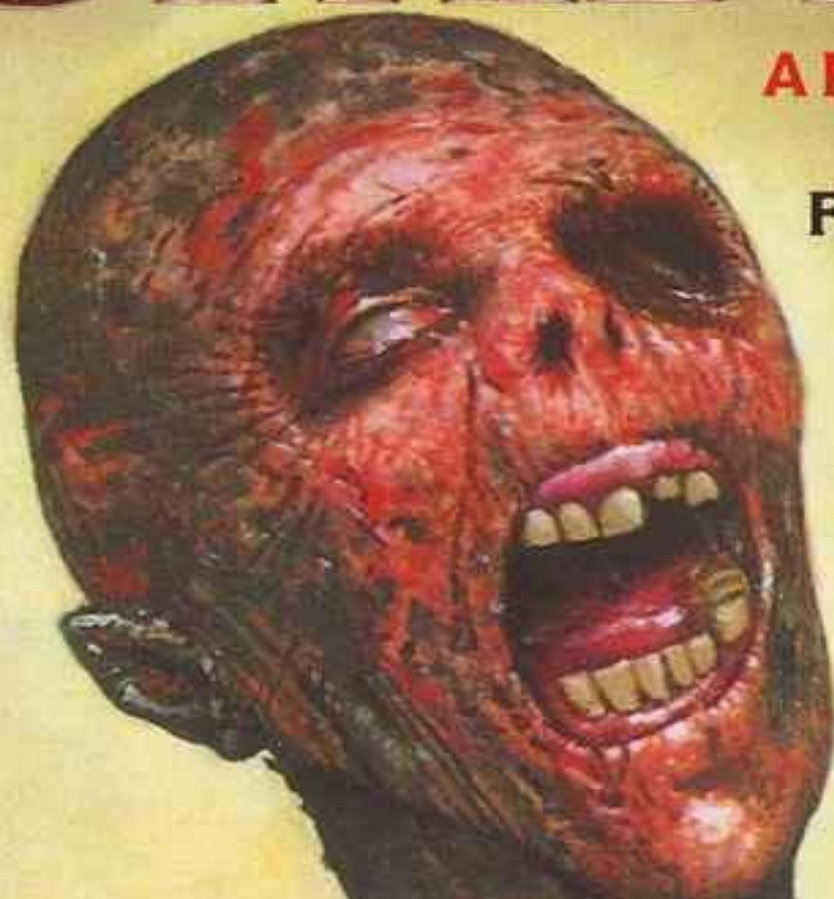



# GUY N. SMITH

**A NIGHTMARISH  
HELL...  
FROM WHICH  
THERE IS  
NO ESCAPE**



 Black Hill Books Ebook

# THE ISLAND

## The Island - Kindle Version 1.0

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For Louisa Michalak

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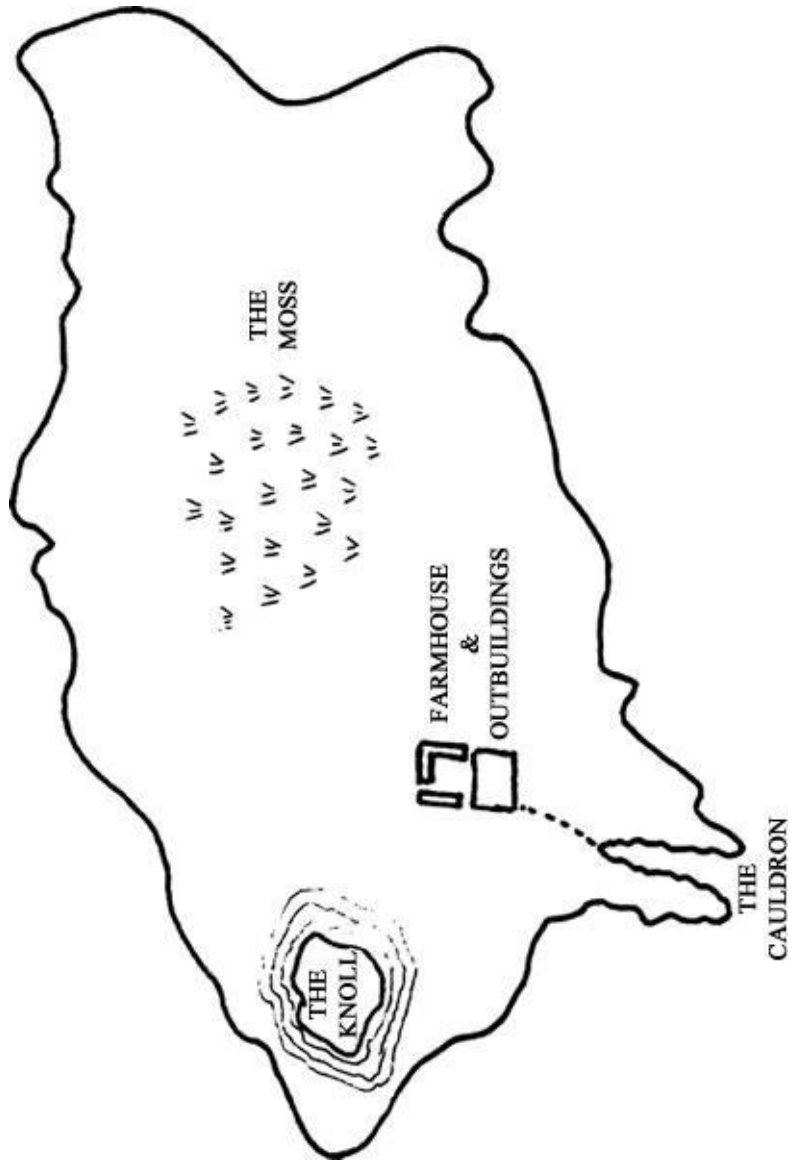
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By this the storm grew loud apace,  
The water-wraith was shrieking;  
And in the scowl of heaven each face  
Grew dark as they were speaking.

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*Lord Ullin's Daughter*  
T. Campbell

# Ulver Island Map



Gradually, through a crimson mist of pain, the woman's agony merged with grief. A hopelessness and stark realization returned, her dark eyes widening and searching the finely furnished room. An oval silver-framed mirror on the oak dresser threw her reflection back at her with venom, had her recoiling on to the pillows.

She saw a hag, features that had once been graced with beauty such as only the aristocracy could preserve at forty now etched with contours of anguish, the once full red lips a tight colourless line, the even teeth biting on the lower lip and drawing a trace of blood. Then forcing herself to look away because she did not care for herself, not now.

She was aware of the dampness of the sheet beneath her, her slight movements causing her to gasp aloud with the pain from a womb that had struggled to give birth. Still bleeding, but she ignored it.

Where was Macaulay with his wisp of beard and piercing grey eyes, his hateful leer and sharp nose coated with snuff? Gone, thank God, for he would only mock her with his scathing tones. The still echoed in her ears, words that had caused her to lose consciousness seconds after the baby had come away from her. They had haunted her even in the depths of oblivion. *'It's a wench, my lord. Be fear not, 'tis dead!'*

Gloating consolation for Marie's husband, the Laird of Ulver, the imposing figure that had stood at the doctor's shoulder, gaunt features thrust forward, oblivious of the agonies of childbirth and the cries of the mother throughout the delivery, scarlet-coated and arrogant as he awaited news of the Battle of Culloden, regardless of the wounded and the slain.

