

Note by Gilbert Blexham. July 23, 1643

Rev. Walter Sencler died of a fever and was buried in the church cemetery today.

Chapter 7

Gilbert Blexham July 10-11, 1643

July 10, 1643

The Vicar returned from Carlisle today. It seems he lost his left leg in some riot nonsense between Roundheads and Royalists. At least that's what Matilda Potter managed to get out of the Bishop's servant leading the mule cart the Vicar rode in.

I went to see him at the Vicarage, and he immediately demanded that I round up the hunters Philip Ruderfurd and Hume Valcar. He wants the three of us to take him to the Standing Stones tomorrow. Mercy of God, why?

I asked, "Why on earth do you want to go back there for? Last year, you said it was too strong for you to exorcise."

"I brought the holy relic from the Cathedral. A finger bone of St. Thomas. That will drive the devil out."

"Uh. .."

How does he have the holy relic from the Cathedral without there being a whole procession from the Bishop on down? It's far too important to be allowed to wander the countryside. But I'm not going to ask.

"I run an inn. I don't walk the hills. Why do I have to help?"

"I've got a crutch, so stop whining. I need you to witness my victory over the demon and tell the rest of the village. Ruderfurd and Valcar can help get me up and back, but they don't talk much."

God's Wounds! I've never been to the Stones. It's a three-hour march up the hill to the Stones at the best of times. I can

handle a drunk in my inn getting out of hand, but I don't want to be at the Stones for a battle between Heaven and Hell. St. Anthony and St. George protect me.

Grumbling, I went back to the inn.

"Marion! You'll have to manage without me tomorrow. That damn idiot Vicar is back and wants revenge on the demon of the Standing Stones."

"What? What are you going to be doing?"

"He apparently thinks I'm the town crier and needs to witness the event."

"He must be awfully sure of himself after last year."

"He claims he has the holy relic from the Cathedral in Carlisle and that will prove him victorious."

There was a clatter as Marion dropped a wooden bowl on the other side of the bar.

"He has the holy relic? How?"

"I don't want to know and didn't ask."

"Is it true that he's missing a leg?"

"Yes. So he wants Ruderfurd and Valcar to help him up the hill tomorrow."

"Who's going to help you?"

"Funny. If he can make it, I can make it. But I'm hoping he won't be able to make it all the way up the hill. You heard how terrified he was when he came back last year. I'm no holy warrior."

Just before nightfall, Valcar stopped in and I beckoned him over to a corner.

"The Vicar's back."

"I saw a light at the Vicarage and wondered."

"Yes. He wants you, me and Ruderfurd to take him to the Stones in the morning."

"He's crazy."

"Yes. He claims he has the holy relic from the Cathedral in Carlisle and that will prove him victorious."

"He's still crazy."

"Have you been to the Stones?"

"Of course. I've been everywhere in the hills. Never had

a problem with the Stones, so I don't know what got him so worked up last year."

"I thought you were the one who wanted the Stones exorcised before we pulled them down."

"I never had a problem with the Stones. Can't say that others can say the same. He was going to drag the whole village there, so it was his job to make sure everyone was safe."

"You know more than you're saying."

Valcar merely nodded his head.

"What I want to know is whether I'll be in danger."

"Don't annoy the spirit of the hill and it won't hurt you."

"The Vicar is certainly going to annoy it."

"That's the Vicar's problem, not yours, Blexham. You're not a bad person. Unless you do something stupid, I wouldn't worry about the spirit of the hill."

"You didn't call it a demon."

"That's because it isn't."

"You know more than you're saying again."

"You'll probably know more tomorrow, too. Why does he want me and Ruderfurd?"

"Because he's missing a leg. He needs you and Ruderfurd to help him get up there."

"By the faith of St. Mary! Fine. I'll find Ruderfurd. We'll meet you at first light at the Vicarage. Maybe we can just strap him to a donkey."

July 11, 1643

Today was a day I'll never forget.

As I was leaving the inn this morning with some ale, bread and cheese, Marion handed me a small flask of medicinal geneva.

"Just in case you need it."

It's always good to have a thoughtful wife.

I went over to the Vicarage and Ruderfurd and Valcar were already there.

The Vicar hobbled out on his crutch and manfully started up the trail towards the Stones. Ruderfurd and Valcar kept their grumbling to themselves, but they had to help him quite a bit by the time we crossed the first of the three crests in the way.

Finally, we cross the third crest and I see the Stones for the first time in my life. Massive. Upright. And yes, standing in a circle around a huge black boulder.

I'm gasping, the hunters look like they're just out for a stroll, and the Vicar seems to have gotten a new life as he clumps over to the Stones.

He pulls a cloth out of his pack and unwraps the finger bone of St. Thomas. He starts walking widdershins round the circle of stones, touching it to each stone and crying out

"In the name of Jesus Christ and St. Thomas his holy apostle, by the power of the Holy Spirit and this holy relic, I command you to leave this place."

Rudolf and Valcar just sit on the grass like they are going to be spectators.

I dropped to my knees praying. I know Valcar told me that I had nothing to worry about, but I did not want to be anywhere near a battle. I'll be honest. I was scared.

Sounds around us stopped. The birds stopped. The insects stopped. The breeze stopped. I faltered in my prayers.

There was this feeling that we were not alone. That something big was watching us. I hoped it wasn't hungry.

Eventually, the Vicar walks into the centre of the circle and touches the relic to the black centre stone and repeats the command to leave again.

As God is my witness, I heard something in my mind ask "*Why?*"

I look around, there is nothing in sight, just a voice in my head that apparently we all could hear. I look at Valcar. He has a small smile on his face.

The Vicar shouts: "Demon. You are subject to the power of God the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Through their power and with this holy relic I banish you to the netherhells from whence you came."

The voice in my head says:

"I am a child of the EverChangingIs, not a demon - whatever that is. I don't have to do anything."

I look at Valcar.

“What is the *EverChangingIs*?”

“Something that isn’t Heaven or Hell? I don’t know,” replied Valcar.

“How can it not be subject to God?”

“I don’t know. Even demons know God and bow down to him. This spirit doesn’t seem to think that God even exists.”

I look back at the Vicar, who is trying to argue with some invisible spirit that talks inside our heads.

The Vicar put the relic to his own forehead and shouted, “Get out of my head!”

“But then we couldn’t talk.”

“You are a liar. A child of Satan, the Father of Lies. Begone!”

The Vicar keeps saying that he has the power to banish the thing, and the voice just refuses to be banished. I heard the voice say something about 110 million years, which didn’t make any sense to me since the Earth is only a few thousand years old.

Finally, the voice told the Vicar to introduce it to the Vicar’s God so they could have a chat!

The Vicar was like a small child trying to give orders to its parent. Valcar and Ruderfurd were getting amused.

I was beginning to relax when suddenly a crow flies down, takes the holy relic out of the Vicar’s hand and practically drops it in my lap. I know I’m not worthy to hold the relic, so I’m scrambling backward. Valcar grabs a handkerchief and picks it up of the ground and gives it back to the Vicar.

The voice in my head then says “*Finger bones of dead humans don’t have any power over anything. And your Bishop might be interested in your theft.*”

Uh Oh. Now it’s out in the open. The voice thinks the Vicar stole the relic. Maybe that’s why it doesn’t have any power.

At this point the Vicar starts screaming at the Stones and the voice actually asks

“Did someone drop you on your head when you were a child?”

Then the voice dares the Vicar to show that the demon has

ever done anything evil.

The Vicar said “You would lead the villagers away from the true God. You want worshippers. Our God says ‘You shall have no other gods before me.’”

The voice responded “*I have no need of worshippers. The villagers can worship your imaginary God or whatever they want. I don’t care.*”

At that my heart leapt in my throat. If God decides to be insulted by being called imaginary, I did not want to be wherever the voice was.

The voice continued, “*If you don’t give up this nonsense pretty soon, you’re not going to get back to the village before dark.*”

Valcar agreed with the voice and said we should go home now. He and Ruderfurd stood up.

The last thing the voice said was “*Different is not evil. Before you start telling stories about me being an evil demon, I suggest you think hard on your own commandment to not bear false witness about your neighbour. And I am a neighbour.*”

That led to more screaming from the Vicar.

“Nothing that is not human can be a neighbour.”

Apparently the voice decided that it was bored with the Vicar because the feeling of being watched disappeared and the sounds of the world resumed. The birds sang. The insects buzzed and the breeze came up again.

I took out the flask of geneva that Marion had provided me and handed it around. The Vicar took a big drink and then had a coughing fit until we pounded him on the back.

We started back on the trail towards home. I shared out the bread and cheese as Valcar and Ruderfurd had their hands full carrying the Vicar most of the way.

Whatever the voice is up there, it treated the Vicar like an patient adult would treat someone else’s petulant small child. I don’t think it’s evil. But I don’t understand how it cannot know God.

I definitely need more geneva.

Back to the Village

We finally got the Vicar back to the Vicarage just before nightfall. Mother of God my legs were sore.

Valcar and Ruderfurd put him on his bed and unstrapped his peg leg. His peg had been strapped very tight, so the blisters weren't as bad as we feared, but he should probably not use the peg for a few days and give the leg a rest.

I excused myself and walked to the inn. As I pushed the door open, Marion saw me and bustled around the bar.

"Thank you Blessed Mother! You are back. What happened?"

I looked around the room. There were more than a dozen neighbours there. Everyone was looking directly at me and waiting to hear the tale. No travellers.

"Can someone find Mathilda? He has blisters that will need looking after."

Cait Rede, the baker's wife said "I'll get her", excused herself and left the room, trusting to her husband Brice to give her the story later.

Brice asked the question everyone wanted to ask. "So what happened?"

"He failed again. I don't know what an exorcism is supposed to look like. I thought it would be all screaming and blood and things flying around. It was more like watching a kitten trying to attack an ox."

"It didn't attack the Vicar?" questioned Donnan Cullane. He has oxen and they are pretty placid.

"No. The Vicar would command it to leave, and it just said no, it wasn't a demon and didn't have to."

"You heard it? Did you see it?"

"We all heard it, like someone speaking directly into your head. But we never saw anything."

"Did it say anything besides 'No'?"

"It said it didn't want worshippers, so it wasn't trying to put itself before the Vicar's imaginary God."

At that, there was an audible gasp in the room.

Luke Rawson, the Blacksmith sputtered. "It said God was imaginary?"

“Pretty much. Then it said ‘Different is not evil’; said it was ‘just a neighbour’ and said ‘If you don’t give up this nonsense pretty soon, you’re not going to get back to the village before dark.’ Ruderfurd and Valcar agreed with it, especially since they had to carry the Vicar down the hill.”

“But what about the relic? Didn’t that affect it?”

I decided not to say anything about the voice accusing the Vicar of stealing the relic.

“Not a bit.”

“What did it mean by ‘it’s just a neighbour’?”

“I think it meant that we live here, it lives up there and if we don’t bother it, it won’t bother us?”

“If we help it, it would help us?” came a question from a more optimistic voice.

“Could it come to the village?” was a question from a more nervous villager.

“How should I know? I’ve never heard stories that it ever left the hills. ”

Rawson snickered. “You didn’t have my parents.”

“Marion, I’m starving, did this pack of mongrels leave us any stew?”

I suddenly realized she was holding my hand. I don’t remember when she took it.

“Yes.” She let go and walked over to the fireplace, where a pot was left hanging just close enough to stay warm. She grabbed a wooden bowl, filled it, and then set it down on the bar for me.

Everyone seemed to take this as a indication that the show was over. The hubbub filled the room as everyone tried to make sense out of what I said. I sat down at the bar, grabbed a spoon and tried not to wolf down the stew.

Chapter 8

Marion Blexham July 12-23, 1643

July 12, 1643 (Sunday)

It was mid-morning and I was sweeping the main room floor. Last night was a tale and a half. I was grateful that Gil was home safe. My parents had been one of those families that told stories to frighten children about the Demon of the Standing Stones. To hear that it was real, but didn't want sacrifices (or anything else for that matter) was somehow reassuring but still unnerving and I had held Gil most of the night.

Mathilda Potter, the petty school teacher and now apparently the nurse for the Vicar, pushed the door open and looked in.

"How is the Vicar?" I ventured.

Mathilda sighed. "Tired. He's angry at everything and everyone. Do you have anything I can bring him to eat?"

"There's some stew left over from last night. It's more vegetables than meat at this point."

"Thank you."

"What is he going to do now?"

"I don't know. He's furious that there were witnesses that saw him just dismissed by the demon."

"I get the feeling it's not a demon."

"How can it not be? Aren't all spirits on earth fallen angels?"

"My husband said that it didn't promise anything and didn't want anything other than to be left alone as a good neighbour."

I would have expected a fallen angel to be making promises and temptations. And I would have expected a fallen angel to have to bow down before the holy relic.”

“That’s what I don’t understand. But my father and the Vicar says there is only good and evil and all spirits are evil.”

Her father was a curate in Kendal, some distance away.

“Not everything our parents told us is true.”

“Yes.”

“Is he going to insist on a church service today?”

“I don’t think he is going to be willing to face the village today. And probably shouldn’t be out of bed.”

Mathilda sat down suddenly at a table and put her face in her hands. After a minute she looked up at me and said.

“Would you dare to go to the Stones with me?”

My heart leapt into my throat. It was like we were twelve again playing dare and each was more dangerous than the last. Did I dare? Gil had gone yesterday, leaving me and our daughter with the inn. We had both been scared, but it seemed like he had not been in danger.

“Today?”

“No, we wouldn’t be back before nightfall. We’d break our silly necks on the path. But tomorrow?”

“Let me talk to Gilbert.”

She nodded, and I handed her a bowl of stew for the Vicar. I didn’t bother asking for payment. I knew from prior experience the Vicar wouldn’t pay. Mathilda didn’t have any money, but there would be a basket of vegetables for the tavern from her garden in the next week.

Mathilda smiled. “Thank you. I’ll come by in the evening. I think it’s time to meet the ‘neighbour.” And she left.

How Gil had described what happened and what we expected was so different. Cait Rede came in with a dozen loaves of fresh bread that she and Brice had just made.

“I saw Mathilda leaving. How is the Vicar?”

“The Vicar is the same as always. Petty, spiteful, angry at the world and everyone else. And exhausted and has blisters, so I don’t expect a church service today.”

"Here's your bread. Brice told me what Gilbert said last night."

"Yes. Not at all like the stories my parents told. I would have been less surprised if there was nothing there. Instead, there is something there, but it's not evil."

Cait laughed. "My parents didn't tell 'Demon of the Standing Stones' stories. They just said something is up there and if we are kind, we have nothing to worry about."

"They didn't say 'If you are 'good' you have nothing to worry about?'"

"No, they said 'kind'."

"And if you're good, but not kind?"

"Then don't go to the stones."

"Huh. The Vicar survived."

"Did he? The thing has made a idiot of him twice. Maybe it thinks that is enough."

"Mathilda thinks that since it described itself as a neighbour, we should 'meet the neighbour'."

"That's not a bad idea."

It seemed like one more person wanted to meet the neighbour.

Two Hours Later

A couple of hours later, I decided to broach the subject with Gil.

"Since you met the whatever it is on the hillside yesterday and it seems safe, a couple of us are thinking about going and seeing it for ourselves tomorrow."

"There's nothing to see."

"I know. But since it described itself as a 'neighbour', we should have a better understanding of what we are living next to."

"We're not living next to it. It's a three-hour march uphill. Don't you think you should leave this to the men of the village?"

"Did you talk to it? Or just overhear what it said to the Vicar."

"I didn't actually talk to it."

"So who is going to talk to it? Are you going back?"

"No, of course not."

"So you men won't talk to it, even though it wants to be a neighbour."

"Well..."

"Mary's Mercy! If you want something done around here, you need to leave it to the women."

"I just don't think it's safe."

"You don't think what's safe? Talking to an invisible voice that can't do anything?"

"I need you here at the tavern."

"You left me alone here with Jenefer yesterday."

"That was because I had to go with the Vicar."

"You could have refused!"

"You can't refuse the Vicar!"

"The thing up there did!"

"What happens if you get lost?"

"Gil. Are you scared for me or yourself?"

"I'm scared for you that the Vicar will find out and accuse you of witchcraft. You've heard the stories from travellers about the witch-hunts going on in Northumbria."

"Northumbria's a long way away, but you're right. He accused poor Sussana Beckworth last year on the stupidest of accusations by Laetitia Forgell. Do you think he will return to Carlisle?"

"No. He told the Bishop he was returning to the village of his birth, and this isn't it. I don't know what he is going to do."

"I'll talk to Mathilda and Cait and get Mathilda to back off. Cait doesn't think it is dangerous, but she wasn't thinking about the Vicar. Mathilda knows the Vicar better than the rest of us."

Mathilda had said she would come by the tavern this evening, so I decided to chop more vegetables and chunks of lamb for the stew and moved the pot closer to the fire.

"Marion."

"Good Evening."

"Well?"

I looked around at the dozen or so people in the room and

decided to move the conversation to the storeroom.

"You know the Vicar better than anyone. If he finds out we've gone to the Stones, he'll denounce us to the witch finders."

She sighed. "True. He's already playing a dangerous game with the Bishop. I don't know how he is going to get the holy relic back to the Cathedral. He already has a fever. I noticed it when he arrived two days ago, and yesterday's exertions only made it worse."

"He didn't demand we all show up for church services today."

"That's because he didn't get out of bed."

"We haven't done anything yet. Cait seems interested as well. Maybe we wait a couple of weeks and see what the Vicar is going to do."

"Alright. But at some point, I'm going up that hill."

July 14, 1643

I saw Cait in the morning.

I told her "Gilbert is afraid we might get lost. What do you think of your brother Hume or Ruderfurd accompanying us?"

"You mean going to the Stones? It's not a bad idea if they can. But we have to ask when."

"Gilbert and Mathilda are both concerned about the Vicar denouncing us to witch hunters if we do it and he finds out."

"Hmm. I suppose you are right. You will have heard more news at the tavern than I would, and Mathilda knows the Vicar. So we aren't going?"

"Mathilda says the Vicar is really sick. Sicker than he was when he arrived. Fever and chills."

"Contagious?"

"No. Mathilda said he admitted to gangrene before they cut off his leg. So it might be from that. And his traipsing all over the hills three days ago didn't help."

"So we wait and see?"

"Yes."

July 22, 1643

The Vicar died today. Gil read his diary to the rest of the village. Everyone is talking about the entry that the Vicar had stolen the holy relic from the Cathedral and, since it had no

effect on the whatever it is at the Standing Stones, the Vicar decided it was a fake. No one knows what we should do. We can't keep a holy relic, but if it's fake, then it isn't a holy relic. Do we tell the Bishop or not?

Gil is suggesting we burn the diary, send a letter to the Bishop saying that the Vicar died here and asking what to do with his things without saying what is there. That way, if the Bishop wants them, we return everything untouched, and if the Bishop doesn't want them, we hide what may or may not be a holy relic inside the church somewhere.

Luke Rawson, the blacksmith, and Brice Rede think we should hide the diary with the relic.

After much arguing at the inn, it was agreed to send the letter to the Bishop and hide the diary and the finger bone.

July 23, 1643

We buried the Vicar today.

I think the Beckworths came just to make sure he was dead. They are still angry that he accepted Laetitia Forgell's false accusation that their daughter Sussana was a witch.

Gil led a few prayers, but everyone was there mostly because it was expected. The man was an ass while he was alive, and the whole finger bone/relic situation is making us all nervous.

Cait caught Mathilda and me after the burial and said she had talked to her brother Hume (Valcar). He would take us to the Standing Stones the day after tomorrow. Lucy, his wife, would also come so that there wouldn't be any tongues wagging in the village. She hunts as well so she knows the hills, is a friend of Cait, and about as talkative as a stone. Just like her husband.

Chapter 9

Mathilda Potter July 23, 1643

July 23, 1643 (Thursday)

My name is Mathilda Potter, the daughter of Mr Roger Potter, the Curate of Kendal. I was hired four years ago at the age of 22 to be the schoolmistress of the village petty school here in Andras Hill, with classes given in the church. Although the village pays me, the Vicar, as Vicars do, then presumed to abscond with my time and treat me as his servant, both for his personal needs and those of the church and vicarage. That time I could have put to better use maintaining my kitchen garden.

I must point out that the village has no grammar school but, if parents are willing to pay me, I will endeavour to teach Latin to boys over the age of eight.

Yesterday the Vicar died from a fever and we buried him today. I managed to prevent myself from dancing on his grave after everyone had left. But I felt like it. “God works in mysterious ways.” Ha. There are so many ways you can interpret that line. No, I did not kill him.

With that preface out of the way, there is a task to be accomplished that will take both clarity of thought and practicality. It also requires some boldness, which, I admit, is not my strong point.

We’ve known for just over a year that the village has a supernatural neighbour. There is a circle of standing stones some three-hour walk into the hills from the village and the circle is inhabited. By what, I don’t know. The Vicar claims it

is a demon. He was highly incensed last year when it refused to be exorcised.

He, the Vicar that is, was called back by the Bishop to Carlisle immediately afterwards because of accusations by the village council. (The Vicar was an idiot for getting involved in a fight between two girls over a boy and taking the witchcraft accusation of one of them seriously.) That was a year ago. He then returned a few weeks ago minus a leg (some mishap involving a riot at Carlisle) but with a fever and the finger bone of St. Thomas, a holy relic that belongs in the Cathedral. With that relic, the Vicar again attempted an exorcism of the stones and failed. This time the failure was witnessed by two hunters and the village innkeeper, so everyone knew by the next morning. That was 10 days ago.

And now he's dead.

I was always taught that all spirits on earth are fallen angels. However, Marion, the innkeeper's wife, assures me that her husband and the two hunters report the spirit did not act evil, offer temptations or demand worship. It just said it was a neighbour and refused to leave. I don't understand. Of course, the men didn't try to talk to it. That leaves the job of establishing neighbour relations to the women.

I must admit that part of me justifies meeting the whatever it is and establishing neighbour relations on the grounds of knowing your enemy. Another part of me has a frisson of excitement about forbidden knowledge.

I've never been to the Standing Stones and certainly don't want to go alone. But Marion knows everyone. So, like a ten-year-old, I dared Marion to go with me to the Stones and actually talk to whatever it is. She was too nervous that the Vicar would accuse us of witchcraft and have us hung, but he's dead now. So we're going in two days. Marion convinced Cait, the Baker's wife, and Hume Valcar (one of the hunters who had witnessed the attempted exorcism) and his wife Lucy to accompany us. So quite a little group to march into the hills.

Chapter 10

Marion Blexham July 25, 1643

July 25, 1643

Cait was the first to arrive as the sky was beginning to lighten. How bakers like Cait and her husband Brice get up before the cockerel's crow I'll never know.

"I brought two loaves for us. I've also got a fresh water bag. Do you have any cheese to go with the bread?"

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. "Yes, cut some out of that pot against the wall."

I splashed some water in my face as the Valcars came through the door. They had collected Mathilda on their way, so now our little group was complete. Lucy waved two cooked rabbits at me and dropped them into a bag at her waist. Both she and Hume had water bags at their hips and a long bundle strapped to their backs.

Hume led the way, with Lucy following the rest of us. It was mid-morning when we puffed over the last crest and saw the meadow with the Stones off to the left. Cait took a deep breath and said, "I'm not 15 anymore." Hume waded through the knee-deep grass and led us to a halt as we reached the Stones.

Lucy pulled the cooked rabbits out of her bag, along with two knives, and handed one knife to Cait. She and Hume sat down in the grass, and she started slicing pieces of rabbit onto a cloth. I guess we eat now.

Cait sat down as well and began slicing the bread and then the cheese and handed pieces around. Mathilda and I stared at

the Stones. Almost twice the height of a man, I couldn't imagine how they got here, but here they were.

"Do we go inside the circle?" Mathilda asked.

"We wait." Hume responded.

I had just finished my slice of bread, rabbit and cheese when "*Good Morning*" sounded in my mind. It didn't sound like a man or woman, just my mind heard the words without going through my ears. I looked around, but there was nothing to see but Mathilda's wild eyes and a tiny smile at the corner of Cait's mouth as she watched us.

"Cait! You've been here before and never told us!" I accused.

She looked over at Lucy and snickered. "Yes. But it is something you need to experience yourself."

Mary's Mercy! Both of them?

"Uh. Good Morning to you..."

"Anthracyda." finished Cait.

"Welcome to the hillside, Marion and Mathilda. And welcome back Hume, Lucy and Cait. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Wait. How did it know our names?

I felt like I was feeling colours as the voice spoke in my mind, but feeling colours makes no sense. I can't describe the feeling of blueness and greenness and sparkle, but that was how I felt.

Mathilda tentatively offered, "You told the Vicar you were a neighbour. We thought neighbours should not be afraid to meet."

"Does the Vicar know you are here?"

Mathilda responded, "He's dead. He got sick and died. Did you do that?"

"No. That would not have been 'neighbourly'."

