

# The Tall Stones

Moyra Caldecott





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# Introduction

This is a story set in Bronze Age Britain, c.1500 BC, when the great circles of standing stones that were such a feature of the Neolithic Age were already more than a thousand years old, yet still in use as sacred temples. Hundreds of stone circles have been found throughout Britain, the most famous today being Avebury and Stonehenge in Wiltshire. That such a homogeneous culture flourished in communities so widely separated by dense and dangerous forests, mountains, and wild and stormy seas, is extraordinary.

*The Tall Stones* begins in a stone circle in Scotland where a young girl, Kyra, finds that she has psychic powers usually only possessed by the Priesthood. She is thrust into a situation of great danger in order to attempt to rescue her community threatened by a dark and menacing evil. She is forced to 'spirit travel' before she is ready, to seek the help of the mighty Lords of the Sun.

# Chapter 1

## The Discovery

Karne and Kyra lay on their bellies in the long grass within sight of the tall stones of the Sacred Circle, but well hidden from view themselves. They were about to commit an act of blasphemy. They were about to spy upon a priest.

Behind them, some distance to the east, was the straight silver line of the sea, from which liquid strangeness the sun came each day to watch over them.

The Sun!

It was said that men of power had built a Temple to the Sun in the south that contained within its circumference the answer to all the secrets of the universe. It was to this Temple Karne longed to go; it was these secrets he longed to learn.

But first there were matters in his own village that needed explanation.

\* \* \* \*

The priest of their community knew many things. He stood alone within the circle of stones and learnt answers to questions that most ordinary people never dared to ask. Karne dared to ask, but Karne was a boy among other boys supposed to work the fields and not question the ancient mysteries. He did not know why he felt compelled to question. The other villagers seemed content enough to follow the daily routine and accept whatever the priest told them, but Karne always found himself discontented, wanting to know more.

The rituals satisfied the others. They chanted the words, beat the drums, lit the fires, did everything the priest commanded and found that that was enough for them. But to Karne there was an invisible part to the ritual which he knew was the most important part of all, understood only by the priest.

Why?

Why were these things kept from him? His mind felt capable of grasping much more than he was given.

‘These things are no concern of ordinary people,’ his father told him. ‘Maal is special. He was chosen in the ancient days and born to bear the burden of knowledge for our people. It is not an easy way. He has nothing of the love and companionship we ordinary people have among ourselves. He lives alone and carries all our lives upon his back. See sometimes how he bends with the weight of it all.’

Karne thought about the priest. He was old, bent and shrivelled like a withered fruit. Surely Death itself walked not far behind his back. But – and now another

picture of the priest came to the boy's mind – on holy days when he walked the processional way towards the standing stones upon the hill his back straightened and he carried himself tall and steady, like a young man. He entered the Sacred Circle and he was transformed. Karne had seen him, his eyes burning with a sudden fire as though he saw things they could not see that made him young again.

Karne was silent, thinking on these matters, but on another day Karne asked his father, 'What if Maal dies? There is no one in our village or in the land as far as any of us has ever travelled who is trained to be a priest. What will become of us without a holy man who knows the mysteries?'

'These matters are not for us to think about,' his father replied. 'It will be taken care of!'

And he would say no more.

'It will be taken care of!'

How that sentence irritated Karne.

How?

How would it be taken care of?

By whom?

When?

In what manner?

Karne felt his head would burst if he did not get some answers.

Maal lived alone and, as he aged, hardly ever spoke except on holy days. When it was the turn of Karne's family to provide food for the priest, Karne volunteered to take it to him, hoping to have an opportunity of

conversation. But the old man was not at home and Karne was forced to leave the food and go back to his chores before Maal returned.

But one day when Karne had forced himself between the adults crowding beside the processional way to see Maal pass during one of the rituals, he fancied he caught Maal's eye looking into his. He had a strange feeling that the eyes of the priest could see right into his head, see what he was thinking. He fancied the priest's lips moved slightly in a smile, but it was all so fleeting and so quickly past that Karne could not be sure he had not imagined it. All he knew was that he was trembling and his head felt as though it were buzzing.

It was just after this that he first noticed there was something unusual about his sister Kyra. Up to that time he had been aware of her as one of his family, two years younger than himself, female and therefore of not much interest to him. His brothers were more fun to be with, companions on hunting expeditions, helping him by taking his place when he wanted to escape some planting or some ploughing, coming with him when he explored beyond the village to the far hills or the forests, even helping him with the building of a boat of wood and hide which he was planning to take down to the sea one day in an attempt to find the fabled Temple of the Sun. He did not believe it was as impossible as the Elders said it was, and he had managed to persuade at least two of his younger brothers to be companions in the adventure.

It was on one of the days when he was working on the boat by himself that the thing happened with Kyra. She came looking for him with some bread she had baked and, while he finished what he was doing, she sat on a log and watched him, breaking off pieces of the bread bit by bit and popping them into her own mouth.

He had told everyone he was making the boat to go fishing. Only Ji and Okan knew what it was really for and he had forced them to draw blood and swear they would tell no one. He did not want his handiwork broken up by some irate Elder on the grounds that it was against the will of the Holy Ones that he should go looking for the Temple.

Karne pulled one of the hide thongs tight with all his strength, binding it again and again round one of the ribs. He tried to hurry, smelling the delicious hot bread and feeling annoyed with Kyra for breaking off so many pieces.

‘The journey to the Temple of the Sun requires more than just a boat, you know,’ she said suddenly.

‘What do you mean?’

He finished the last knot hastily and shot out his hand for the last piece of bread before it vanished down his little sister’s throat.

‘It is a journey on many levels,’ she said calmly.

He stared at her astonished. Her face had a strange expression.

‘You know I am right,’ she continued patiently. ‘There is no need for you to pretend.’

He swallowed a lump of bread unchewed and it stuck in his throat. He choked and thought bitterly about his two younger brothers. But even as he thought up suitable punishments for their betrayal of his confidence, he knew there was something more to Kyra's knowledge than it was possible for the boys to have given her.

She was staring at him calmly and for a second he had the same peculiar feeling that he had had when he had met the eyes of the priest.

Kyra could see into his head!

She also knew things that he did not know.

He was horrified and dismissed the idea immediately.

'Go away!' He was angry with her. 'What do you think you are doing interrupting me like this? I am busy! And besides,' he added with extreme irritation, 'you have eaten all my bread!'

He picked up a stick and pretended he was going to throw it at her. She laughed and jumped lightly to the ground. As he watched her running and leaping across the field she looked just like an ordinary little girl again and he was sure he had imagined that she could see into his thoughts.

He returned to his work disturbed and disgruntled.

Somehow it no longer went so well. He lost confidence that the boat was ever going to be able to sail across the sea. The hides, however taut and oiled, would not withstand the buffeting of the really big waves. He had seen sea-going boats. In fact he had modelled this

one upon them, though his was smaller, and knew this one was not good enough.

Perhaps that is what Kyra had meant.

No, it was not what Kyra had meant.

'The journey to the Temple of the Sun requires more than just a boat,' she had said, and she had said it with authority as though she had secret knowledge.

'Nonsense,' he said loudly, packed up his belongings, pulled his boat under the awning of leaves and branches he had built for it and left, marching and striding back to his home as though he were being watched by someone he was trying to impress.

\* \* \* \*

Some days passed without much of note happening. It rained a great deal. He saw Kyra but she seemed such an unexceptionable little girl that he thought more and more he had been mistaken about her.

And then on the next ritual day something happened to renew his suspicion that his sister was not quite as she seemed.

The people gathered as usual along the processional way on the night of the full moon to watch the priest tread his slow measured way to the stone circle at the top of the hill. They bowed their heads as usual as he passed, whispering softly the names of the gods so that their voices sounded like wind through the leaves and the air vibrated gently to a kind of rhythm. This was not to be the spring ritual when they brought the branches of blossom, nor the winter ritual of fire, it was the moon

ritual when the priest stayed alone with the spirit of the full moon and listened to the messages of night. For the Rising the people stayed with him, the vibrations of their voices important for his work.

‘Why is it so important?’ Karne thought defiantly. ‘What are these sounds that they matter so much?’

He knew they were the names of gods, but there were many gods and these were only a few of their names.

