

THE NINE QUINES

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by
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ONE

They were all in the Roundhouse, checking over the equipment, when they heard the unmistakable sound of a land rover grinding its way up the track in low gear, pausing and revving now and again as the driver slowed to negotiate the most vicious of the bumps and potholes. Dakin looked up.

“That’ll be him, then.”

“I would have thought so,” commented Parker, “Christ, listen to that. That diff will be all over a garage floor near you in six months’ time, if he carries on like that!”

The tyres crunched gravel as they heard the driver do a wide, careful circle into the compound, and then park up, apply the handbrake, and kill the engine. The door opened and clunked, and then came the sound of boots on gravel.

“What, no welcoming committee?” said Jenny, looking around at each of them in turn.

“Initiative test,” grunted Dakin, “let’s see if he passes.”

A few moments later, light flooded into the gloomy interior as the door was set lightly aside and a tall, rangy figure strode in. At first sight, he could have been a 1930s scout leader. Short-cropped hair, clean-shaven, with round wire-framed glasses; in early middle age, wearing a khaki shirt tucked into medium length faded green army shorts; thick walking socks, and a pair of old leather Brasher walking boots completed the ensemble. Obviously a man who was a stranger to Gore-tex. He stopped, and appraised them all with a cool glare.

“Peter Glasson. I assume you were expecting me?”

“Oh, yes, no problem,” said Dakin. “the University emailed me to say you’d be here today.” To make the point, he held up his Blackberry, only recently acquired and mastered, of which he was, nevertheless, inordinately proud, by way of explanation.

“I’m Dakin, by the way, this is obviously Jenny, being female, this here is Parker, and John Waterlow is currently down on the shore, appropriately enough, counting molluscs or whatever floats his boat.”

“Glad to meet you,” said Glasson, rather distractedly. “Listen, is there anywhere I can stow my kit?”

“Well, it’s all a bit communal at the moment, until we get the individual huts up, we’ve all been sort of dossing at nights in here, and looking the other way when it’s Jenny’s turn to undress. The University’s arranging delivery of some pre-woven hazel panels, by the way. We’re supposed to re-enact building our own huts from scratch, but someone’s realised we’re behind schedule and probably over budget, and the cameras arrive in a week or so.”

Glasson paused for a moment, as though he’d just been handed some startling revelation which needed assimilating, then said,

“It’s OK, no problem. I brought my own tent, as it happens. I’ll go and get set up.”

With that, he turned and was gone again in a couple of long strides, almost as quickly as he’d arrived. They heard the door of the land rover open again and the sound of kitbags being dumped on gravel. They looked at each other.

“Do you think we should offer to help?” ventured Jenny.

“I rather get the impression it would be quicker all round if we didn’t,” chuckled Parker.

Just then, the door flap opened again, and the bulky frame of John Waterlow eased into the cool interior.

“There’s some Jonah putting up a tent out there!”

“It’s our new colleague, Dr Glasson.”

“Ah. Rather thought it might be. He didn’t speak, so I left him to it.”

“We’d just decided to do likewise!”

By the time they had finished ticking off the last of the list of scientific kit on the inventory, and had ventured back outside, in the late afternoon sunlight, Glasson's tent was already in place. In keeping with his boy scout image, it wasn't the modern "dome" sort, brightly coloured with fibreglass bendy poles, but in fact a rather drab olive-green ridge tent, with a separate flysheet and guyropes. It had the look of a tent that had seen both desert and tundra, as it sat there, anachronistically, just beyond the car parking area, zipped up tight, presumably with both Glasson and his gear inside it, since neither was anywhere else in view.

Jenny noticed, with delight, that he's even dug a narrow trench right round the perimeter of his "pitch", to carry away any accumulating surface water before it got under the groundsheet if it rained, and this excavation eventually deepened and terminated in a trench set across the back of the tent, some distance away, in the peat. At first, she was baffled by this, until she realised it was probably an attempt at a slit latrine.

"He's even dug his own bog!" she whispered to the others.

"I assume that the Uni forgot to tell him about the Portaloos coming on the hurdle lorry, then!" commented Dakin, drily.

Parker stepped over towards the tent,

"Glasson! Are you in there?"

He was answered by a sleepy grunt from within.

"Do you want anything for supper? Waterlow's going down to the village chippy for us all, in the landy. They do sausages and burgers and stuff as well."

"Would they be neolithic burgers?" enquired Glasson sardonically, from deep within the confines of the tent.

"You've obviously tasted them, then. Well, the thing is, we're not officially re-enacting yet, not until the site's up and running for the cameras, so we've been having a few last Bacchanalia. Interested?"