Marie had heard his mutterings, a background military-like tattoo amidst her labour pains. *'A boy, give me a boy, woman, that I might have a son and heir to the Ulver estates. You have failed me four times. If it is another bitch, may she be dead! Worthless wench!'*

She groaned her hate for him aloud, cursed him with every exhalation of her breath. A child conceived in a loveless act, herself an object of his contempt during copulation that was her duty and his right, a nightly ritual for months when he came to her room stinking of the peasant whores of Ulver, goading her with his sordid exploits, demanding a boy child from her. And now, win or lose the moment was nigh, something over which even he had no control.

*'Tis dead, my lord.'*

Marie heard her husband's shriek of rage as she slipped into a black bottomless abyss, a sickening thud as though something had rolled from the bed and hit the floor. Then nothing, except the meaningless whisperings of Macaulay as he followed to plague her, to admonish her for yet another failure.

Now they were both gone, Macaulay back to his hooch, Ulver to his giggling, orgasming whores with their diseases that robbed them of longevity. Marie forced herself up on to her elbows, fought against the dizziness that threatened to engulf her. *Where is my baby? 'Tis dead!*

*No, I want it, to cradle it to my bosom, to give it my teats to suckle. It cannot be dead!*

Late winter daylight struggled through the large window, sea mist groping at the panes and trying to get inside as though to obscure her vision. Stark silhouettes which she recognized as items of furniture, a tall chair with carved wolves' heads, mouths agape in hideous snarls, wooden man-eaters in search of human flesh. *Give us your babe, woman, for we are scavengers and we hunger for dead childflesh.*

No! She clutched at the curtain of the four-poster bed, somehow found the strength to tug it right back, leaned over the side. That was when she saw the bundle on the floor, hessian sacking which

failed to hide the inert infantile shape, tiny lifeless arms flung out as if to grasp despairingly at life too late. A stench of blood and afterbirth, the death sentence passed and executed before it came into the world.

Marie stared in horror and revulsion, and tried to reach it, believing in her grief that she could give it the life it sought. But she had not the strength. She slumped over the edge of the bed, retched and tried to vomit. Hanging there, willing herself to die, spumed by death just as by Dr Macaulay and the Laird of Ulver.

Some time later, long after darkness had hidden the dreadful shape on the floor from her burning eyes, she struggled back into bed and lay staring up at the faintly luminous ceiling. Carvings that were the obscenities of the wealthy scowled down upon her, angels with silent harps, the focal point a sculpture with tentacles like a gloating octopus that would have constricted her had it been able to tear itself free of its setting. She sensed the evil, felt the damp cold and smelled the stench of death in the room.

Her hatred festered, ate at her like a fast-growing cancer. Downstairs in the huge flagged hall of this formidable coastal castle a shield with sharp dirks adorned the wall, the crest of the Ulvers who had ruled these wild lands and shores, estates bestowed upon them by James the Sixth. They had lived by the dirk, and if Marie had been strong enough the present Ulver would have died by it. She trembled as she felt the thrust of her tender arm, her wrist jarred by the impact as the blade sank through the velvet of his waistcoat, sliced through flesh and jarred on bone. Twisting viciously, she brought the sweat to her fair features, his screams sweet music in her ears.

Following him down to the flagstones, she gouged and disembowelled like John, the stalker when he gralloched a stag on the hill. The body beneath her twitched and jerked, but it was only the nerves; it was dead. Even now she was not content, hacking the clothing from the corpse, exposing the vile body, laughing insanely as she sliced through soft flesh, and mocking the village wenches who would no longer enjoy the delights of a regal human stag at the rutting stand.

Exhausted, she cried her frustration in her own bed because it would never be. Before her tenderness had had time to heal he would be coming to her again, delighting in hurting her, punishing her because she had not given him an heir to the Ulver lands and its islands along the coastline.

Somebody was coming! She tensed, pulled the sheet up and feigned sleep. Fast light footsteps; they were neither Macaulay's nor those of her husband. The door swung open and the light from a swinging lantern lit up the room. Through half-closed eyes she saw faces that brought temporary respite from hatred and terror. Relief.

'Mother.' The eldest of the four girls, dark-haired and in her late teens, forced a smile from quivering lips. 'Mother, we heard ...'

'Aye, it's true,' Marie whispered hoarsely, 'twas a girl and it was stillborn. Cursed in the womb. Had it been a boy it would have lived.'

There was an uneasy silence during which Marie looked from one to the other of her visitors. Mary, eighteen, who held the lantern aloft. Elizabeth, a year younger, with long fair hair, whose birth had enraged the Laird when he was convinced the babe would be male. Margaret, sixteen, with bright auburn locks that curled around her shoulders, whom the physician had protected from her father's blind rage. Marie had appeared to become infertile after that. Five years of unrelenting and desperate mating by Ulver until Edith was conceived, months of anxiety and then the Laird's spite was born again in yet another daughter. Edith, sullen and ill-tempered, still screamed and threw uncontrollable tantrums if she was denied her own way. Four daughters, and a fifth dead upon the floor.

Mary pushed the door closed; they all listened for a few seconds as though they feared an eavesdropper. Glancing at one another and then at the bed, they did not see the huddled shape on the floor hidden by the shadows.

'Mother.' Mary advanced a step and the others pressed close to her. 'We must leave Ulver and'

soon as you are well enough to travel. Secretly by night. I have spoken with Angus, the groom, and he will have five horses saddled and ready at a moment's notice. Then we must ride as though the devil himself was after us. South, to England, and beseech the mercy of the Duke of Cumberland. If his soldiers slay us then we are no worse off than if we stayed here in Ulver.'

'You are mad, girl!'

'No, our father is mad. His rage is uncontrollable. We listened to his ravings; he will kill us and rid the Ulver lands of the female curse as he calls it.'

Marie trembled visibly, knowing that her eldest daughter spoke the truth. 'I shall not be well enough to travel for some time.' She spoke falteringly. 'Mary, you must go without me, take the coastal road and ...'

'No, Mother.' The girl shook her head. 'We will not leave you, for your fate would be even more terrible when Father realized we had fled. We shall wait. And pray.'

'So be it, then. But in the meantime you must keep out of his way. It is rumoured that the English are poised to seek out and confront the Prince in battle and destroy all who follow him. There are terrible times ahead, I feel. We are all loyal to our beloved Charles' – her voice sank to a whisper – 'but your father once said that if it meant keeping his lands under English rule then he would betray his kinsmen.' Her lips curled in scorn.

'Then he is a traitor,' Elizabeth spat, 'and deserves to die.'

'Aye, he does that,' her mother replied, 'but we are likely to be killed first. Let us pray that we shall be well enough to ride before long.'



The crematorium seemed horribly impersonal, almost spurning the grief of the tall man who stood bowed in the front pew of the airy chapel. His weather-beaten features were ashen, his dark hair flecked with grey. A strong man broken, a lone figure except for the seemingly unsympathetic priest who recited the prayers as if he had an important appointment pending, and this service was an unavoidable nuisance to him which he was eager to be done with.

Professional mourners hardened to feigning grief, fidgeting and perhaps craving a cigarette, slyly glanced at wrist watches, and someone gave a cough that might have been an impatient signal to the cleric.

A cold sunlit autumn day. The concrete paths outside were carpeted with chestnut leaves, and sunshine slanted in through the large windows and played on the polished coffin. Frank Ingraham experienced a brief sense of indignation; there was no feeling here apart from his own, it was just routine to the others. A business, in fact, a way of making money out of the grief of others. Fifteen minutes, that was all they allowed you. He was aware of another gathering outside in the foyer, somebody weeping. Another passing and another after that. Join the queue.

He wasn't a religious man, not like the other farmers up in the hills, but somehow church funerals carried a dignity that wasn't evident here. You felt that somebody cared; perhaps they were just better actors. They didn't rush you, allowed you time to grieve, and after the body was buried there was still *something* there, even if it was only a grave to go and tend, to shed a private tear over. Here there was nothing, a casket of ashes with a label on for you to go and scatter somewhere. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Wind and rain removed all traces. And Gillian would be gone forever.