There seemed to be a sigh in my head. *"If he was still alive, you would not have dared come, would you?"*

I spoke up. "No. He would have accused us of trying to make a pact with Satan and we might have been hung."

There was another mental sigh. *"So much fear. So much envy."*

Hume spoke up again, "Easy for you to say. You don't need to kill to survive, don't have children to raise, and no one can hurt you."

"True. *My philosophy probably doesn't work for you.*"

I carefully asked, "Is the relic real?"

"*You mean the human finger bone the Vicar kept waving around? It was a human finger bone if that's what you're asking.*"

"No, I mean is it a finger bone of St. Thomas?"

"*No idea. I've never met St. Thomas.*"

"Are you here, in the stones?"

There was a little chuckle in my mind. "*No. Humans put the stones up to mark where they talked to me and to make some calculations for seasonal planting.*"

"So they never sacrificed anything here?"

"*No. I would have suggested that was a bad idea and, if they have to do it for some misbegotten reasons of their own, do it elsewhere.*"

"Can you come into the village?"

"*No. I'm in the hills even farther away. This is about as close as I come to your village.*"

"Can you cure the sick?"

"*Depends on the sickness, but probably not. I might be able to give advice on what you should do.*"

"Could you have cured the Vicar?"

"*No. I didn't cause him to become sick, either.*"

Mathilda spoke up. "What could we give you to be good neighbours?"

"*The people who set up the stones used to sing and dance here. That would be nice.*"

Mathilda grimaced. "Our God might think we were worshipping you."

"*So sing songs about it for me to listen to and maybe I'll come to know it better.*"

"Him." Mathilda said firmly.

"*Him? Is there a 'Her' god as well? In this world they normally come in pairs.*"

"Actually there is a trinity and all three are 'him'."

The mental voice laughed. *"I think we need to talk about something else."*

Mathilda asked "Are you a him or her?"

"I'm an it."

"An it? What are you?"

"Call me a small god or a spirit of the hills if you want."

I joined in. "You told my husband you were a child of the *EverChangingIs*. What does that mean? Who or what is the *EverChangingIs*?"

"Everything arises from the EverChangingIs. Think of a thunderstorm. There is wind and rain. The rain is uncounted drops of water. Almost everything is the drops of water. From time to time, there is lightning and thunder. The small gods are like separate lightning bolts that last a really long time. Each of us are different and we are very unlike raindrops."

"So you think the *EverChangingIs* created you?"

"You believe God is a person who decided to create everything. We don't think the EverChangingIs is a person any more than we think a thunderstorm is a person. It just is and rain and lightning and thunder happen."

"We?"

"We don't have a name for those like us. Some call us 'small gods'. We can talk to each other. Some of us can travel beyond the stars, though I can't."

"How many are you?"

"I don't know. Not that many."

"So what do we do now?"

Cait, silent this whole time, spoke up.

"Anthracyda. Can you show Hume and Lucy's aura to Marion and Mathilda?"

Suddenly I could see colours glowing around Hume and Lucy. The glows expanded and, when they touched, the colours brightened and there were little sparkles all through each glow. Then the glows faded.

Cait said "When we sent my daughter Fiona and Alastair Cullane up here, there were no sparkles. Fiona said it was just an ugly bruise. They would not have been a good couple for

each other.”

I choked. “Alastair Cullane knows? Is that why he left?”

Hume replied. “No. Anthracyda put Alastair to sleep before speaking to Fiona alone and doing the colour thing.”

Cait laughed. “Fiona had some strong words for us afterwards telling us we should have warned her what to expect. She thought the Spirit of the Stones was just stories we told children.”

“As opposed to the Demon of the Stones stories. So it’s a marriage test?”

Cait said “Call it a second opinion. We knew Alastair was an ass and so did Fiona, but it was our way of letting Fiona ‘meet the neighbour’. We also knew Anthracyda could handle Alastair. Hume and Philip Ruderfurd escorted them so Alastair didn’t get any ideas on the way up or down the hill.”

“So Ruderfurd knows as well?”

Hume responded “You hunt in the hills, you come close to the Stones. Anthracyda can decide to talk to you or not. There were a couple of Border Riever bands that would have come over the mountain if Anthracyda hadn’t thoroughly confused them so I think its a good neighbour. We just have to be careful who we talk to about it.”

“Who else knows about the glowing test thing?”

“*Duncane and Hannah Lyfelde. Elspet and Daury Malison.*”

“Daury Malison the fisherman? What was he doing on the .. no, I don’t want to know. ”

I suddenly realized I wasn’t feeling colours in my mind anymore. “Is it gone?”

Lucy spoke up. “Yes. It said there was a doe somewhere over there having trouble with a birth and it wanted to comfort it.” She waved her arm to indicate further up into the hills.

“It can talk to animals?”

“And plants and trees, apparently.” Lucy replied.

“And wants to comfort them when they are in pain?”

“Yes.”

Cait interjected “The whole village knows that the Vicar tried and failed to exorcise a demon at the Stones. What do we

say about coming up here?"

I chewed my lip. "I think we say we wanted to make sure we could be good neighbours, in spite of the fact that the Vicar tried to attack it. It agreed."

I looked at everyone in turn, got a nod from Lucy and Hume and "yes" from Cait and Mathilda.

Noon

It was barely noon. Lucy passed around the water bag. We started to gather what we brought together.

Suddenly both Lucy and Hume's heads snapped around to look at the path over the crest towards the village.

Hume whispered "No cover" to Lucy and she nodded. She turned to us, put her finger to her lips and motioned for us to get behind them. She and Hume hurriedly unwrapped the long bundles they had carried, revealing their hunting bows and a dozen arrows. They quickly straightened up, bent and strung the bows, and jammed the arrows point first into the ground in front of them. Notching an arrow each, they faced the crest.

Face white, Mathilda whispered "Border Reivers?"

Lucy shook her head. Just then we saw two figures top the crest and start downwards. They turned towards the meadow and stopped, apparently seeing us for the first time, then resumed making their way towards the Stones.

Hume laughed "Rawson". He and Lucy lowered their bows.

As they came closer, I realized it was Luke Rawson, the blacksmith, and his 16-year-old son Thomas.

When they were about twenty yards away, Hume untied the water bag at his waist and offered it to them. "If we had known you were coming, we would have saved some food."

"Thanks Valcar, women." Luke took a swig from the bag and passed it to his son. He looked at the bows and arrows sticking out of the ground. "You think we were Border Reivers? There's never been Border Reivers coming over these hills."

Hume replied "One never knows." He continued "What brings you up the hill?"

"We thought to end this threat to the village. You need the right tool for the job. Holy water for demons. Cold iron for Fae.

The Vicar used holy water. We brought cold iron.”

He and Thomas dropped their packs on the ground. The packs clanked.

“You’re a braver man than me.” Hume said. “If this was Fae, I wouldn’t come anywhere near this place. And if you nailed their door shut with iron, I’d sing your praises for the next month.”

“But it’s not Fae, I’m hearing you say. What are you doing here?”

“It’s a hillside spirit. It’s bound to the hills. It couldn’t come down to the village if it wanted to. It told the Vicar that it wanted to be treated as a neighbour and the women wanted to meet ‘the neighbour’.”

“It killed the Vicar!”

“It didn’t kill the Vicar. He already had fever when Ruderfurd and I carried him up the hill. We could feel it.”

“Have you talked to it?”

“Yes. We agreed the village wouldn’t bother it and it wouldn’t bother the village.”

“You can’t trust these things!”

“And they probably feel the same way about you. But like I said, it’s bound to the hills, it can’t threaten the village.”

“But we could threaten it?”

“*You could try.*”

I could suddenly feel colours again; Anthracyda was back. Luke and his son looked frantically around, then ripped open their packs and pulled out heavy hammers.

A second later, the hammers flew out of their hands, through the air, and seemed to glue themselves to the closest standing stone.

“What?”

“*Isn’t magnetism fun?*”

“Who are you?” gasped Luke.

“*I’ve been through this once already today.*”

Cait spoke up. “Its name is Anthracyda. As Hume said, it’s a hillside spirit. If you want your hammers back, behave like good neighbours.”

“Is this your best iron? I can give you suggestions on how to make it better.”

Hume stepped between them and the Stones. “Look Rawson, I said you were braver than me, thinking you were coming up here to save us from the Fae. Now you’ve got a chance to be a hero to the farmers by making better plows. Take it.”

Luke’s face screwed up in thought. “I can’t haul the forge up here.”

“No, but we could talk through what you do, and you can go back and try my suggestions.”

“Release our hammers and we’ll talk”

The two hammers fell to the grass at the foot of the stone.

Hume said “I will take the women back and leave you to your iron secrets.” He and Lucy unstrung their bows, rewrapped them and the arrows in their leather bundles and gestured to the rest of us.

As we walked past, I saw Thomas walk to the hammers, pick his up, hold it against the stone and shake his head.

As we cleared the first crest, Lucy muttered, “God save us from people who need to be heroes.”

I looked at her and asked, “Just out of curiosity, why bows and not the new guns?”

She glanced over her shoulder at her leather wrapped bundle. “Quiet, quicker, less threatening and lighter if you don’t anticipate using them.”

Hume added, “And they cost less”.

The trip home was uneventful, but now we needed to face the village.

Chapter 11

Andrew Dericote July 25, 1643

July 25, 1643

I was sitting in the village inn, at one of the plank tables with my oldest son Henry, my wife Rachel and Husbandman Donne Cullane and his wife Cicilia. The room was crowded, most of the village seemed to be in attendance.

We were at the inn because Hume Valcar had taken a gaggle of women up into the hills to 'meet the neighbour'. At least that's what Gilbert Blexham, the innkeeper, had told us. The 'neighbour' in this case is supposedly whatever demon or hill-side spirit the Vicar had tried twice to exorcise. He tried once just before getting recalled, then came back and tried again two weeks ago. He failed both times. According to Gilbert, who was with the Vicar up in the hills the second time, the spirit just said it just wanted to be a good neighbour and laughed at the Vicar's attempts to get rid of it. Hume had brought them all back a couple of hours ago, so half the village was here tonight to hear the story.

I looked around carefully. No one from outside the village was here.

"It's an ill wind that blows no one any good." I said, chasing the last bit of stew in my bowl with a bit of bread. "We used to paid our tithe to the Vicar here. Then that idiot made that witchcraft accusation last year and got recalled by the Bishop to Carlisle. With the Vicar gone, we had to pay the tithe to the Bishop. The Vicar came back three weeks ago, so that should

have changed where we had to pay the tithe; we shouldn't have to send it to Carlisle."

My son Henry said, "But now the Vicar's died of fever. So the tithe goes back to Carlisle again."

"Yes, but the Bishop has declared for the King. Suppose the Roundheads besiege Carlisle. If we send the tithe at harvest to Carlisle, it will just be throwing it away. The Roundheads will confiscate it. Better we sell it south and keep the money. With any luck, we will be completely forgotten in all the political nonsense for years."

My wife Rachel said thoughtfully, "So, worst case, we hold the money until the winner comes for it. Best case, the records get lost in the fighting and we keep the money. And we are more likely to be 'forgotten' if no one in the village sends a tithe to Carlisle to remind anyone."

"Exactly. Now, assuming the ghost or whatever wants to be a good neighbour, we don't want anyone tattling outside the village and drawing attention to us. Any attention and someone is going to ask about the tithe. So Andrew, you make sure that all the older lads know - no talking to outsiders about ghost stories. Rachel, you and Cicilia make sure all the women know it too. I'll handle the men. Donnan, you good with that?"

"Yes. War might be the best harvest we've had in years." Donnan replied.

I snickered, then called Gilbert's daughter Jenefer over and asked for another ale. She nodded yes and turned to go. Henry's hand dropped and patted her behind. She spun around in one step, slapped his hand hard enough to make him to wince, and continued walking to the bar. We all laughed.

Donne said, "Henry, Jenefer's been slapping hands since she was twelve. Are you a slow learner?" Henry shook his head and rubbed his wrist.

I started to call after her to ask where Hume was, when the outside door opened and Hume walked in. The talk in the room fell silent, everyone watching and waiting for the story.

He beckoned to Gilbert and asked for an ale, then looked at the room and asked

"Has anyone seen Rawson?"

Someone, I didn't see who, replied, "He and his son were working at their forge a few minutes ago when I walked past."

Hume grunted, walked up to the bar and faced the room.

"You're all here for news."

"Yes!" came a cry from several voices.

"There is some kind of spirit in the hills. The Vicar, may he rest in peace, was mistaken thinking it was evil. If it had been evil, the Vicar's exorcism would have worked. But since it isn't evil, an exorcism can't drive it away. Gilbert and I told you that two weeks ago."

That started up hubbub in the room til Hume raised his hand, then it quieted down again.

"It's a spirit that is bound to the hills, so it can't come to the village. Because it isn't evil, I took some women from the village, including my wife, up to meet with it at the Standing Stones today. The spirit is invisible, but it does talk and is willing to talk to us. It agreed to be a good neighbour and leave us, our children and animals and crops alone. In return, we agreed to leave it alone. If someone from the village tries to pull down the Stones, it might get annoyed, then the hills wouldn't be safe."

He continued, "Rawson and his son also went up there today with cold iron in case it was Fae. You'll have to ask them what they talked about with the spirit. They're back, so more proof that we don't have anything to fear, so long as we treat it like a neighbour."

"Did it kill the Vicar?" called someone.

Hume rolled his eyes. "No, it didn't kill the Vicar. The Vicar died of fever. He had that fever before he went up to face it the last time. Ruderfurd and I both felt the heat on his skin."

Gilbert's wife Marion had quietly appeared near the bar and spoke up. "It said it likes music, even church hymns. Nothing evil would be willing to listen to church hymns." She had been one of the women who went up the hill with Hume. The other three, Cait Rede, Mathilda Potter and Lucy Valcar stood with her.

That started another hubbub in the room.

I decided it was time I, as the Yeoman with the largest farm, took a hand in things, so I stood up and rapped on the table. The room again quieted down. I looked around to make sure that there were no outsiders in the room.

“I think it is clear that the hillside spirit means no harm and the Vicar’s constant attempts to exorcise it did not turn it against us here. However, it should also be clear to everyone that we don’t want outsiders prying into our affairs, and that includes that we know about the hillside spirit. We don’t need witch hunters prowling around.”

There were general murmurs of agreement around the room.

“I want all of you to make sure your families know - no talking to outsiders about the spirit or any ghost stories.”

Again, murmurs of agreement.

I saw Geoffrey Gaynesford, another of the four Yeoman of the village, across the room. “Geoffrey, a moment of your time.” He nodded to the others at his table, stood up and came over to us. Rachel nodded to Cicilia, excused herself and stood up, motioning across to Sarah Gaynesford that they meet with Marion on the other side of the room. Cicilia followed.

I opened, “I think we should have a discussion about the tithe, and, for that matter, the rent that many in the village pay to the Church.”

“Oh? The Vicar’s dead, so it goes to the Bishop.”

“Have you heard the latest news from Carlisle? They’re declaring for the crown. That will draw Parliament’s army. Or Scotland’s.”

“You think if there is a siege the Bishop will be distracted and forget us?”

“We can’t send the tithe through a siege.”

“So, if there’s a siege we sit on the crop?”

“No, I’m suggesting we sell it south. If anyone later comes asking, we can pay them the proceeds. If no one comes asking because the village is forgotten in the politics, well ...” I smiled. He smiled back.

I stood up. “First things first. Siege or no siege, the village

won't be forgotten by the Bishopric if anyone talks outside the village about our neighbour. We need to control that right now."

"Agreed. But until there is a siege, we still have to sell to the Bishop. And even if there is a siege, there's no certainty we will be forgotten. But I like the possibility."

"Yes. I'll start with this side, you start with that side. Remember who you've talked to because tomorrow we'll have to talk to anyone who wasn't here. Shall we?"

Geoffrey laughed, "We shall."

We shook hands and started the campaign.

Chapter 12

Women's Meeting

July 25, 1643

Marion Blexham

I watched as it seemed like most of the village women started moving in my direction. The men clustered in little groups, the women seemed to coalesce. Typical.

Rachel Dericote pushed to the front.

“So. The neighbour.”

I chuckled. “Yes. You want to know what’s it like?”

There were murmurs of agreement.

“Its name is Anthracyna. As Hume said, it is invisible, but can talk to you. What he didn’t say was that you don’t hear it with your ears, you hear it directly in your head. There’s no sense of direction, it’s just everywhere.”

Cait Rede piped up. “It’s not in the Standing Stones. We stayed outside the circle. The Stones just mark where the pagans used to gather and talk to it.”

I said, “And here’s the really interesting bit. It does something like look into your heart and mind and paint colours in the air around your body. It did that to Lucy and Hume and where their colours touched, it created sparkles in the air that floated around the meadow.”

“What?” There were audible gasps among the crowd.

Cait interjected, “If you put a man and a woman up there that are not a good match for each other, you won’t get sparkles, you get really bruised colours.”

“How do you know that?” came a question.

We had agreed that Cait would lie if this question came up because she didn't want to admit her family had dealings with Anthracysda before.

"We asked it to match Marion and Hume. It was not pretty."

Lucy snickered. There were a couple of other chuckles around the room.

Sarah Gaynesford looked thoughtful and said, "So if a couple wants to marry or handfast, we send them up the hill and it can read their hearts and minds and decide if they will be good for each other?"

"Seems like it," I replied.

I could hear the whispering around the group. Some women already starting to think about whether this would be a way to break up couples they didn't approve. It would be a two-edged sword. They would have to decide what to do if Anthracysda approved the match, but they didn't.

On the other hand, they would also have to decide what to do if the match was good "business" but bad from a heart and mind standpoint. I stand here in the inn every day, watching the village come and go. I hear the arguments and fights. Or I hear OF the arguments and fights. Maybe there would be fewer if a hill god approved of the match.

We needed baby steps.

"Rachel, what are the men talking about?"

"They're talking about the tithe to the Bishopric. The Bishop has declared for the King. That might draw Parliament's army or the Scottish army to besiege Carlisle. If that happens, we couldn't pay the tithe if we wanted to. If Parliament wins, there's a chance tithing records get destroyed. We are small and not well known. We could be forgotten and not have to pay any tithes, ever. But only if we don't come to the Bishopric's attention. That means no one talks to outsiders about this Anthracysda."

I added, "I'd be more concerned about Andrew's last point. Talking about Anthracysda is likely to bring witch hunters down on us as well."

Rachel looked around the group and repeated herself. "No

one talks to outsiders about this Anthracyda. It's our secret."

There were nods around the group.

She continued, "Those of you who expect to send your daughters or sons somewhere else to be servants, you need to insist that this is a village secret."

She turned to me. "You said it can look into people's minds. Can it make someone forget about it?"

"I don't know."

"We need to find out. Children talk. Even if we don't tell them, they will find out about it from other children."

She looked around the group. "Don't tell your children yet. Lucy, can you take me and Sarah up there on Monday morning?"

Lucy, short with words as ever, just nodded.

"Whoever can make it back here Tuesday night, be here. We'll decide what to tell the young people and children."

I reminded the group, "Better tell your husbands not to talk to the young people and children as well."

That got a few chuckles. The group broke up and separated to collect their husbands.

Chapter 13

Mathilda Potter July 25-28, 1643

July 25, 1643 (Saturday)

Hume Valcar told everyone at the inn a small amount of the story about what happened at the Stones today. Hume being Hume, he kept it short and confirmed that an invisible non-evil spirit is bound in the hills and will leave us alone. He pointed out that Rawson (the Blacksmith) was also up there with cold iron and confirmed it wasn't Fae. We reached agreement that we won't bother it and it won't bother us. It can't leave the hills, so there is no way it could threaten the village anyway.

Hume also told the village that the spirit didn't kill the Vicar because the Vicar died of a fever that he had even before he went into the hills. That seemed to satisfy the men and they got sidetracked into discussing promises not to tell anything to outsiders.

Marion separately told the women the interesting stuff about our neighbour. Yes, the Stones are huge. Yes, there was an invisible voice that talked to us in our heads. Yes, we discovered that it could paint the air around a person somehow and, when it did that to two people, when the colours touched they gave off sparkles. Supposedly, this only happens if the two people would be a good "match" for each other. If the couple would not be a good match, then both sets of colours would start to look bruised. No, we don't know how it did it. No, we didn't see any bloodstains on the centre stone.

But now I'm thinking back to when we were about to leave

and Rawson and his son showed up. The spirit offered to teach Rawson ways to make better iron to get into his good graces. It did the colour trick for us, but it didn't offer to teach us anything.

I think I want to negotiate a better deal. I teach reading, writing, arithmetic, religion and Latin. If it can, and is willing to teach the blacksmith ways to make better iron, what can it teach me? Now that I know the way, I want to go up on my own.

Is this how it lures you in, promising to teach secrets you don't know, and then stealing your soul?

But if it was a demon, the Vicar would have been able to exorcise it and if it was Fae, it couldn't have taken the blacksmith's iron hammers. So, maybe it isn't evil. Valcar said it was a hillside spirit, but what does that mean? Arrgh. I don't know.

Tomorrow is Sunday. Since it's the Lord's Day, maybe that's a safer day in case it is evil. I could go up and still decide to turn around before walking to the meadow.

I've decided. I'll go up at first light tomorrow so no one sees me. Then I can decide to back out when I get up there.

July 26, 1643 (Sunday)

It's still dark. I'm nervous, I'm excited. I don't have a water bag. How could I have forgotten I need a water bag? There are a couple of streams on the way, I just need a cup. Some apples. I'll take some apples too.

Do I need to write something down? I have some foolscap and some of the new black lead pencils. No. Its getting too much. I'll just go and talk. Or not talk. I can remember.

There's a candle lit at the bakery. I need to get going.

My legs are still tired from yesterday. I can do it though.

I have my cup and apples in a bag. I put a cloth in as well. It might come in handy. Don't panic. It's still too dark, I'm going to get lost. No. I just need to get far enough up the track that I'm not seen from the village, then I can stop until it gets lighter.

I'm going. I'm actually going.

I'm off the track. It's not light enough to see well. Stop.

Don't panic. Just sit down. I haven't crossed the first crest, so even if I'm lost, just going downhill will take me to the village. Just wait for more light.

Good. I found the track again. Up we go.

I made it. There were a couple of times I wasn't sure, but I made it. On my own. I can see the meadow with the Stones. I dared Marion. Do I dare myself?

I'm going.

I'm here. Yesterday we waited until it spoke. Is that the polite thing to do or just that Hume and Lucy barely talk anyway? It's not like it has a door to knock on.

"Hello. Anyone home?"

No answer. Maybe it's talking to a squirrel.

"Hello, Anthracyda!"

"You don't have to shout. Hello Mathilda."

Now what do I say? "I teach reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. You told the blacksmith you could teach him how to make better iron."

"No. I told the blacksmith I could give him suggestions. It is not quite the same thing."

"Did he learn to make better iron yesterday?"

"Yes."

"So you taught him."

"No. He taught himself. I just helped to open his mind to some possibilities he had not thought of before. Humans seem to learn better that way."

"I was taught that repetition ingrains the knowledge in your mind."

"Do you learn how to learn new things? Or just remember old things?"

"You mean how does someone learn without a teacher or a book?"

"Yes. How does someone solve a problem they have never seen? Or imagine something they have never heard of?"

"They try until they get it right."

"How do they decide what to try first?"

"Whatever comes to mind."

“And if that doesn’t work?”

“Try something else.”

“How do they decide what to try next?”

“Whatever comes to mind.”

“What about thinking ‘what the first attempt actually did and why that didn’t work?’”

“So you decide what to try next based on what would improve the result of the first failure?”

“Yes.”

That started a long conversation on what Anthracyda called ‘Why and reproducible results’. If you do the same thing several times, but the result is different each time, you need to ask yourself why? Is there something random like honest dice, or was there something different each time that caused the different result? If you cannot say why the result was different, then you probably don’t yet understand. Similarly, if you think you got the right result, can you then ‘reproduce’ that correct result again and again. If not why not.

Finally, I had to take a break and asked, “So what are you? Yesterday you said, ‘Call me a small god or a spirit of the hills if you want.’ That is just a name, not what you are.”

“I’ll answer that if you can tell me what you are.”

“I’m a human .. oh. That is a name, not what I am.”

I started again. “Humans have two arms and legs and ... no, wait, that’s a description, not a definition.”

The sensation of a smile formed in my mind.

I did feel like my brain had been exercised the same way as my legs.

“So only God really knows.”

The mental voice laughed. “*I think we need to talk about something else.*”

“I agree. Is it alright if I come again?”

“Yes.”

I retraced my steps back down towards the village, but didn’t walk directly in. Just before I would have crossed the last crest, I tried to look carefully over the crest to see the village. Ideally I would have walked a mile south and crossed the

crest there to come down to the road, but the brush was too thick. The brush was thick around the track I was following as well, so I crossed the crest, trying to stay below the tops of the bushes. Just before the track opened up at the village, I paused, concealing myself until no one else was in view, then walked directly to my cottage.

Closing the door, I leaned back against it.

“What is a human?”