"Who decides when we're officially up and running?"

Parker turned to Dakin and rolled his eyes. Supper would be late enough already, without people who answer questions with further questions of their own.

“The University don’t want the cameras anywhere near here until we’ve at least got some more huts on site and we’ve done some digging, and we’ve got some costumes and stuff,” said Dakin, authoritatively. “So do you want some chips or no?”

There was a shuffling inside the tent and suddenly the zip came down enough for Glasson’s head to protrude.

“Yes, OK. Fish and chips and a bread cake, if they do such a thing. Do you want the money now?”

“No, settle up later. Come over to the Roundhouse when you hear John come back in the landy. We’ve got beer, as well.”

Glasson nodded enigmatically, then withdrew his head. Parker nudged Jenny and whispered loudly,

“I bet he’s stark NAKED inside there!”

“Actually, I am, as it happens.” came a response from inside the tent.

Hand over mouth, Parker tiptoed off exaggeratedly, followed by Jenny and Dakin, both of whom were grinning with barely-suppressed laughter. Parker handed the final version of the chip shop order to Waterlow through the land rover’s open window, and in a few seconds, the arc of its headlights swept the compound as it exited the gate and bobbed off down the slope, towards the coast road and civilization.

They had lit a fire in the Roundhouse hearth by the time Waterlow returned, bearing steaming bags of takeaways. The wisps of the peat smoke were just starting to curl up towards the opening in the ceiling. Glasson and Waterlow both coincided awkwardly at the entrance, Waterlow, his hands full of carriers, trying to shake hands with Glasson while Glasson was holding the lap inside the door aside for him to enter, so all they managed was an awkward sort of high-five.

A trestle table had been set up, around which they’d arranged a fairly decrepit selection of folding camping chairs. A couple of oil lamps cast a warm glow on the faces of Parker and Jenny, though the ciascuro effect only served to make Dakin look darker and more heavily-jowled than ever. Glasson slid onto one of the empty chairs, vaguely wondering if it was a “joke” one, and would fold up on him

but it held. He deftly produced from behind his back a litre bottle of red wine, and a corkscrew.

“Cheap swag, I am afraid, and yes, I know it should be white with fish.”

Parker visibly brightened, then reached down beside his feet, coming up with,

“I see your red wine, and I raise you...” as he dumped a six pack of strong export lager on the table.

“Alright, that’s probably enough Bacchus for one night,” growled Dakin, taking control. Waterlow was already busy emptying the carrier bags and passing out various people’s orders, and Jenny briefly left the table, returning after a quick rummage in a box, rather unbelievably, with five plastic wine glasses, of the sort that you might find in use at a suburban picnic. She set them up on the table, under Glasson’s quizzical stare.

“Don’t worry, Glasson, it’s Neolithic plastic.”

They ate mostly in silence, the common need of hunger postponing any speech. Finally, when they had finished and re-charged their glasses with either lager or wine, and Waterlow had supervised the collection of the wreckage back into the same carriers it came in, then stowed them in a handy bin-bag, Dakin finally leaned forwards and tapped lightly on his beer can with the thick signet ring he wore on the little finger of his right hand.

“On behalf of the Department of Archaeology and Pre-History of the University of Strathloan, of which I happen to have the honour of being the titular head...”

Parker sniggered, then looked down at his lap

“... allow me to extend a welcome to the latest addition to our merry band, Dr Peter Glasson, of Emmaus College, Cambridge, expert on Neolithic monuments, who has joined us in such spectacular style today, complete with his own accommodation!”

Glasson shifted slightly in his seat, but kept a fixed smile as Dakin continued, floridly,

“Peter, allow me to formally introduce you to three more doctors, each with their own separate specialisations, professional as well as personal, which I have no doubt you will discover in due course. Dr Stephen Parker, Dr Jenny McArthur, and Dr John Waterlow. Sadly, none of them are

medical doctors, so if you keel over way up here, you *will* still die, I am afraid!"

Waterlow raised a large, hammy arm and cut in, his fair curls bobbing with schoolboy excitement,

"I've got my British Red Cross First Aid Grade 1!"

"Thank you John," continued Dakin, "we will all sleep much better for knowing that." and gestured towards the heap of camping foam mats and sleeping bags stashed in the inglenook.

Parker took a gulp of lager, then spoke,

"Would our newest member care to make any kind of a statement?"

"Not really," said Glasson, "but I was wondering what the precise state of the project is right now, and about the start date."

All eyes deferred to Dakin on this one, a point which was not lost on Glasson.