A week ago today they had made love after lunch. A carefree union, perhaps more physical than loving simply because they both needed it. Spontaneous, on the sofa in the lounge; the phone had rung but they had ignored it. And afterwards they had dressed hurriedly, their lust spent. He had gone out to finish some ploughing, she had taken the car to go into town. A stupid unnecessary errand – she had forgotten to buy the coffee when she shopped on Friday. They could have managed on tea until next week, there was no reason for her to go. Oh, God, if only she hadn't.

Narrow winding lanes, anybody who did more than twenty-five miles an hour was a fool. And the Jones boy was a fool, hammering his father's Volvo at forty, meeting the Metro head-on on the bend just past Gwyther's farm. Gillian was killed outright; they had to cut her out of the car. Ralph Jones suffered a knock on the head, was taken to hospital and had not even been detained overnight. And the bloody Volvo was even repairable, and in a week or two the bastard would be burning up the lanes again. The innocent died and the guilty lived; it was always the way.

Frank wondered if a family would have been a comfort to him on that awful sunlit day. Not kids, he and Gillian hadn't wanted children – but maybe parents or even an in-law. But neither of them had any parents left alive, or brothers or sisters; just her cousin, whom they had not even had a card from last Christmas and who certainly had not bothered to show up today. He was a man alone, not just today but every day from here on.

The organist played some slow music and the curtains moved automatically, jerkily, to hide the coffin from view. And that was that. Final. The undertakers moved with indecent haste, glancing back at him as if to say, Come on, mister, we haven't all day, there's others waiting, get a move on. Frank managed a scowl through his tears. I'm going to cry, you bastards, he thought, and just you try to stop me.

He moved slowly, as if his supple body was suddenly crippled with arthritis, and found himself tracing the mosaic patterns on the floor, following them. They led outside. Leaves scuttled round him

feet as though to impede him as he headed across to the car park. He had some difficulty in finding the old Land Rover, a kind of mental block, subconsciously searching for the Metro, unable to believe that it, too, was gone for ever. Like Gillian.

He started it up in a cloud of diesel fumes, the fresh breeze wafting them back towards the chapel. A dirty old farm vehicle, half a bale of hay in the back, wisps of it on the seat and on the floor. Hardly dignified funeral transport, but nobody cared, not about him anyway. Everyone here was too taken up with their own grieving.

He didn't look back, there wasn't any point. A fleeting thought, a disturbing one: Did they cremate the body immediately after the service or later? Another nagging worry: Were you certain to get the right ashes back? Nobody cared. Nobody could be sure. Did it really matter?

That had been last autumn. The winter had passed – he had scarcely noticed it – a mild one, at least for those living up in the hills at one thousand feet above sea level. A deep fall of snow towards the end of January had thawed within a week and spring had come early. His thoughts turned to lambing in the routine way. There was no incentive, nobody but himself to look after now. So why the hell worry?

It was in April that Frank Ingram decided to sell Guilden Farm. The idea had lingered subconsciously in his mind since Gillian's funeral but he had gone through weeks during which everything was just too much trouble; existing rather than living, seeing to the stock and eating makeshift meals when he was hungry. Moving was tempting but the task was pushed to one side. Later, maybe, next year or the year after.

By April the Guilden was grating on his nerves. It was a painful memory of happy years. Far better to start a new life elsewhere, then he could remember without it hurting. It had to be a farm of some kind – a smallholding would suffice – because he had to make a living, however meagre, and he knew nothing else apart from farming. A new patch in a different area; the thought appealed.

'I would advise an auction.' Mr Hay of Hay & Heller, estate agents and auctioneers, looked mildly surprised when Frank called in at the office. 'If you *really* mean to sell the Guilden, that is.'

'I wouldn't be here if I didn't,' Frank snapped irritably. 'It'll fetch forty grand without any trouble. And then there'll be the livestock and implements sale for you to handle.'

'If you wish.' Hay rummaged through a large pile of brochures on his desk. 'Doubtless you wish to buy something else, Mr Ingram. A retirement bungalow perhaps ...?'

'Not round here.' There was more resentment than irritation in Frank's tone, as though there was a plot to keep him a prisoner in the hills. 'I'll find what I'm looking for. You leave it to me.'

'Very well.' Hay scraped his chair back. 'Our valuer will be out to look at the Guilden later in the week, Mr Ingram. Good day to you.'

That same evening Frank sat beside the Rayburn, idly flicking through a farming journal, not reading because he had lost his power of concentration. Flipping pages, going through the motions, restless. Glancing at pictures, display advertisements; running his eye down the "properties for sale" column. A small classified jogged his butterfly mind, forcing him to read and re-read it.

*FOR SALE. Scottish island, west coast, 3,000 acres grazing. 3-bedroom cottage in need of modernization. Outbuildings. Freehold. £48,000. Apply: McBannon & Brown, Estate Agents, Edinburgh.*

Frank tensed, his pulses racing. A west coast island farm for a snip. Or, at least, a snip compared with agricultural land prices down south. Forty grand for Guilden Farm, another ten for livestock and implements. He tried not to remember that the solicitor had said that there would be a "very considerable sum" due once the accident had been settled up. No, he'd manage without that; you could

not equate a loved one's life in monetary terms. There would be enough, anyway, to buy Ulver island from the proceeds of his own sale. It wasn't exactly a cast-iron investment; nobody wanted remote windswept islands if they had any sense. Or unless they just wanted to opt out.

He pictured the scene: flat grassland without a tree in sight, the sea pounding on its rocky shorelines, himself struggling against the might of a howling westerly, rain and sleet stinging his face. The power line down and the phone out of order for long periods. Huddling over the fire, listening to the wind buffeting the house, just Jake, the collie, for company. He'd take Jake; no man worth his salt put his sheepdog in a livestock sale. It would be hard, harder than these hills in winter, a kind of penance. He'd be a monk in a monastery. Tempting, in a masochistic sort of way. He knew he'd phone the agents in Edinburgh first thing in the morning. Just to satisfy his conscience if nothing else. It was probably already sold.

It wasn't.

May, but to the casual observer it might have been November. A thick sea mist had reduced visibility to a couple of hundred yards and the lowering grey skies were unrelenting. Waves pounded the tiny jetty, forcing him to turn up the collar of his weatherproof jacket and stand with his back to the wind. The small ferry boat strained at its moorings as though eager for its freedom. There was some doubt as to whether the mail boat would put to sea at all today. It all depended upon the harbour master's decision, and the boatman had gone to consult him.

Frank fidgeted with the key in his pocket, doubting the wisdom of his venture. If only the bloody place had been sold, then it would have let him off the hook. Fate had hooked him and was determined to land him like a struggling salmon. No escape. But, of course, the place might not be suitable; a ruin of a house, the grazing eaten right down to the butt and browned by the elements. I don't have any capital and if I can't make a living out of it, that's that, he thought. Excuses. But he had come this far and at least he would have a look. Maybe this time he would be able to satisfy his conscience.

'We're going.' The grizzled boatman was back, a wraith clad in yellow oilskins with a sou'wester hiding his wrinkled features. 'Get aboard, and on yer ain head be it.'

Frank was surprised that there were no other passengers on the small craft, just a couple of crewmen, some mailbags being loaded and boxes of groceries piled in the cabin. A fleeting sense of loneliness engulfed him.

Ten minutes later the rugged ferry boat was battling against the waves, seemingly making little progress.