‘What would happen if I whispered different names?’

‘Do not,’ Kyra whispered in answer to his thought. ‘It would be dangerous for him.’

He spun round and stared at the dark shape of her face. The moon had not yet risen and it was too dark to see clearly, but he had the feeling her eyes were upon him and that she could ‘see into his head.’ A chill ripple passed under his skin, but he said nothing. He made sure he whispered the correct words.

At moon rise the momentum of the vibrations changed and finally stopped. With the first glint of brilliant light the whispering became chanting which grew louder and louder, faster and faster, until the time when the enormous disc of blazing light was in full view, its lower rim resting on the horizon. At this point the priest raised his arms in a sudden splendid movement, and with that the immense vibrating sound of the chanting cut, stopped, utterly ceased. In dead silence the visible counterpart of the invisible moon spirit lifted

clear of the horizon and sailed majestically into the realm of the stars.

The villagers watched with an awe that never grew less no matter how often they took part in this ceremony.

After a timeless moment of watching, of worshipping, the priest moved again, his arms lowered to shoulder height, cutting the air sideways with a sharp movement. The villagers turned to go, leaving their priest to communicate with the spirits and the gods.

In the morning, when they gathered again at the coming of first light, Karne noticed that the priest, who normally walked lightly as though he felt no strain, stumbled slightly on the path, and as he did so looked up swiftly to see if anyone had noticed. No one except Karne and Kyra had, and the priest's eyes found them out immediately. His sharp eyes penetrated Karne's mind briefly and blazingly, daring him to repeat what he had seen, and then turned to Kyra's, where his gaze stayed, and Karne could sense a shaft of consciousness leap between them like lightning in a stormy sky.

But even as he registered it, it was over, and the old priest was gone, surrounded by the Elders.

This time Karne was determined to find out what was happening with Kyra.

'I did *not* imagine it,' he told himself and followed her closely. But she was walking with her mother, their arms linked, and there was no way he could talk to her alone.

It was not till late that afternoon that he managed to corner her.

‘I must talk to you,’ he said urgently, knowing that it was only a matter of moments before their baby sister would tire of playing in the mud puddle and demand Kyra’s attention again.

She knew at once what he meant and nodded.

‘Where?’ he asked tersely.

She thought about it seriously for a moment.

‘Near the boat?’

She knew this was a relatively secret place and a place he went to often to get away from people. Ji and Okan were far away this afternoon helping their father in the forest, so they would be no bother.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘When?’

She shrugged and looked at the baby covered in mud from head to foot. It grinned up at her with its little toothless gums black with the mud it had been stuffing into its mouth.

They could not help laughing.

‘You had better get it cleaned up,’ Karne said. ‘I will be at the boat. Come when you can.’

He was glad he did not have the task of cleaning the baby and he wondered how much mud it had swallowed and whether it would be sick as it had been the last time. Poor Kyra.

Poor Kyra?

The priest had looked at her in a way he had never seen him look at anyone else.

The priest had smiled at *her*.

Why?

He had looked at Kyra as though he knew her in some way.

Something was beginning to happen out of the ordinary, and Karne was finding it very intriguing and exciting.

He waited impatiently for Kyra to come to him. If she did not hurry they would have no time to talk, it would be time for the sun to set and the setting sun meant family prayers and then the evening meal. By rights he should be helping now with the animals, but with any luck the rest of the family would manage and he would get away with a mild reprimand from his father. For all his questioning he would not like to miss the evening prayers. The dark was not a thing to face unprepared.

Kyra came at last.

He pounced on her.

‘What is going on?’ he demanded.

She hesitated a moment.

‘I do not really know,’ she said slowly, her face thoughtful, ‘but it seems to me . . . sometimes . . . I know things . . . I mean I *feel* as though I know things . . . I cannot possibly know . . . like . . . like people’s thoughts . . . before they say something . . .’

‘I knew it,’ shouted Karne triumphantly. ‘You can see into my head!’

‘I cannot!’ Kyra answered indignantly and vehemently.

‘Well, sometimes you look as though you can!’

Kyra's expression was distraught.

'I do not mean to,' she said miserably. 'It just happens.'

Karne was very excited and was walking up and down restlessly.

'It is great! It is the most wonderful thing! Why on earth are you looking so miserable?' He was talking faster and faster as he walked about. 'There is no end to the things we can do with a talent like that . . .'

'We?'

Kyra looked astonished, but Karne took no notice of her.

'The priest Maal can do that. I know he can. He looked into my head in just the same way as you did the other day. We will be able to find out all kinds of things this way. We may even be able to find out what *he* is thinking . . .'

'Karne,' Kyra began to be really alarmed. 'What are you saying? You will be stricken by the gods for such blasphemy! A priest's thoughts are sacred. All his ways and his knowledge are secret. They *must* be secret . . .'

'Why must they be?' Karne challenged, his eyes blazing at the thought of all the power they could have if Kyra really could see into people's thoughts.

'It has always been so, since the ancient days!' she cried.

'Well, these are not the ancient days! And why do I feel in myself such urgency, such desperation to know the things it is forbidden to know if the time has not come to know them?'

Kyra looked at him with wide eyes. He seemed inspired. Possessed?

‘Karne,’ she whispered, afraid for him. ‘It *cannot* be! Calm yourself! Besides . . .’

She hesitated.

‘Besides what?’ He found himself shouting.

‘Besides . . . I do not have this great power you seem to think I have . . . only sometimes . . . occasionally I get glimpses . . . only bits and pieces . . . nothing one could rely on. And besides . . .’ she said again.

‘Besides what?’ He shouted again, his voice amazingly loud and unlike his own.

‘Besides . . . even if I had the powers you think I have I would not use them the way you want me to use them. Only the priest can know the High Secrets. It is not fit for us to know them.’

‘Why not fit?’ He challenged her angrily, but she held her ground bravely.

‘Well, not safe then.’

‘How not safe?’

‘We cannot know the whole, and to know only the parts can be misleading.’

He thought about this for a while, somewhat sullenly. He sat on the grass with his head in his hands, thinking deeply.

‘You see,’ she said at last in a very small voice, ‘I cannot see what you are thinking now. I can never *make* it happen. It just seems to happen . . . by itself . . . sometimes . . .’

He still said nothing.

She strained to catch his thoughts, 'to see into his head,' but she could not.

She felt miserable and wished that she had never told him. She wished that it had never happened to her in the first place. Before this day she had found it disturbing, but not frightening. Now she was wondering if it was an evil. She had never seen Karne in such a mood.

But his mood was changing even as she was thinking this.

'Kyra,' he said, raising his head from his hands and looking at her more calmly, but with something in his eyes that had not been there before. 'I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you.'

She noticed that there was a hint of respect in his voice, and affection.

She looked at him uncertainly.

'This matter is important. We must think about it. The gods must have given you this gift . . . surely to some purpose?'

She still looked doubtful and unhappy.

'Think?'

She shook her head sadly.

He could see there was no point in pushing her further at the moment. Her pace was not his pace. He would have to be patient with her, but he would not let the matter rest forever.

They walked home together, and yet not together, two very small separate figures in a huge landscape, the gigantic red sun god that ruled over their lives sliding

past them into the dark regions of the west, the tall stones on the hill growing taller as they grew darker and sharper in outline against the brilliant luminosity of the sky

Kyra shivered slightly as she looked at them. They had always seemed holy before, protective, the priest's concern and none of hers. But now it came in to her mind that somehow her destiny was crossing theirs and her life as a little girl minding babies and grinding meal for the family was going to change. She stopped walking and stared at them. They grew longer and longer, dark shapes reaching great distances into the universe, the light behind them growing in intensity of pale yellows and greens to an incredible white. It seemed to her that she was staring into the heart of Light and it was blinding her.

She dropped her face into her hands and squeezed her eyes shut to avoid the hurting of the light, but she could feel it still.

The light and the circle were both within her in some way, and yet, at the same time, outside her, encompassing everything that existed.

*She encompassed everything that existed?*

She was the circle encompassing everything that existed.

*Nothing existed that was not within herself.*

\* \* \* \*

Karne was shaking her.

‘Kyra! Kyra!’ he was calling, his face a study of anxiety. ‘What is the matter? Kyra!’