Chapter 14

Rachel Dericote July 27-28, 1643

July 27, 1643

Lucy Valcar and Sarah Gaynesford met me at my door at sunrise. I had a water bag and pack with some food, they had the same and Lucy also had a long bundle wrapped in leather which I assumed was her hunting bow. We didn't say anything to each other, we just walked in single file to the path leading into the hills, pushing back some tall brush, started the path upwards.

Farm work may keep you from getting fat, but three hours later I was short of breath as we topped the third crest and started descending again. We could see the meadow with the Standing Stones not far off across a meadow with tall grass and moved off the path towards them. As a hunter, Lucy could probably have looked at the grass we walked through and told us how many people had been passed in the last week, but it wouldn't have been important.

We had gotten our breath back by the time we came up to the Stones. I looked in askance at Lucy, but she just indicated we should sit down, rest and have some lunch. I swear the woman must say at least 10 words a day. She and her husband can't have arguments - neither of them talk.

Sarah just shrugged and dropped her coat on the ground to sit on, laying her pack and water bag beside it. I did the same. I guess we wait.

Ten minutes later, things started happening. A crow flew

in and landed on one of the Stones, watching us, followed by two more. Other birds stopped singing. Even the insect buzz stopped. Lucy raised her right hand, then dropped it and nodded to us. I have no idea what kind of signal that was, but suddenly there was a feeling that we were being watched by more than the crows. The air felt like it had more colour, which makes no sense to me at all. Air is air. You don't see it.

"Welcome to the hillside."

Yes, just as we had been warned, it spoke directly inside our minds. I replied for the group, "Thank you. I've been told your name is Anthracysda."

"Yes. It's as good a name as any."

"My name is Rachel Dericote and this is Sarah Gaynesford. You already know Lucy."

"Yes."

"Much of the village now knows about you. There seems to be some services you can render to us with respect to, shall we say, affairs of the heart for younger people. In that regard, I've been told that you can read minds."

I waited for a response. But there was none.

"I think we have a mutual interest in keeping your existence secret and only known to villagers. However, there is a potential problem in that two or three of the younger people leave each year and they might talk. Is there any way to ensure they remain silent with respect to your existence?"

I thought back to the last few who had left to become servants, or so they hoped, in some city farther south. If they stayed, it would have been too many mouths to feed. If the tithing avoidance worked, the village could feed more, but the excess crops could be better sold for hard coin. If they talked about the hillside spirit, it would bring attention to the village and our tithing avoidance might be found out.

"You want to know if I can magic their memory."

"Yes."

"I can make it seem like stories about me are fairy tales that you tell children that aren't real. I can't make it go away entirely."

"I supposed that will have to do. What kind of payment do you demand for your services?"

A wave of what felt like amusement rippled through my mind.

"Do you really think there is anything you can pay me?"

"There must be something you want."

Two of the crows spread their wings and glided down of their perch, and to my shock, landed, one on each knee. I steeled myself not to cry out or scramble away. They looked at me intently, then flapping their wings, returned to their perch. I found I had been holding my breath and let it out.

"A village is like a flock of crows. They don't need a ruler. What they need are lookouts and scouts and cooperation when there is danger. They need members of the flock who can teach them to cooperate with the rest of the flock when there is danger and be free to play by themselves if there is none.

I don't provide 'services'. If you would like my advice or guidance to help you or help your young people with respect to 'Affairs of the heart', I expect you to treat me with respect. I am a neighbour, not a servant. As a neighbour, I also expect you to properly introduce everyone in the village, including introducing your children to me before they get old enough for affairs of the heart.

Finally, again as a good neighbour, I will talk to those who leave the village to reduce the danger that you fear."

I looked at Sarah. "We could do a fête with the entire village up here. I know at least two girls and a boy who are leaving the village. We could get the introductions and the memory magic all done at the same time."

She looked doubtful. "A fête? Those require too much planning. I think we just firmly suggest everyone come up here on a day we choose and bring their own food and drink. We can choose the day tomorrow night."

I looked back at the Stones. I really didn't want it to think that I was afraid of it. Ripping three pieces of bread off the loaf I had in my pack, I said, "As a token of our appreciation of having you as a neighbour, I offer this bread to your three friends."

One flew down, landed on my knee again, and took the bread in its beak. It bobbed its head, then returned to the stone. The other two also did this in turn. All three then flew off.

"My friends and I thank you for your gift. May you have a safe return home."

The air seemed more transparent again and I lost that feeling of being watched.

Lucy got up. I took that as the signal that we were going home. She looked at me and said "That went well. It could have gone much worse. You know what they call a flock of crows?"

"Yes. A murder."

I think I had gotten what I wanted, and Marion could sell the idea of a village outing as a celebration, even if it wasn't a fête and involved six hours of walking in the hills. Time to plan explaining this to the other women of the village tomorrow.

July 28, 1643

I went to see Marion at the inn around midday. She was sitting with Lucy at a table, drinking an ale.

Marion spoke first, "So what did you think?"

"It seems to be willing to affect the memories of those leaving, but we would have to bring them up there."

"It does have a name, 'Anthracyda'. If we are going to treat it as a neighbour, we should use its name. How would it affect memories?"

"Anthracyda then. It can't erase them, but can make them think everything is just a fairy tale told to children."

"Everything? Or just what relates to Anthracyda?"

"Just what relates to it."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. It wants to be introduced to everyone in the village, including children, as if it is a real neighbour."

"It is a real neighbour. We just hadn't realized it."

"It's not a person."

Lucy spoke up. "You don't want to make it angry."

I said, "Its bound to the hillsides, it can't do anything to us so long as we stay away."

Lucy replied, "You want to make a bet on how far a god,

even a small god, can throw a boulder?"

"it doesn't have arms. How can it throw a boulder?"

Marion said, "Remember the first time the Vicar said he tried to exorcise it a year ago?"

"Yes."

"The Vicar said that it just knocked over two of the Standing Stones like they were dominoes. Did you see them lying down?"

"No."

"So it can knock over boulders that are 9 feet tall and put them back again. Just because it's invisible doesn't mean it can't do things."

I temporized, "So long as it can help us stay unnoticed, I'll treat it as if it were a neighbour."

Marion then changed the subject. "How are you planning on introducing the village? I know you've thought of something."

"We might as well get everything done at once. If everyone goes up one day, we get the introductions done and it... oh, alright 'Anthracyda', changes the memories of the two or three that are leaving."

"How are we going to convince everyone to just drop everything and take a day to go up there."

I smiled. "That's your job."

She grimaced.

Nightfall

Almost all the women in the village had made their way to the inn. I walked around and made sure there were no strangers.

I stepped to the front of the bar and held up my hands for quiet. After a minute, I got it.

"Sarah Gaynesford and I have now talked to the hillside spirit. We can confirm what Marion said three days ago. It has requested to be treated as a neighbour and, as you would expect from a neighbour, would like to be introduced to everyone - including children."

Cicilia Cullane asked, "How do you talk to a spirit? Isn't it invisible?"

"Yes, it is invisible, but it talks to you inside your head.

You can talk to the air and it will hear you. Or you can just think what you want to tell it and it can hear you.”

Cicilia continued, “Does it know if you’re lying?”

I was a bit surprised when Elspet Malison responded from the crowd, “If you can talk to it by thinking about what you want to tell it, then if you are thinking about telling it a lie, it will know that you are telling it a lie.”

That I hadn’t thought of and would need to be very careful in any future conversations. I was talking out loud to it today, but since I put my thoughts together first, maybe it could see that whole thought process. I’ll have to remember exactly what we said to each other yesterday.

Someone asked, “Do you think it is safe bringing the children to meet it?”

Marion answered, “If it could do something to children, it would have done something to us. When Cait and I were up there with Mathilda and Lucy, it took time out of the conversation to go comfort a doe that was having problems with a pregnancy. That is not the sort of thing that something that wants to harm children would do.”

Cait added, “And we can’t very well leave them in the village by themselves for most of the day.”

One woman called out, “It’s not a neighbour. It’s three hours away!”

Marion replied “It’s not next door to your house, no. But it’s close enough that our hunters and shepherds are around it. It’s close enough that the Vicar tried to attack it. Is it going to buy a drink from me in the inn, no. But it is there, we have dealings with it, and we need to stay on good terms. Otherwise our hunters and shepherds might find the hills closed to us.”

A second said “How can it be a ‘neighbour’? It’s not a person!”

Marion replied, almost scornfully, “And I’m not your sister. Yes, it’s not human. But it can carry on a conversation better than some of the men in the village.”

Another woman asked, “Why should we care? What difference should it make to us?”

Cait joined in. "Marion just said it could close the hills to our shepherds and hunters. But here's a better benefit. How many of you ever wondered, when you were courting, whether this was the right person to spend the rest of your life with? Anthracyda - and let's use its name because it has a name - Anthracyda can look into your heart and mind and your boyfriend's heart and mind, and can show you or show both of you whether your hearts will support each other.

Wouldn't you want that for your children? To know they are not making a mistake? To know that you aren't making a mistake, allowing them to marry or handfast?"

That caused a hubbub.

Someone asked, "Is it Christian?"

Marion said dryly, "No, but it doesn't care that we are."

"I'm not walking the hills. If it wants to meet me, it can come here."

Lucy answered this one. "It can't come any closer to the village than the Stones. It goes much further east and north. In fact, it regularly confuses Border Reivers trying to cross the hills so be grateful for that. But it can't come here."

I raised my eyebrows at the claim about the Border Reivers, but didn't say anything.

"Is it true they used to have sacrifices there?"

Marion rolled her eyes "No, the pagans never had sacrifices there. Anthracyda doesn't want to be worshipped and, if it comforts animals having difficult pregnancies, can you possibly think it would allow sacrifices?"

"What does it want from us?"

I said, "Just what I told you at the beginning. It has requested to be treated as a neighbour and, as you would expect from a neighbour, would like to be introduced to everyone - including children. It doesn't want to be worshipped, so you have no danger to your soul. You are not putting anything before God."

"What is your angle Rachel? You always have something up your sleeve?"

I smiled, "It's always good to have friends."

“Did it kill the Vicar?”

Mathilda responded to this one. “No, both Lucy’s husband and I noticed the Vicar had a fever when he came back from Carlisle. He died of that same fever.”

“What do the men say?”

Marion took this one. “This involves the well-being of the village and our children. That is our concern. The men ..” She looked at me and I picked up the cue, “The hunters and shepherds are in favour of being friendly. The rest of the men are not opposed to being friendly, but are mainly concerned that no one talk about this to anyone outside the village. I agree with them both with being friendly and with not talking about this to outsiders.”

Another woman said, “It’s a demon and I won’t deal with it.”

Marion looked sharply at the speaker and pushed through the crowd until she was standing right in front of her. “You’ve already been told by my husband and Rachel’s husband that it isn’t a demon. If it was, the Vicar would have been able to exorcise it. You’re acting like a three-year-old child who doesn’t want to obey their parents.”

A final question was posed. “I don’t have the time and my children are grown and gone. Why should I care?”

Marion responded to this one as well. “Because it’s for the good of the village. If you don’t like it, and you don’t want to act for the good of the village, we’ll remember that and you’re not welcome in the inn.”

I decided to conclude the meeting. “Attend Me!. This is for the good of the village. Marion and I expect that you, your husbands and your children will, and I repeat will, join us in meeting Anthracysda in four days. It will take most of the day to go there and back, so pack dinner and water cups or water bags.”

There was much quiet conversation as everyone broke up into small groups and headed towards the door, but I knew the village. If Marion and I were on the same side, we could direct them like sheepdogs. And tonight we did.

Chapter 15

Village Lunch at the Stones August 1, 1643

Marion

There was still a little bit of arm twisting that went on over the last few days, some by me, some by Rachel, some by Rachel's husband Andrew. I expect some even went on inside some cottages. By this morning, we had convinced most everyone that it was in their best interest to come. We decided that the hunter Philip Ruderfurd would stay in town just in case of any mischief. He had already met Anthracyda and didn't have any family to bring up the hill.

As people gathered, Brice Rede pointed out that this was the first time the entire village had been together since the last church service back in June of last year. Today was Saturday. If we were doing this tomorrow, I'm sure some families would have decided to sing hymns as we walked up the hill.

My husband Gil walked from family to family, making sure that everyone had either a water bag or cups to drink from the couple of streams that we would cross. It appeared that everyone had brought food with them, so we wouldn't have children crying about being hungry. Of course, we would still have children crying about being tired.

We'd had rain two days ago, but it looked like no rain today. For a moment I wondered whether anyone had told Anthracyda the village was coming today, but then decided that it probably had birds that acted as sentries this side of the Stones.

Hume Valcar and Andrew got everyone's attention, then

led the way to the path into the hills. With all the comings and goings the last three weeks, it was beginning to look more like a trail than a trace, but still required single file much of the way.

Lucy Valcar and I were last in line to ensure no stragglers. We were joined by my eldest daughter Jenefer and Sussana Beckworth, who had been falsely accused of witchcraft last year. My other two children could be relied upon to be wandering back and forth in the line from one family to another. Gil would be keeping track of them.

One could argue that the false accusation was the pebble that started an avalanche, resulting in ousting the Vicar and, eventually, this outing by the whole village. Her parents were somewhere up ahead in the line. If I know her overprotective mother, they would be between us and Laetitia Forgell, the girl who had made the original accusation that the Vicar had taken up. Stupid teenage girls and their fights over boys.

Sussana looked at Lucy and me, "Is it scary to have something in your head?"

"It's certainly not something that's ever happened to me before. So it's surprising but not scary." I looked at her and smiled. "It can't be as scary as being accused of witchcraft."

She replied. "No. I can't think of anything that is as scary as that was. Well, maybe childbirth. I remember hearing Mrs Rawson screaming in pain and threatening her husband. And she's the village midwife. That was scary too."

"Yes, childbirth can be painful. But it's worth it." I gave Jenefer a shove on her shoulder.

"Just remember, Mother, you'll need me to take care of you when you get old."

I laughed.

We stopped at two different streams on the way up. That provided water for those who only had cups, allowed those with water bags to refill them, and allowed the old and young to take a short rest. Finally, we got to the top crest and started down the other side, then walking through the tall grass meadow to the Stones themselves. Although everyone in the village knew the Stones were here, this was the first time most of them had

actually seen them for themselves. Many families, holding children's hands closely, walked around the circle. No one ventured into the centre.

Andrew Dericote was just in the process of telling everyone that they might as well sit down when "*Welcome everyone*" sounded inside my mind. Again, there was a sense that I could feel colours inside my head as Anthracyda talked. Blueness, greenness, sparkles and just a hint of feeling yellow.

I looked around at all the mouths gaping from my neighbours. A few who had not sat down previously suddenly did so, like they had lost the support of their legs. More than one stammered "Witchcraft".

I thought, in my mind, back to Anthracyda "Does everyone have this sensation of being able to feel colours?" "*No. Some people like you are just more sensitive to this form of communication.*"

Andrew was just as startled as everyone else who had not experienced Anthracyda before. It doesn't matter what you tell someone, until you experience a voice in your head, you are not prepared. However, since he thought himself to be the leader the village didn't have, he decided to speak up.

"You asked us to treat you as a neighbour and requested the village introduce itself to you. Since you are unable to travel to the village, we have brought the village to you, walking the hillsides for hours to get here. I would like to present..."

"*There is no need for you to present each family individually.*" Anthracyda then said directly to me, "*I think it is probably easier and faster for me to talk to everyone individually at the same time. Each person will only hear their own conversation with me.*"

I could hear everyone babbling at once, responding to whatever Anthracyda was saying to them specifically. As I watched, a few looked like they were starting to talk to Anthracyda by just thinking their response. As more started to do that, the babble lessened, but more than half kept talking aloud. It was strange to hear only one side of a conversation, and even stranger to hear only one side of many conversations.

Jenefer caught on to just speaking in her head quickly, which made me proud. Sussana was a bit slower.

I looked around and saw Rachel and started walking to her. She had a look of fierce concentration on her face and waved me away. I turned away and decided to find Gil instead.

“Gil, you might want to talk to Andrew about whatever young people here were going to be leaving the village.” The feeling of colours in my mind came back, this time with a sensation of Gil-ness as well. *“Marion, Gil. There are four that expect to leave to seek better fortune. Their remembrance of this day will be a bit different than the rest of the villagers. When they hear villagers talking about this day, they will think that their fellow villagers are talking about fairy tales that were shared on the hill.”*

I could hear Gil in my mind responding, “That will make Andrew happy. Have you told him?” at the same time I’m sputtering “What, how?”. *“I’m repeating what Gil is saying to me so that you hear it as well. This is not something you can do at home.”* Then Anthracyda responded to Gil’s question *“I’ve told both him and his wife. They both seem very keen on the topic.”* I felt its attention return to me and it said *“I’m carrying on forty conversations. But this is easy compared to talking to bee hives. That took me 10 years to learn.”* I said, mentally, “I thought you were a god.” There was a mental chuckle. *“Small hill god remember. No omniscience or omnipotence. I have to learn just like everything else. I’ve just had 110 million years of practice.”*

“What? The earth is only a few thousand years old!” I felt Gil’s shock the same as mine.

“Let’s not worry about that. Just accept I’m older than your village and can do some things you can’t. At the same time, you can do some things I can’t, like move around past these hills.”

I’m not sure I know how to deal with this information. What would Mathilda Potter, our petty school teacher and daughter of a curate, would think about it being 110 million years old.

I was about to ask if Anthracyda was an angel when I realized that angels would be visible and they can move around.

So, not an angel. That still left me with the question of how a small hill god can exist for longer than the life of the heavens and earth. Worry about that later.

“Have you met everyone then?”

“Yes. Like every other kind of being, everyone is different. Some are curious, some are frightened, some are angry or tired. Some are focused on wealth, some are just worried about their next meal and sleep. If more of you thought about supporting the village and neighbours, fewer people would be frightened or worried. But most seem to think only about themselves or their immediate family. If fewer people were worried or frightened, there would be fewer fights in your inn. Pity.”

Fewer fights in the inn? Some people do get drunk or angry and start fights. Sometimes people or furniture and crockery get broken. That is just part of the life of an innkeeper. Would life be better with fewer fights? Yes, of course it would. Another thing to think about.

I looked at the sky. More time has passed than I expected. Rachel was staring fixedly at some crows. For some bizarre reason she had fed them bread. Who ever heard of a farmer feeding crows? Gil and I looked for Andrew to see if we could get people moving and start home. He looked like he had reached the same decision. “Everyone. It is time to start home so that we get to the village before nightfall.”

Most people looked bemused. Anthracyda seemed to have somehow reassured the ones crying about witchcraft. Whatever Anthracyda had said to them had not scared them and they had gotten over the shock of something speaking to them inside their heads. Even the children looked quiet. I didn’t hear any crying or complaining all the way down.

Andrew Dericote

“Welcome everyone” I felt my jaw drop as the voice sounded inside my head, and apparently everyone else’s heads as well.

I spoke out loud, for the village, “You asked us to treat you as a neighbour and requested the village introduce itself to you. Since you are unable to travel to the village, we have brought the village to you, walking the hillsides for hours to get here. I

would like to present...”

“Thank you for leading everyone up for introductions.”

I tried to remember what Rachel said, that you could just think your response. Since it was already in my head, I decided to try honesty.

“Believe me I would rather have let things continue as they had been. We leave you alone, you leave us alone. That worked for hundreds of years.”

“Since we’re being honest with each other, that worked until the Vicar decided to try to demonstrate his power and authority and publicly failed. Now he’s gone, you can’t ignore the fact that I exist, the village is leaderless, and you are stepping up to the responsibility.”

“The Vicar was only the leader in church matters. I’ve always been the leader in other matters. Well, leader of the village council, which makes me the leader.”

“Ah, the village council composed of the five landowners.”

“Yes.”

“Most of the village rents their land from the Bishop. How does the council get its authority?”

“The Bishop is not here. We represent the village to the Bishop and, if he does not act, it is only right for the landowners to lead.”

“Why does landownership make a difference in who should lead? Tell me, which person is more worthy of respect and honour - one who people want to follow because of their actions, leads by example and who demonstrates their care of their followers or one who has a more handsome face?”

“Obviously the one who leads by example. A handsome face is worth nothing.”

“Why is wealth different from a handsome face?”

“God bestows wealth on those he favours.”

“But gives handsome faces to those it does not? You inherited the land from your father. Why should god favour your lineage? What do you do to keep god’s favour? Or is there a divine right of landownership as there is a claimed divine right of kings?”

"I can see in your mind that you have a hope that the village can become obscured from the Bishop's taxes and rent because of the death of the Vicar and current events. That would lead to the benefit of everyone in the village. Landowners and tenants alike. That is what makes you worthy of being followed. Continue to demonstrate that the entire village benefits, not just you, and they will always follow you."

"I have made your task slightly easier. There are four young people that expect to leave to seek better fortune. Their remembrance of this day will be a bit different than the rest of the villagers. When they hear villagers talking about this day, they will just think that their fellow villagers are talking about fairy tales that were shared on the hill."

That was helpful. I did not know who would be leaving the village in search of jobs. My wife had pointed out the danger that they would talk of the hillside spirit and draw attention to the village. It would not do to get the attention of the witch hunters who seem to be infesting Northumbria.

"Thank you. Are you talking to everyone at the same time?"

"Yes. *One of the benefits of being what I am.*"

"And what is that?"

"Titles don't matter to me. Call me a small hillside god or spirit if you like. I'm not an oracle or omniscient or omnipotent. I'm not looking for your worship or adoration. You need not worry about angering your god in that respect."

"Let me know when you have introduced yourself to everyone and I'll lead them off your hillside."

There was a smile in my mind, *"So we can go back to 'you won't bother me and I won't bother you'."*

"Exactly."

Rachel Dericote

"Welcome everyone." At least I was prepared for the internal voice this time. Focus on the goal. Find who is leaving the village and get the spirit, Anthracysda, to cloud their memories about it.

"As you requested, Marion and I have convinced everyone to come and meet you. I'm not sure of all the young people who

will be leaving. Since you are looking into everyone's minds, can you do that?"

"Yes. There are four."

"Hmm. I expected two or three. Thank you. Are your feathered friends here today? I brought more bread."

"They can be here shortly."

I focused on feeding crows. After about 10 minutes, two descended from the sky and landed on one of the stones. I sat down and ripped two pieces of bread off a loaf I was carrying and raised it in my hand. They glided down and landed right in front of me. I solemnly handed one piece of bread to one and the second to the other. They bobbed their heads and flew back to the top of the stones.

"Do they have names?"

"Nothing that you can pronounce."

"We, all of us, appreciate your assistance in reducing the chances of bringing witch finders down on us."

"Or tax collectors. I do know what you're doing. At the end of the day, everyone in the village is better off if your plan works. Even my feathered friends here. If your plan just aided you and your husband, we would be having a different conversation."

The feeling of being watched disappeared. I really don't like something that can read my mind, so I just watched the crows intently until Andrew called for everyone to pack up and get ready to leave.

I joined Andrew and Hume Valcar at the head of the line. As we cleared the final crest and headed down to the village, I told Andrew "That is the last time I'm going back there. Use Marion instead."

Andrew looked at me, surprised, "Why?"

"I hate having something in my head!"

Valcar asked, "Because you hate having something in your head or because it knows if you're lying?"

I huffed, "How dare you!" and turned away, continuing into the village and towards home.

Henry Dericote

Most of the village has walked into the hills for this stupid

'Meet the Neighbour' idea of my parents. An invisible something is supposed to talk inside our heads once we get up to the Standing Stones. I expect something, because too many men have said they talked to it, but if it can't help with the planting and harvesting, I really don't care.

"Hello."

And here it is. "So. I'm here, you're here. Impress me."

"*Why should I impress you? Is that something you typically demand of neighbours?*"

"You wanted to meet. I have a lot of work to do. What about you makes it worth my while to walk all the way out here? Either impress me or I'm leaving."

There was a chuckle in my mind. "*Ah, the impatience of youth. We could discuss crop rotation. Or you could take a step down.*"

"How can I take a step down? I'm already on the ground!"

"*Are you?*"

I looked at my feet. They were solidly planted a foot above the ground, but still below the height of the meadow's tall grass. How did that happen? I gingerly reached out and down with my right foot and yes, I reached down to the ground. I stepped down with my left as well.

"You're in my mind. You could just make me believe I was standing in the air."

"*True. Or you could have been standing in the air. A conjurer's trick.*"

"Illusions are not worth my time."

"*As I said, we could talk about crop rotation.*"

"We already use the best three crop rotation. A hillside spirit would not understand the best ways of farming."

"*Do what you want to do. We've now met. You have completed your parents' request.*"

Geoffrey Gaynesford

I'm in the camp of 'We leave it alone and it leaves us alone' but Rachel Dericote has a point. The Vicar's failed attempts to exorcise whatever the spirit is alerted the entire village that something is here. Young people leave the village every year

and, if they talk, it could bring witch finders down on the village. Even if Andrew Dericote's idea of trying to hide the village from the Bishop's tithe and rent takers doesn't come to fruition, witchfinder attention would never be good. Rachel thinks the spirit could cast some sort of spell on those who would leave, so they do not remember or think it's a fairy tale or something like that. If it works, good. But if it doesn't work, the entire village could be hung for witchcraft. Damn the Vicar.