'It'll be two hours, maybe three in this weather.' The boatman forced the cabin door shut and eyed Frank with suspicion that bordered on hostility. 'Ulver, eh? We've no called there for nigh on two years now. Summer, it was, the sea like a millpond. Some tourists wanted tae go ashore. Damn fools, they didna stop more'n ten minutes. Naebody stops long on Ulver.'

'Why?' Frank experienced a chill trickling up his spine.

'It's a bad place, Ulver. Always has been. That's why naebody wants it. They've been trying tae sell it since 1948. Naebody's lived there since then.'

'But somebody lived there once.' Frank noted how the boatman averted his gaze to watch the man at the helm just too intently.

'Aye.' A sullen grunt. 'Once they did. But no since 1948.'

'Who lived there then?' Damn it, the man shouldn't have mentioned it if he wasn't prepared to elaborate.

'The Greenwoods. They bought it tae try and get as far frae the war as they could.'

'And after the war was over they just left, eh?'

'No-oo.' The boatman had his face turned towards the rain-lashed cabin window.

'Why did they leave then?' It wasn't just because of the raging sea that Frank Ingram yelled. The hand in his pocket clutched the estate agent's key until the rough metal dug sharply into his flesh.

'They didna leave.' A pause, the words scarcely audible. 'They died!'

The goose pimping came back again, this time travelling right the way up Frank's spine and into the nape of his neck, causing the hairs to stiffen. 'They were old, I suppose.' For Christ's sake, he thought. I've got to know.

'They were young. Younger than ye. She was pretty, too. She slipped on the rocks, fell into the sea. He jumped after her, but naebody gets out of the sea when it's in a mood like it is today. It takes ye, smashes yer body to pulp on the rocks and then leaves what's left of ye on the beach when the tide goes out for the crows and gulls tae feed on.'

Frank found himself grasping a stanchion for support. He felt slightly sick, and told himself that he had never been a seafaring man. The boatman turned away abruptly, forced the door open and went out on deck.

An accident, he thought. Just an accident. It could happen to anybody. Even *you*, Frank Ingram.

They called at a large, apparently well-populated island where people clad in oilskins helped them to land, eager for their mail and supplies. Then the boat pushed off again; half an hour later they landed at a smaller island. Just a shepherd appeared, but at least there was a collie at his heels. He took some letters held together with a rubber band and struggled with a box of groceries.

'Ulver next.' The boatman scowled at Frank accusingly. 'Without that we'd be heading back to the mainland.' 'Half an hour; I'll wait nae more. Every minute ye're ashore puts our lives in danger. We'd no have come but for the harbour master, ye ken.'

Ulver island was large, and there had to be a lot more of it than was visible. Jagged rocks towered up above the flying spume. A small inlet where the waves threatened to dash the small boat against the sides. A wooden jetty that looked precarious as it leaned out to defy the elements. With some difficulty the boat was tied up and Frank grasped the flimsy rail and pulled himself ashore.

'Half an hour, nae more,' the boatman yelled after him. 'Otherwise ye'll be here till next Tuesday and I wouldna like to spend a night on Ulver. No for a year's pay!'

Frank followed the narrow path from the shore, noticing how flat the terrain was. The grass was surprisingly green; it had not been grazed for a long time and was seeding in places. There were some clumps of heather and broom, and a stunted silver birch that had somehow defied a score of winters and survived. Then, through the mist he spied the house, a shape that was magnified by the grey gloom, seemingly gigantic like some ancient fortification scowling to frighten off an invading foe. He almost turned back, then was angry with himself for even thinking of it. Damn it, the whole trip would have been a complete waste of time if he had chickened out. He was at least going to look, and so was that morbid boatman. It was just like some of the older locals back home; they resented newcomers and outsiders. They didn't realize that without new blood their jealously guarded homelands would die. Maybe they preferred it that way.

The agents had certainly been right about one thing, Frank smiled grimly to himself, the house was in need of modernization. There were numerous slates missing off the roof, and two of the upstairs windows were cracked, the panes grimed with filth, like bloated dead eyes watching his every movement. Stone-built, the walls were smooth where wind and rain had constantly driven at them, eroding the mortar; some pointing was a matter of urgency.

There was no garden; the grass ran right up to the walls, an overgrown untrodden path leading to the paint-peeled door. He hesitated. Again his instincts told him to turn back, and yet the building was structurally sound. The Guilden had been as bad when he and Gillian had moved in. A kind of cycle starting all over again. Except that this time there was nobody to encourage him, to share the loneliness of a desolate home, to murmur words of comfort in those times when everything seemed

too much for him.

~~The key turned easily in the lock but the door had warped and he had to use his shoulder to force it open, grating it on the uneven floor. The dim and dusty interior smelled damp and stale. And evil.~~ was his imagination, he told himself. That boatman had got under his skin, damn the fellow.

Frank wished that he had brought a torch when he tried the light switch and nothing happened. Of course it wouldn't work – the generator was probably switched off or, more likely, in need of repair. He started when he saw that there was still furniture in here, a scrubbed table thick with dust, some straight-backed chairs. There were plates on the draining board. He shivered uncontrollably. It was just as if the previous occupants had up and left at a moment's notice. Fleeing from some unseen terror. No, they were dead, drowned in the sea, their corpses bashed to an unrecognizable pulp on the rocks. It was an unnerving thought. Perhaps they *had* fled from the house, run heedlessly in blind terror and thrown themselves into the sea rather than stay here and face ... *For Christ's sake, pull yourself together, man!*

There was a telephone on the sideboard, a squat monster that watched him with its dial, a single malevolent eye. He stepped back, feeling that it might suddenly ring, scream at him, demand that he pick up the receiver. *And listen to the crackling voices of the dead.*

He walked forward quickly, making for the stairs. Bare boards that creaked beneath his weight resisting the urge to look behind him. The small landing had three doors leading off. He opened the nearest one, and looked into the bedroom. Again, it was furnished: a double bed with the sheets thrown back, the material frayed and rotten, hanging in strips. As though the Greenwoods had fled from the bed in the dead of night, straight down the stairs and out into the stormy night. Now he knew that was sheer bloody nonsense. He was sweating, the perspiration cold and clammy on his forehead. OK, they had died, drowned – an accident. Which was why they hadn't come home to wash the dishes and make the bed. That was logical. Probably, like himself, they had no next of kin so nobody had bothered coming to Ulver to clear the house. Or if they did have relatives, then they weren't interested in anything but selling the place.

The adjoining room was empty, the third one piled with junk – a kind of store room – and he wasn't going in there in the failing light to examine the contents. He forced himself not to hurry as he went back down the stairs. It was best to view property on a bad day, he'd read somewhere once because then you saw it at its worst. It would look a damned sight better when the sun shone, he decided. This house could be cosy if it was done up, cleaned out, with a fresh coat of paint, some slates put back on the roof and the windows mended. It would make all the difference. Not that he was going to buy it, anyway. He had just come to look. Some folks looked at dozens of houses before they bought one; others made a hobby of viewing property just to be nosey.

Outside again it seemed lighter; the mist had rolled back and he could see across the island and just make out the jetty where the ferry was moored. Thank God they hadn't gone without him.

There were some outbuildings forming a square at the rear of the house, a sheltered yard in which to house the cattle in winter. Derelict, with stable doors hanging crazily, it was a miracle that they had not all blown off over the years. The straw litter was rotted and black, the thick mud never got a chance to dry out. Farming at its toughest, he realized, clawing out a living against all odds, land on which nothing but grass and gorse grew, at the mercy of the gales and lashing rain. Whatever chores had to be done, he would have to do himself – there was no friendly neighbour to lend a hand. Not Gillian to have his food prepared at the end of the day; he would come in soaked and frozen and have to set about making a meal. Nobody to share his bed. Just work and sleep – scant reward for his efforts – and the odds were that he would fail.