The vision disappeared and she was left a shaken and shuddering little girl in the growing dark, her brother’s rough hands upon her shoulders, his worried face, very much outside her own, staring at her in consternation.

Still shivering, she looked around her. The light was gone and the sky was dimming rapidly. The stones on the hill looked very ordinary and were almost fading from sight. A last straggling string of birds was trailing off to the forest in the south, some of them calling mournfully. Friendly smoke from home fires was rising beyond the barley field.

‘Oh Karne,’ she cried, tears streaming from her eyes, but laughing at the same time with the sheer pleasure of the ordinariness of everything. ‘That beautiful, beautiful smell of wood smoke!’

Karne dropped his hands from her shoulders and took her hand. They ran towards their home together, looking at nothing but the ground beneath their feet.

## Chapter 2

### The Mind of Maal

They did not refer to this again for some time, but both thought a great deal about it. They had touched on something they had not understood, about themselves and about the world they lived in. Although there was no outward sign in their daily lives that anything had changed, they both knew there was no going back to where they had been before.

\* \* \* \*

One day the Elders called a meeting of the community.

There was some murmuring and grumbling from many of the villagers. It was not convenient to leave the work they were doing at this point, but a command from the Elders could not be disobeyed.

As Karne hurried from the fields in answer to the call he found Kyra carrying their baby sister on her hip. He walked beside her.

‘Do you know why there is to be a meeting?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

At that moment they were joined by others asking the same question.

The village gatherings were always held beside an enormous flat stone that formed a kind of natural platform. It was heavily striated from north to south, scratched and gouged in the ancient days by some force the villagers did not dare to contemplate.

While the people were arriving the Elders walked with measured, dignified steps around the outside circumference of the Sacred Circle on the hill, and when everyone was present and the expectant chattering had died down, they took their places on the platform, each one standing in a position echoing the position of one of the major stones in the Sacred Circle. They formed a kind of living circle, their chief spokesman nearest to the people.

The ordinary members of the community never entered the Sacred Circle of standing stones. The seven Elders were permitted under special conditions at special times, but otherwise no one dared to go within range of its powerful influence except the priest who had been trained for many years to work safely with its secret energies.

There was something very awesome about the stones. They had been chosen in the ancient days in ways the villagers did not understand, for purposes they

did not understand. They were content to leave them well alone.

Karne was beside Kyra and they put the baby on the grass to play. He noticed that as Thorn, the chief Elder, began to speak, Kyra stiffened slightly and began concentrating on his words in a way that gave Karne the impression that she was hearing more than he was saying. He was so interested in her reactions he missed the whole first part of the message. When he became aware at last of what the man was saying it was something about change . . . and adjusting their lives . . .

His attention was riveted at once. Was something actually going to *change* in their settled ways at last?

‘What . . . what is going to change?’ he whispered urgently to Kyra.

She raised her hand to stop the interruption of her concentration and he fell silent immediately. This was not the gesture of his little sister, but of some stranger with authority.

‘. . . he has been chosen by the gods and will serve us with the dedication that the Lord Maal has shown throughout his time with us. Nothing will be disturbed. It is the natural time for change.’

For the first time Karne noticed that the priest was not present in his usual place.

Was he dead?

As the Elder stopped speaking, a kind of movement went through the crowd of listeners that Karne had seen in a barley field on a windy day. The hillside did not seem to be covered with individuals but with a kind of

composite being that reacted, sighed and moved as one. Only Karne, seeing it, felt himself separate and apart.

He turned to Kyra. She too stood alone.

‘Is the Lord Maal dead?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘No, but he is about to die,’ she said calmly.

‘Is he ill?’

Karne remembered seeing the old priest stumble.

She shook her head again, but said nothing. There was a line between her eyes and he could see that she was deep in thought. He tried to keep from asking her questions, but he found he could not hold the silence between them for more than a few moments.

‘Who will be the new priest?’

Kyra had picked the baby up and turned to go. She did not reply.

Karne followed her insisting on an answer.

‘A new priest is coming to take Maal’s place?’

‘That is what he said,’ she replied, but there was something in the flatness of her voice that made him know that there was more to the story.

‘What do you mean “said”?’ he said. ‘Do you think he will come?’

Kyra walked on thoughtfully for a while.

‘Kyra?’

‘I do not know,’ she said impatiently at last. ‘He said there would be a new priest coming from the Temple of the Sun, but . . . I do not know . . . I sensed something else . . . something wrong . . .’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I cannot be sure . . . but Thorn seemed not to be speaking the truth . . . and it is a strange thing . . .’ Here Kyra seemed to be staring at something Karne could not see. ‘I do not *see* a new priest coming to us . . .’

‘Perhaps Maal will not die?’

‘Maal will die . . .’

‘Perhaps he will die before the new priest has arrived and there will be a period when there is no priest.’

‘The gods would surely not allow that,’ Kyra said firmly, but she sounded more like her ordinary self when she said it.

Karne had taken to distinguishing two people in Kyra, the child sister and the stranger who could ‘see into heads’. The stranger had been there a moment before, but already the child was taking over. There was no point in questioning her any longer. He moved off and went back to his duties with much to think about.

\* \* \* \*

The priest in the community was the guardian of the Mysteries, the messenger of the gods. He communicated with a network of priests across the world and spirits across the universe, so that their community could develop in harmony and peace as part of a greater whole.

Maal had served them well for many years, attending to their sick, presiding at birth and death, guiding them on good and evil, on rain and drought. They were sorry his time had come to move on to other duties in the hierarchy of the spirit world, but they accepted it.

It was the way.

\* \* \* \*

While the rest of the village was anticipating the arrival of the new priest with pleasurable excitement, Karne was worried and intrigued by what his sister had experienced.

It was to find out what was behind that experience that he and his sister came to be lying on their bellies in the long grass within sight of the circle of Sacred Stones, unseen but seeing, as the priest Maal came alone and without the ceremonial crowds to commune with whoever he communed with, within the circle.

As they watched he seemed not to be aware of their presence. His face was thoughtful and withdrawn as he walked evenly and calmly between the entrance stones.

They had never been so near the sacred place before and Karne could hear his heart beating loudly. At first he thought it was the earth pounding with a kind of deep rhythm, but then he realized it was coming from inside himself. He wondered if Kyra's heart was doing the same, but she looked calm enough. Her head was raised slightly and her expression was one of concentration and intensity.

The priest walked to each stone in turn, touching it with his forehead and pausing as though he were sensing something from the stone through his forehead, and came to stand at last before the huge recumbent one in the southwest quadrant that was a different shape to the others and was flanked by the tallest pair of

standing stones. He stood for a long time in front of it, his head slightly bowed, thinking . . . or was it listening? Then he put his back to it, lay against it, with his arms spread out on either side, the tips of his long and sensitive fingers stretched towards the two uprights on either side. He tipped his head back to lie upon the stone with a sigh, and the two watchers noticed the sun was at its highest point of the day and blazed down upon his face.

They dared to creep a shade nearer the circle the better to observe his face and were startled to see a strange pallor upon it, the muscles relaxed in a way that made them think of dead people they had seen.

‘He is dead!’ Karne whispered in horror. ‘He has come here to die!’

But Kyra held up her hand and her inner senses were alert. She shook her head almost imperceptibly and with the gesture of her hand prevented Karne making any further movement or sound. Her face was strained and she was leaning forward as though she were trying to catch some minute breath of sound too small for normal ears to catch. He recognized the stranger in her and waited patiently, watching her more than the priest now, admiring the concentration of her attention, the stillness of her body. She scarcely seemed to be breathing.

As the time went on every muscle in his body ached and itched to move. He dared not and yet he could not stop himself. He sensed there was almost a thread as fine as a spider’s web from the girl to the priest and any

movement on his part would snap it. But he could bear it no longer. They seemed to have been there for hours and as far as he could see nothing was happening. He moved at last and as he had feared his movement cracked the girl's delicate and subtle concentration.

An expression of loss, followed by irritation and almost dislike, flitted across her face as she turned to him. She seemed at first bewildered as though she had forgotten where she was and looked as though she were about to say something. He seized her shoulder and pulled her lower in the grass, at the same time indicating with a jerk of his head the danger of their situation so close to the Sacred Circle, spying on the priest.