"The state of the project. Hmmm. I see," he said, sounding for all the world like Dr Cameron in *Dr Finlay's Casebook*. "Well, young man, stop me if I start to tell you some bits you already know. Next door to this site, as you cannot fail to have noticed, are nine very large pieces of rock called Brid's Needles, or The Nine Quines, to give them their more popular nomenclature. It is a UK candidate for a World Heritage Site, one of the jewels in Scotland's archaeological crown, nobody knows precisely who put them there and when, or indeed why, and we are not allowed to do anything really while we are here other than bask in their reflected glory, because if we were to damage them more than the hordes of tourists who find their way here every summer, we'd have to answer to The National Trust for Scotland, The University, several irate Japanese tour operators, and possibly Detective Inspector Taggart, for all I know. OK so far?"

"He's dead," said Parker, *sotto voce* as Glasson nodded. Dakin looked at Glasson.

"No, I distinctly saw him twitch. Anyway, the University of Strathloan has a marketing department, which has just discovered The Nine Quines, a few thousand years behind everyone else, but on the other hand, they do design nice logos. Anyway, they have signed us up with a TV production company, Gaeltacht TV, to make us all into

reality TV stars. So, we are to spend eight weeks or so here, in the company no doubt of various students, members of our families and other such scrofulous volunteers as we can press-gang, re-enacting the lives of the Neolithic people of the area, in authentic surroundings, eating authentic things, and no doubt with some authentic dramatic tension factored in along the way.”

“Hardly authentic,” countered Glasson, “with pre-woven hurdles.”

“Listen, laddie.” Suddenly, Dakin had shed his avuncular, sardonic, mocking tone. “There is a lot riding on this. Those insane bastards in parliament are cutting our budgets to the bone. Big money is coming to Strathloan from this series, bigger than you think. Overseas sales, the DVD, they have already got syndication theoretically in place with the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan. This has got the backing of every tourist authority and the Duke of bloody Edinburgh for all I know. In any case, what makes you think there’s anything real about reality TV?”

“But why involve us at all, then, why not just use actors?”

“Well, Glasson,” Jenny answered, “probably because, first of all, we’re a lot cheaper, and secondly, there *is* also a sop to the serious side of archaeology going on here. This area, the last time it was seriously excavated, back in the 1950s before everyone got precious about heritage, showed some very strange, very contradictory results. There was evidence that the Neolithics *were* actually indulging in farming, alongside hunter-gathering. This may be a crossover site, and they want us to re-examine that.”

Glasson was not, despite Dakin’s earlier pronouncement, a specialist on the subject, but he knew that bitter arguments raged about it amongst academics, over just how quickly hunter-gathering had been abandoned in favour of static farming, battles were waged in the thick forests of footnotes in archaeological journals, and devastating salvos fired in book reviews. He supposed Jenny McArthur to be in favour of the thesis.

As for the others, he knew vaguely that Waterlow had originally been a Marine Biologist, quite appropriate in view of his name, though he looked too young and boyish with his blonde curls to have had a former career. Professor

Dakin had of course risen to his present position on the back of some very high profile, media-savvy gigs in the 1970s, establishing him as something of a maven on the Arthurian period, which also sparked his media career and the no-doubt lucrative work as a consultant to everything from Time-Team to Timewatch. Stephen Parker was more enigmatic. Another Scot, despite his English-sounding name, he had originally trained as an Industrial Archaeologist, but his move back to his native Scotland, and the blossoming of his career, had gone hand in hand with his burgeoning interest in ancient technologies.

Suddenly, Glasson realised that he was at the centre of a silence.

“I’m sorry?” he blinked.

“I was inviting you to outline your part in the project, mainly to check if the University had done their usual thing of telling you one thing and us poor bloody infantry something entirely different,” rumbled Dakin.

“Well”, began Glasson, “my official attachment is in terms of measurement. Incredibly accurate measurement, in fact. The University – my College, I mean – asked Strathloan if, given the re-enactment project, and the hoohah that will ensue, we could have unprecedented access to the site, alongside your team, to carry out a whole new set of measurements on the monument.”

“We’re talking access beyond the rope here, I assume,” muttered Dakin.

“Indeed: whereas tourists and visitors will have to stick to the paths as usual, I have permission to go right up to the stones and touch them, if the fancy so takes me.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing, laddie,” said Dakin. “If one of those stones goes over, you’ll cause an international incident!”

“I thought they’d been measured several times before, anyway,” interjected Parker, smoothly.

“Oh, they have,” replied Glasson, “but never with a gizmo.”

“What sort of a gizmo?” queried Waterlow.

“Basically, a super-accurate laser-scanner, that can map the surface of each stone with incredible precision. You know how the US has all the world patents on this sort of technology, well, we did a deal with them.”

“Where is it?” asked Parker.