My wife Sarah and the children accompanied me on the village walk into the hills. The children visit with their friends in the line and that distracts them from complaining about the long walk. I've never actually been up here, so seeing the massive stones in the far meadow just over a crest was a little impressive. I have no idea how the pagans would have gotten the stones up here. We found a comfortable place to sit and started unpacking our luncheon.

"Hello."

Everyone was looking around frantically, but as we had been warned, there was nothing to see.

My wife said, "It is good to meet you, neighbour." I tried to think the same thought in my mind.

"Welcome to the beginning of my hillside."

"Is it true that this is as close as you can come to the village?"

"As close as I can come, yes."

The thought flickered in my mind about Sarah telling me about Lucy Valcar's comment to Rachel about Anthracysda being able to throw things long distances. I felt rather than heard a snicker. "Can you do that?"

"Yes. But we can talk of more useful things."

Much to my surprise, the conversation evolved into a long discussion on crop rotation and planting turnips and clover instead of letting a field be fallow for a year or two. If that worked, it would be even better than Andrew's hope of being forgotten. It would be an advantage compared to other farmers, both inside and outside the village. I'll not commit all my land to this idea, but try it for half and see the results. There might be other

fruitful discussions with this Anthracyda in the future.

I could hear my wife talking out loud to Anthracyda saying something about love, handfasting and abuse. I quickly racked my brain about anything I had said or done to her. *"No, she is not talking about you. Others in the village."* Ah. Good. That sounds like a woman's conversation I do not want to be part of.

I turned over the different points we had discussed about crops in my mind until everyone decided it was time to leave.

Mathilda Potter

Six days ago, Anthracyda had asked me what a human is and I couldn't say. I was taught humans are different from animals and had authority over animals. But that is a distinction. It doesn't say what we are. Anthracyda is clearly not an animal, but just as clearly doesn't fit into the Bible anywhere. Unless, maybe it is a demon playing a very subtle game? But they are not known in the Bible for their subtlety. What do I tell the children at school when they ask what Anthracyda is?

"You can just tell them I'm a hillside spirit and leave it at that. Right now they're more interested in whether I can teach them how to talk mind to mind because they want to talk without an adult listening in. They're disappointed that they can't."

"So you are talking to the children right now?"

"Yes. I'm calming the frightened, telling stories about rabbits to the very young, and suggesting to the curious that they ask you questions and see what you have to say."

"What kinds of questions are they asking?"

"Can I make the stones dance? Am I a ghost? Where did I come from? Do I know everything? What is a demon? The questions of children are endless and can keep you occupied for the rest of your life."

"So what are the answers to those questions?"

"I can make the stones move around, but they are not bendable, so it doesn't look graceful like a dance. I'm not a ghost because I'm not the spirit of someone who was alive and has died. My bible says that I came from the EverChangingIs, but your Bible doesn't mention me at all. No, I don't know everything. Finally, I have no idea what a demon is."

“I don’t have an answer to your question about what is a human. We are created by God to be above animals, but that doesn’t tell me ‘what’ we are.”

“The hawk that flies in the sky is ‘above’ you.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. I mean we are superior to animals and birds and fish. We are more important and have authority over them.”

I could feel Anthracyda laughing at me.

“Does the hawk know you have authority over it?”

“Lords catch hawks and use them to hunt, so that shows humans have authority over them.”

“Almost all the villagers are within my reach right now. I could prevent you from going home. Does that give me authority over you? No. That would be a ‘Might makes Right’ sort of thinking. Mathilda, you can do better than that sloppy thinking.”

The tone was gentle, not angry. I felt like I was a child and had just disappointed my father at my studies.

“I have the Bible and the philosophers. What else do I have?”

“You have your own mind. Don’t just accept what others have told you.”

“But the Bible is the word of God.”

“I have my bible. You have yours. They say different things. That is not to say that mine is right and yours is wrong, or yours is right and mine is wrong. Do you explain something to a small child the way you explain something to an adult? No. Do you read a book the same way as a child and as an adult? Again No. You think too little of your god if you believe it meant for your bible to be understood only in a childish simple way.”

“Come back later when you think you have a better answer on what is a human. Also think about what it means to be human. Those are not the same questions.”

Hamlet was right when Shakespeare had him say “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” I can’t place Anthracyda in the Bible. I don’t know how to explain it.

Laetitia Forcell

My parents told me that I had to go on the walk into the hills with the entire village. Everyone still looks at me with suspicion. Someone even threw a rock at me last month. I don't care. I'm leaving next week to go to Kendal where I'm to assist the upstairs maid in a large home. I suppose I can now say that I've actually been to the Stones, but people just told children's stories about what they had heard from their parents; the Stones are empty, the Stones had a demon once, the Stones were a pathway to the Queen of the Fairies Court. Then we went home. A very long walk for nothing. I can't wait to leave.

Fiona Rede

Before the Vicar decided his stupid attempt to exorcise Anthracya last year, only a few villagers knew of it. My parents were two of them. After the Vicar's stupidity, the entire village knew of it, but very few had actually met it. Again, my parents were two of them. Not that I had ever been told. They did tell make believe stories about an invisible dancing master that would teach the Standing Stones to dance, but that's all they were - make believe stories for children. I didn't get the normal village stories told to children about blood sacrifices. That should have told me something.

I was introduced to Anthracya earlier last year when a man twice my age thought I would make an appropriate wife. My parents thought a six-hour walk in the hills would ensure that by the end of the day we would both hate each other and that Anthracya would introduce itself to me. They were successful on both counts.

After the Vicar's second failed attempt to exorcise Anthracya, the entire village decided to publicly agree to be peaceful neighbours and went up into the hills en masse to meet it. So here we are. Anthracya, whatever it is, somehow has private conversations with everyone at once. I decided to ask about the original stories my parents told me.

"Do you actually teach the stones to dance?"

"No. I can move them around so they seem like they are dancing, but they are not 'alive' to teach."

"That makes sense. What about music? What tunes are

played while you make them dance?"

Anthracyda chuckled in my mind. *"There are bird songs, or I can think of music in my mind. A long time ago, as you count the years, there was another village closer to here. They would come and dance in the meadow. Sometimes I hear shepherds playing in the hills, but I do not know what you would dance to or even how you would dance in your village."*

I suddenly had a thought. "No one has ever heard the music the pagans used to play or dance to. Could you make it so I heard some of their music in my mind?"

"Yes."

I spent the rest of the time on the hill listening as Anthracyda played strange dance music that only I could hear. It was wonderful. And mine.

Sussana Beckworth

I was talking with Jenefer Blexham at the inn and lost track of my parents in the gathering. I finally saw them well ahead in the single file line going through the bushes and up the hillside, so decided to stay with Jenefer, her mother and Lucy Valcar. Lucy is a hunter, married to a hunter, brother of another hunter and also is the butcher for game. I don't think anyone would cross her. She would just stand there and look at you, unblinking, and you would find yourself slowing backing away. I wish I could be as brave as she is.

Jenefer's mother is the wife of the innkeeper. She can deal with the drunks almost as easily as her husband can, but she also can listen to your problems, at least if it isn't busy in the inn. Jenefer as well.

I wish I could be as brave as all of them.

I brought a cup, so I got drinks of water from the two streams we passed on the way up. They said it would take three hours, but it seemed longer. I was tired when we got to the top. There, down a little ways and off to the left, in a meadow of tall grass, flowers, bees and butterflies, were the Standing Stones. I knew they were there, of course, but this was the first time I had actually seen them. Everyone started across the meadow and I found myself looking at the variety of flowers, more than I would

have expected in a single meadow. Though I looked closely at the flowers, I left the bees and butterflies to their business and they ignored me.

We finally got up to the Stones and people started settling down in the grass and unpacking the food they had brought. I found my parents and sisters and joined them. We had just finished eating and were wondering what would happen next when “*Welcome everyone*” sounded in my head. I think I shrieked. All around me was stammers and yells, gasps and gulps.

“*No need to be frightened.*”

My heart was racing. “Uh. Hello.” I stammered.

“*Just think what you want to say. It will be quieter that way.*”

“Umm.”

“*You looked at the flowers in the meadow.*”

“Yes. I’ve never seen so many different types in one place.”

“*Did you think about why they normally don’t grow together?*”

“Well. I saw some that I see only in the woods and others that I’ve only seen next to streams.”

“*Yet here you see them out in the open meadow.*”

“Yes. How does that happen?”

“*Because I want it to. I care and cajole them into being successful here.*”

“So you’re like a gardener? Of flowers?”

There was a feeling of a smile in my head that somehow made me more relaxed. “Yes, you could say that.”

“Can I do that?”

“*Not the same way I do it, but yes, you can learn what plants and flowers need. Some need more sun, some less. Others need different types of dirt. Some need more water or less water. Others want to be near specific other types of plants or animals. You need to keep your eyes open and look for all the differences you can think of between one place and another. It’s the same for crops and trees as well. You can talk to farmers about how they know what crops to plant where.*”

“What about people and animals? Is it the same with

them?"

"*Maybe. It's not as obvious as dirt, water and sunlight. And I don't see people in different surroundings, only when they come up here. So that you would have to discover for yourself.*"

"How do you read our minds?"

"*You know how you make sound when you speak?*"

"Yes"

"*Inside your body, you create little sparkles When you think, even as little as just deciding to move your finger. I can sense the sparkles and have learned to read them.*"

"Do animals have the same sparkles?"

"Yes."

I found myself distracted, watching a ladybug climb a stalk of grass, reach the top, then fly away. This was a nice meadow. I wondered what kind of sparkles Anthracyda saw in the ladybug.

I was a little startled when my father touched me on the shoulder and said it was time to go. Everyone around was brushing themselves off, picking up children or packs or water bags. As we started back out of the meadow then onto the track leading back to the village, I started wondering about whether I could come up here again. Not if Laetitia Forcell was around. But Jenefer had said Laetitia's parents were hinting that she was being sent south to Kendal. Maybe after that.

High above, a black crow sailed.

Elspet Malison

It had been a long time since Dauby and I had been to the Stones. Once we married and had children, there is always something that needed to be done in managing a household. How did we ever have the time when we were young and wandered the hills. How did Cait, Brice, Lucy and Hume find the time? They always seemed to run around as a pack. Now that I think about it, I have a question for Anthracyda when we get up there.

Eventually we all succeeded in trudging up the hill without losing any small children. Dauby, Clarice, Oswyn and I sat together, Hannah sat with us as Duncane had to stay with the village sheep.

"*Hello Elspet. It has been awhile.*"

"Yes, I got older and more responsible."

"You were always responsible. You just have more things to be responsible for."

"Yes, I suppose. How are you? Still trying to be the mother for the hills?"

"If I didn't try, I would have to find something else to occupy my time."

"No fear, no worry about food or shelter. Some hope for that in the afterlife. I guess they would take up all their time with singing song of praise for eternity. I wonder if they have thought about whether there is any need for sleep?"

I decided to change the subject "Did you meet Cait, Brice, Lucy and Hume when they were younger? I know they used to roam the hills, but Daury and I were a few years earlier and older and more secretive about it."

"Yes. I had similar discussions with them as I did with you and Daury. As I do with crows and others that actually raise children. Some agree with kindness and some do not. It is often a cruel world and the path of kindness is hard."

"Why crows?"

"Crows, like humans, stay together as families and the young crows learn more from their parents. There are a few other animals and things that swim in the ocean that are also like that. It is a bit more complicated with trees and seedlings."

"Trees raise seedlings as families?" I was utterly perplexed.

"I said it was a bit more complicated. Their roots talk to each other. We don't have time to explain it today."

"I think I will just take your word for it."

I decided to go back to the subject closer to me. "I think Cait and I have tried to follow your advice in raising children. More kindness and guidance and less punishment for failures. Certainly the children seem to grumble less than other children and I actually trust mine to be responsible."

"You don't trust Fiona to be responsible?"

I laughed inside my head. "Oh, I trust her to be responsible. But she does not suffer fools or injustice gladly. There may come a time when she needs to learn when to be forthright and when

to fight quietly. Cait might send her for hunting stealth lessons from Lucy and Hume and tell her to apply it to dealings with people. Actually, now that I think about it, Fiona is strong willed like her mother and maybe all she needs to do is learn Cait's ability to manage customers."

I felt a smile from Anthracyda form in my mind. *"There are different ways to move a mountain, and some of them require much patience. But it must be said that it can be lonely trying to change behaviours. Fiona, Clarice and Hannah and their children will have to support each other."*

I looked across the meadow at all the families from the village. Somehow Anthracyda and I ended up comparing the antics of young crows with the antics of young children. Finally it talked of how crow parents tried to teach their children until everyone decided it was time to leave.

I would certainly have some interesting stories for Dauy when we got back to the village and he returned from the boats.

Cait Rede

Brice, Fiona and I obviously joined the line of families hiking into the hills to "meet the neighbour". Just as obviously, we were not going to admit, except to very few people, that we already knew the neighbour.

The meadow was much as I remembered it seventeen or eighteen years ago. Mostly wildflowers and tall grass leading up to the Standing Stones themselves. Anthracyda thinks of this as his front door for talking to people. Just as Brice and I experiment with different baking recipes, Anthracyda also experiments with different things, but those happen somewhere other than the Stones. It would be appalled if you thought any of those experiments involved blood sacrifices.

"Hello Anthracyda!"

"Hello Cait. Thank you for helping to bring the village to me."

"I honestly thought you would have just ignored the Vicar rather than teasing him."

"Hume Valcar told me what the Vicar had done with the accusation of witchcraft and his plan to throw down the stones."

I like how they are arranged. If I ignored him and put them back the next day, eventually someone would notice. So ignoring him, which is the same as trying to hide, wouldn't work. So I thought to try something else."

"I would have loved to see his reaction when he commanded you to leave and you asked 'Why?' Did you really say 'Did someone drop you on your head when you were a child?'"

"Yes. He was a remarkably slow learner."

"Was there any way an exorcism could actually work on you?"

"I suppose if there was a some jealous entity that wanted all things to praise it because it feeds on praise, it might have the power to end me. But if something needs to be praised and will kill to get lesser beings to praise it, do you really want to feed something that vicious with more praise. I haven't heard that such a thing exists."

"Unfortunately accusations of witchcraft can definitely cause us to get killed."

"Yes. Hume said that you proved the Vicar's witness false. That was brave of you and smart in doing it just with bread purchases. You also seem to be doing a good job raising Fiona. It cannot be easy raising a girl to be independent and believe in fairness when everyone around her would not agree."

"Both I and Elspet are trying, although I did not know that she had learned from you until last year. I think her children are not as strong willed as Fiona, so she tries to teach kindness more than independence, but simply being kind is to be different."

"Teaching kindness when it is a difference still requires a willingness to be independent, otherwise you and she would not keep trying. It may just be a different style of how it shows."

"I suppose. By the way, thank you for convincing Alastair to move away. the village is better for his absence."

"You are welcome."

I looked around at everyone in the meadow. Most seemed to be in some kind of conversation with Anthracyda, but a few had clearly been shunned or cut-off early. They didn't seem angry or upset, just lost in their own thoughts rather than thinking or

speaking to someone. I wondered if Anthracysda was distracting them in some way until all the conversations were done, but I decided not to ask.

Eventually Andrew Dericote and Gilbert Blexham announced it was time to return, everyone packed up their luncheons and we all started for home.

Clarice Malison

Oswyn and I had talked about going up to the Stones someday, but it would have been a long walk. Besides there never was any time and we certainly would not have gone if we thought there actually was a spirit. Now it seems there is.

We were both excited and uncertain. What was it going to be like to meet a real “hill spirit”? Our mother did not seem worried and neither did our sister Hannah, but we didn’t know what to expect. The rumours running around the village were that it talked to you in your head and it was invisible.

At the same time, everyone was also remembering the stories told around the fireplace about the Demon of the Stones and that good children stayed in the village and did not wander the hills. Now the entire village was going to meet the demon, or was it spirit, willingly. I guess the stories that other families told of the blood soaked Standing Stones were just tales trying to frighten children into doing what their parents wanted.

Oswyn and I knew, of course, that Hannah’s husband Duncane, the village shepherd, wandered the hills with the sheep and had never been bothered, but now... we didn’t know what to think.

Wait a minute. Last year Fiona Rede had gone to the Stones when Alastair had tried to court her, and she didn’t say anything about meeting a spirit. Is it new? Did she hide something?

“Hello Clarice.” a voice sounded in my mind.

Oh God, it’s here. “Uh, Hello?”

“Don’t be scared. I’m not going to hurt anyone.”

Should I have brought a fish as a welcoming gift? No one had talked about what to do when there are new neighbours. I can’t actually remember there ever being “new” neighbours. No one “new” ever came to the village.

There was a laugh that sounded in my mind. *"I do not need to eat, so I would have had to use a fish as fertilizer, but thank you for the thought."*

Oh God again, it can read my mind!

"Yes. You do not have to say anything out loud to me, just think it."

I glanced at my mother and sister. Their eyes were closed, but their mouths were moving just a little bit, like they were trying to think a conversation. "Are you talking to everyone here right now?"

"Yes. I can talk to many at once."

What would someone ask of a new neighbour? "Where did you come from?"

"I've always been here. I didn't come from somewhere else."

"Do you have a family?"

"No, but I do watch over all the life in the hills around here. Does that count?"

"All the life?" I could see treating puppies and kittens as children, but plants and insects?

"I'm not their parent, but I watch them grow and try to comfort them if they are hurt."

Huh. That is acting like a parent. Or at least acting like my parents.

"Where did you come from?"

"I've always been here. I didn't come from somewhere else."

"Do you have any favourite animals?"

"Ones that can learn."

"Do you think people can learn?"

"Sometimes I have my doubts."

"Sometimes I have my doubts too."

I looked around the meadow and saw Mrs. Dericote feeding some crows. "Is she teaching them or are they teaching her?"

Anthracyda chuckled. *"She is trying to tell me that she is not afraid of anything that I might do without actually talking."*

"Should she be?"

"Only if she tries to harm them up here. I won't interfere if she tries to protect her crops from them down in the village."

But I think she understands the difference. She is also trying to avoid thinking about anything she does not want me to overhear. She and I are not in conflict, so I'm not trying to read her mind anyway."

"What are the best animal families?"

"Maybe crows. The children stay around longer than they physically need to in order to learn more from their parents. And even after the children leave the nest, they keep coming back for years to help the parents raise the next set of babies."

"I bet the children would not come back if the parents were mean."

"And you would be right."

We kept talking about families and parents and children until Mr. Dericote announced that it was time to leave. We all stood up, brushed ourselves off, gathered whatever we had brought, and started the long walk back.

Chapter 16

Marion, Sarah and Cait Talk About Courtship Advice August 3, 1643

Marion

The village visit to Anthracyda was certainly good for business. The inn had been busy ever since with everyone in the village wanting to talk about their conversation with Anthracyda. It seemed like Anthracyda had managed to tease out each person's interests and the conversation then revolved around that.

Cait Rede and Sarah Gaynesford came into the inn during a lull in the midafternoon. They sat down at a table and Cait waved me over. Sarah started off the conversation.

"Did you know Anthracyda has a vegetable garden?"

I was stunned. "What? Unless it is feeding animals up there, what would it need with a vegetable garden?"

Sarah said, "Geoffrey and Anthracyda had quite a conversation about crop rotation. When Geoffrey asked how it knew anything about crops, Anthracyda said it had a vegetable garden that it planted different ways to see how the plants grew."

Cait said, "Where does it get .. oh. It has crows pick up seeds from our fields and uses those."

"Yes. Like I said, it and Geoffrey talked quite a bit about crop rotation and Geoffrey is going to try some of its ideas. But that's not why I came in to talk."

I looked at her. "I am running an inn. Are you buying?"

"Yes, yes."

She must be really excited. I went back to the bar, drew three ales, then returned.

"Remember when I asked about whether Anthracyda could read minds and determine whether a courting couple would be a good match?"

"Yes." Cait and I both responded.

"When it is children from the village, we all have watched them grow up and have a good idea ourselves about a match. But often prospects are thin here and a young person goes looking outside the village. We don't know the outsider."

Cait said, "I see where you are going. Take them up to Anthracyda and it can tell us. Even better, it can show us sparkles or bruises without the outsider even knowing. No one needs to speak to Anthracyda aloud."

I looked at Cait. This sounded like her comment when she and I were on Anthracyda's hillside with Mathilda, Lucy and Hume. Cait had admitted knowing about Anthracyda and sending her daughter Fiona and Alastair Cullane to the Stones to get a 'second opinion'. I would have asked Cait privately if she had put the idea into Sarah's head, but Sarah had already gotten there during the women's meeting a week ago. She'd clearly been thinking about it since.

"Exactly." Sarah said. "And whoever acts as escort can verify Anthracyda's testing. I had a long conversation with it about abusive spouses. I think I shocked it, so it is willing to help."

I looked thoughtfully at Sarah. "When did you get so interested in young people's courtships? Your children are not old enough yet."

"Actually it was last year when Alastair Cullane wanted to court Fiona", referring to Cait's daughter, now 16. Remember Cait said she 'didn't know which one of them would kill the other first.' And we all know a couple of families in the village where a spouse often has bruises and we all look the other way. Then I started thinking about my sons and daughters."

She continued, "Marion, you see it in the inn when someone gets drunk here and their wife wants to drag them home."

Cait said, "When you get old and feeble and want one of your children to take you in, you don't want to live in a battlefield."

I objected. "But wait a minute. In the old days, you didn't need the couple's permission to marry them off. Nowadays, if they want to get handfasted, they barely need their parents' permission. No one has ever needed the village's permission. "Are we trying to stop handfasts or just withholding our blessings?"

"I agree it can't be a question of the village giving permission. More like counseling from the elders or giving our 'blessing' if you want to call it that," said Sarah.

I continued probing. "Are we saying that Anthracysda's approval is necessary for village blessings? Assuming both are villagers, are we only sending them to Anthracysda if we're not sure it's a good match?"

"No," said Sarah. "There is no one 'village blessing', just individual blessing from people the couple may respect. And we would need to convince people that it is in everyone's interest that Anthracysda be one of the respected people."

"So they could get blessings from me and Cait disapproves?"

"That could happen, yes," answered Sarah.

"So who would be on the list of 'respected elders'?"

"Whoever the couple has respect for. If we want this to be useful, the couple will only listen to approval or disapproval from people they respect. So probably different people for every couple."

"But we would strongly suggest to either the couple or the parents that they add Anthracysda to that list?"

"Yes."

"What if we don't think it's a good match, but the parents think it is the only way to set the child up?"

"Village elder approvals can't be a requirement. If the couple want it and the parents want it, we can advise against it, but we can't say no," said Cait.

"What if she is pregnant?"

“Then we’re all stuck with the situation. No sense suggesting they go see Anthracyda - or anyone else - in that case,” responded Sarah.

“Do you have any young person in mind right now?” I asked.

“Not immediately. Laetitia Forgell is going to Kendal at the end of the week. The boy she and Sussana Beckworth were fighting over left six months ago. So no, I’m not thinking of anyone in particular right now. But planting seeds needs to be done before harvesting.”

“So we keep our eyes open and talk to the parents if and when we see anything,” said Cait.

“I can agree to that.”

Chapter 17

The Wise Woman

September 1-3, 1643

September 1, 1643 (Tuesday)

Sussana Beckworth

I was weeding the herb portion of the kitchen garden in the late afternoon when I heard a small wagon come up the road into town. That, in itself, was unusual. Normally the only traffic are big farm wagons. Maybe a rider once every couple of weeks.

The weather was pleasant. I shaded my eyes as I looked past the house to the road. There was an older man and woman walking beside a mule, pulling a cart. The two looked tired and nervous, maybe? The cart had what looked like all their belongings. I stood up, brushed off my dress and wondered if my mother had seen them. It isn't often we have unfamiliar faces in the village.

I walked out to the street and watched as they continued up the road to the inn. They tied their mule to a tree and went inside. I wondered who they were, then shrugged my shoulders and went back to my weeding. I'd hear soon enough.

Marion Blexham

No one was in the main room when an old couple pushed through the inn door and looked around. They were haggard and looked like they had slept rough. Of course, that didn't matter if they had money. If they didn't have money, then we got into the intricacies of trade and valuing goods. Ours was a tiny village and a lot of business was done with barter.

"What can I do for you?"

“Is there a wise woman in town?” asked the man.

“No. And no doctor either. How serious is the problem?”

“It is but a stomachache. We are not a danger to the village.”

“Good.” I doubted they were going to buy any food with a stomachache.

“Is there any place we can camp for a week before we move on?”

“There is a stand of trees near the road, before you get to the village, back the way you came. You could camp on the other side of the trees.”

“Thank you.”

They turned and went out.