Her face registered recognition, quickly followed by panic. He flung his arm around her comfortingly and they lay flat in the grass. They could hear the priest moving in the circle now, but were too frightened to raise their heads. Karne could feel his sister's body trembling under his arm. He suddenly wished they were far away and had not done this blasphemous thing. It seemed to him the footsteps were coming nearer and nearer and he braced himself for some terrible blast of wrath.

But nothing happened.

Maal walked calmly out of the circle between the two entrance stones and steadily and quietly down the path as though he knew nothing of their presence.

'He knows,' whispered Kyra, tears streaming down her cheeks. 'He knows!' She was very much the little girl again.

‘Nonsense!’ he said, feeling bolder now that the priest had moved off. ‘He would have said something to us. Come on, let us leave this place!’

He was longing to ask her what had been happening when she had been concentrating so intensely. He was sure something had been going on that was beyond his senses, but the place had become oppressive for him now and he wanted to get as far away as he could from it.

She felt the same and before the priest was safely out of sight the two were scrambling down the hill and running and tripping and sliding down into the valley where Karne kept his boat.

Once there they flung themselves panting down on the grass and tried to collect their thoughts. After giving her what he considered enough time to recover, Karne asked her what had happened in the circle. She was a long time answering and then spoke slowly as though she were trying to find words for an experience that did not really have words to express it.

‘Strange,’ she said. ‘Very strange. He seemed to . . . I mean . . . he seemed to . . . go away . . .’

Karne was staring at her intently, anxious not to miss a word.

‘What do you mean? As though he were dead?’

‘No. Not like that. As though he had gone away . . . somewhere else. At first when I was trying to reach his thoughts I could not get anything . . . but it was different to the other times when I try to see people’s thoughts and I cannot. Those times I cannot because there are too

many thoughts crowding . . . making too much “noise” somehow . . . This time there was nothing there . . . a sort of absolute blank . . . a sort of silence . . . as though there were no thoughts to see.’

‘He looked dead.’

‘At first I thought he was dead . . . as you did . . . but I knew he was not. I could not make out what was happening . . . and then it seemed to me I was inside his head looking out.’

Karne sat bolt upright at this.

‘What did you see?’

She was silent, struggling to find the right words.

‘I did not see what I expected to see,’ she began slowly.

‘What did you expect to see, for the gods’ sake!’ cried Karne impatiently. She was so slow!

‘The Sacred Circle, the sun, the hills and fields all around us here . . .’ She swept her arms in an arc to indicate everywhere in every direction they could see.

‘What did you see then? Darkness?’ Karne prompted.

‘Sort of. At first.’

‘And then?’

‘And then . . . I saw other people . . . very dimly . . . I could not make out their faces . . . standing round him in a circle all touching hands . . . in a circle . . .’

‘And?’

‘And beyond them, standing stones . . .’

‘Ours?’

‘No. Much bigger . . . different ones . . . the circle seemed to be enormous . . . and beyond the stones there

seemed to be a kind of hill . . . I suppose a bank that went right round behind the stones . . . you could not see over it . . . there was no landscape beyond . . .’ Her voice trailed away.

‘What else?’ he cried impatiently.

‘I am sorry,’ she said miserably, putting her head in her hands, ‘I am trying . . . but it was all so . . . so . . . strange . . . and already I cannot believe I really saw it . . .’

‘You did. You did see it! Try and remember.’

She shook her head.

‘That was all.’

‘Were they saying anything . . . the other people?’

‘No . . . I do not think so . . .’

‘What were they . . . priests? Elders? Ordinary people?’

‘Priests I think . . . I am not sure . . . but they were *inside* the stone circle and they were trying to communicate with Maal . . .’

‘Communicate? You said they were not saying anything!’

‘They were thinking . . . they were all thinking the same thing . . . that was why they were holding hands in a circle. They were really *trying* . . .’

‘What were they thinking?’

‘I do not know.’

Karne gave an exclamation of disgust.

‘Think!’

'I am! I am!' she cried, 'but it is so hard. My head is hurting!' She rocked backwards and forwards holding her head in her hands.

Karne pulled himself together.

'All right. I am sorry. Let us see now what we have. Maal enters the Sacred Circle, our Sacred Circle, goes round touching the stones with his forehead . . . goes into a kind of . . . a kind of death . . . or . . . sleep . . . and in that sleep he travels somewhere else to another, larger Sacred Circle . . . leaving his body behind here. You somehow get into his head and go with him. Other priests 'think' in a circle round him . . . but you do not know what they are thinking. Is that right so far?'

'Yes.'

'What happened then?'

'I do not know. I was suddenly in my own body again and you seized me and pushed me down in the grass.'

Karne was silently cursing himself for having moved when he did. It was his fault she had jerked back. He sat, thinking hard, his hand automatically stroking Kyra's hair. He could see from her eyes that she had a very bad headache. She had become very important to him and must be looked after. The germ of an idea began to grow in his mind but he had sense enough to see that Kyra had had enough strain and worry for the day and would not take kindly to his latest scheme, which was even more dangerous and daring than the last. How he wished he did not have to work through Kyra all the time. If only he had these powers himself! He wondered

if she could teach him, but he knew she did not really know how they worked, nor even how to control them herself, although it seemed to him they were certainly growing. What she had done this day was so much more complicated than what she had ever been capable of before.

‘Kyra,’ he said gently, ‘how do you do it?’

She looked at him questioningly.

‘I mean . . . can you explain . . . what do you do to get into someone’s head?’

‘Nothing,’ she said sadly. ‘It just happens.’

‘But surely you notice something . . .’

‘No,’ she said firmly. ‘It just happens.’

And she would say no more. He decided to leave it for the day and led her home. Their mother watched them coming slowly along the path and was ready with a sharp and voluble stream of abuse for their laziness in leaving her to do all their chores for a whole afternoon. They would not be drawn on where they had been and eventually she gave up trying to find out and settled for doubling their evening duties as punishment.

Karne, seeing that Kyra was near to dropping with fatigue, took over some of her tasks and let her crawl into her warm straw bed early.

Although he was tired too, when he came to lie down he could not sleep for a long time. There was much to think about. A shaft of moonlight came through the doorway and fell upon Kyra as she lay sleeping, one pale arm outside the fur rug, lying beside

her on the stamped clay floor, her face hollowed with shadow but curiously beautiful and peaceful.

‘She is growing up,’ he thought. ‘It will not be long before she will be given in marriage.’ And he began to feel the urgency of what he wanted to do with her pressing upon him. But he knew that if he rushed her too much, worked her too hard, he could get nothing from her. It was like watching a plant grow, nothing would hurry it beyond its natural pace, though watering and care would help a little.

## Chapter 3

### The Experiment

The next day Kyra would not talk of the matters of the previous afternoon. She avoided Karne and worked very hard and very close to her mother. He decided not to push her but to work on the background to his new plan by himself. When Ji and Okan called him to work on the boat he said he had more important things to attend to and that they could have the boat for fishing sometimes if they were prepared to spend time on it by themselves. They were overjoyed and rushed off to it at once.

He sought out one of the Elders of the community, Faro, and set about questioning him as much as he dared. He wanted to know all there was to know about the Sacred Circle and the priest, and how often the priest visited the circle. He really wanted to know when it would be safe for him and Kyra at the circle. He also wanted to know if Faro could throw any light on the mystery Kyra had sensed surrounding the arrival of the new priest.

No one knew when he would arrive, Faro told him, but he was expected soon. They all hoped Maal would not die before the new priest appeared.

‘He does not seem ill,’ Karne said as casually as he could.

‘That is because he is a brave man and knows how to hide it,’ Faro said. ‘Thorn says he is very ill and very near to death.’

‘How does the new priest know when it is the time to come?’

‘The gods tell him.’

‘Where does he come from?’

‘From the Temple of the Sun in the south.’

‘What is this Temple of the Sun? Is it for men or for gods?’

‘It is for both. It is a place so holy that families of importance come from all over the world to worship and to bury their dead within sight of its Sacred Circle. But it is used for training as well, and initiates from this land and from beyond the seas come to learn the mysteries from its powerful priesthood.’