Frank began the walk back to the boat, pausing just once to look back at the deserted farmhouse with its dull eyes, the door a mouth that seemed to smile. And in that instant it was no longer sinister

pathetic, perhaps, pleading for company, calling him back.

~~He had seen it on a bad day, at its worst. There had been an accident forty years ago, a double drowning. There were accidents every day, people killed. But life still went on; he couldn't hide from it no matter how hard he tried. Even here. A place of respite, to sort his life out, because back at Guilden Farm there were too many memories. He turned and walked away.~~

'Ye only just made it,' the boatman grunted as Frank clambered aboard. 'Well, have ye seen aye ye want to see?'

'I've seen,' Frank replied. 'A lot of work to be done but it could be made quite comfortable.'

'No Ulver' – almost a snarl from those curled lips – 'naebody could be comfortable there. They never sell it, ye take it frae me. No in a hundred years. Because Ulver doesna want tae be sold. *The dead want tae keep it for themselves.*'

'Rubbish!' Frank retorted. 'Two people got drowned forty years ago, and because of that nobod will buy the place? There's people dying in houses all over the world but others still move in.'

'Ye do as ye please.' The boatman shrugged and opened the cabin door to go outside, impatient with the stubbornness of his passenger. 'But I'll tell ye this, and maybe I shouldna ...' He hesitated and dropped his gaze. '*What happened on the island goes back a lot longer than that!*'

And then the oilskin-clad ferryman was gone out into the flying spray as though he regretted his words.

Marie lay in the darkness of her bedchamber, tense and listening, anticipating footfalls, hoping to hear the light, hurried steps of her daughters, fearing that instead her ears would pick up the heavier tread of her husband. But nobody had been to see her for three days, with the exception of the young man who brought her broth and fresh bed linen.

Macaulay, it seemed, had lost interest in her. Having prescribed a potion that would supposedly heal her sore womb, he had not been for five days now. Neither had her husband. Perhaps, between them, they hoped that she would die and thus be punished for failing to spawn a son and heir to the Ulver estates. Oh, God, how she hated the Laird, and sometimes she prayed that the English would rout the Scots at Culloden; if the Ulver lands were taken, then so be it, for they were of no use to her honor to her daughters. They were virtually prisoners here.

Today she had walked for the first time, unsteady steps the length of the landing and back, almost fainting once – but she had made it. Tomorrow, God willing that she still lived, she would try it again and perhaps in a few days she would be fit to ride a horse. A nocturnal dash for freedom, clutching the reins and glancing behind all the time, anticipating pursuit. If the Laird's men caught up with her then she would take her own life, plunge a dirk into her bosom and mock them as she lay bleeding to death in the heather. Never would she return to Ulver Castle, for it was a place of torture and death.

She would never forget that night her husband's gillies had caught MacPherson, the poacher, in the glen up on Kilkirrin. A huge bearded man who killed the deer so that he might live, he took only what he needed for meat. A trap had been set and this giant will-o'-the-wisp had walked into it staggering home with a gralloched stag across his mighty shoulders. It had taken four of them to overpower him and, still defiant, he had been brought to the castle.

The Sheriff had not been summoned, for the Laird was a law unto himself from the west coast to his furthest inland boundaries. Shouting defiance, the poacher was dragged down to the dungeons, stripped naked and hung by manacled wrists, his bare feet six inches from the floor. That was where the Laird himself had taken over, forced his men to watch, demanded that they applaud and guffawed coarsely as the punishment began. A whip with a barbed lash was wielded with unerring cruelty, lacerating the flesh so that it hung in bloody ribbons from the writhing body.

The victim swung to and fro, turning one way then the other under the onslaught, his defiance changing to roars of pain which grew weaker and weaker. The stud who took the Laird's peasant wenches just as he stole his deer was reduced to a pathetic wretch who would never again be able to share the bed of a village girl nor cut a stag down in full flight with his deadly crossbow. Blinded and dying, the highland eunuch was cast out into the storm-lashed night to crawl back to his lair. The next morning the groom, exercising the horses, found his mangled body barely a hundred yards from the castle.

Marie knew it was true. She had writhed her revulsion in a faked orgasm as the Laird lusted for her flesh that same night; those screams from the dungeons had echoed in her mind for weeks afterwards. And she knew only too well that her husband would mete out the same fate to his wife and daughters if the mood took him.

She still smelled death in the bedroom, an occasional whiff of an infantile corpse wafting into her nostrils. They had removed the dead baby from the room the following day – a servant had been sent to collect the bloody sack with its grisly contents. There would have been no funeral, she knew; in all probability it had been thrown to the fierce deerhounds in their kennel, the Laird perhaps deriving some amusement from watching the beasts fight over the body. Or else it had been cast out for the crows and predatory beasts of the wild to feast on. Ignominy because it was female.

She started, feeling the vibrations of approaching footfalls seconds before she heard them. She relief — it was the girls, dainty and stealthy, sneaking upstairs to visit their disgraced mother, whose sin was giving birth to a child of the wrong sex.

They entered, clustering around Marie, the flickering flame from their candle revealing the terror in their expressions.

‘Mother, we could not come before,’ the tall girl whispered. ‘The servants are watching our every move, our father’s spies. Only Angus is loyal to us. He has the best five mounts in his stable ready and they can be saddled at a moment’s notice. How long, Mother, oh, how long?’

‘A day or two, no longer,’ Marie smiled wanly. ‘I have walked today for the first time and I am getting stronger by the hour.’

‘We hear that a terrible battle rages at Culloden Moor.’ Mary lowered her voice still further. ‘It seems that the Prince’s army will be heavily defeated. The heather is stained with the blood of the faithful.’

‘We must still flee south.’ Mary shifted her position, trying not to wince with pain. ‘I have more faith in the mercy of the English than putting our lives in the hands of the devil who is my husband and your father. Try to be patient, keep in touch with Angus, and possibly the night after tomorrow may be well enough to ride with you. Do not risk coming here again. I will meet you at the stables at midnight and ...’

Her voice trailed off and there was a gasp of fear from the girls as they heard the thud of heavy footsteps on the landing outside, the resounding vibrating tread of a fairy tale giant enraged.

‘Oh, ’tis *father!*’ Elizabeth clutched at Mary’s arm, almost causing her to drop the candle. The flame flickered, and nearly went out, casting ghastly, frightening shadows on the wall by the door.

The door was flung open, the draught extinguishing the candle and giving off a cloud of acrid tallow smoke, the glare of a lantern held aloft dazzling those in the bedroom. They gave strangled cries of fear as they recognized the towering shape of the Laird, an ogre with features twisted into a malevolent waxed mask, his scarlet tunic soiled as though he had just returned from a hunting trip.

‘So’ — his thin lips curled in a leer — ‘a brood of wenches clustered in a brothel bedroom. Whores, the scum of the land, the female spawn of Ulver plotting their treachery, no doubt.’

‘Oh, no, my lord.’ Marie forced herself to speak calmly. ‘My daughters were merely enquiring after my health, visiting their sick mother.’

‘Lies, but it matters not.’ He seemed to relax, and they noted in the faint candlelight how white and strained his features were, the face of a man badly shaken. ‘Worse things have happened than the birth of a girl child. Prince Charlie’s army has been routed at Culloden, our kinsmen slaughtered by their hundreds, and no news yet of the fate of the Prince himself. The English will be here ere the week is out.’