Sussana Beckworth

It was only a few minutes and I heard the mule again, this time taking the cart out of town. I got up again and watched them leave. In the distance, I saw them stop at the large copse near the road, then slowly walk their mule and cart off the road and into the bushes. Maybe the innkeeper had given them permission to camp there for the night. I should tell my parents and brother.

I collected the weeds into a basket and then tossed them under a tree. The shade would kill these particular weeds before they could root themselves. I then gathered the herbs I thought we might be wanting for a stew for dinner and went to dig out some root vegetables. Once that was done, I put away the tools and brought my day’s harvest into the cottage.

As I expected, both my parents were sewing. I don’t know why the word is ‘tailor’ for a man and ‘seamstress’ for a woman. It doesn’t make any sense to me. I’ve asked and they can’t tell me either.

I tossed the produce on the table and started chopping.

“It looks like there is an elderly couple camping by the copse at the side of the road.” I said. “They stopped at the inn, but then went directly back. They have a mule and cart.” I added helpfully.

“Elderly with a mule and cart? Unlikely to be thieves then.”

said my father. "I wouldn't worry about them."

My brother entered, bringing wood for the fire.

"Nathaniel," my mother said, "there's some old people camping down the road. They stopped at the inn first. Go see what you can find out."

"Yes Mother." My brother didn't need a second invitation to avoid having to bring in water from the well, and ran out the door. That meant I would have to fetch the water. Maybe someone at the well would know. I finished the chopping and grabbed the kitchen bucket.

Clarice Malison and Fiona Rede were at the well, getting water for their own families. Actually, Fiona's family are the village bakers, so it could have been for baking, but, at this time of day, it was more likely to be for dinner.

Clarice immediately wanted to share the news. "There's a sick couple camping at the stand of trees by the road."

"Sick? How sick?" My heart started beating faster.

"Just a stomach ache, nothing scary."

"Oh. I've got some good recipes for that if they need them."

"Where did you get them?" chimed Fiona.

"Old Mother Burgess before she died two years ago."

"Oh. Now I remember. She had started to apprentice you before she died. She had good recipes for medicine. She helped me once." said Fiona. "I need to get this home. Let me know if you get any good gossip." She hefted her bucket and started down the street.

Clarice said thoughtfully, "I wonder if fish oil would help. Maybe not. My mother gives it to my father when he wakes up stiff in the morning. But that's not the same as a stomachache."

I laughed. "Trust a fisherman's daughter to solve problems using fish."

Clarice laughed too. "Well, it worked."

I asked, "How do you store fish oil?"

"A clay pot sealed with wax. It needs to stay cool. Some people put it in a stream, others dig a deep hole and put it in there, but it's harder to get to. It spoils, so if it smells rancid, throw it out."

I learn new things every day. Anthracyda said I need to keep my eyes open. I try to do that. Maybe keeping my ears open is important as well.

Clarice said carefully, "Sussana, if you have Old Mother Burgess's medicine recipes, maybe you should go see the campers. We haven't had any news in a few weeks. Maybe you could trade stomachache medicine for news." She picked up her bucket and headed home.

Now that was an idea. It would have to wait until after dinner, though . **After Dinner**

I told my parents about the idea to trade stomachache medicine for news. They approved, so I made a small amount of two different medicines and, accompanied by my brother, went down the road. We saw their campfire flickering through the trees and my brother called out "Hello!" We followed the path that their mule and cart had made through the bushes and came up to the fire. They looked nervous, but relaxed a bit when they realized it was just the two of us.

The mule had been unhitched and loosely tied to a tree. They had made a lean to against the cart with a tarp, where they apparently intended to sleep.

I asked "I'm told you have a stomachache?"

The woman grimaced and said "Yes. And I'm feeling hot."

"Can I look at it?"

"Have your man look the other way."

"Nathaniel." I started to say, but he was already turning to look at the trees.

She pulled up her shirt. "How long has it been hurting?"

"Two days."

"Does it hurt if you touch it?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Here." She pointed to a spot on the left side of her belly.

I thought carefully about Old Mother Burgess's recipes. One seemed more likely than the other and it had more willow bark. I took out the flask that I had marked for that recipe. "This might help. Two swallows of this now and two swallows

when you go to bed.”

She lowered her shirt and she and her husband looked at me. “Are you a wise woman?”

“Not yet, but this recipe is from a wise woman and I was her apprentice. Nathaniel, you can turn around now.”

She took two swallows and put the stopper back in the flask.

I crouched down and looked straight at them. “So, what news have you?”

The husband looked at us. “The King and Parliament still have their armies fighting battles. I don’t know who is winning. There is talk that Parliament is looking for an alliance with Scotland.”

I looked at my brother “Nothing new under the sun.” Then back at the husband “What brings you to our village?”

“My wife was accused of witchcraft in Northumbria, but I swear she has done nothing wrong.”

My brother snorted. “If she was a witch, she wouldn’t be looking for a wise woman to heal a stomachache.”

He can surprise me sometimes.

I said “I will come in the morning to see how you are. Good-night.”

They mumbled “Thank you and goodnight.”

As we walked home, my brother looked at me and said “My little sister, a wise woman.”

“Not yet.” As we got to our cottage, I started thinking about how Old Mother Burgess told me to keep notes for my own recipes.

September 2, 1643 (Wednesday)

First thing in the morning, I walked down the road to the elderly couple’s camp. This time I saw no need to bring my brother for protection. I called a “Hallo” to the camp before I went around the trees. The man was awake, sitting on a log, looking forlorn.

“How is your wife’s stomachache?”

“Less pain, but it still hurts and she is getting hotter.”

That didn’t sound good. I started thinking about fever remedies. “Can I see her?”

“Yes.”

I peered under the tarp and looked at her lying there. Her lips were cracked. I hadn’t noticed that last night, but maybe it was the light. She reached out and I took her hand. It was warm. I touched her forehead. Again, warmer than it should be. I looked back at her husband, at the fear in his eyes.

“Go to the well in the village and get a pail of water.”

He got up and searched around on the cart for a minute before he found a bucket.

“If anyone asks, tell them Sussana told you to get a bucket of water for her.”

He nodded and set off.

He returned several minutes later. I grabbed a cloth, soaked it in the bucket, then laid it across the woman’s forehead. She gave me a faint smile. I looked at her, then at her husband. “See if you can get her to drink more water. I need to go and make up a fever recipe. I will return.” They nodded and her husband took her hand.

I ran home. I had more willow bark for pain, but it doesn’t help with fever. Carefully, I washed my hands. I didn’t want any bad stuff from touching her seeping through my pores. Old Mother Burgess had recipes for fever, but she had told me that she wasn’t convinced about how well they work. Cooked elderberry might help. What I had was dried and cooking it would take a few hours. All I could do was try.

My mother looked at me as I started to gather what I needed. “I’m trying to make a fever recipe for the old lady that Nathaniel and I saw last night.”

“Better you experiment on a stranger than on us.”

Ouch. At least she didn’t object. I started soaking the elderberries.

Midday

By midday, I had managed to soak and then cook the elderberries. I mixed the juice with willow bark water, put it in a cup and carefully carried it down the road. Her husband looked at me. “She’s still hot.”

I handed him the cup. “She needs to drink this. All of it.”

He raised her head, but that wasn't going to be enough. I crouched down and helped her sit up. She took the cup in both hands and shakily raised it to her mouth. Sip. Pause. Breath. Sip. Pause. Breath. It took some time before she could drink the entire cup, then we eased her back to lying down. I told the man, "Soak the cloth again. She needs to have it wet so it can take the heat away from her forehead."

After he did so, I asked, "When was the last time you ate?" He looked up and answered, "The day before yesterday."

"I'll talk my mother into letting you have some stew. I'll be back." I stood back up and started home again.

Early Evening

I returned with a bowl of stew. Just vegetables, but it was what we had. The man ate for a minute, then he and I tried to get his wife to sit up. I could feel the heat from her body burning up, in spite of what her husband had tried with wet cloth or my elderberry and willow bark mixture. She took some sips of the stew from a spoon, but barely touched the chunks of vegetables. We laid her back down.

I turned to her husband. "The fever is much worse. How is the pain?"

He said, "The pain lessened after she drank what you gave her earlier, but she is getting hotter."

"Has she slept?"

"Uneasily."

I didn't know what to say or do, then decided. "I'll stay with you tonight."

We sat on either side of her and held her hand. She had a weak coughing fit in the middle of the night for a little while, then quieted down.

September 3, 1643 (Thursday)

Sometime before the first cock crowed, I couldn't hear her breathing any more. I tried to feel her heartbeat and it was silent and I cried.

As the sky started to brighten, her husband looked at me, said "Thank you," and he wept. I sat with him for awhile longer, then reached across and touched his sleeve. He looked up with

tears streaking his face, disappearing into his beard. I said, "We don't have a Vicar, but I will find someone who can help us." He nodded and I stood up.

Shoulders slumped, I stumbled up the road home. Opening the door, my parents saw my face. My father just nodded and reached for his coat. I stood in the doorway as he stepped forward and enfolded me in his arms and I cried again. After a minute, I looked up at his face, pulled back and nodded. I turned, and both of us walked to the road.

"Where to?" I asked.

He stood for a moment in thought, then said "Let's talk to Gilbert" and we headed to the inn.

Mrs Blexham saw us coming through the door and called for her husband. He stepped out of the kitchen, looked at me, dead tired and full of tears and asked "What happened? Sussana, are you all right?" Marion interrupted "The old couple camping up the road?"

"Yes. The woman." I blurted out. "I used some of Old Mother Burgess's medical recipes, they eased her pain, but she burned up with fever. I couldn't stop it." Mrs Blexham wrapped her arms around me and I started crying again. "There dear. God's will to take us comes to us all at some time."

She looked at her husband, then to my father. "We've no Vicar, we can't bury her in the church cemetery. We'll have to find another place for a cemetery. Gil, go talk to Brice (the baker) and figure out something. Jenefer, run along to Dericote's and Gaynesford's and tell them what's happened. They'll want to be involved in any decisions and will complain if we don't tell them. Actually, stop at the blacksmith's and ask if Thomas can help Mr Beckworth and meet us down the road by the stand of trees."

She then looked at me and my father and said "Well, come along."

Feeling like baby chicks following a mother hen, we hurried along behind her.

"Hallo the camp!"

We found the man still sitting beside the body of his wife,

holding her hand.

Mrs Blexham offered her sympathies then said “We don’t have a Vicar, so the only offer we can make is a simple burial. You can say some prayers if you like.”

“I would be much obliged.”

I surprised myself, and probably everyone else, “Maybe we could bury her here?”

Mrs Blexham shook her head. “Mary’s Mercy. Too close to the road and the dead won’t rest easy. If we find a place further up the hill, t’would be better.”

She looked at the man and said, “It will take a while to get organized. What will you do afterwards?”

He looked down at his wife and said, “I guess I’ll go back to our children. My wife was the one the village accused. I’ll go back and await my time to join her.”

About that time Thomas Rawson, the blacksmith’s son, joined us. Mrs Blexham told him, “We’re going to need some shovels and a cart to bring the body to wherever the men decide we’re going to have a cemetery. This cart’s already loaded. Off you go.” He started back the way he came at a lope. She looked at my father, “We’ll come get you when we need you.” and off he went.

Mrs Blexham and I sat back down with the husband. I tried to wash the wife’s face as best I could with the remaining water in the bucket, arranged her hands, then all three of us waited.

A couple of hours passed, then we heard a mule cart coming down the road, accompanied by several men. My father had also heard them and joined the procession. Mr Dericote and Mr Blexham led the group and had a tarp for the body.

After receiving permission from the husband, they wrapped the body in the tarp and loaded it onto the cart. We passed all the way back through town, and then up a slight rise where, I guess, the men had decided we were to have a new cemetery. Several of the men who worked on the Dericote farm were already there with shovels, digging out a resting place. Someone showed up with a small wooden cross and Mathilda Potter, the petty school teacher, came and asked the husband for a name to put

on the cross. “Rosamund Edgcomb” was the answer.

After the men had dug down to some depth they thought appropriate, a couple of them respectfully picked up the tarp from the cart and lowered it into the hole. We all stood in silence for a minute, then Mr Blexham asked the husband if he wanted to say anything. The man stood there for a moment, head bowed, then, in a faltering voice, sang a song we all knew from church. We joined in. At the end of the song, he picked up a handful of dirt, and threw it gently into the hole. Everyone else did the same, then the men with the shovels started the job of filling in the holes.

The man looked around at us all. “Thank you for your generosity.” He looked at me. “And thank you for trying your best to save her from the fever. I didn’t expect that for a stranger.” He looked back around. “I’m going to go back to Northumbria now and wait my turn.” He slowly made his way down off the rise, through town, collected his cart. And we never saw him again.

Mathilda Potter looked at Mrs Blexham and me and asked. “What was his name, so I can write ‘Beloved wife of ’ on the cross”? I put my hand to my mouth. “They were strangers. We never asked their names.”

Mathilda replied, “They were God’s children, not strangers.” and wrote ‘Beloved Wife’ below ‘Rosamund Edgcomb’. Then she looked back at me. “The important thing is that you tried to help them, name or not.”

My father put his arm around my shoulder and whispered, “You will become a very wise woman someday, and last night was when you started your journey. Remember this day. You will have both victories and defeats. We all do. Sometimes there is nothing you can do but hold their hand and ease their path. It hurts right now, but you’ve shown the strength of your heart. I am proud of your beginnings. Do not let this stop you.”

I knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to ease my pain and hold my hand as I had held ... I glanced at the cross ... Mrs Edgcomb’s hand. I didn’t feel proud, but I appreciated his attempt.

Chapter 18

Mathilda Argues With Sussana September 7, 1643

Mathilda

I was still puzzling over the question Anthracyda had posed of “What is a human?”. I wondered if a healer had any insight. I’ve been here for four years and the woman who had been the healer in the village had died two years ago. Sussana Beckworth was her apprentice and is just now stepping into the role. Although she’s just 18, she stayed up all night with some travellers as one of them was dying, so she’s conscientious. I guess we’ll find out whether she’s any good. It won’t hurt to ask her anyway. I decided to stop in at her house after school.

I knocked on the door and her mother called out to come in. The inside of the cottage was full of hanging clothing and linens partially completed. Sussana’s parents were a tailor and a seamstress, so that was to be expected.

“Is Sussana here?”

“I expect she’s in the garden.”

I bid her parents, “Good day” and backed out, then went around to the extensive garden in the back. Sussana had her back to me and was crouched down between rows of some herb.

“Sussana?”

She turned and raised her hand to shield her eyes. “Miss Potter?”

“How do you decide what medicine is good for a human and what is good for an animal?”

She stood up and started walking up the rows towards me. "Observation and recipes. And leaving recipes for your successor."

"So you try something and if it works, you write it down, and if it doesn't work, you write it down?"

Sussana frowned a bit. "It's more than that. First you match the symptoms and the patient. Heaving stomach horse is different than heaving stomach person. Then you look at what the patient ate or breathed or touched. Is that different from someone who isn't ill and has been near them? If you are lucky, you have a recipe that matches the case. Then you try it and see if that works. If it doesn't work you ask yourself what is different? If you don't have a recipe that matches, you look for a partial match. If you don't have a partial match, now you have to be creative. It's like being a good cook. A good cook looks at what they have and decides what taste will change if I add this herb or more water or different vegetables. What happens if I cook something longer or shorter, closer to or farther away from the fire?"

"What if I asked you what is a person? What would you say?"

She shrugged. "I'm a person, you're a person. This bee here" as she pointed towards a flower "is a bee, not a person. I can make a list of the differences between a bee and a person, but I can't tell you what is a person. Why?"

"I asked Anthracyda what it was, and it responded that it would tell me if I could tell it what a human was."

"Isn't it a hillside spirit?"

"Yes. But what is that? Demons are fallen angels, but it doesn't seem to be a demon. I don't know any other spirits in the Bible that are not angels, but it doesn't claim to be an angel either. If it isn't in the Bible, then what else isn't in the Bible?"

She looked almost angrily at me. "There are many things that aren't in the Bible. Like a good recipe for fever. I have to get back to my weeding. Good day." She turned away and walked back down the rows.

I called after her. "Sussana, you tried. God wanted to take

her to paradise, there was nothing you could have done.”

She whirled around. “I don’t see any signs from God as to what he wants. Telling me everything is God’s will is too easy.” She stomped back up the garden rows towards me. “In that case, why bother doing anything? Why bother to eat? Either God takes us or we live forever without needing to eat. Why bother to weed if weeds or no weeds are God’s will?”

“Because you are an instrument of God’s will. He acts through you.”

Sussana actually shouted at me. “I failed last week. If I’m an instrument of God’s will, that means he failed last week. Either that or you’re telling me I killed her because he wanted her dead. And I didn’t kill her. I just didn’t save her. If he killed her, he did it in spite of me. Don’t you dare tell me I’m an instrument of his will.” She turned back around and walked away.

I didn’t know what to tell her. She hurts and I didn’t expect the conversation to go this way. I don’t want her to lose faith and be condemned. How I can turn her around?

Chapter 19

Mathilda, Elspet and Clarice September 8, 1643

September 8, 1643 (Tuesday)

Mathilda

I was drawing water at the well when Elspet Malison and her daughter Clarice approached, bearing two empty buckets each.

Elspet greeted me with, “So schoolteacher, I saw you on the village walk last month. What did you think of Anthracyda?”

“I hardly know what to think,” I replied. “It’s not in the Bible or my philosophies.”

“I don’t suppose it is.”

“I asked it what it was and it said ‘hillside spirit’. I asked what that was. It laughed and said it would tell me that when I could tell it what a human was. I started to say what a human was and realized I was just describing humans, not saying what a human IS. The philosophers talk about what it is to ‘BE human’, but that is not the same thing either.”

Elspet laughed. “You’re thinking too much.”

She waved a bucket. “This is a bucket right? It is made out of pieces of wood. In a few minutes it will have a purpose of carrying water. Later today it will have a purpose of carrying vegetables.”

“Yes.” I said cautiously.

“Now, if I were to turn it upside down and put it on Clarice’s head here, it would be a helmet, not a bucket.”

Clarice laughed and ducked her head as her mother pretended to put the bucket on her head.

"Bucket, helmet, water carrier, vegetable carrier. Doesn't matter. It is a made thing. You, me, Clarice, the fish that Daay (her husband) catches, Duncane's (her son-in-law) sheep are living creatures. So is Anthracyda."

"So you are saying the answer to the riddle is that a human is a living creature?"

"Yes. And Anthracyda would probably tell you that a hill-side spirit is also a living creature."

"Humans are not 'creatures'," I retorted.

"Oh? We live, we die. What is the difference?"

"We're made in the image of God, so we have souls. They don't."

Clarice interrupted, "You can't look into the eyes of a sheep-dog and say it doesn't have a soul."

"But it doesn't."

Clarice, with all the authority a 16-year-old could muster, looked at me coldly and said "You're wrong."

Elspet looked at me, smiled and said, "You have your answer."

"What is this? Yesterday Sussana, today Clarice. I'm not going to argue theology with children."

Elspet shook her head. "Now you have to argue that Anthracyda doesn't have a soul. It's not even in the Bible. So what would you base that conclusion on? It's clearly not an animal. Face it Mathilda. When the Bible and reality disagree, one has to give way and make room, It's not going to be reality."

"I'm tired and have things to do." I said and picked up my water bucket, turned away, and walked home.

Elspet

Clarice looked at me and asked, "She's wrong, isn't she? Dogs do have souls?"

"Yes, dogs have souls."

"But why did she say they don't?"

I frowned. "Because people want to feel special. They want to tell themselves they're important. So they tell themselves

they are better than other people, better than animals. That they are closer to God - as if being closer makes them better. And if they can't feel good about themselves, they push other things down, so they can feel that they are more important than those things."

I continued. "Look around the village." I motioned towards the inn. "Is Mr Blexham (the innkeeper) better than Mrs Blexham? Is he more 'important'?"

"No. They both run the inn. They couldn't do it without each other."

"Yes. Is Mrs Blexham better than Mrs Rede (the baker)?"

"No. They're both nice people."

"But the Blexhams own the inn while the Redes only rent the bakery."

"That doesn't make them better."

"Yes." I touched her nose with my forefinger. "What makes you special is who you are, not how much money you have or how much land you own or whether you have a title."

Clarice puffed herself up a little. "I'm better than Henry Dericote. All he talks about is his family has more money than anyone else in the village."

I laughed. "But if you tell other people that you're better, what they hear is that you are trying to push someone else down. That doesn't make you better. What makes you better is being kind and helpful. Then in bad times other people will help you before they help the Henry Dericotes of the world."

"What did she mean by 'made in the image of God'?"

"The Bible says that God made man in the image of God. Of course, we've never seen God. He could be invisible just like Anthracoda. But if we were made in the image of God, then we should be invisible, And we're not. Mistress Potter, and the Vicar before her, seem to think it means that we are like God, but since the Bible doesn't say that animals are in the image of God, that they aren't, so we are better. They think the 'better' bit must be that we have immortal souls. I've heard some women say that it was added by men so they could say they're closer to God than women are. It's all just a part of people wanting

to feel special without doing the hard work of being special. I wouldn't worry about it."

"So what is Anthracyda?"

"Did you ask it?"

"No. We talked about birds. How most birds feed the babies, then, when they leave the nest, the babies don't stay around. But with crows, the young crows stick around and learn and play with their parents. Did it mean that crows are more like people?"

I chuckled "Probably. I don't know what Anthracyda is. You can't see it, but it is there, it talks to you, it can do things and, for some reason, it likes to help. People, animals, plants, or whatever else is up there in the hills. Anthracyda is kind and that makes it a good whatever it is. That's enough for me."

I motioned with the bucket still in my hand. "And now we need to fill these buckets."

"Yes, Mother."

A minute later she ventured "Mother, what did you and Anthracyda talk about?"

"Raising children, crows and villages."

She was quiet for a moment.

"Umm. Does Anthracyda think it is going to raise a village?"

"No. Anthracyda is up in the hills. It wants us to raise a village." I looked at her seriously and spoke over the creaking of the well windlass "But don't tell anyone I said that."

"You mean you and me?" Clarice looked a little wild-eyed.

I laughed again "No. It will take a lot more than the two of us and will take more than your lifetime. Set a good example by being kind, and that will be your part."

After I said that, I started to wonder. Yes, Anthracyda and I had talked about raising children, crows and how eventually that might make villages take care of each other better. Was Clarice right that it was trying to 'raise a village'? I'm just a fisherman's wife. Duay and I have enough on our hands to feed and shelter ourselves and our children. I don't think Anthracyda is trying to make me a disciple for a hillside god. I think it is trying to

make us pebbles, not bait. Duay and I and Cait and Brice Rede met Anthracyda when we were much younger and wandering the hills together. I think it opened our minds to different ways of thinking. We are probably the only two families in the village that never beat their children. Maybe eventually none of the families will beat their children. It will take a very long time, but I think Anthracyda, sitting in the hills, is patient.

Chapter 20

Sussana-Nathaniel- and-Anthracyda

September 7-10, 1643

Sussana

September 7, 1643 (Wednesday)

We, my parents, my older brother Nathaniel and I, were eating our supper. I gingerly approached a subject that we hadn't talked about, and I wasn't sure we would ever talk about - the visit to the neighbour. "Nathaniel, what did you think of the Stones?"

"It certainly was not what I expected."

"The Stones?"

"Oh, the Stones I expected. The voice inside my head, not so much."

My father snorted, "You could say that again."

I looked at my father, "What did it say to you?"

He rested his chin in his hands and looked thoughtful. "It introduced itself and somehow we ended up talking about textures of cloth and when it was good to match textures and when it was good to contrast textures. I had never really thought of different textures before."

My mother said, "We talked about colours of thread and what made one colour attractive to one customer, but not attractive to another customer."

I responded, "We talked about different flowers and how to look for differences in where to plant them."

We all looked at Nathaniel. He shrugged his shoulders. "We

talked about thistles.”

“What?”

“Yes. Thistles. How they all have different kinds of hooks to catch on things and how and why they release.”

“Huh.”

I looked around the table. “Do you think it’s a demon?”

My father shook his head. “No. I think Dericote is right. If it was a demon, the Vicar would have been able to exorcise it. I don’t know what it is, but it’s real. The whole village didn’t dream it.”

My mother said, “I don’t understand how it could have different conversations with everyone at once.”

My brother laughed, “I don’t understand how it exists at all. Or why I would ever think a conversation about thistles would be interesting. But it was and it is.”

I looked down, then up at him, “Would you be willing to take me up there again?”

My father glanced at me sharply. “Does this have something to do with your argument with Mathilda Potter today?” We could hear you in here.

“I want to ask it why things die. And how to make a fever recipe.”

“You think it can tell you?”

I sighed, “Probably not. But prayers to God aren’t working. At least Anthracyda answers questions.”

September 10, 1643 (Thursday)

Nathaniel and I started the next morning. Now that we knew what to expect - and were not following a line of the entire village - the walk went faster. Still we were tired and glad to get to the top and sit down in the meadow.