‘It sounds a place of great wonder. How I would love to go there!’

‘No one of our community has ever been there except the Lord Maal,’ Faro said. ‘He was trained there. He has told me of it.’

‘What did he tell you? What is it like?’ Karne’s voice was eager.

‘There are many temples to our gods in our land but none so grand as The Temple of the Sun upon that

southern plain. It is not just one circle, but several. One is so filled with magic that it controls the sun and moon.'

'How can that be? The sun and moon are gods! No man, however holy, can command obedience from them!'

Karne's face registered his amazement and old Faro was delighted at the attention he was getting.

'Ah, but in this holy place the stones are taller than you have ever seen, and there is a god-like priest who commands the moon to disappear – even when it is full in the sky, blazing in all its glory, he commands it and it disappears!'

By the end of this sentence Faro's voice had risen from the low, hushed note of awe to a crescendo of triumph. He was enjoying impressing Karne.

The boy was truly shaken. These were wonders indeed.

'And from this place our new priest will come?' he asked, impressed.

'Not the very same. There is another great circle, part of the same Temple, but a day's hard walking from it. A circle so great that we cannot conceive of it. I believe it has a wall of earth surrounding it that took a thousand men a thousand days to build.'

'A wall of earth surrounding it?' Karne almost shouted, remembering Kyra's description of her experience in Maal's sleep-mind. 'And many standing stones, much bigger than the ones we have?'

'Yes,' Faro said, surprised.

‘And many priests, not only one like ours?’

‘Yes, many priests and many acolytes, initiates and students of all degrees.’

Karne was sure this was the place. He was wildly excited and had great difficulty in stopping himself dancing about and hugging the bony old man.

‘Has Maal ever been back there?’ he asked, trying to restrain himself. ‘I mean . . . since he left as a young priest to come here.’

‘It is a journey of many, many moons. Seasons of planting and of reaping would go by and still one would not arrive there.’

‘I know. I know it is a long way. But has he ever said he has been back there?’

‘He has not left this village since he arrived here when I was young,’ Faro said with conviction.

Karne tried another tack.

‘From whom does he receive his messages?’ he asked, trying to sound casual.

‘From the gods, of course,’ old Faro said impatiently, as though any fool would know that.

Karne thought about it for a while and was shrewd enough to know that he would not find out anything more from Faro. Faro, although a long-established Elder, did not know all there was to know.

Karne decided to speak directly to Maal.

During the next few days Karne watched for an opportunity to speak with the old priest every moment of his waking time. He volunteered to dig a certain field strip that had not been dug for years and consequently

was particularly difficult, because it overlooked Maal's house. He broke many a sturdy digging stick and antler pick and worked until his back was aching. His father was amazed, but said nothing.

'Perhaps my prayers have been answered,' he thought, 'and Karne will settle to being a good farmer yet.'

The boy's determined effort gave him some rewards. He learnt something of the priest's movements. Sunrise, sunset and midday seemed particularly holy times. Maal was often at the Sacred Circle then. He had heard from Faro, and indeed he knew from his own experience, that certain rituals had to happen at night, but the times of these he could not figure out without the star knowledge possessed by the priest. He decided against the night for his plan. The priest's movements were too unpredictable then and the darkness, faced alone, too full of danger. There were nights when even the moon did not shine and on those nights the wolves and the spirits of darkness prowled freely.

On the third day of work on the field there was a time when Karne might have approached Maal directly. He could see the old man standing between the wooden entrance columns of his house, looking over the land to the far line of the sea. Karne fancied that he looked once or twice in his direction, and he could feel the old priest's gaze almost like a touch upon his skin, almost like an invitation.

The second time this happened Karne put his digging stick down and prepared to run the distance

between them, his heart pounding strangely, because what he was about to do was contrary to rule and custom in their community. But even as he took the first step the priest took a step back into the shadows, and Karne was unnerved. It would mean he would have to approach in full view of the old man, but Maal himself would not be visible to him. Karne hesitated, but he still might have dared to go ahead had he not seen Thorn approaching the house from the direction of the village. It must have been the sight of him that made Maal retreat so suddenly into the shadows.

Karne abandoned his plan, picked up his stick again and dug so viciously with it that he snapped it in half. He flung the pieces down with irritation, turned on his heel and strode back to his father's house.

'Kyra!' he said in a commanding tone that surprised even himself. 'Come!'

He led her away from the place where she was scouring some earthenware bowls with sand and ash.

'What is it?'

She had to run to keep up with his striding pace.

'There is something I want you to do for me,' he said with such determination that there seemed to be no question but that she would obey him.

'Not spying on the priest again!' she cried.

'No, not spying on the priest again.'

She was relieved, but not for long.

'Karne, where are we going?' She realized suddenly they were making for the Sacred Circle again and approaching it from the side away from the village so

that they could not be seen. ‘We are not going to the Sacred Circle?’

‘Yes, we are. And this time you are going inside!’

Kyra stopped immediately, horrified.

‘Karne!’ she gasped. ‘You *cannot* mean it!’

‘Yes, I do.’

She turned to run, but he was too quick and too strong for her. He held her arm so tightly that she cried out with the pain.

‘Karne, you are hurting me!’

He released his grip slightly, but did not let her go.

‘Now listen, I have worked it all out. There will be nothing to fear.’

‘Then why do you not do it yourself?’

‘Because I do not have the powers you have.’

‘I have no powers!’ she cried miserably.

‘You have. We both know you have. Think for a moment and stop crying like a baby. Would the gods have given you these powers, almost those of a priest, if they did not intend you to use them for their benefit?’

She was silent, knowing unhappily that he was somehow going to trap her into doing something she *knew* she should not do. He had always had this power over her. She loved him and she hated him at the same time and somehow he *always* won.

‘You said yourself when you were listening to the message about the new priest that you felt there was something wrong. No new priest is coming. The Elders believe he is coming. The community believe that he is coming. Maal even believes that he is coming. But you

know he is not. This is important. You must find out what is going on. You are needed. You are our only hope of finding the truth.'

'But I may have been wrong.'

'I hope you were. But we must make sure.'

'But Maal's powers are great. He would not be misled or mistaken.'

'How do we know that? He is an old sick man. We saw how his flesh hung loosely upon his bones, how pale his face, how he stumbled after the long night of messages. His powers may not be as strong as they used to be. He may need our help.'

'This is blasphemy!'

'No. Believe me, we do it for the gods' sake, for Maal's sake. I have seen him look at you. He *needs* you.'

Kyra was silent. It was true he had looked at her in a way that was no ordinary way of looking. It was true that he was old and probably ill, otherwise there surely would be no talk of a new priest for their village. It was also true that she had the strangest feeling that she could not *see* a new priest coming. But how could she know if this was imagination or not? When she was having these strange 'feelings' she was sure she was not imagining them, but once they were past she was not so sure.

Karne could see that she was hesitating, and he released her arm very gently. She rubbed it absent-mindedly where his grip had reddened her skin, but her attention was far away.

‘But it is forbidden to enter the circle if one is not an initiate of the priesthood or an Elder,’ she said at last, but her voice had no more serious protest in it.

Karne smiled, relieved, knowing that he had almost won.

‘No one has forbidden us. It is just an old custom. I admit it would be wrong to go to a sacred place to play, but to find the truth to help one’s people . . . that must surely be allowed!’

Kyra allowed herself to be led to the very rim of the circle – and there she stopped.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I cannot.’

‘You saw what Maal did that day. Do the same . . . see if it works. Try.’

She seemed to be pulled from every direction now. She was standing close to the tall stones and she could almost believe she felt them pulling her towards them. She was in many ways as curious as Karne to explore her capacities and find out more about the Mysteries, but she had a stronger respect for law and custom than her brother and feared the consequences of meddling with forbidden things.

His voice was soothing and his arguments convincing.

‘Would it really harm,’ she thought, ‘to try?’