Silence. The Laird glanced from his wife to each of his daughters in turn, a piercing stare, a mirthless smile on his cruel lips, contempt in his eyes, deliberately keeping them waiting. At last he said, ‘The English are a lusty race, particularly their soldiers. They will strip each one of you, rape you as they pass you amongst themselves, and when they have no further use for your spent bodies they will disembowel you and leave you for the wolves.’

Edith began to cry and buried her face in Mary’s gown. ‘Be quiet, child!’ Ulver snapped. ‘We have no time for blubbing.’

Marie’s expression was one of anger and indignation, her slender fingers clutching the side of the bedsheet, screwing it into a ball. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. The small children had fallen silent but was still shaking with terror. Fixing frightened eyes on the tall scarlet-clad figure they were breathless as they awaited his next words. Whatever these might be, they would bode ill for the womenfolk of Ulver Castle.



‘I am going to send you to a place of safety whilst there is still time.’ Ulver’s tone had changed but the glare of the lantern in his hand reflected the evil in his close-set eyes.

Marie’s heart seemed to miss a beat. Icy fingers clutched at her stomach, knotted it into a hard ball and set her tender womb aching again. The horses were ready, they should have ridden last night she realized. She could have been tied to the saddle in case she fainted. Even if she had died, at least her daughters would have stood a chance of escaping. Her lips quivered as she asked, ‘Where?’

‘There is only one place.’ His thick eyebrows were hooded, as though he had already sensed what they planned to do and was delighting in thwarting their escape plan. ‘The glens and mountains will be crawling with the red-coated English soldiers; they will scour the whole of Scotland, pillaging, looting and burning, raping as they go. The mainland will be safe for nobody, yet I think they will not put to sea. Not yet, anyway. I am going to send you to Ulver island!’

‘No!’ Marie shrieked involuntarily.

‘No?’ Those thick eyebrows were raised in mock surprise. ‘And why not, pray tell me, woman?’

‘It is a terrible place,’ Marie blurted out. ‘A barren island at the mercy of the elements, unfit for human habitation, frequented only by the wild geese and sea birds. We should perish there as surely as if we fell into the hands of the English.’

‘Nonsense.’ His tone was honeyed, sweet with pretended kindness, only his eyes belying his words. ‘Wild, perhaps, but a coastal paradise. The bothy there is snug and warm. There is ample driftwood on the beaches to provide you with firewood for the long winter months.’

‘We shall starve.’

‘No, I will see to it that ample food is ferried across to you regularly by Zoke, the boatman.’

‘Zoke! No, my lord, not Zoke, I beg of you!’

‘And why not, woman?’

‘He is ... *evil!*’

Ulver threw back his head and roared with exaggerated mirth, coarse laughter that made the girls huddle together, cringing. Marie pulled up the bedsheet until the lower half of her face was hidden from view. ‘Zoke, the boatman. Zoke, the wizard of Ulver, the self-styled magician whom the peasants fear. A faithful servant, one of the few I can trust. We cannot let wild accusations stand in our way when your lives are at stake. Enough of this stupidity. Get yourself clothed at once, and all of you be downstairs within the hour. I have instructed Zoke to make ready his boat. The sea is wild but he is the finest boatman in the land. We have no time to linger. Leave your bed, wretch, and let me see some gratitude for this – even though you have denied me a son and heir.’ He turned, strode out through the door, leaving them in darkness.

The trembling girls listened to his receding footsteps. Aware that Edith was crying again, they moaned their terror aloud, incapable of coherent speech. There was a rustling of linen as Marie strove to leave her bed, wheezing as though a sudden fever had taken her.

‘Mother.’ Mary spoke at last. ‘Angus can have the horses saddled in minutes. There is still time if we go now.’

‘No.’ Her mother sounded tired and there was no mistaking the hopelessness in her voice. ‘He knows, I am sure of that. In all probability he has servants mounted in readiness to ride after us and pull us down, perhaps even set the deerhounds on our trail. We have no choice, we must go whither we are commanded or else be put to death here in the castle.’

‘Zoke will –’

‘Hold your tongue!’ Marie spoke sharply, afraid they would terrify Edith further. The child was already beside herself with fear. ‘Dress warmly, and let us take your father at his word for we can do nothing else. Surely he can have no other motive for sending us to the island other than to try to save us from the English. If he wished to harm us, then he could do it here with less trouble to himself.’

Now, couldn't he?'

~~The other four nodded in the dark. Their mother's words made sense. Perhaps on this occasion the Laird had only their welfare at heart and wished to save them from the savagery of the English soldiers.~~

Attempting to hide her pain and fear from her daughters, Marie began to dress. Yet she knew in her heart that her husband was bent upon revenge; upon herself for having given birth to five female children; upon her children for daring to be born thus, a personal insult to the lusty man who had fathered them. She sensed foreboding, all the more so because Zoke, the malformed boatman and sorcerer, Ulver, had been assigned to ferry them across to that dreaded island which the mainland peasants whispered was the dwelling place of Satan himself.

The sea was calm, with just a steady swell, a stretch of azure water dotted white where gulls floated on the surface rippling where a hunting seal searched for shoals of herrings. Without the cooling sea breeze it would have been unbearably hot on the small boat, yet the old boatman still wore his frayed, off-white rolled-neck sweater, a stubby blackened pipe clenched firmly between toothless gums which had hardened over the years.

He stared aggressively at the cloudless sky, seemed to bear it some secret grudge, perhaps because there had been no rain for three weeks and he yearned for the lashing gales and flying spunk of winter. Or maybe it was because they had a passenger aboard today, a "foreigner" from south of the border whose ways were not his ways and who did not understand the ocean with its varying moods.

The boatman removed his pipe, spat overboard and replaced it in his mouth. It was unlit, the tobacco a nicotine-soaked dottle from a previous smoke which would gurgle and defy the attempts to light a match to light it. But he made no attempt to smoke, merely chewed on the stem with a ferocity which, had he still had his teeth, would surely have bitten through it.

He glanced disapprovingly towards the small cabin, which was stacked with wooden crates and some cardboard cartons tied with plastic string. Last week they had had to hire two extra men to help with the consignment of tea chests, even had to unload them and wheel them one at a time down the narrow path that led from the jetty to the Ulver farmhouse. He had argued with the harbour master over it but it made no difference; the ferry boat delivered anything destined for the islands on this stretch of coastline, and if he wanted to keep his job then he had to do it. Orders were orders; he had no say in the matter.

The boatman glanced round again, eyeing his passenger furtively. It was the same man who had gone to the island last April, or was it May? A rough day, they wouldn't have put to sea at all if the harbour master hadn't insisted. And they'd had to go right across to Ulver just because some bloody fool wanted to look at the place. The boatman had tried to dissuade the visitor but it had not worked. He had hinted at things that no man really understood, but the Sassenach had still come back and apparently bought the island. That was bad, not just for him but for everybody else as well because Ulver Island was best left undisturbed. Nobody had lived there for forty years, and even then the couple had not lasted long, their bodies found washed up on the shore, battered and unrecognizable, as if the devil himself had picked them up and pulped them on the rocks, then thrown them down as a warning to everybody else. Aye, it had been a warning all right and now it was going unheeded again. It was like a cycle that spanned centuries, the stories handed down from father to son. Folk kept away from the island, but every so often a stranger showed up, went to live there and ... it was always the same. They'd find this fellow dead on the shore one day. Or else they wouldn't find him at all, he would just go missing.

The boatman did not want anybody living on Ulver, naturally, because that meant he would have to go there twice a week with mail and supplies. And, apart from the legend, it was a long way out in stormy weather. Ulver was a bad place, even the deep-sea fishermen kept well clear of it, turned their heads in the other direction if it hove up on the skyline because it was best not looked at. And now this centuries-old cycle was beginning again.