Nathaniel said, “I guess this is Anthracyda’s front door. But I don’t know what to knock on.”

“No need. I know when someone comes. Good morning.”

“Good morning Anthracyda.” We both chorused.

I decided to be direct. “Why do things die?”

“Someone died and you want to know why?”

“An old woman came to the village. She had a fever and a

stomachache. I tried giving her some willow bark and elderberry tea. It helped her pain, but the fever got worse. I put a wet cloth on her forehead, but that didn't help. All I could do was hold her hand as she died."

"I certainly can't tell you why SHE died. Living creatures die for many reasons - disease, injury, drowning or just getting old and worn out."

"They don't die because God wants to take them to heaven?"

"I haven't talked to or even met your god, so I don't know. Is that what people are saying?"

"I think they say it just to make me feel better that I couldn't save her."

"Maybe. And maybe they believe it because they want everything to have a purpose, instead of just a reason."

"What is the difference between having a purpose or a reason?"

"Pick up the stone next to your foot. One side is rougher than the other. If you rub the rough side of the stone against cloth, the cloth will tear. If you rub the smooth side against cloth, it won't. Yes?"

"Yes." We both said, and I realized Nathaniel was included in the conversation.

"Purpose has intent. If you decide you want a cloth with torn holes, you rub with the rough side of the rock. Tearing the cloth has a purpose because you intend it torn. The reason it is torn is that it is rubbed with the rough side of the stone."

Nathaniel offered, "So people want to believe that God, who knows all things and can do anything, wanted the woman dead, or in heaven or in hell, and caused her to have a disease to accomplish his purpose?"

"Yes. And the alternative is that there was no intent. Something may have caused her death, but no being intended that she die. It just happens. Which causes more fear?"

I said, "Not knowing why."

"Sometimes things happen for reasons, but there is no intent behind what caused them. If you stop thinking about holding the stone, it falls because you let go of it. You did not intend for it

to fall. You weren't thinking about the stone at all."

"So sometimes things happen, I can't stop them and God doesn't care?"

"That is my belief, but that doesn't make it true."

"God knows when a sparrow falls."

"'Knows' is not the same as 'causing' or 'allowing'."

"I see."

"Do you know how disease happens?"

"Miasma in the air poisons the person."

"Why don't you bathe often?"

"Because toxins in the dirty water will get into your body through your pores."

"You could use clean water."

"Yes, but that requires more work."

"Why do you think miasma is only in the air? The air touches everything."

"But the miasma only gets into your body by breathing."

"Oh? Why is it different than toxins in dirty water? Or it lands on your hands, then when you eat, it goes from your hands into your mouth. Same as breathing it."

"So what do we do?"

"Wash your hands with clean water to get the toxins and miasma off your skin. Particularly if you are touching another diseased person. And definitely if you are touching anything that is bleeding. The blood can carry miasma from inside their body to you. Then you touch someone else and the miasma comes off your skin and tries to get inside them. Boiling water will kill some of the toxins in water, but not all of them."

"What do I do about fever?"

"Fire purifies things, does it not?"

"Yes."

"A fever is your body trying to make a fire within itself, to purify itself."

"But fevers do not get hot enough to purify anything." Nathaniel objected.

"No, but it can make the body uncomfortable enough that the miasma leaves."

"Are you saying that I shouldn't try to reduce the fever?" I responded.

"The body doesn't always know when to stop trying to make a fire, or it makes the fire too hot for the rest of the body, not just the miasma. But it is difficult to reduce a fever. Keep giving them water to drink and wet cloths to cool their brain, just like you did."

"So there's no good recipe for reducing a fever?"

"Wintergreen has some things in it that might help reduce pain and fever. Or you might discover one yourself by observing very carefully."

Nathaniel decided to ask his own questions. "Anthracyda, what are you? What is a hillside spirit?"

"Mathilda Potter asked me the same thing. I asked her what a human is. We can describe ourselves but does that really say what we are? You cannot see me although I'm alive and have lived a long time. You and I can speak, but I can only speak in your mind. I can manipulate things but you don't know how."

Here it lifted the stone into the air that I had dropped on the ground without thinking, and then dropped it.

"I can watch you think. But I don't pretend to know everything or be all-powerful or whatever you think your god can do. I can't travel to your village. I cannot leave these hills. I am myself and content with that. I don't consider myself subject to your god or your religion. That works as a description and you will have to be happy with that."

"Do you have your own God?"

"Not like you have yours. You think of your god as a person. The EverChangingIs creates without intent."

"Are there more of you?"

"There are a few more like me, but they are very far away, scattered amidst the stars you see in the sky. We can talk, but we cannot visit."

"Because you cannot leave these hills?"

"Yes. There are a few, less like me, that can visit."

"How old are you?"

There was a mental chuckle. *"Older than you can imagine."*

I decided to go back to my own questions. “How can I know what my God wants?”

“If it exists and doesn’t talk to you, then you can’t know what it wants. If someone tells you they know what it wants, they are telling what they want to be true or what they want you to believe is true, not what is really true.”

“Sussana, you can only know what you want and decide what you think is the right thing to do. Then see if you can make it happen. If you can, good. If you can’t, then accept it. Not being able to do the impossible is not failure. You try to help others and that, I think, is a good thing.”

“Now, you might want to consider heading home if you want to get to your village while it is still light. Goodbye until later.”

Nathaniel and I said our own goodbyes, then began the slow walk back home.

Nathaniel looked at me and asked “Well little sister. Do you feel better or worse?”

“Better because I shouldn’t punish myself for not accomplishing the impossible. Worse because it makes me think differently. Thinking differently is not accepted very well. And being accused of witchcraft once was enough.”

“Unfortunately true,” he said ruefully. “We need to keep this conversation to ourselves.”

Chapter 21

Fiona and Mathilda

September 11-12,

1643

September 11, 1643 (Friday)

Fiona

I was working the front of the bakery when Mathilda Potter came in. She looked around and then asked “Is your mother in?”

“Both my parents are up to their elbows in dough. It’s just me here.”

“Oh. What do you have today?”

I looked at the shelf. “Rye, Oat or Oat and Barley. We might have wheat and rye tomorrow, but that will cost more. We still have some two-day old rye that will cost less.”

She grimaced. “I’ll have the two day old rye.”

I handed her the loaf, then looked down at a cat that was rubbing against my ankles. “Mice,” I reminded it. “No pets unless you’ve paid for it.”

Mathilda laughed. “Do you think it understands?”

“No. But it makes the day more interesting if I pretend.”

“Are all your days boring?”

“Yes. When my parents were my age, they and Uncle Hume and the Ruderfurds were always wandering around the hills. Now they don’t go anywhere, but they get to hit bread dough to burn off energy. I just deal with customers and I’m not allowed to hit them.”

“You don’t have anyone to run around with when you’re not working?”

“No. Clarice and Oswyn are homebodies. Sussana is usually slaving away in the family garden. Thomas Rawson is learning blacksmithing from his father, and Henry Dericote is an ass.”

“You are a very opinionated young woman.”

I laughed, “Most people think my parents should have beaten me more so that I know my place.”

“And what do you think?”

“About what? Whether they should have beaten me more? They didn’t beat me at all. Unlike some others in the village, they don’t beat each other, either. I’m grateful for that, even if I’m bored most of the time.”

“What did you think of the Stones?”

“Ah. Now that was fun.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Music.” I decided not to go into details and admit it had given me a private concert of barbarian music from centuries before.

She raised her eyebrows. “I understand you had been there before.”

I looked away for a moment. My mother had told me that Mathilda had been with her, Mrs Blexham and Aunt Lucy and Uncle Hume when they went to see Anthracyda before the rest of the village. My mother had also admitted to them about sending me up in May with Alastair Cullane.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to go again?”

I looked sharply at her. “With you?”

“Yes. I want to have another discussion with that thing, and I don’t want to go alone.”

“That thing? You mean Anthracyda? Are you afraid of it?”

“Not afraid. Not really. More that it makes me uncomfortable with questions it asks.”

“What kind of questions?”

“I asked it what it was and it said it would tell me when I could tell it what a human was.”

“You’re the school teacher and can’t tell it what a human is?”

"I can describe a human, but that's not the same as saying what it is. If I say 'a child of God' it will respond that it is 'a child of the *EverChangingIs*' whatever that is. That doesn't tell me anything. If I tell it that humans are made in the image of God, it will question what 'image of God' means. That would lead into a discussion of souls, and I don't know if it has a soul. It says it has its own bible and that it is different than ours."

"If it makes you uncomfortable, why do you want to have another discussion with it?"

"Because I can't let go of the questions. How can it not be in the Bible and still be intelligent? Why doesn't it know God?"

I thought for a moment. "Huh. I'll talk to my mother. Maybe I can get Clarice to work for me tomorrow. Is that when you were thinking of going?"

"Yes. Please let me know if you're given permission," and she turned and left.

About an hour later, there was no one in the front, so I walked into the back where my parents were.

"Mathilda Potter wants me to go with her to see Anthracyda tomorrow."

My mother looked up from the dough she was folding. "Oh? Do you want to go?"

"Yes. I'd like to. I can ask Clarice to help here."

"So why does she want to see Anthracyda again?"

"I think the fact that it has a different religion makes her uncomfortable. She doesn't like her beliefs questioned and she can't stop herself from arguing with it."

My father laughed. "Mathilda is discovering that she is dough and Anthracyda has added yeast. I suppose the kneading process is uncomfortable when you're the dough."

I snickered, "Are you suggesting our school teacher is merely flatbread and Anthracyda is changing her recipe?"

My mother said, "Yes. But don't ever let her hear you say that."

"Yes, Mother."

I walked back to the front of the bakery. Still no one, so I ran to the Malison's to see if Clarice could work for me tomorrow.

September 12, 1643 (Saturday)**Fiona**

The sky was overcast, but my mood was bright when Mathilda Potter and I started up into the hills. I was finally doing something again and I was intrigued by what might happen between Mathilda and Anthracysda.

We saved our breath and had no conversation until we reached the top and started down into the meadow. The Stones were still in place, as they had been for hundreds of years unless Anthracysda had been playing with them. We marched up to the closest stone, laid our cloaks on the ground, and sat down.

"Hello Mathilda and Fiona."

Mathilda decided to take initiative and said aloud, "Is the answer to your riddle about what is a human that a human is a living being? That you and all of the animals and plants are also living beings?"

"That is one possible answer. You had a different answer from Elspet though."

Oh, good. Since Mathilda spoke aloud, Anthracysda has decided to include me in on its side of the conversation. Let the fireworks begin!

Mathilda responded, "Yes. Elspet said living 'creatures' and humans are not 'creatures'."

"So what is a 'creature' and why are humans not 'creatures'?"

"Creatures are beings without souls, or at least without immortal souls. Humans are made in the image of God, so we have immortal souls."

"What is a 'soul', are there mortal and immortal souls, and what is the importance of having a soul?"

"A soul is the spirit in humans that is the image of God. It is immortal, It means we will live forever, glorifying God in heaven. Whereas when creatures die, that is the end for them. If they have souls, the soul is a mortal soul, not an immortal soul in the image of God."

"And you know this because this is what it says in your bible, knowing my bible is different?"

"Yes. Because my Bible is the true word of God. Yours must be false."

"Mathilda, why do you want to have this discussion? Why do you think I would be interested in a bible that doesn't acknowledge my existence?"

"Don't you want to be saved? To live forever?" Mathilda asked.

"I've already lived 110 million years. An eternity of glorifying someone who is supposed to be so perfect that glorification is irrelevant sounds boring compared to making each day meaningful, interesting and valuable here. Do you look for the hope of that sense of ecstasy because life today is not worth living?"

"Wait a minute. 110 million years? Creation has only existed for some thousands of years. That can't be right!" Mathilda objected.

I was thinking the same thing myself. My parents taught me reading and arithmetic (you need it in baking) and I'm quite good at my sums. I know that millions are just adding more zeros at the end of numbers, but 110 million years is beyond my ability to understand.

"And yet it is. You need to take your story of creation less literally."

Anthracya just made the oven hotter, I thought to myself. How is Mathilda going to react to that? She apparently decided to just ignore it.

"If you do not accept your saviour, you will burn in hell for eternity. Doesn't that scare you?" Mathilda pleaded.

"Not if I don't believe it."

"I'm trying to save your soul!"

"So you believe that I have a soul, even though I'm not mentioned in your bible?"

"Well, I hope that you have a soul if you will accept your saviour, and I hope you don't have a soul if you don't accept your saviour."

"So less 'Loving God' and more 'Fear the Jealous God'?"

"I think he is only jealous about idols or putting other gods before him, but yes, he will be loving so long as you fear him

and his wrath.”

“Why is ‘fear’ of your god so important? Why does a omnipotent and benevolent god want its creation to fear it? Beware of gods who create or claim to create and then demand fear or worship from their creations. Such gods are needy and do not love, nor are they worthy of love.”

That last sounded like it might be a quote from Anthracyda’s bible. I really wonder what it is like.

Mathilda tried to soften it a bit, “Fear also means to honour and respect.”

Anthracyda sighed. *“But it also means ‘Fear’. Your kind seem to mix up love and abuse, respect and subservience. Your hierarchies are not complete unless those who are lower demonstrate their fear of those above, demonstrate to those even lower down that they must be feared and punish those who threaten the ‘natural order of things’. It implies those high in hierarchy fear the loss of their position. If your god has such fear of its creation, is it really worthy of worship or do you just fear what it will do to you?”*

Mathilda retorted “He is our God, he created us! Anything he does is right and good by definition.”

“Mathilda, this discussion is pointless. Religions are matters of faith and belief. I will stop questioning yours and I ask that you do not disrespect mine. I will try to be kind and helpful towards you, Fiona and the other villagers. Unlike many humans, I do not treat any beings as ‘things’. That path is the beginning of evil. That’s all I will promise.”

Yay. I was mentioned, but Anthracyda’s last comment made me think a question back to it.

“Anthracyda, we make bread from wheat, rye and other plants. Are plants ‘beings’? We eat plants and animals. Is that treating them as ‘things’ and somehow evil?”

Anthracyda responded, I think just to me, *“You can’t sustain yourselves without eating plants or other animals. But you can respect their existence by making the process as painless for them as possible.”*

“Is it true that you are bound to the hills?” I thought quietly

in my head.

"I'm not bound in the sense that something is preventing me from moving. I don't have any ability to move at all. Although you can't see or feel me, I'm shaped like a ball about six miles in diameter. So I go down quite a ways as well as up. I can only talk to you if you are actually inside me."

Wow. "Is it boring just sitting there for millions of years?"

"I spent a long time just trying to find out what I was and what I could do, exploring what physically was or came within reach. The plants and animals were different then. Sometimes the seas covered the land. Sometimes ice covered the land. I tried building things that could move and come back so that I could explore further, but I could only do it from materials that I encompass. It quickly became apparent that there was only a limited amount of material that I do encompass, much of it is not useful and there are limits on how much I can change it. Eventually I became aware of others like me, scattered among the stars. We can talk and share information, but the communication is slow. Then one day a transient being named Acrydaanth came to visit and I learned a lot more while it was visiting."

"What is a transient being?"

"Sort of like me, except that it can move between realities and universes but can't manipulate matter. They like to share information and can pass messages between beings like me that cannot move."

"What are realities and universes?"

"Simplest just to think of them as other worlds where things don't act the same."

"So what happened after the transient being visited?"

"There was a long time of exploring what I had learned from it. Then, to your original question, yes, I got bored. I had reached the limits of what I could do and had to face the question of 'Is that all there is? What now?'"

There was a tiny laugh in my mind.

"You can go crazy thinking about those questions for too long. It got worse about 66 million years ago when most of the animals and plants died. Different plants and animals came back

eventually.”

“Was that the flood mentioned in our Bible?”

“No. They all died because of something other than a flood.”

“Oh.”

“Then Acrydaanth came back and we talked philosophy and religion. We don’t struggle for food because we are self-sustaining. We find the question of power to be meaningless. We don’t seem to die. So what is our purpose and what do we focus on? What we settled on is the struggle to make each moment meaningful, interesting and valuable. I talk to plants and animals and insects. I try to understand what helping would mean and when would helping actually make things worse. So that is what keeps me from being bored - the struggle to make each moment meaningful. Finding your purpose and the meaning of life moment by moment, day by day, year by year. And sometimes you find a way to make the next moment meaningful, interesting and valuable and sometimes you don’t. Then you start over with the next moment.”

I thought carefully “A life without meaningful moments is like bread without yeast?”

“Yes.” There was a smile in my mind.

“Of course humans are not hillside spirits. What gives you purpose in the next moment may simply be how to have enough to eat or shelter from the cold. Or maintaining the oven at the right temperature for your bread.”

“It is true that my kind and our religion does not believe in an afterlife. That means that every day, every moment, every laugh and tear and kindness is important. Each moment of your life is a chance to create meaning and purpose for you and others. An eternal afterlife would make this life so fleeting as to be inconsequential. Many lose the urgency to use these moments to make this world better because of that. Others fall into the opposite trap of focusing only on themselves today. They treat others as things to be used to make their own today better. Do what you will with that thought and form the beliefs that fit your heart so long as it does not harm others. Your parents understand this. Go and find yourself. But a word of warning.

Be careful. Humans do not react well to other humans that think differently.”

I was beginning to understand why my parents had not told me the truth about Anthracyda. A younger me would not have been able to keep my mouth shut and there would have been trouble. Anthracyda’s warning was a good reminder.

I suddenly thought of the story of Prometheus, bound to a rock by the gods for sharing the secret of fire with men, torn by scavengers every day. I thought I should give it a warning as well. “Anthracyda. Never admit to anyone that you can’t move.” I decided this was one secret I would take to my grave.

I heard an audible sigh from Mathilda. I’d forgotten about her. Then she said stiffly “I agree you do not seem to be in the Bible. I don’t know what that means or how to interpret that. I will have to continue thinking about this. Thank you for your time.”

Anthracyda responded “*I appreciate your concern for my non-existent soul. We can talk again. However, if you expect me to be open minded towards your bible, you will need to be open minded towards mine.*”

I looked over at Mathilda and said “I’m done with my conversation. How about you?”

She looked a little disappointed and said “So am I. Let’s go home.”

Chapter 22

Hannah's Baby

September 14, 1643

Sussana

I was woken up by pounding on the door. My father opened it to see Oswyn Malison, breathing hard. Oswyn said, "My sister Hannah just went into labour. Mrs Rawson wants Sussana there." My father called back into our sleeping room, "Sussana, you're wanted."

I knew that Hannah, a weaver and the village shepherd's wife, was heavily pregnant. Mrs Rawson, wife of the blacksmith, was the village midwife, having both the experience of several children and helping at the birthing of a few dozen others. If she sent Oswyn Malison to get me, she apparently felt it was time to get my hands bloody too.

I called back to the doorway. "Do I need to bring anything? A pain recipe or something?"

Oswyn replied, "No. Just come."

I hurriedly put on decent clothes instead of my nightclothes and rushed out to follow him. I held the front of my dress up and hurried as fast as I could.

"Is she at her cottage or at your parents' cottage?"

"Ours. If it was her cottage, they'd have to kick Duncane out his own house, and he'd be sleeping in the sheepcote."

When we got to Malison's, the back room had been completely closed off with a blanket and Duncane Lyfelde, Hannah's husband, was pacing, head down, in the main room. He looked up as I came through the door and said, "I've done a hundred

lambings, but it's different when it's your own." I nodded. I could hear heavy breathing coming from the back room and the murmuring of a few women. Oswyn called out, "I've brought Sussana Beckworth." "In here Sussana" came Mrs Rawson's authoritative voice. "If you are going to be a healer, it's time you started attending childbirths."

I pushed back the blanket and stepped into the back room. It was ill-lit by candles and smelled of sage. There was a low fire in the hearth, a warmed caudle in a wooden cup on a table nearby. The one window was open, but partially covered by another blanket. Hannah was seated on a birthing stool, with Mrs Rawson sitting on a chair beside her. Hannah's mother was there, as well as several other village mothers crowded into the room.

"Come here, Sussana! Put your hand on Hannah's belly, right here." I came over and looked at Hannah's flushed face. She grimaced but nodded, so I put my hand on her belly next to Mrs Rawson's hand. "Remember what you feel. Now put your hand here." She pushed my hand to another part of Hannah's belly. "You are trying to feel where the head is and where the feet are. We want the head to come out first."

"It better not be a lamb, or Duncane has got some explaining to do." grunted Hannah.

"Yes. Now keep your hand there and tell me when you notice a squeezing or contraction." I felt one contraction, then another a few minutes later. "That is Hannah's body trying to put the baby in the right position to be pushed out. Feel Hannah's hips. They need to spread for the baby. We don't want Hannah trying to push the baby out until the baby is in the right position and its head is already starting to appear. Now look down there, girl."

Hannah suddenly yelled, and her mother put a wet cloth on her forehead. "Don't look up there! Her mother will take care of that. I want you to pay attention to what is happening at the other end. Elspet, give your daughter a drink."

Duncane called from the other room "Is Hannah alright?"

Mrs Rawson called back, "She's fine. We'll tell you if you

are needed.”

Three hours later, after much huffing, puffing and a little screaming, Mrs Rawson wrapped a new baby girl in clothes, pushed past the blanket into the other room and handed Duncane his new daughter. “Father, see there is your child. God give you much joy with it or take it speedily to his bliss.” Duncane seemed entranced. I was glad he wasn’t disappointed that it wasn’t a boy.

My job, apparently, was to clean up the mess on the floor, the straw, the birthing chair and Hannah while the other women helped her up out of the chair and into the bed.

A half hour later, Mrs Rawson called me out of the house.

“That was a very easy birth. Don’t go thinking they will all be this easy. Duncane and Hannah knew what was going on because they’ve seen sheep do it. They can probably tell you horror stories of what they have had to do when a lambing is bad and the lamb is coming out the wrong way. You didn’t shirk at the cleanup on this one, and I heard that you stayed up all night with that old woman who died. That’s how I know you’ll not faint and be useless when needs be. I assume you want to learn?”

“Yes. Thank you, Mrs Rawson.” I replied.

“Good.”

I looked at her. “Mrs Rawson. Why is human childbirth so painful? It seems easier with animals.”

She looked thoughtful. “I don’t know. The Bible says that God made it so because he was angry at Eve’s sin. But Christ died and washed away our sins, so that should have made childbirth easy again.” She sighed. “We deal with what is, not what is in a book. All the books on childbearing I’ve ever seen were written by men who’ve never seen it.”

She looked pensive for a moment, then smiled. “Now go on home and tell your mother there’s a new girl baby in the village. She’ll probably get some seamstress business in baby gifts and might want to prepare.”

Although I’d lost my first patient, it seems that how I acted had generated some respect among older women in the village.

That felt good and relieved a bit of the pain of my failure.

It was midday. The sun came out from behind a cloud and the world seemed happy. I started home with news for my mother and a vegetable garden to tend waiting for me.

Chapter 23

Mathilda Writes a Letter September 15, 1643

Dearest Father,

I find myself in need of your counsel on a matter of such sensitivity that I dare not commit it to writing. No, I am not with child. Would it be possible for you to visit me here?

Mathilda

I sealed it with a sigh, knowing full well that the answer would be no, that his duties as curate would prevent him from leaving his parish.

In any event, my father would tell me the same thing he always did - either think it through logically or, if that doesn't work, pray for guidance.

Sigh. Starting with thinking it through logically.

Is Anthracyda evil? If I believe evil is a shortage of good, then either nothing is evil or everything other than God is somewhat evil. Under this view, Anthracyda is only evil if humans themselves are evil.

If I believe in evil as a thing in itself, then I distinguish between those who take joy in the suffering of others, those who merely act from selfishness and do not pay attention to whether their actions cause others to suffer and those who care about others. Anthracyda does not appear to either take joy in the suffering of others nor does it seem to act from selfishness, and it does seem to care about the sufferings of other beings. It

would not appear to be evil under this view either.

The only remaining allegation that Anthracyda is evil is simply the claim that all supernatural beings must be spirits and the only spirits on earth are fallen angels. Fallen angels are evil because of their rejection of God and their intent to lead humans away from God. The fact that Anthracyda has its own bible might be taken to imply such an intent, except that Anthracyda explicitly said that it would not disrespect my religion and asked me not to disrespect its religion.

I must conclude that logically, Anthracyda is not an evil spirit.

Now I'm confused. Are all demons spirits and all spirits demons?

The Bible talks about unclean spirits, therefore implying that there are clean spirits. Is Anthracyda a clean spirit? Is a clean spirit not a demon?

Does it matter if Anthracyda is a clean spirit if it engages in sorcery? The Bible says sorcery is abominable, but it doesn't say what sorcery is. Anthracyda does not offer divination or consulting the dead. Although if Anthracyda is a ghost, then simply talking to it is consulting the dead.

Young as she is, Sussana is right - not everything is in the Bible. After all, it does not name me or my parents. Maybe Anthracyda is not a ghost or a demon?