Still hesitating, she put her hand upon the nearest stone, tentatively, compelled by curiosity. The stone itself was taller than the tallest man she had ever seen. As her hand touched it her eyes were drawn to study it. The surface seemed cold and hard at first, like ordinary

stone, and then began strangely to ‘hum’ through her fingers, as though it were forming a deep relationship with her which she would find hard to break. It had seemed grey from a distance, but when she looked at it closely it was a mass of crystals pressing together, black, white, silver and grey, their myriad surfaces glinting light in different intensities, from different angles, and through them all, running from earth to sky, from sky to earth, long intricate passages of crystal, ribs and paths and channels of crystal of dazzling whiteness. Her finger traced one of the lines upwards and she had the strangest feeling for a moment as though she herself was within the stone and somehow flowing upwards.

She withdrew her hand hastily and took a step back. Karne was close behind her and very gently, but very firmly, propelled her forward. Her shoulder rubbed against the stone as she passed into the circle and she noticed that her flesh tingled slightly. She fancied for a moment that the stone could feel her presence as clearly as she could feel the presence of the stone. But she did not think about this for long because she became aware that she, Kyra, was within the Sacred Circle and committed now beyond recall.

She was trembling and her heart was pounding with the enormity of the sacrilege she was committing, but somehow she was held within the circle and could not have left even if she had tried.

Karne was outside, watching her anxiously, afraid now that he had gone too far, but she was not aware of

him. It seemed to her she was alone in all the world and no one could help her.

And then she remembered dimly Maal's movements on the day they had watched him, and slowly, tentatively, she went to the first stone and placed her forehead close against it as she had seen him do. She closed her eyes and waited, not knowing what to expect. She had chosen to start with the one she had already touched. Somehow she felt there was already a rapport there between them that would be less frightening than with the others. At first her own body was reacting so violently with fear she could feel nothing but the racing of her blood and the pounding of her heart. But gradually the stone seemed to take over and she quietened down, restful peace began to seep through her, and as she went from stone to stone repeating the ritual she grew calmer and calmer, till when she reached the final stone she was in such a state of peace she had no recollection of her former doubts and fears and leaned, as she had seen Maal do, as though it were the most natural thing in the world and she had done it often. She lay, relaxed and still, her arms stretched to their limits, but not straining. At first she felt nothing but peace and well-being, almost as though she were falling asleep on a grassy bank in the sunshine.

Karne, watching, had noticed the change in her and was frozen to the spot with interest. From being a frightened little girl his sister had become a dignified and elegant woman, treading the ritual round of stones like an initiate. He could see the calm confidence with

which she laid herself in the last posture and was full of hope that the experiment would succeed. He noticed how still she became, how pale, but he reminded himself of the priest and refused to worry about her condition.

He sat on the grass outside the circle and waited patiently for her to 'return.' He enjoyed the sun, the song of birds, the sea glinting and winking far away to the east. From time to time he looked back at his sister. She had not moved. The same still pallor was upon her. He longed to know what was 'happening', but there was no way he could until she told him.

Suddenly he was shocked to see her jerk 'awake' with tremendous force, her face distorted with fear. She half tumbled, half scrambled off the leaning stone and almost fell out of the Sacred Circle into his arms. She was sobbing and clinging to him, at the same time beating him with her fists. He did not know whether to hold her off at arm's length, or hold her tight and comfort her.

'Why did you not *help* me!' she screamed. 'You just *left* me there!'

'What? What!' He tried to ward off her blows. 'How could I help?'

She sobbed and sobbed and he could get no sense out of her. But she stopped hitting him and he drew her down beside him on the grass and held her in his arms and tried to calm her.

'I want to go away from this place,' she said, the little girl again. He decided not to say anything, but to help her to her feet and lead her away. When they were

well away from the circle and out of sight of it they sat down side by side and he tried to make her tell him what had happened.

‘You just seemed to lie there. You looked peaceful enough. I did not know you were in any kind of trouble.’

‘It was horrible,’ she said, shuddering. ‘I thought I was dying.’

‘Maal looked as though he was dying, but he was not,’ Karne said. ‘Did you not think of that?’

‘I could not think of *anything!* It was so horrible!’

‘What happened? Tell me about it.’

‘At first it felt all right,’ she said, sniffing slightly, ‘as though I was just falling asleep. But I did not fall asleep. I sort of *died!*’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, one moment I was lying there just the same as usual and the next moment my *body* was lying there but somehow I was not in it.’

He raised his eyebrows.

‘Were you in the place you saw when you were with Maal?’

‘No. I was still here, in this circle! I could see you as clearly as anything looking at the sea and some birds and not paying any attention to me, and I could see my body as clear as I could see you . . . only I was looking at it from *outside* and it looked dead. I tried to move my legs and arms but nothing would move. I tried to scream out to you but no sound would come. I even tried to open my eyes thinking that would make me wake up. But my eyelids would not move! And anyway I

was not asleep. I really was awake, but I was not *in* my body'

'Are you sure you did not go anywhere else?' Karne asked, visibly disappointed.

'No!' she screamed. 'You do not care about me at all! You just want your stupid questions answered. If I could not have returned to my body I would have *died!*'

'How did you get back?' Karne asked with interest.

'I do not know. I just tried and tried to get back in and suddenly there was a snap and I was *in* and everything was normal again except that I am never, *never* going to try that again!'

'I am sure it is a beginning,' Karne said thoughtfully. 'I mean . . . we could not expect you to do too much the first time . . .'

'It is not a *beginning*,' she said vehemently, 'it is an *end!* And with that she stood up and marched off.

Karne remained sitting for a long time thinking about it all.

## Chapter 4

### The Midsummer Festival

Not long after this the chief Elder, Thorn, ordered the construction of Maal's burial mound. Maal asked for it to be sited on the line of earth power that ran invisible but straight as a spear throw from the Sacred Circle, along the processional route, through Maal's house, beyond and through an older burial mound, to the horizon where a notch had been cut in the skyline to lead the eye to sunset on Midsummer's Day.

Karne was among those deputed to gather stones of the right shape and size to line the tomb and the path leading to it. The actual construction was left to men who had the skill of building, the boys gathered the stones and piled them near the site. They worked in pairs and chatted cheerfully as they worked, not really thinking much about the purpose of their work.

\* \* \* \*

Midsummer's Day was near approaching and there was much talk of the ceremonies and festivities that accompanied it. Dawn was always something special. Everyone brought flowers to the circle and Maal prayed and made obeisance to the Sun. There was singing and music and the whole day was holiday and pleasure. A great deal of barley ale was drunk, and there was dancing from the oldest to the youngest. By the evening they were all greatly tired and when the sun came to set directly into the notch on the hill it was a very solemn moment. The evening ceremony was a quiet one, and afterwards they wandered contentedly home to rest.

This year there was the added poignancy that it was Maal's last midsummer ceremony. Kyra went far into the forests in the south the afternoon before to gather some special white lilies she had set her heart upon. The forests were always considered dangerous places by the villagers because of the wild boars and other beasts and they did not venture there alone if they could help it. But Kyra was determined and she slipped away without anyone seeing her.

From the bright hillsides near her home it was as though she had entered a cave of dark and sinister green. It was much denser than the light woods she had known before and she could not help a moment of hesitation and fear. But the lilies hunters had once brought to the village from deep within the forest called to her, and she plunged into the shadows trying to shut her mind to the dangers. Sometimes she heard the leaves rustling and twigs crackling as though creatures

were lurking and moving in the undergrowth. She kept her attention sharp and moved quickly, making sure to note unusual things so that she would be able to find her way out again. After a long time searching she decided, tired, discouraged, filthy and scratched, to abandon the search. Hearing the whisper of water running she pulled aside some heavy and dangerously thorned branches to find a tiny stream picking its way carefully over moss covered stones to fall and disappear into a cleft in the rock. Drinking thankfully from it she could hear that it continued underground and longed to follow the intricate passage of its course, wondering what secret and beautiful delights of crystal and moss frond she would uncover. As she lifted her head from the water she met face to face the delicate, glowing whiteness of the very lilies she had been seeking. Breathlessly she stared at them, half afraid they were a vision and would disappear. But a very practical bee appeared and busied itself with one of them and that gave her courage to believe in their reality. She picked some, careful to leave enough behind for them to fruit and seed and reproduce themselves. The ends of the stems of those she had picked she wrapped in damp mossy earth to keep them fresh, and then she set off to find her way out of the forest again.