Frank Ingram leaned over the stern, watching the foaming water in their wake, aware only of Jake, the black and white collie, sitting by him, leaning upon him with his full weight as he always did. Jake was adaptable, he didn't mind where he went as long as his master was with him.

The sunlight sparkled on the water and dazzled him so that when he looked up he had floated before his eyes. The west coast in one of its quiet moods, unrecognizable from that day last May when

they had had to shelter from the elements in the cabin. He sensed it was moody, teasing him. ~~tomorrow could be as wild as today was calm.~~

Frank felt the boatman's eyes on him, boring into him with a resentment that bordered on malice. Because he was a stranger. There was no welcome, even the officious ex-naval harbour master had only assisted because it was his job and he was accustomed to obeying orders. If you want to live on Ulver, sir, that's up to you, he had seemed to say. I'm here to help you in an official capacity and I do no more than I'm obliged to. Here's a ferry boat timetable, dependent on weather conditions, of course. We'll transport your belongings because we're paid to do so, we wouldn't otherwise. Cold and polite, a "sir" every time he spoke.

Frank turned and faced the other way, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun. The boatman had his back towards him but Frank had the feeling that he had only just turned away. Way out on the horizon the farmer could just make out an uneven shape that protruded slightly above the sealine, too big for a boat, long and flat. The eastern tip of Ulver Island!

A tiny shiver trickled part of the way up his spine, an icy tremor which reminded him of that day three months ago. Ulver; it was more than just a remote west coast island to him now, it was his home. Only now did realization set in, a kind of shock that made him breathe unevenly as though with a minor asthma attack. Realization that Guilden Farm was gone for ever, along with Gillian. He had lost his wife and his home; it was like waking from a bad dream and discovering that it had all really happened.

A moment or two of regret. Jake leaned harder on his leg as though he understood and wanted to say, We shouldn't have done it, master. We should have waited a year, seen how we felt then. But it's too late now.

'We've burned our boats, I'm afraid, Jake.' Frank reached down and fondled the dog's ear. 'We've no choice now, because even if we change our minds there's nobody else going to buy this island off us if they haven't wanted it in forty years.'

The collie's tail thumped slowly on the deck as though in answer.

They could see the island plainly now, like some huge sea beast floating on the surface, a jagged, ferocious head at one end, tapering down to an elongated scaly tail at the other, partly submerged so that the observer was not quite sure of its size. Head erect, jagged jaws agape in a warning snarl. *Keep away, there's death on Ulver; always has been and always will be.*

'We're letting our imaginations run away with us, boy.' Frank patted Jake's head. The dog's tail wagged again but still only slowly; without enthusiasm, implying, I'll go wherever you go, master. Even if Ulver is a bad place.

'We'll be landing in ten minutes.' The boatman spoke gruffly without removing his pipe from his mouth, saliva dribbling from a corner of his lips and trickling slowly down on to the stubbled, jutting jaw. 'Get everything ashore as quick as you can, we haven't time to hang about.' Nobody hangs about on Ulver, he thought, if they've got any sense.

The weather remained fine up until October. Frank worked tirelessly right from the day he arrived on the island, his first task being to make the house as habitable as possible, using most of the existing furniture, which was perforated with woodworm, as fuel for the Rayburn; replacing the missing slats on the roof; and repairing the worst of the structural damage; he even managed to point up some of the stonework on the west-facing gable end.

Jake slept on a mat in the kitchen, mystified, but not ungrateful, for the first few nights at being allowed to remain indoors. At Guilden he had always been housed in the outbuildings, but now Frank valued the collie's company.

During the second week in September the livestock boat arrived to deliver Frank's sheep, two

hundred Cluns transported from Shropshire. It was becoming fashionable to run Cluns in Scotland and the isles; if you were a Shropshire farmer you invariably bred Suffolks – which didn't make sense except to a farmer.

The air was colder now; autumn had come early to the western isles. Work was the best therapy for a bereavement, Frank was finding out. In many ways it had been a good thing to move here because it was something new, a challenge. Already his thoughts were turning to spring and the lambing season.

Just one stumbling block lay in his path, and suddenly he could not get it off his mind. Next week was the anniversary of Gillian's death; Tuesday was going to be hard; he accepted that and was preparing himself mentally for it. A hurdle which he had to jump; then he could carry on because he would no longer be looking back each day and trying to remember what he and Gillian had been doing exactly a year ago. After Tuesday a new cycle would begin for him.

A dreaded countdown. On Sunday night Frank did not go upstairs to bed, a combination of being unable to face the loneliness of sleeping alone and a lack of willpower to make the effort. Instead he dozed in the chair by the Rayburn, fell into a troubled doze and slept away the night hours. Next morning he awoke stiff and depressed, with a slight headache, the kind which intensifies throughout the day. He did not bother with breakfast, merely fed Jake and went outside to see to the stock. A grey, cloudy day greeted him, an intermission in the long dry spell, with a mist rolling in from the sea. It wouldn't rain, it would just be dull and depressing all day. And with each passing hour his own depression mounted.

He lacked energy and did only the basic chores, but delayed going back inside the house until the darkness fell. Hunger did not take its usual form; he barely noticed the nausea, and even when the receding daylight drove him indoors he made a corned beef sandwich without enthusiasm, giving most of it to Jake, who had taken to pestering him for tit bits.

He stoked the Rayburn, sat in front of it and stared at its shabbiness without really seeing it; he knew he would sleep here again tonight in spite of the discomfort, and found himself dreading the morning. Even the sheepdog seemed to sense the coming day and lay with his head between his paws, eyes wide and fixed knowingly on his master's slumped form.

Frank was ploughing, back on the top Guilden field, which sloped sharply down to the narrow lane. Jake rode in the cab and was quite content to remain there all day; it was work, even if there were no sheep to round up.

As Frank turned to negotiate a downward furrow he saw the Metro glinting in the sunlight far below – Gillian on her way to fetch the coffee. She would be gone a couple of hours; it was an outing on the errand a slender excuse to go into town. A chill prickled his back, an urge to switch the headlights on and yell to her not to go. Futile, because his words would be drowned by the cab radio – and even if they weren't she wouldn't hear him anyway. Shrugging off his misgivings, he tried to concentrate on the ploughing. A boring job; you just drove up and down until you had finished the field, then moved on to the next one. Mentally rather than physically exhausting – farming was becoming too mechanized these days.

He was almost halfway through the field, skirting the boggy patch in the middle which had defied all his efforts to drain it, when a movement down below caught his eye. A car had turned into the gateway, a white Escort with a blue beacon light on its roof, red lettering on its doors: POLICE. He caught his breath, and saw the blue uniformed figure standing beside it, watching him as though unwilling to walk on the soft soil in low shoes. PC Price – it was too far to recognize the officer, but it couldn't be anybody else up on the Guilden. Frank's mouth went dry. He lifted the plough and began to take a diagonal course down towards the road. He flicked the radio off, it was a distraction. What did the constable want? Any one of a dozen things – 'You haven't renewed your shotgun certificate

Frank.’ But he had sent it off a fortnight ago. ‘There’s some sheep-stealing going on. Thought I better let you know, Frank.’

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Nearer and nearer; near enough now to see the gravity of the policeman’s expression. It wasn’t good news. *Oh, God, I know what you’re going to say!* Gripping the steering wheel, trying to switch the radio on to drown out the terrible words so that they might never reach him and then it wouldn’t have happened. The radio had gone dead. You’ll have to stop or else you’ll run Price over, he told himself. Braking, keeping the engine ticking over, revving it loudly, he fumbled for the door handle but not to open it – hold it tight, keep it closed, the cab’s soundproof. *I don’t want to hear!*

‘You have to hear me, Frank.’ The officer seemed taller than before, his usually sympathetic expression now one of gloating, standing on his toes so that his face was pressed up against the glass window, squashing his features into those of a living evil gargoyle. Lips moved, words penetrating the thick pane. Frank recoiled and pulled on his ear muffs, but even they could not shut out the words that hammered in his brain.