The comment it made about being 110 million years old is concerning. What if it is playing out a very long strategy? But that way madness lies. I might as well suspect every rock and tree of having a long strategy of deception.

Shaking my head, I placed the sealed letter inside the bible laying on the table, postponing the decision of whether to send it.

Chapter 24

Fiona, Clarice and Sussana September 16, 1643

Fiona

By some sort of unspoken agreement, Clarice, Sussana and I met at the village well. They knew I'd gone up the hill with Mathilda four days ago, but this was the first time we'd had a chance to talk among ourselves.

Clarice asked, "How is Mistress Potter coping with Anthracycda?"

"Not that well," I responded. "She is having a hard time accepting something that isn't in the Bible. She wants to save its soul, but it doesn't think it has one to save. Apparently it has its own bible that disagrees with ours. Besides that, it doesn't have a body to be resurrected into anyway."

I decided not to mention that it thinks it is an invisible ball six miles in diameter.

"It didn't give her a sermon, did it?" laughed Clarice.

"No, but I think it wanted to. It didn't like that Mathilda's God is jealous and wants to make people fear it. It said it will stop questioning her beliefs and asked that she not disrespect its beliefs. I wonder what its bible says."

Sussana interjected, "I think she is struggling to accept Anthracycda as not evil. She teaches what she was taught. Good spirits are a new thing to her."

"She's teaching small children to think the way she does, and uses her birch quite often," said Clarice.

“Practically every family in the village except yours and mine agree that is the way to teach” I said to Clarice. “That doesn’t teach you how to learn new things your parents didn’t know.” I turned to Sussana. “What about yours?”

“My family? We were beaten for mistakes, but then hugged afterwards” replied Sussana.

“So halfway in between” I said. “At least you are curious, so you can become a wise woman, even if your mother wasn’t.”

I decided to bring the subject back to Anthracyda and Mathilda. “Anthracyda told Mathilda that it was 110 million years old. I was always told the earth is only a few thousand years old. I can’t comprehend that kind of age. Do we think it lies just to confuse us, or what do you think? It did say we needed to take our story of creation less literally.”

Sussana said, “It told me that it was older than I can imagine.”

Clarice added, “When my mother and I talked to it, we talked about raising children, birds and villages, not about how old it was. My mother thinks it wants us to teach the village to be a kinder place.”

“What? Kinder place? I have no idea what that means” I said.

Clarice said, “More like Sussana than Henry Dericote. You” she said turning to Sussana, “care about people and try to help them even when it costs you nights of sleep.” She turned to me. “Henry just talks about how much money his family has and how that makes them more important than us.”

“More hugs, fewer beatings” said Sussana.

“I think we can agree on that” I replied.

Sussana grimaced. “Fine for us to say that, but as the only one in the village who has actually been accused of witchcraft, I don’t know how we convince the village, let alone the world, to be a nicer place.”

Clarice thought a moment and said, “If we start with our children, maybe their children’s children will have taught the village. If Anthracyda really is 110 million years old, it must have a lot of patience and isn’t expecting miracles from us.”

With a sudden inspiration, I picked up my bucket of water, tipped a little water from my bucket into each of theirs and set it down again. “More hugs, fewer beatings.”

They looked puzzled for a second, then Clarice nodded, set her mouth in a firm line, picked up her bucket and tipped a little water into mine and then into Sussana’s. “More hugs, fewer beatings.”

Sussana looked carefully around. There was no one in sight. She grabbed her bucket and tipped a little water into mine and Clarice’s. “More hugs, fewer beatings” she agreed.

There would be push back from those who believed in the adage “Spare the rod and spoil the child”, but my parents and Clarice’s parents had faced those before us. We wouldn’t finish the project they and Anthracyda had begun, but maybe future generations in the village would.

More hugs, fewer beatings.

Chapter 25

Clarice, Elspet and Anthracyda

September 17, 1643 (Thursday - Clarice Malison)

“Mother, can you and I go talk to Anthracyda?”

My mother replied, without taking her eyes off the repair she was making in Oswyn’s pants “Not today. Why? Are you still upset over the argument with Mistress Potter over animal souls last week?”

“Yes. Do you think Anthracyda knows about souls?”

“I think it will give you an honest answer about whether it knows. Is it worth the six hours of walking if Anthracyda says it doesn’t know?”

“Jenefer Blexham says that her mother, Mrs Rede and Mistress Potter saw Anthracyda show colours around Mr and Mrs Valcar. She said they called them ‘auras’. Is that like seeing your soul?”

This time my mother looked up. “I don’t know. I know they told all the women in the village that if two people are courting and they go to see Anthracyda, it can make your auras visible. If their auras, then they can sparkle if the two people are right for each other or turn really ugly bruised colours if they are not right for each other. I don’t know if auras are the colours of your soul or not.”

“Well it can at least talk to us about something that it can make visible.”

My mother sighed. “Alright, we can go next week.”

September 21, 1643 (Monday - Clarice Malison)

My second walk to the Stones seemed to go both faster and slower. Faster because I was excited rather than worried and slower because I could look at everything instead of just following the person in front of me. Finally we got to the meadow and I ran over to the Stones.

I could feel its attention as I drew near and slowed down.

I had to remind myself to be polite. "Hello Anthracyda."

"Hello Clarice, Elspet"

Since I "heard" it say hello to both me and my mother, "Do I need to talk aloud so my mother can hear my part of the conversation?"

"No, I can include you both in the same conversation. You can talk or just think what you want."

"Anthracyda, do you know what souls are?"

"I know what some humans say they are. They seem to believe that souls are immortal, which implies that they can be separated from a body and is everything that makes you different from someone else other than your body differences. So what makes you 'YOU' and different from your mother or Fiona or Sussana."

"Can you see our souls like you see our thoughts?"

"No. If you or me or animals, plants or trees have souls, I cannot sense them. That doesn't mean they don't exist, it just means that if they do exist, I don't see them."

"But you see and show our auras. Is that not like our souls?"

"Good question. Certainly your aura is not your thoughts."

Anthracyda continued: *"Think of a fire. Your aura is like the heat and the light coming from the fire, but the heat and the light are not the fire. Your aura comes from you, but plants and other animals have auras as well. So if souls are real and your aura comes from your soul, then plants and animals have souls as well."*

It added *"When a plant or animal dies, their aura seems to die with them. If souls exist and are immortal, maybe they don't die, they just go somewhere else."*

I asked "How do you make them sparkle or turn ugly when you show them meeting each other?"

"I don't make them sparkle or turn ugly. Think about when you mix two wool dyes together. You get a different colour dye. Just like you can reflect light from a piece of glass or water or some shiny metal, I can reflect auras towards each other in a way you can see them. What you call sparkles or bruised colours is just what happens when different auras mingle and get mixed."

My mother decided to ask "Do auras change over a lifetime?"

Anthracyda chuckled *"Well yours is not quite the same as it was when you just before you got married. You have more cares and worries and that can be seen in your aura."*

"Mother!" I exclaimed. "How come you never told me you met Anthracyda before the village walk?"

"I didn't want to get in trouble with the Vicar if you accidentally said something to anyone."

"What? I would never ..." I paused, then shrugged my shoulders. "I guess it was safer that way."

Mother refocused on Anthracyda. "If people change for the better, does that change their auras as well? So what was not a good match in one year could be a good match in a later year?"

Anthracyda seemed thoughtful *"It is possible, but it would really have to be a big change in the person, almost to the point where they are not the same person as in the first year. Every entity has certain characteristics when they are born and other characteristics that develop as they live. Sometimes those can change but I don't see humans enough to know what will change and the best way to change them. I'm better at knowing the plants and animals that live around here."*

"So we have to figure that out for ourselves." Mother mused.

"Some entities get pleasure from hurting others. Some entities get pain from seeing others hurt. Some entities just think about themselves and do not pay attention to others at all, for good or bad. Sometimes they are born that way, sometimes they learn that from others."

I jumped back in. "Sheepdogs are born to herd sheep, but you need to train them to herd the sheep where you want the sheep."

“And how do you train them?”

“Duncane says you need to start them as puppies, and each one is a little different. They need to learn to trust you even when they see or smell new things so you can be partners. Oh, and you need patience. And you need to train them to correct the sheep, not hurt them.”

“Duncane is wise. Elspet, do you see a connection between a shepherd and their dog as a partnership and a pair of handfasted humans?”

My mother thought for a moment. “Some people will want to be the shepherd all the time. But, yes, so long as the two are willing to be both shepherd and sheepdog, you need patience and trust and knowing not to hurt each other to be a partnership.” She sighed. “It takes time, even with the best intentions.” She looked away, troubled “And I’ve seen couples that seemed to have the worst intentions.”

She looked back at me “Your father and I will do our best to make sure that never happens to you or Oswyn.”

I just know that at some point I’m going to ask my sister Hannah if she is the shepherd or the sheepdog with Duncane.

My mother looked at the Standing Stones. “You told Hannah and Duncane to be an example to others in your village about respect and kindness and support. If you want us to raise the village like children, so everyone has patience and trust, it is going to take longer than I live.”

“I know. But it could be a start.”

My mother added “Cait Rede said her parents talked about kindness instead of goodness. Did they get that from you?”

“Yes. Many people want to believe in gods that share their values. If one of their values is “my tribe good, all others bad”, then they justify killing or hurting others because their god wants that and has stated that hurting others is “good”. Your vicar wanted power and control and did not care who got hurt so long as he achieved that goal. It is a little more difficult to justify hurting others if their god wants them to be kind.”

“I’m not your god, but I do think that kindness makes for a better world. I think you do as well, so I am suggesting it even

though I have nothing to gain from it. I've been trying to explain the benefits of living together to plants for several million years. They are slow learners too, but I have patience and hope."

My mother reached out and touched the nearest of the Stones, brushing its rough surface with her fingers and then looked at me and offered a sad smile.

She said "Anthracyda, I think you do have something to gain. At the beginning of the month an old woman came to the village, driven from her home by accusations of witchcraft. She was sick and died with only her husband and Sussana to comfort her. Yesterday, Clarice saw a baby bird fall from its nest and get killed by a cat. There was nothing to comfort it."

She continued "You have lived millions of years and seen so much pain and conflict in humans and animals and plants. You could harden your heart and ignore it, but you don't. While nothing can hurt you physically or kill you, you care and seeing others' pain causes you pain."

She finished "I think you hope that if you teach things to be kinder, there might be just a little less pain in the world."

I slowly realised what my mother was saying. "We are all children to you. All the life you see in the hills."

There was an immense feeling of sadness in my mind.

"There is a lot of pain everywhere. Plants and animals need to eat. What they need to eat is each other. That is unavoidable. I can't change that. But I would like to reduce the suffering, the avoidable pain."

"Well, Fiona, Sussana and I have agreed to more hugs and fewer beatings! For everyone, not just children."

"That is a good start. You won't change the world overnight, so have patience, but I am proud of you."

"That's what I told them! If we start with our children, maybe their children's children will have taught the village. "

Chapter 26

Epilogue

Philip Rede Returns August 12-18, 1960

August 12, 1960 (Friday)

“Your wife on line 2.” Emily leaned to her left and looked through the open door into my office. Puzzled, I picked up the telephone. Caroline normally does not call me at work.

“Caroline, what a surprise.”

“Your sister called. Your father’s had a fall and taken a turn for the worst. The doctor is there now and says it is not looking good. Your father’s asking for you.”

You know it’s going to happen sometime. We all get old, parents just get there faster. It had been 43 years since I’d seen him. It wasn’t intentional. There wasn’t any animosity. I left home in 1917 at the age of 17 for the meat grinder hell on the Continent. Then those of us who survived were just so happy to be alive that I think we partied for five years. Then whirlwind romance and marriage, the Depression, the next war, rebuilding from that... I always meant to go home for a visit, but it would be a gruelling all day trip just to get to Andras Hill from London. There was always something else that got in the way. You turn around and suddenly 43 years have gone by.

“Philip? We should go. I’ve never met your family.”

“Yeah. Let me talk to Glen. I’ll call you right back.”

“Emily, is Glen in his office?”

“Yes.”

I got up, walked to the office next door and knocked.

“Come in.”

“Glen, I need to take the next week off. I just got a call

that my father is dying.”

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. I knew he was doing the mental juggling of schedules and calendars that he does so well. He finally looked up and said “All right. But I’ll need you back the following Monday for the Porter thing. They won’t be in for another week, but we need time to prepare.”

He leaned back across his desk. “I can’t remember you ever going to see your parents. I seem to recall your mentioning you’re from a small village in the northwest, but that’s all.”

“Yeah, tiny village in the back of beyond in Cumbria. It will take us all day just to get there.”

“Well, the weather seems to be holding. You driving?”

“Yes, the train doesn’t seem to think that sheep farms are a viable destination.”

“Good luck. Your job will still be here when you get back.” He waved a pencil in the air to indicate his part of the conversation was done, and looked back at the papers on his desk.

I walked back to my office. Emily, of course, has heard my conversation with Glen and inferred my wife’s side of the telephone conversation. “I’ll reschedule your calendar and clear you for next week. Mr Johnson is supposed to meet with you in an hour, but I’ll reschedule that as well. Do you want me to get your wife back on the line?”

“Thank you.”

A moment later I heard, “Mrs Rede? This is Emily. One moment before I transfer you to your husband. I’m sorry to hear about your father-in-law. I’m clearing your husband’s schedule for the rest of today and all of next week. Make sure that he pays attention to his family responsibilities and doesn’t think about us. Transferring you now.”

The telephone on my desk rang, and I picked up in time to hear my wife laugh and then say, “Is she in charge or you?”

“You should hear her and Glen’s wife. The two of them probably run the company as much as he does.”

“So he gave you the time off?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll call your sister back and start packing. Are you coming

home early?"

"Apparently that is Emily's intention."

"If you get home early enough, we can leave immediately and get some hours on the road. That will make tomorrow less painful."

"Alright. Love you."

"Love you too. Bye."

I sighed and looked down at the folders on my desk. I grabbed the top five folders and turned to my briefcase. "Put those down." Emily the all-seeing was leaning over, looking through my open door again. I sighed again, laid them carefully back on the desk, arranging them carefully to align with the edge of the desktop, and looked at her. "Good. Now go."

I grabbed my briefcase and got.

Home

As I walked through the door at home, Caroline called, "Your sister said that since your parents are living with them, she's got us a room at the Gull. You know it?"

"I knew it fifty years ago. It was a pub with a couple of rooms then. Who knows what it is now."

"What shoes should I take?"

"The village didn't have any paved roads when I left, and I haven't heard that has changed."

"Comfortable walking shoes it is. And we're done. Your suitcase, my suitcase. Our overcoats and umbrellas."

It was two o'clock. My wife could shame efficiency experts.

August 13, 1960 (Saturday)

The miles rolled by and the roads kept getting narrower. We spent last night in a serviceable inn after driving four hours. That meant only six hours of driving today unless we run into a livestock roadblock before we get there. With an early start, we should be there by two.

The last ten miles were dirt road, but decently graded, with no ruts. We finally pulled into Andras Hill proper - just a cluster of houses surrounding a church, a pub and the Village Shop. Memories started coming back. It didn't look like much had changed. We parked in front of the pub, pushed the door open

and went to the bar. The publican was polishing a glass and looked up.

“I think my sister Clara Rede reserved a room for us.”

“Yes. Christopher!” he called to a young man cleaning a table-top that was probably older than all four of us put together. The young man looked up.

“Get these people over to Clara’s right now.”

The publican turned back to me and said “We’ll take your things to your room for you. Best get to your sister’s right away.”

The young man wiped his hands on his towel and said “This way.” pushed open the pub door and started down the street. Caroline looked at me with raised eyebrows.

I said “I think it’s a fairly short walk.”

“Good thing I’m wearing my walking shoes then.”

It actually was only a short walk - four houses down from the pub. All the places were old and small but in good repair. Christopher knocked on the door, looked at us, touched his hand to his cap and started walking back.

The door opened and a young woman looked out. “Uncle Philip?”

“Yes.” Niece, grandniece? My mind frantically started flipping through Christmas cards in my head.

“I’m Rosalyn, Grandma Clara told me to bring you into the bedroom. You must be Aunt Caroline. Just follow me please.”

We walked through the main room, into what was clearly an add-on in the back and entered a bedroom. A half dozen people sat on chairs surrounding the bed and my sister looked up. I think it must be my sister. She looked older than I remember. Of course, I must look older than she remembers as well.

I think of the pictures of Caroline when we got married and how she looks today. Time moulds us so gradually that I never really noticed the changes. That girl forty years ago is a different person from the woman I love and snore next to every night. Looking at my sister now, the changes are hammer stamped by time all at once. The change is abrupt, but she is still recognizably my sister. And my mother, looking extremely frail sitting next to her. And my father, frailer still, lying in the

bed.

“Philip!” My sister got up rushed over and embraced me. “It’s been so long.”

She looked at Caroline and said “He never should have kept you away from us. We don’t bite.”

I stepped to the bed, my father turned his head and I took his hand. “I’m glad you could make it.” It was just a faint croak.

“I’m sorry I never came back.”

“The world does that. You grew up. You look older.”

“I look older? I guess it happened when I wasn’t looking.”

My mother came around the bed and took my arm. I looked at her, her eyelids trembling, and hugged her.

Two Hours Later

Two hours later my father had fallen asleep and we adjourned to the main room. I took my sister aside and asked, “How long does he have?” She replied, “The doctor says tomorrow or the next day.” I started to say, “Shouldn’t he be in hospital?” then realized that of course he wanted to die at home instead of in some antiseptic white room. The ties that bind in small villages are powerful. And I could feel the whispers of the village trying to remind me of what I left.

“Are the Stones still there?”

My sister looked at me a little more sharply, “Yes.”

“Is it still there?”

My sister now looked at me like I was an idiot. “Of course it’s still there. It will still be there when the village falls into the sea. Why do you ask?”

“Would you take us up there?”

“You’ve been married for 37 years. Happily?”

“Yes.”

“You want to see the magic for you and Caroline?”

“Yes. More than just see it.”

“This isn’t a parlour trick for the children to be trotted out then put away again.”

“I know. It’s almost a rite of passage I was denied when I went to fight for King and Country.”

“You should have brought her here before.”

"I know. I got lucky. Very lucky. The smile that brightened the room and stole my heart still does that every day. I want it to know and see us too."

"Have you told Caroline about any of this?"

"No. I'd rather she experience it than think I've lost my mind."

"Alright. How long are you here for?"

"I talked my boss into allowing me to be gone for the whole week."

"Good. Now let me introduce you to the children and grandchildren."

August 14, 1960 (Sunday)

We were eating in the pub in the morning when Rosalyn came in looking for us. "Great grandfather passed away overnight. You got here just in time." Caroline reached out and squeezed my hand, glanced up and said, "We'll be there shortly."

After a minute, Caroline asked, "I assume a service in the church right here?"

I responded, "Unlikely. I don't think the church has had a service since the 1600s. No Vicar or Curate. Probably just a graveside service at the cemetery about a mile from here. Unless things have changed. I'll have to ask Clara."

"Wow. This really is the back of beyond."

We finished what was left on our plates, went back to our room to grab our coats and headed to my sister's.

"Faster than expected."

"Yes. I wonder if he was just waiting for you."

"Now off on another adventure."

"No. I think he'll find a sitting room and wait for Mother."

"Probably true. What do we need to do about arrangements?"

"The doctor is arranging for the mortuary to pick him up. Then we'll have a service Tuesday at the cemetery. I can take you and Caroline to the Stones on Thursday."

"Still no services at the church?"

"No. No one is in any hurry to remind anyone it exists. We take care of our own."

“What does the mortician say?”

“Nothing. He knows there aren’t enough vicars to go around and it’s not his problem.”

“How is Mother?”

“She accepted the situation last week, so I think she is just waiting for her turn.”

Caroline turned to one of the nieces we had been introduced to yesterday. “What can I do to help?”

August 16, 1960 (Tuesday)

The graveside service was short but intentional. Andras Hill has a population of maybe 200 and probably half the village turned out. It rained. Apparently even the weather felt bad about my father’s passing. We then filled the pub and I was reintroduced to people that I hadn’t seen in forty years. And their spouses and children and children’s children. Funny what stories you remember that other people don’t and what stories they remember that you don’t after all those years.

August 18, 1960 (Thursday)

I had told Caroline that there was a henge in the hills beyond the village and that I wanted to revisit it with her, but we would need Clara to lead us and keep us from getting lost. She looked thoughtfully at the shoes she had packed for us both, then said “I think they’ll do if it’s not too steep.” I replied “It’s a three-hour hike each way over three crests, but no, it’s not mountain climbing.”

Clara met us at breakfast and had brought three walking sticks and packs. “Hey, we’re all getting older.” She went to the bar and picked up a take-away lunch that she had apparently ordered the day before. “We’ll have a picnic when we get up there.”

The track up into the hills was the same that I recalled from childhood. By the time we reached the top, our muscles were reminding us that they were no longer the muscles of our childhood. We huffed and puffed and stood for a moment at the top of the third crest and I pointed towards the meadow off to the left, on the other side of the crest.

“Wow. They are huge.” Caroline exclaimed. “How did they

get up here?"

"Giants." said Clara "Actually no one knows. They've been here longer than the village."

We caught our breath, then wound our way through the tall grass and around bushes to get to the meadow. Twelve standing stones, all nine feet tall, surrounding a black centre stone. I led Caroline around the outside of the circle while Clara pulled the picnic things and food out of our packs. Finishing our circuit, we joined Clara, sat down on a blanket and passed around the food.

"*Welcome back*" sounded in my mind. I looked at Caroline. She was trying to decide what to eat first. Clara, on the other hand, had looked up and towards the Stones.

"*Should I assume you brought your wife here to meet me?*"

"Yes." I thought rather than spoke aloud to the voice.

"Caroline?" This I said aloud.

"Yes."

"You might want to put the sandwich down."

She looked puzzled, but did so.

"*Hello Caroline. Welcome to the hills.*"

She looked frantically around, then at me, then at Clara and back at me.

"Uh. What?"

Clara reached out and took her hand. "Welcome to the village secret. I'd like you to meet Anthracyda."

Caroline looked around again, then back at Clara. "Who or what is Anthracyda?"

"*You can call me a hillside spirit or small god. Of course that's just a noun rather than a real explanation.*"

"You're in my head?"

"*A bit. I don't have a physical body for you to talk to.*"

"Are you a ghost?"

Clara laughed. "No. No one died up here. In the witch hunting days, the question was whether it was a demon. It's not that either. It's just what it is. And a neighbour to the village."

"Only the village knows? What about all the people who leave the village?"

I responded “There was a time, in the witch hunting days when anyone leaving the village would be brought to Anthracyda and it would make adjustments to your memory so that you thought it was just stories for children. Nowadays, they don’t talk because no one would believe them. The supernatural only happens in books and movies these days.”

“So you trust me to keep my mouth shut.”

Clara said “Philip wanted me to bring you up here because he wanted Anthracyda to meet you. Because you’re important to him and, even though he left the village, some part of the village never left him. And Anthracyda is important to the village.”

I said “Anthracyda, I know I didn’t bring Caroline when I should have, but I’ve brought her here now. Can you, please?” Caroline looked at me, not certain what was going to happen next.

A quietness fell over the meadow. Or rather, I was now aware of that quietness. Colours started to coalesce around Caroline and me and glow like auras. Caroline gasped. The surrounding glow started to expand and, when our glows intersected, colours brightened and sparkles began to appear and started to float around the meadow, some flying into the circle, others just floating around us or in the grass. Caroline laughed like a small child, trying to catch some from where she was sitting. Then the colours slowly faded away.

“Was that what you were hoping for?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Caroline asked “What was that?”

Clara responded “Anthracyda likes you and likes you together as a couple. If it thought you were a bad match, you wouldn’t see sparkles, you’d see bruises.”

“How often does that happen?”

Clara chuckled “With teenagers, often enough. Hormones are not a measure of compatibility.”

“Wow.”

The sounds came back to the meadow. I took that to mean that Anthracyda had chosen to leave.

Clara looked at me “Now, my brother. I want to see you

more often than every forty-three years.”

I took a deep breath. “I’ll try.”

Rev. Jonathan Cary April-June 1996

April 22, 1996

It was just like the Bishop to find some task for me to accomplish while on my holiday! I mentioned that I was going to take a driving holiday up along the coast and look at the wilder scenery in that lightly inhabited part of the country. His face lit up, and he said that it had come to his attention that the church owned some property in some little village or hamlet called Andras Hill but hadn’t had a parish there since the mid 1600s. Could I stop there for a day, look around and see if it was something we could sell or salvage? I looked up the village. Way off the beaten path, population probably around 200. It is definitely on the coast, likely to be “wilder scenery” - where the mountains meet the sea sort of thing. So I agreed to make a side trip to check it out.

June 3, 1996

Against all expectations, it seemed like that village of Andras Hill (who was Andra or Andras?) has a pub with a couple of rooms, so I’d booked two nights at the Lonely Gull. This place is so out of the way that I assumed I would get there in the evening, take a day looking at the church property, and leave the following day. For reference, the landlady is Catherine Carniss (assuming I understood her accent properly).