When she returned home just before nightfall, exhausted and very much muddied and scratched by thorns, but clutching triumphantly in her hands the lilies of her choice, her family realized where she had been and she was treated to a severe lecture on the

dangers of the forest. But when she had finished her harangue, her mother hugged her close, greatly relieved that she was safe, and bathed her scratches herself as though she was a little child again, muttering many a tender phrase and name.

Karne brought rushes from the marsh in full flower and as tall as himself. Most of the rest of the family just picked the wild flowers from the hills and fields around. Even the baby had a little crown of daisies tied to its bald head. Karne could see it with its chubby hand trying to pull it off as they walked together as a family in the dim light just before dawn towards the standing stones.

Maal was there already. It is probable that he had been there all night. He was standing now in the dead centre of the circle facing east, his arms raised, his full ceremonial robes giving him a stature he did not normally possess.

One by one they arranged their offerings of flowers around the outside of the Sacred Circle. Kyra climbed to her special stone, the one she had first touched, the one with the ribs of crystal pointing to the sky, bowed slightly and put her lilies at the foot of it. As she raised her eyes she met those of the priest looking directly into hers. She stood very still, feeling his mind closing in on hers. He was trying to tell her something, but the 'noise' of all the other minds around was getting in the way. He was appealing to her, asking for her help, searching her for some way out, as though he were caught in some kind of trap.

She stood amazed. This could not be. She must be misinterpreting. She strained to catch something more specific but she could not. As more and more the general hubbub of the minds around intervened and pulled them apart she thought she caught the word 'Thorn' several times and then something that sounded like 'take care', and strangely she had a mental image of the sunset through the notch in the hills, but this time there seemed to be something in it . . . something dark. She could not make it out.

Someone pulled her back. She was too close to the Sacred Circle. It was against the custom for ordinary people to go so near to the tall stones.

'I see you put your lilies next to your stone,' Karne whispered to her as she joined him. Her face was troubled and she did not reply.

'What is the matter?'

She shook her head.

'It will not be long now,' her mother said and they all began to turn towards the East. By the time the first running point of blazing gold appeared above the distant liquid line, the whole community was aware of it. A kind of gasp that seemed to come from one throat, but came from all in unison, greeted the god of fire and life. Maal lifted up his voice and the most beautiful hymn in the world, the hymn affirming life and the renewal of life forever, burst and rose upon the clean, clear air of the land. The gasp the people had given was the first note of the hymn and the last note was the people's too. Their voices rose above the priest's and

seemed to fill the land from horizon to horizon. Tears came to Kyra's eyes. It was the most moving ceremony of the year and somehow this year it meant more to her than it ever had before. Somehow she was part of life's mysteries, life's renewal, life's magic. Life would never again be for her a humdrum and meaningless daily routine of waking, chores, eating and sleeping. There was something more to it. Something she did not yet fully understand but which she knew would unfold to her as she grew, revealing with every unfolding something new and magnificent.

When the hymn was over and the sun fully risen one might say the secular festivities began. The women had prepared a special festival breakfast, the communal eating of which took up most of the morning. Karne's task was to help move the smooth, hot cooking stones from the fire into the hollowed log filled with water in which a special broth was boiling, and back again to the fire when they had started to cool. He liked the way the water bubbled and boiled around the hot stones. But it was a tiring task and he was not sorry when he was relieved by his brothers.

After the meal there were the competitions – the log chopping, the pole climbing, the spear throwing, the steer catching, the dancing, the singing, the reciting of heroic poems handed down from their forefathers and extended by themselves.

The priest was not part of all this and Kyra did not see him again until he arrived for the sunset ceremony when everyone was more or less over-fed and worn out.

Karne was drunk on rough ale and impossible to talk to. He kept following one of the girls around, the one called Mia, the village flirt. She giggled at everything he said and Kyra felt sick that her brother looked at her with such eyes when there were girls like Fern present, tall and beautiful, thoughtful and dignified.

At the end of the afternoon the Elders gathered first and stood in front of their particular stones very impressively. The tardy and somewhat dishevelled villagers gradually gathered themselves together for the last big event of the day, the sunset.

Maal approached with dignity.

The sky had become somewhat overcast without anyone paying it much attention. Now, however, there was some speculation that they would not be able to see the sunset in the special place because of the ominous black clouds that were gathering in the west. In fact the approaching storm lent drama and splendour to the scene. The clouds were broken enough for the dazzling light of the dying sun to illuminate them in strange and royal ways. Purple and crimson were the predominant colours, where gold and silver and mother-of-pearl had been the gentler colours of the dawn.

Where the sky was not black and sullen with the weight of brooding storm, it was rent with blazing flame and flagged in purple and red. Directly above the notch on the hill there were no clouds at all, but a weird and sickly green.

The villagers grew very quiet as they turned to look at the west. While the morning sun had lifted up their

hearts to joy and hope, the evening one was causing depression and despair. Kyra could not see Maal's face, but she was thinking of the experience of the morning and was watching for the sunset with some anxiety. The warning she had felt she sensed from Maal had something to do with the sunset. Perhaps it was the storm. Perhaps the storm would do great damage to their crops and houses. A rumble of distant thunder disturbed the air that had become so thick and silent. The sun sank blood red into the hole in the hill. Maal's voice, deeper than usual, droned the incantations of the evening, and for a moment as the great orb touched the hill they saw silhouetted against its fiery furnace a small but distinct black figure.

Kyra remembered the vision of the morning in a flash. Strange. Strange. A man standing in the sun!

How she longed to talk to Karne. This once when she would have liked to discuss matters with him he was incapable of it. She looked for him despairingly and he was standing as she had thought he would be with his arm round Mia, who was simpering and not even looking at the sunset.

How could it be!

She looked back to the hill but the figure had gone. The sun itself was sinking fast.

After it was over everyone started talking at once. It seemed most people had seen the figure, but some refused to believe that it had been there. Others believed, took it as an omen, and were afraid.

Thorn, the chief Elder, lifted his impressive arms for silence, and when he had obtained it spoke in a loud and awesome voice.

‘The man you saw walking in the furnace of the sun is the priest for whom you wait.’

A stunned silence followed his words.

Kyra looked beyond Thorn at Maal. He seemed to have shrunk in size. Thorn had spoken in his place, with his authority. No one seemed to notice it but Kyra. She remembered the half-formed warnings of the morning: ‘take care’ and ‘Thorn’, and the vision of the black mark in the setting sun.

There were things she needed to understand.

## Chapter 5

### The Arrival of Wardyke

The coming of the new priest brought a great deal of excitement to the small community.

Midsummer's night had been, as the sunset foreshadowed, a night of violence and storm. After the dramatic disclosure by Thorn that it was indeed their new priest who stood upon the hill, a deputation of villagers was sent to welcome him and guide him safely through the night to his new home. The father of Karne and Kyra was one of those chosen and the two young people stood beside their mother watching the flickering torches as the small group set off into the rapidly spreading darkness. As they reached certain high points on the track they lit beacons and the Sacred Circle itself was ringed with flame till it looked to Kyra like the flickering spectre of the Sun god itself.

Usually when darkness came to the land and the sea the people were safely in their homes, but this night, wild as it was, saw the whole community still upon the hills. At first the numerous fires upon the earth made up

for the lack of stars and moon but as the wind rose that was the harbinger of the storm the flames were whipped every way, pulled and torn by the demons of the night, till some of them could hold their own no more and were extinguished. The villagers were afraid, but hesitated to leave.

Maal stood still within the circle as though in trance. They could see his figure with its giant shadow intermittently as either the flames or the growing frequency of the lightning illuminated it.

Thorn and the other Elders stood at the entrance to the circle and exhorted them to put more wood upon the fires.

Karne, sober now, worked energetically, Kyra at his side.

The women and smaller children were sent back to the huts and Kyra could see them as a sudden sheet of lightning lit the valley, scattering like leaves before the wind, wailing with fear.

She herself was very much afraid, but was determined not to give way to it. As long as Maal is there, she thought, he is in control. Concentrated in his body, through the circle, through the inexplicable forces she had sensed in the standing stones, was a power that held chaos at bay. Around them, moving darkness was ripping at the trees, tearing the very roots from the soil, shaking and pulling and whirling, trying to reduce their ordered community to a scattering of useless fragments. But the centre held, the circle held. *Somehow* they were

held together. They were stronger than the demons of the air.