*‘Gillian’s dead, Frank. Nothing much left of her but you’ll have to come to the morgue with me to identify the corpse.’*

‘Shut up. You’re lying. Get off my land!’

The handle clicked and was torn from Frank’s grasp, and the door opened. Strong hands reached inside for him, closed over his wrists and began to drag him from the cab. *Get him, Jake, for Christ sake get the lying bugger!* But Jake wasn’t around anymore.

*‘Come and look at your wife’s body, Frank. See what they’ve done to her. It isn’t pretty, you might not even recognize her. But I promise you, it’s Gillian.’*

Falling, everything a blur, the policeman’s mocking features seeming to vibrate so that he couldn’t even be sure that it was Price. No, it couldn’t be – Price wouldn’t do this to him. It was some kind of trick. Maybe, but Gillian’s dead all the same.

The sunlight was gone and it was growing dark. Walking behind the officer’s plodding silhouette he was forced to follow, as though some weird piper called with notes that were compelling. On, on into the deepening darkness – and somewhere Gillian would be lying, dead and mangled. Frank started to scream but no sound came. Everywhere there was a silence that it was impossible to break. The silence of the dead.

And that was when Frank Ingram woke up, shivering with cold and fear, the first faint light of dawn creeping in through the windows, the Rayburn long dead and Jake still lying watching him with apprehension in his wide brown eyes. Jake understood. You’ve had a bad dream, master, his expression said. It was inevitable.

‘More than a dream, Jake. I’m never going to go to sleep again in case I carry on where I left off. Oh, God, I saw her all right, a year ago *today*, on the slab in the mortuary, staring up at me even though they’d closed her eyes. She was all stitched, as if they’d had to put her together again, a quite rough job for my benefit. I couldn’t even cry, the grief just ate me up – and it isn’t over yet. This is *today*, and I’m just waiting for the policeman to come again.’

Frank’s head was thumping but he didn’t go looking for aspirin; no painkiller invented could have soothed his pounding temples. He just sat there watching the sky lighten through the window and trembled because it was Tuesday.

All the same, the sheep had to be looked at. He made a cup of strong tea, rejecting the idea of breakfast. Today he would fast again, in memory of Gillian. She suffered, and he had to, too.

The wind had freshened, the atmosphere was moist. This was more than just a break in the dry spell, he told himself, the weather was breaking. Autumn had arrived on the island and soon it would be winter. Suddenly the loneliness was intensified, and once again he was tempted by an easy way out. So easy. He only had to walk over to the headland, that place where the rocks were sheer and jagged

where the sea pounded them even in calm weather. He wouldn't even have to jump, just walk forward and stumble, fall headlong into the foaming cauldron below. It would be over in seconds, the white flecked waves dashing him to insensibility against the sharp edge of the cliff, sucking his unconscious body down. He shuddered. The thought was appealing.

Or if he didn't have the courage, then there was an even easier way. There was a full bottle of aspirin in the kitchen cupboard. He could swallow them with a stiff whisky to toast his exit from life. He paused in his step; two choices. Jake whined and rubbed up against his leg. He ruffled the dog's head. 'Don't worry, Jake, I'll telephone the mainland first and they'll come out and pick you up on the mail boat. Good sheepdogs are at a premium, you'll have a good home because you're one of the best. I've got to do it, running away here was no good because wherever I go I can't get away from it.'

The chill wind buffeted him, and in that instant he heard Gillian's voice, so clear, so decisive. Firm, but not angry, sympathetic but commanding. *Don't do it, Frank. Not for me, please. I won't let you.*

He whirled around as though expecting to find her standing there behind him, but there was only Jake, looking up at him. Pleading, Don't do it, master – you heard what she said.

He experienced an urge to cry but laughed instead, a mixture of grief and joy which he did not understand. A decision had been made, and he would abide by it. Gillian was out there somewhere, in a dimension which was beyond his comprehension, but she was there, all right. A place of timelessness where she would be waiting, still there when the day came – but she had told him to wait. And he would wait.

But it was still Tuesday and it was going to be hard. Very hard.

Night. Frank decided that he would go upstairs to bed. A conscious decision because Gillian had spoken to him and it would not be like being alone. She would be there in the darkness, unseen, intangible, but definitely there. A kind of union which he couldn't fathom, but in the depths of his grief it gave him a strange peace of mind. Jake thumped his tail on the floor in agreement. Perhaps dogs understood more than humans did.

Frank lay there in the darkness, listening to the shrieking of the wind, feeling it buffet the house as though angry with him because he had refused to yield his body to the elements. Their intended prey had been denied them and they were trying to get to him. He remembered how it had been on the night a year ago – it might have been the bedroom at Guilden Farm, the darkness and the same wind. Trying to cry, to release the pent-up grief, in the end he succeeded.

And now, as then, he fell asleep.

Somebody was screaming. Frank heard it in his sleep, and tossed restlessly. A woman ... no, women, piercing yells of abject terror rising to a crescendo, the wind howling as though trying to drown the cries. He woke in stages, the screams gradually dying away until, when finally his consciousness returned to him, the only sound was the howling of the gale outside. *And Jake whining downstairs in the kitchen.*

Frank switched on the light – at least the generator was still working. He pulled on his shirt and trousers, stumbled down the stairs and entered the kitchen.

Jake was by the door, scratching at it, hackles risen, wide-eyed. Ignoring his master, trying to get outside.

'What's the matter, Jake?' Subconsciously he noted the clock on the stone fireplace: 2.20 a.m. Thank God, Tuesday's over, he thought. It's Wednesday!

Jake glanced back, growled in his throat: *There's something out there, master. Or somebody.*

'Nonsense, Jake.' Frank tried to smooth the stiff hairs on the dog's neck but they refused to lie down. 'There's nobody else on the island except us. There aren't even any foxes, just a colony of rabbits. It was all a dream.'

Gillian again, screaming because she was trapped in the mangled Metro. No, that wasn't right, there were more than one of them. A dream, a nightmare, that was all it was.

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But Jake was insistent: *Out there, master!*

Frank's flesh was creeping again, it was becoming a habit. Reluctantly he reached down for his powerful battery lamp, then clicked the door latch. 'All right, we'll take a look. Just to satisfy both of us.'

The door flew inwards with the force of the wind and rain lashed Frank's face venomously. The torch beam was reflected on the sheeting droplets, a myriad of winking evil eyes roaring their wrath at him. *We want you, Frank Ingram, come out here.*

'Go see, then, Jake!' I'm a bloody coward, he thought. I'm not going out there on a night like this.

Jake whined and cringed, his tail snaking between his hind legs. He looked up at the farmer, and there was terror in those canine eyes.

'Well, we can't stand here all night with the bloody door open.' Frank forced it shut against the wind. He shot the bolt; not because I'm scared of what might be out there, he told himself, but I don't want the wind blowing it open.

The collie was back over by the Rayburn, lying down, curled up as though trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. He glanced at the door, growled softly in his throat, and then he was silent.

'Satisfied?' Frank tried to laugh but the sound was eerie.

He went back upstairs and lay on the bed fully-clothed, trying to listen against the noise of the wind and the rain pattering on the window. There was nothing, never had been. It was all just another dream, and there would be others. There were bound to be. But a year had passed and the new cycle was beginning. From now onwards everything would be better.



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