June 14, 1996 (Friday)

Andras Hill is what you’d expect from a tiny village in the middle of nowhere. A cluster of houses surrounding a church, a pub and the Village Shop. It was evening when I arrived, so hard to tell, but the church looked in surprisingly good shape. There were 15-20 locals in the pub when I walked in. Of course, every conversation stopped and everyone looked at me, but at least they seemed curious rather than hostile. The middle-aged woman at the bar asked if I was Jonathan Cary, said my room was ready, and the locals resumed their conversations. As she walked down the narrow hallway, she said that she had passed the word that someone was staying for two nights, just so that

people would not be surprised. I asked if there were more people than normal just to see if I had horns. She laughed and said that it was the pretty normal crowd; no one had satellite telly so the pub was the social centre for everyone. As she gave me the room key, she glanced at my collar and asked if I had come to look at the church. I admitted I had, and she responded with a hmm. That news will probably get passed around before I get my dinner.

Eventually I came back to the main room after setting out my clothes to get a shepherd's pie and pint. (Even churchmen take a pint in the local, although I didn't expect to have to buy any rounds for the room.) There were a few glances my way, but no one came over to my small table for an interrogation session. I had just gotten the pie when the door opened and a young couple came in, obviously very happy. The lad shouted they'd been up the hill and gotten the blessing. There was a great huzzah from the room. A few heads cocked over my direction and the lad nodded his head as if having received some message. I should not have worn my collar.

I got a second pint and asked the landlady what "the blessing" was about. She smiled and said the two have been courting for some time and the families and village elders have now all agreed. That surprised me.

"In this day and age do young people need permission to marry?"

Mrs (?) Carniss said, "It's not permission. It's everyone approving and giving the couple advice."

I guess sort of like marriage counselling by the village elders since they have no minister. Maybe the last village elder the couple were expected to talk to was "up the hill".

June 15, 1996 (Saturday)

I went out before breakfast to look at the church. It was in remarkable shape, considering. You could see where it has been repaired recently. Even the grounds are kept up. I walked around and took a number of pictures for the Bishop. The cemetery was a surprise. The last burial had been the last vicar in July 1643. The door was unlocked and again, everything looks

well cared for. I took more pictures. Of course, we don't have the number of priests necessary to station someone in such a small isolated location, but they certainly seem to want to be ministered to. I thought maybe I should offer to hold services in the morning before I leave.

I went back to the Gull for breakfast and commented on the surprisingly good condition of the church.

Mrs Carniss remarked "The village was tasked long ago with keeping the church in good condition for its absent landlord, and now here you are."

She looked directly at me and said "What are you going to do with it?"

I admitted I didn't know. People seemed to want it, but our resources are stretched too thin to staff it. I then offered to hold services, but she responded with a chuckle.

"It's your church, not ours. We just take care of it for you."

??? Do they feel abandoned by the church?

I asked about the lack of graves in the churchyard. She said that there is another cemetery up the hill where everyone is buried. At least I haven't stumbled into some horror movie about immortal beings or *The Wicker Man*. Time to look at any parish records in the church.

The vestry had a record book showing births, deaths and marriages until June 1, 1643. There were also notes for sermons or drafts of letters to the Bishop or, I don't really know what. The handwriting style was different back then and I found reading difficult. There was something about a devil on the hillside seducing the flock and the Bishop needs to get the army to pull down the "Stones" and throw them into the sea. Is there a henge somewhere in the vicinity? If so, the English Heritage people would love to know - this could be an archaeological site. Back to Mrs Carniss.

There was no one at the Gull, but on a hunch I stopped in at the Village Store next door. She was chatting with another woman, back to me, when the other woman saw me, raised her eyebrows and tilted her head to indicate to Mrs Carniss that I was there.

I said "I don't mean to interrupt, but do either of you know if there are any ancient sites in the area I might look at? I'm just sightseeing, and they happen to be an interest of mine."

They looked at each other in that sort of wordless communication that two old friends and card players might have, then both turned to me and said "No".

I was beginning to have the feeling this is one of those rural villages where there is something English Heritage would love to know about but the locals do not want any outsiders invading their territory.

What I really wanted to find right now is a teenager. They usually want to leave the small town and go somewhere there is more excitement and they're willing to complain about life in the sticks. The only problem being that teenagers in a place like this are working with their parents on the farm or the fishing boat in the middle of the day. What to do? I thank the ladies and step back out into the sun. Well, not really sun, more light overcast at the moment. We might get sun later.

I walked the perimeter of the village on the uphill side and noticed a path. It is clearly a footpath, not like a path that sheep and cows might use with farmers going up to their pastures. Hmm. On a hunch, I went back to my room and put on some hiking boots. I then came back to the path and started up. After twenty minutes or so, I stopped and looked around. The scenery was gorgeous. The path seemed in the same condition this far up the hillside as it was down at the village. There was no branching, no indication that it is coming to an end. I was beginning to wonder if this will lead over a pass to a neighbouring village. I didn't have any food or water with me, so I did the sensible thing and returned. Mrs Carniss was back in the Gull and I asked for a flask of water and a sandwich to take away. I mentioned that I saw a path leading up the hill and wondered where it went. She responded that it goes up the mountain to a pass, then leads to a hamlet in the upper meadows of the next valley. I told her that as I've seen the church, I'm going to take a bit of a ramble up the path. She told me to mind that I start back soon enough to get here before dark, then muttered

something that sounded like “This should be interesting.”

After two hours I had topped two crests. I couldn’t see the village from there and there was still no end in sight. Three hours in and I’d crossed another crest. I had not seen “a hamlet in the upper meadows of the next valley”. I was beginning to see the wisdom in starting back. Fortunately this far north this late in summer the days are pretty long. Then I saw what I’d been looking for - a stone circle on a level place on the hillside. Twelve or thirteen stones, all surprisingly still standing, each of them at least nine feet tall. I took out my camera and start shooting.

In the middle of the circle is a huge black stone, possibly basalt, partly buried in the earth. There was no telling how big it is under the grass. As I passed between two of the standing stones to approach it more closely, there is suddenly the feeling that I was not alone and the unseen presence is everywhere. I gingerly stepped back out of the circle, but the presence didn’t go away. The ranting about the devil on the hillside suddenly started to make sense.

“He thought I was competition.” It wasn’t words, just thoughts suddenly appearing in my mind.

“Were you?” I said.

There was a mental shrug. *“I suppose when you preach subjugation to a single mystery with threats of punishment instead of understanding and future rewards for obedience without any way to verify them, any other mystery is competition. It wasn’t competition, except in his own mind. Then again, he also wanted to be a hero.”*

“What does wanting to be a hero have to do with competition?”

“Many people want to be the heros of their own stories. You can be a hero by saving someone or something. You can be a hero by winning a conflict and beating the other side. So you create conflict even if there isn’t any, just so you can “beat” the other side and be the hero for your side.”

“What did you do to him?”

There was a mental laugh. *“Nothing. The simple fact of*

my existence was sufficient. I don't feel a need to be the hero of a conflict."

"What are you?"

"Just another being who cares for a place. A small god, or hill spirit if you like."

"What do you mean by 'small god'?"

"'God' apparently has different meanings to different humans. The humans who brought the stones here believed in many gods and thought I was just the closest one they could talk to."

"Some humans think it might mean any immortal entity. For others, it can only mean a creator. They tie themselves in knots about whether there can be only one or whether creator must mean 'creator of the universe' sorts of things."

"I would limit it to immortal entities which are self-sustaining. I have friends who meet that criteria and have different abilities than I do. I'm certainly not 'God' as you think of 'God' - first cause and all that. By the way, those pictures won't develop."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want them to."

"Oh. What are you going to do with me?"

"What should I do with you?"

"The villagers know about you."

"Yes."

"If I tell the Bishop, the village and hills will be swarming with scientists."

"For a few days, but they won't find anything, and your reputation will suffer. At most, they would put a historical marker on the stones - if they can find them."

"You can hide the hillside or the stones?"

"I could, or I could simply not manifest."

"Why did you make yourself known to me?"

"Because I was interested in how your church might have developed over the centuries and thought it would be interesting to see your mind. I can tell that many of your colleagues haven't changed all that much."

"You can read my mind?"

"Yes"

“Would pulling down the stones have banished you?”

There was a silent laugh.

“No. Why would it? They’re just a marker. The Celtic villagers put up the stones because I would talk to them here. The stones don’t do anything.”

I suddenly wondered about the young couple from the night before. “Did you give your blessing to a young couple yesterday?”

“Yes. They will be good for each other and the village.”

“Mind reading sounds advantageous to marriage counseling.”

There was a chuckle. *“It is, but even more important is helping them see their own minds. You can’t ‘tell’ young people something. The hormones get in the way.”*

“Oh. Do you have a name?”

“You can call me Anthracyda. You might think about starting back. Although you can get back while it is still light, it will start getting colder and your jacket is a bit thin.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Nothing. You’re beginning to realise that having outsiders wandering all over will upset the village and since they won’t be able to find this hillside, there’s no offsetting benefit. You can come back alone if you like and want to talk.”

“Do you know God?”

There was another chuckle. *“No more than you do.”*

As I started back down the hill, I realised that there were multiple ways to interpret that last statement, depending on how much I really knew God. Or if I even did.

The voice was right. It was beginning to get cold when I got back to the Gull. Mrs Carniss looked up from polishing a glass and said, “You’ve talked, then.”

“Yes”

“Be glad it’s not a vengeful god.”

That didn’t sound good. But what could the church have done to such an entity?

Oh. Not to the entity. To a village that the entity cared for. Like killing someone’s puppy.

Yes indeed. It was right. I'm not telling the Bishop.

Song of Anthracyda

T'was the night of Winter Solstice
snow was falling down
A shepherd and his flock would never
Make it back to town
They'd spend the night bedded down
Upon a windblown hill
Haunted by some standing stones
Which watched over the chill

The shepherd pulled his coat round tight
And gathered close the flock
Settled down in drifting snow,
His back against a rock
He prayed that he'd not die that night
On such unhallowed ground
Then from deep within the stone
He heard a soft voice sound

You may call me Anthracyda,
I'm the god of Andra's Hill
My children are long gone now,
yet I abide here still
A simple farming village
I watched o'er best I could
They thanked me for the harvest,
danced in my sacred wood

I'll still watch over my hillside,

Try to help the ones in pain
I will warm my stones for you,
so your prayers are not in vain
When they awoke next morning,
continuing their way
They found the snow had melted
everywhere they lay

You may call me Anthracyda,
I'm the god of Andra's Hill
My children are long gone now,
Yet I abide here still
Christian people hear me,
See the tears of Christ the Son
Two commands he gave to you
Love your god and everyone
You may call me Anthracyda,
I'm the god of Andra's Hill

Author's Notes

To state the obvious, this book is about people's reaction to something that is an indisputable "other". There is no single individual that can be characterized as "the protagonist", rather, each villager has their own reaction to the reality of Anthracyda's existence.

Anthracyda is an outside context problem (some risk that is beyond imagination) to the Vicar and Mathilda Potter because it threatens their biblical world view. For the Vicar, it also threatens his religious and secular power position.

For the rest of the villagers, Anthracyda is merely an "other". Unlike many "others" in our own world, you can't threaten, abuse, marginalize or subjugate Anthracyda. It is too powerful, in its own territory. At the same time, since it is restricted to the hills, Anthracyda can be ignored in the villages' daily life without harm for either party. Other villagers try to see if it can be provide a benefit.

Anthracyda itself has a philosophical world view that it admits probably doesn't work for humans. As the hunter Hume Valcar said "Easy for you [Anthracyda] to say. You don't need to kill to survive, don't have children to raise, and no one can hurt you."

Names

Characters by First Name

- Alastair Cullane
 - Cooper. Alastair courts Fiona Rede, daughter of the baker Brice Rede and his wife Cait Rede in May 1643. He leaves the village shortly thereafter.
- Alice Beckworth
 - Seamstress, wife of the tailor Isaac Beckworth, mother of Sussana and Nathaniel.
- Andrew Dericote
 - Yeoman, husband of Rachel Dericote, father of Henry Dericote.

The largest landowning farmers, the Dericotes are solely focused on wealth. From that respect, Anthracynada doesn't represent a threat and is, therefore, almost irrelevant. The only reason they care at all is to the extent that people talking about it might bring visibility to the village, endangering their hoped for tax evasion scheme.
- Brice Rede

- Baker, husband of Cait Rede, father of Fiona Rede. Cait and Brice, Lucy and Hume Valcar and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracyda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone.
- Cait Rede
 - Baker, wife of Brice Rede, mother of Fiona Rede, sister of the hunter Hume Valcar. Cait and Brice, Lucy and Hume Valcar and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracyda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone. For Cait, Anthracyda is just a fact of life and accepted as such. Any assistance by Anthracyda will be gratefully accepted (e.g. teaching Sussana) and requests by Anthracyda (such as putting an animal out of pain) will be equally rendered.
- Catherine Carniss
 - Innkeeper in 1990s.
- Cicilia Cullane
 - wife of Husbandman Donnan Cullane, mother of Alastair Cullane.
- Clarice Malison
 - Sister of Hannah Malison, youngest daughter of the fisherman Dauy and his wife Elspet Malison. She is 16 years old in 1643.
- Dauy Malison
 - Fisherman, husband of Elspet Malison, father to Oswyn, Hannah and Clarice. Dauy and Elspet have met Anthracyda before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone.

- Donnan Cullane
 - Husband of Cicilia, father of Alastair Cullane, Husbandman.
- Duncane Lyfelde
 - Shepherd, fiance of Hannah Malison.
 For Duncane and Hannah, Anthracyda is just a fact of life and accepted as such. Any assistance by Anthracyda will be gratefully accepted (e.g. teaching Susana) and requests by Anthracyda (such as putting an animal out of pain) will be equally rendered by them.
- Elspet Mar Malison
 - Mother to Hannah, Clarice and Oswyn, husband to Dauy, maiden name Mar.
 Dauy and Elspet have met Anthracyda before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone.
- Fiona Rede
 - Daughter of Brice and Cait Rede (the bakers), courted by Alastair Cullane. She is age 16 in 1643.
 Fiona, daughter of the bakers, was brought up in a safe family environment and allowed to develop a strong personality. Having a strong personality as a woman, given the context of the times, is not necessarily safe and she hasn't learned that yet. She is enjoying watching the conflicts between the aspects of her culture that are rigid and the obvious reality that is Anthracyda. We don't yet know whether Anthracyda's attempts to introduce her to another way of thinking from a philosophical standpoint will bear fruit.
- Geoffrey Gaynesford

- Yeoman, husband of Sarah Gaynesford.
The second largest landowning farmer, Geoffrey starts in the Dericote camp, but then expands his horizon to include learning from Anthracysda about potential new crop rotation methods. Geoffrey is still focused on wealth, but open minded enough to learn from something else. They have children, but the children are not named in the story.
- Gilbert Blexham
 - Innkeeper, husband of Marion Blexham, father of Jennifer.
Gilbert has his sphere of authority - the inn - but outside the inn, he is just pushed and pulled by the currents around him.
- Hannah Malison
 - Fiance of the shepherd Duncane Lyfelde in 1642, daughter of the fisherman Dauy and his wife Elspet Malison. 23 years old in 1641. Handfasts with Duncane sometime late 1642 - early 1643.
- Henry Dericote
 - Eldest son of Yeoman Andrew and Rachel Dericote. He is 17 or 18 in 1643.
- Hume Valcar
 - Husband of Lucy Valcar, brother of Cait Rede, hunter. Cait and Brice, Lucy and Hume Valcar and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracysda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone. For Hume, Anthracysda is just a fact of life and accepted as such. Any assistance by Anthracysda will be gratefully accepted and requests by Anthracysda (such as putting an animal out of pain) will be equally rendered.

- Isaac Beckworth
 - Tailor, husband of seamstress Alice Beckworth, father of Sussana and Nathaniel.
- Jenefer Blexham
 - Eldest daughter of Innkeeper Gilbert and Marion Blexham.
- Jonathan Cary
 - Vicar visiting from Manchester in 1996s.
- Laetitia Forgell
 - Teenager accusing Sussana Beckworth of witchcraft while arguing over a boy. She leaves the village in August 1643.
- Lucy Valcar
 - Wife of Hume Valcar, part time hunter and butcher for game. Sister of Philip Ruderfurd.
Cait and Brice, Lucy, Hume and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracyda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone.
- Luke Rawson
 - Husband of Sybil Rawson, father of Thomas Rawson, Blacksmith and fiddle player.
Luke Rawson, the blacksmith, initially has the inclination to attack because of a fear that Anthracyda is Fae and a threat to the village. Luke is easily distracted by Anthracyda's little show of strength combined with the offer to learn better ways of making iron.
- Marion Blexham

- Wife of Innkeeper Gilbert Blexham, mother of Jenefer Blexham.

Marion and Sarah Gaynesford, in some ways like Rachel Dericote, see Anthracyda as a possible tool for their own ends. Unlike Rachel, Marion and Sarah's ends are not personal wealth but a reduction in domestic violence in the village and helping to ensure compatible (and hopefully happy) marriages. Also unlike Rachel, they don't treat Anthracyda as a lesser or as a servant.

- Mathilda Potter

- Village petty school mistress, a curate's daughter not originally from the village. She is 26 years old in 1643. School teacher and daughter of a curate, Mathilda is the only other character whose religious world view is sufficiently core to her being that Anthracyda's simple existence is a problem. Unlike the Vicar, the challenge is not to her external authority (she has none), but to her sense of self as defined by her literal view of the book of Genesis in the Bible. She can bend far enough to accept that Anthracyda is more than an animal, but that leads her to want to save Anthracyda's soul, if indeed it has a soul. Anthracyda's different religious beliefs, and Mathilda's arguments with Clarice Rede on animal souls and Sussana Beckworth on the actions of God threaten the foundations of Mathilda's internal world even as she tries to be a good person.

- Nathaniel Beckworth

- Son of Isaac and Alice Beckworth, older brother of Sussana Beckworth.

- Oswyn Malison

- Younger brother of Hannah Malison, Son of Dauby and Elspet Malison. 20 years old in 1643.

- Philip Ruderfurd
 - Hunter, brother of Lucy Valcar.

Cait and Brice, Lucy, Hume and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracyda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone. Philip, Anthracyda is just a fact of life and accepted as such. Any assistance by Anthracyda will be gratefully accepted and requests by Anthracyda (such as putting an animal out of pain) will be equally rendered.
- Rachel Dericote
 - Wife of Yeoman Andrew Dericote, mother of Henry Dericote.

For Rachel, Anthracyda is a useful tool to aid in the tax evasion scheme. Her treatment of Anthracyda as a servant leads to the little attempts by both of them to use the crows in their little contest of wills in setting boundaries.
- Thomas Rawson
 - Son of Luke and Sybil Rawson; blacksmith apprentice to his father.
- Sarah Gaynesford
 - Wife of Yeoman Geoffrey Gaynesford. They have children, but the children are not named in the story. Sarah Gaynesford and Marion Blexham, in some ways like Rachel Dericote, see Anthracyda as a possible tool for their own ends. Unlike Rachel, Marion and Sarah's ends are not personal wealth but a reduction in domestic violence in the village and helping to ensure compatible (and hopefully happy) marriages. Also unlike Rachel, they don't treat Anthracyda as a lesser or as a servant.

- Sussana Beckworth
 - Teenager accused of witchcraft, daughter of Isaac and Alice Beckworth, sister of Nathaniel Beckworth. 18 years old in 1643.
 - For Sussana, once encountered, Anthracyda is just a fact of life and accepted as such. Any assistance by Anthracyda will be gratefully accepted (e.g. teaching Sussana) and requests by Anthracyda will be equally rendered.
- Sybil Rawson
 - Wife of Luke Rawson, the Blacksmith, mother of Thomas Rawson.
- The Vicar, Walter Sencler
 - Vicar during 1640-1643. No one uses his actual name, Walter Sencler, just his title.
 - Anthracyda is a threat to his authority, both religious and effectively secular power and must be destroyed. That singular focus arguably results in costing his own life.

Characters Ordered by Family Name

- Beckworth
 - Alice Beckworth
 - * Seamstress, wife of the tailor Isaac Beckworth, mother of Sussana and Nathaniel.
 - Isaac Beckworth
 - * Tailor, husband of seamstress Alice Beckworth, father of Sussana and Nathaniel.
 - Nathaniel Beckworth
 - * Son of Isaac and Alice Beckworth, older brother of Sussana Beckworth.
 - Sussana Beckworth

- * Teenager accused of witchcraft, daughter of Isaac and Alice Beckworth, sister of Nathaniel Beckworth, 18 years old in 1643.
- Blexham
 - Gilbert Blexham
 - * Innkeeper, husband of Marion Blexham, father of Jenefer.
 - Jenefer Blexham
 - * Eldest daughter of Innkeeper Gilbert and Marion Blexham.
 - Marion Blexham
 - * Wife of Innkeeper Gilbert Blexham, mother of Jenefer Blexham.
- Carniss
 - Catherine Carniss
 - * Innkeeper in 1990s.
- Cary
 - Jonathan Cary
 - * Vicar visiting the village from Manchester in 1996.
- Cullane
 - Alastair Cullane
 - * Cooper. Alastair courts Fiona Rede, daughter of the baker Brice Rede and his wife Cait Rede in May 1643. He leaves village shortly thereafter.
 - Cicilia Cullane
 - * wife of Husbandman Donnan Cullane, mother of Alastair Cullane.
 - Donnan Cullane
 - * Husband of Cicilia, father of Alastair Cullane, Husbandman.

- Dericote
 - Andrew Dericote
 - * Yeoman, husband of Rachel Dericote, father of Henry Dericote.
 - Henry Dericote
 - * Eldest son of Yeoman Andrew and Rachel Dericote, 17 or 18 in 1643.
 - Rachel Dericote
 - * Wife of Yeoman Andrew Dericote, mother of Henry Dericote.
- Forgell
 - Laetitia Forgell
 - * Teenager accusing Sussana Beckworth of witchcraft while arguing over a boy. She leaves the village in August 1643.
- Gaynesford
 - Geoffrey Gaynesford
 - * Yeoman, husband of Sarah Gaynesford.
 - Sarah Gaynesford
 - * Wife of Yeoman Geoffrey Gaynesford.
 - * They have children, but the children are not named in the story.
- Lyfelde
 - Duncane Lyfelde
 - * Shepherd, fiance of Hannah Malison.
- Malison
 - Clarice Malison

- * Sister of Hannah Malison, youngest daughter of the fisherman Daury and his wife Elspet Malison. She is 16 years old in 1643.
- Daury Malison
 - * Fisherman, husband of Elspet Malison, father to Oswyn, Hannah and Clarice.
- Elspet Mar Malison
 - * Mother to Hannah, Clarice and Oswyn, husband to Daury, maiden name Mar.
- Hannah Malison
 - * Fiance of Duncane Lyfelde in 1642, daughter of Daury and Elspet Malison, handfasts sometime in late 1642 - early 1643. 23 years old in 1641.
- Oswyn Malison
 - * Younger brother of Hannah Malison, Son of Daury and Elspet Malison.
- Potter
 - Mathilda Potter
 - * Village petty school mistress, a curate's daughter not originally from the village. She is 26 years old in 1643.
- Rawson
 - Luke Rawson
 - * Husband of Sybil Rawson, father of Thomas Rawson, Blacksmith and fiddle player.
 - Thomas Rawson
 - * Son of Luke and Sybil Rawson; blacksmith apprentice to his father.
 - Sybil Rawson
 - * Wife of Luke Rawson, the Blacksmith, mother of Thomas Rawson.

- Rede
 - Brice Rede
 - * Baker, husband of Cait Rede, father of Fiona Rede. Cait and Brice, Lucy, Hume and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracyda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone.
 - Cait Rede (nee Valcar)
 - * Baker, wife of Brice Rede, mother of Fiona Rede, sister of the hunter Hume Valcar. Cait and Brice, Lucy, Hume and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracyda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone.
 - Fiona Rede
 - * Daughter of Brice and Cait Rede, courted by Alastair Cullane, age 16 in 1643
- Ruderfurd
 - Philip Ruderfurd
 - * Hunter, brother of Lucy Valcar. Cait and Brice, Lucy, Hume and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracyda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone.
 - See also Lucy Valcar
- Sencler
 - Walter Sencler
 - * Vicar during 1640 - 1643.
- Valcar
 - Hume Valcar

- * Husband of Lucy Valcar, brother of Cait Rede, hunter. Cait and Brice, Lucy, Hume and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracyda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone.
- Lucy Valcar (nee Ruderfurd)
 - * Wife of Hume Valcar, part time hunter and butcher for game. Sister of Philip Ruderfurd. Cait and Brice, Lucy, Hume and Philip Ruderfurd have met Anthracyda together in their adventurous youth, before the book starts, but have not shared that fact with anyone.
- See also Cait Rede