Was the power, the magic, that held them still working against the forces of disorder and disintegration, in the stones themselves, in the shape of the circle itself – the divine and perfect shape – or was it in the man within the circle holding them together with the powers within himself, the powers of which she had only recently become aware?

She found herself smiling, in spite of the situation, thinking that she was becoming as curious about things, as questioning about the hidden mysteries, as Karne himself. Her brother would be proud of her.

Even as she thought of him he looked up from his work at her.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘stop standing about and give me a hand with this log!’

She bent to the work willingly. Moving logs was certainly easier than trying to answer questions.

They expected rain any moment, but strangely rain did not come. The main weight of the storm seemed to fall elsewhere and the wind, the weird flashing of lightning over the hills and the growling of the thunder in the neighbouring valleys showed that the night demons were satisfied with the role of warning and frightening for the moment.

As the storm moved off to the south, their fires grew stronger and the stone circle stood up clear against the immense blackness of the sky. Their hearts began to lift and there was talk amongst them about the coming

changes. All were curious about the new priest. Maal had been with them so long it was almost impossible to imagine how it would be with a different priest.

‘Of course the rituals will be the same,’ someone said.

‘Will there be new Elders chosen?’

Kyra pricked up her ears at this. She had never realized it before this day, but she had never really liked Thorn. It would be no bad thing if new Elders were chosen.

‘No,’ someone replied. ‘Elders are chosen for life.’ Kyra’s heart sank. ‘Only death or disgrace releases them from their duties.’

‘Besides, who would we choose? Those already chosen are the best men we have.’

‘Ay,’ murmured someone else. ‘Thorn knows the ways of this village better than the priest does.’

‘That is blasphemy,’ came a voice from the shadows.

‘It may be blasphemy,’ one of Kyra’s uncles said with a laugh, ‘but it also happens to be true!’

‘Ay!’

There seemed to be general agreement on this.

\* \* \* \*

Kyra thought about what she had heard and she thought about Thorn. As long as she could remember he had ruled the village. Everything that had been done had been on his command. It is true he always spoke as though he was only delivering a message from Maal, but what proof had they that Maal’s messages were being

delivered honestly? She was shocked at herself for daring to think such a thought and looked round hastily, worried that someone might have caught it from her mind. But she need not have worried. Her kind of talent was very rare indeed.

What did she know of Maal? He was an old man, very much revered and honoured. So much so that no one dared speak to him, except Thorn and the Elders. She had seen him walking about the place from time to time. When he passed, the villagers bowed and kept silent. No one spoke to him. As far as she knew there was no law that said they could not speak to him, it was just a matter of respect and diffidence. Even when he came to their homes when there was illness, Thorn came with him and Thorn did most of the talking. But it was Maal who put his long gentle fingers on the ailing person and it was Maal who did the healing.

Kyra had seen such a healing once. A friend of her mother's was in great pain. Her husband brought Maal to her and the priest stood quietly by her for a while and then placed his hands upon her, bowed his head and closed his eyes.

The woman looked up for the first time as though she were aware of someone else in the world. She looked into his eyes and Kyra would never forget the dawning trust and peace that spread over her face. After he left she stood up and went about her chores.

Kyra remembered thinking that of all the powers in the world, the power of healing was the one she wanted most.

\* \* \* \*

It was almost sunrise before the new priest arrived. Kyra and Karne were with the group of villagers still tending the fires and so were present when he and the deputation that had been sent to meet him arrived. From time to time they had taken it in turn to doze off so they were not too weary. Kyra was still asleep, curled up in a small hollow of grass, Karne's fur jerkin tucked round her, when the shout went up that greeted his arrival. She leapt up immediately, somewhat dazed, momentarily having forgotten where she was and what was going on. She was in time to see the new priest, immensely tall and broad, striding up the processional way alone, long cloak flowing, head held high, eyes blazingly fixed upon Maal still standing in the dead centre of their Sacred Circle. Above and behind him, as though his presence had disturbed them and his power was calling them from the secret places of the earth, an immense flock of crows was beating across the sky. Kyra looked up in alarm and in the half light of dawn, the crows, the flowing cloak, the hugeness of the man, all served to make her shiver. Karne put his arm around her.

'Cold, little sister?' he whispered gently. But even he could sense something did not *feel* right and he was cold too. They stood very close together trying to take warmth from one another.

'Is he not huge?' Kyra whispered.

'More like a warrior than a priest,' Karne replied.

The man had reached the circle and Maal stood like a standing stone himself challenging him with his eyes.

The man paused as though for a moment he had encountered an invisible barrier. Kyra and Karne hardly breathed, they were watching with such fascination. They no longer dared even to whisper. Karne increased the pressure of his arm on his sister's waist and she nodded. Yes, she *had* noticed. Yes, she was trying to find out what was going on.

Thorn now stepped forward beside the man and together they stood confronting Maal.

Kyra put her hands to her head, pain searing through it.

'No!' she cried within herself. 'No, I cannot!'

Maal was calling her to stand beside him, to add her strength to his. But she was afraid. Afraid she was not really hearing the call but imagining it, afraid of what she could sense but could not understand, afraid of getting involved in something beyond her capacities. Even afraid she might make a fool of herself.

'What is it?' Karne's brotherly voice broke through the roaring of her inner voices. He shook her slightly.

'Kyra! Are you all right?'

Her face was filled with fear and pain. Her arms were over her head as though she was fending off something.

'Oh Karne,' the tension broke with tears and she clung to him. 'Oh Karne . . . I cannot . . . he cannot expect me to . . . he cannot . . . I would not know what to do . . . I am not ready . . .'

'What is it? Tell me!'

He tried to lift her face and look into her eyes but they were obscured by tears and she could say nothing but 'I cannot' and try to hide her face. He held her close, bewildered, but knowing that she needed comfort. He turned his head to see if anything in the scene before them would give him a clue to her behaviour. Much had changed since he had last looked.

'Kyra,' he gasped, 'look!'

The new priest was within the circle now, in the centre, facing east, his arms raised to the ocean where the sun would soon be rising. Thorn and the Elders with heads bowed were in their ritual places by the stones. Maal had disappeared.

'Kyra!'

Kyra looked and saw.

She spun round and looked back along the processional way, tears forgotten now. The figure of Maal, ignored by all his community, small, steps somewhat unsteady, was making its way towards the pile of stones that had been gathered for his burial mound.

She began to run.

When she reached him he was sitting on one of the larger stones, contemplating the pile, looking no longer like a priest, mighty in magic and mystery, but like a very tired, old man who had decided to give up trying.

Out of breath she arrived and stood a little distance from him, watching. He did not seem to notice her but went on staring at the pile of rocks, his head turned from her. They stayed so, in that configuration, for some time.

Then he said, very distinctly and calmly, without turning his head, without apparently having seen her approach, 'Come, my child,' and he indicated another stone beside the one that he was on. 'Sit awhile.'

She approached like a shy fawn, step by step, watching him, ready to take off at any sign of anything untoward. He did not turn his head towards her until she was seated near him, and then he looked at her with great gentleness and tenderness. As her eyes met his she opened her mouth and tried to say all the things that were hurting in her heart. The regrets, the fears, the apologies.

He held up his hand and stopped her before one word could leave her lips.

'I know, my child,' he said quietly. 'You were not ready. I should not have asked you.'

So she had not imagined his voice calling to her!

She dropped her head and sat very quietly, gradually becoming more relaxed and peaceful in his presence.

It seemed to her now, as the first rays of the sun crept across the landscape and rested upon his white hair, that she had known him always. This was no strange god-like creature, remote from her everyday life, this was someone she knew. She looked up with the realization and met his eyes again. They were as old as the hills . . . But so were hers!

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.  
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## About Moyra Caldecott

Moyra Caldecott was born in Pretoria, South Africa in 1927, and moved to London in 1951. She married Oliver Caldecott and raised three children. She has degrees in English and Philosophy and an M.A. in English Literature.

Moyra Caldecott has earned a reputation as a novelist who writes as vividly about the adventures and experiences to be encountered in the inner realms of the human consciousness as she does about those in the outer physical world. To Moyra, reality is multidimensional.

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