“Outside, in my tent.” replied Glasson, evenly.

“What if somebody nicks it?”

“Who’s going to nick it, up here?”

“More to the point,” cut in Dakin, “how the hell did you manage to swing that one?”

“Oh, God knows,” said Glasson, “it was presented to me as a *fait accompli*, but if you ask me, I would say that the process probably involved the Rector of my college inviting over some boffins from the Department of Defense, putting them up in oak-panelled rooms, dining them at top table on haunch of venison from the College estate, complete with gowns and latin graces, followed by an introduction to the Founder’s Crusty Port. Half of Cambridge is working for MI5, anyway.”

“And the other half for the Russians!” chuckled Dakin, earning a general laugh.

“Anyway, this will be the most accurate scan of the Quines ever carried out,” continued Glasson, “and it could even finally settle the debate about whether their purpose is ritual, astronomical, or what. Plus, I have a couple of extra experiments of my own I have devised, on that score.”

“It all sounds a bit New Age, a bit *View over Atlantis*,” remarked Parker.

“Actually, I did correspond with John Michell when I was a student, but he never came here or did any work on the Quines.” said Glasson.

If he was conscious of any *faux pas*, Parker kept it well hidden.

“Well, I think I am going to take a turn outside, then turn in...”

“We’ll allow you a decent interval,” joked Waterlow, “then it’s coming, ready or not!”

Glasson stood and stretched slightly.

“Before you get too engrossed, could I just make it back to my tent?”

“Sure. Can you see OK out there?”

“It’s OK, I’ve got a Maglite, and no, it’s not Neolithic, before anyone asks.”

TWO

The next morning, the sound of the lorry bearing the hurdles and portaloos brought Glasson out of his tent, just as the others were standing talking in a huddle outside the Roundhouse. The spring day was already warm, and the lorry actually created a small dust-cloud as it swept into the compound.

It turned out that the driver was under the misapprehension that there would be a forklift to unload the lorry's contents, and was on the point of phoning his depot on the mobile to say he was bringing the whole load back again, when Dakin persuaded him that the archaeologists would handball them off, as a human chain.

The individual hurdles weren't heavy, but they were many, and it soon became sweaty work handing them down from the lorry and stacking them neatly on the ground ready for use. They were all blowing hard by the time the last one was in place. That just left the Portaloos.

"Ye're no' supposed tae tip them up!" growled the driver, as Glasson and Waterlow manhandled one of the two green and white cubicles to the edge of the lorry.

"I think that's only when they're full," grunted Glasson.

"There's still the problem of getting them down, though," said Parker.

"Has anyone decided where they are supposed to go?" asked Glasson.

"I think that's up to us," said Dakin, "why do you ask?"
In reply, Glasson pointed.

“Well, if the driver could park as close as possible alongside that stretch of wall just there, and we used those two planks that are lying down behind the Roundhouse, I reckon we could slide them, upright, along the planks, over the wall, and onto that grassy bank the other side. It’s about the same height as the back of the lorry, it’s a bit uneven, but the only other option seems to be for him to take them away again.”

The others paused to consider the idea.

“Well, it’s worth a try, I suppose,” said Waterlow.

The driver shrugged his shoulders and clambered back into the cab, and after some precarious moments with Glasson and Waterlow clinging on to the Portalooos as he manoevered, he was finally in position.

Parker, Dakin and Jenny had fetched the two planks and wedged them in place across the top of the stone wall, so that one end of each was on the grassy bank and one end on the back of the lorry. Glasson and Waterlow then “walked” the heavy plastic Portaloo into position and started to slide it along the plank. Surprisingly, the idea worked, mainly because the amount of exposed plank was very small, with the wall providing crucial support in the middle.

Soon, the second one was in position alongside the first. The driver then unloaded the various packs of chemicals that were necessary to prime them ready for use, and made off in another cloud of dust as soon as his paperwork was signed, before anyone else could introduce a further problem or delay into his routine.

“He’ll be asking for danger money next time!” said Parker. Dakin looked at the two Portalooos.

“They’re quite, er, prominent, up there, aren’t they? And it’s a long walk round, unless you scramble up and over the wall.”

“Yes, I suppose so”, conceded Glasson, “but on the other hand, if this reality TV is half of what it’s cracked up to be, that could end up as the second most famous grassy knoll in history!”

Jenny’s voice shouted from within the Roundhouse that coffee was on. Glasson asked Dakin about the washing and cooking arrangements.

“Well,” said Dakin, “there’s a standpipe tap behind the visitor toilets in the National Trust car park over on the far side of the monument, and we’ve got permission to draw water from there, we bring it over in those 5 litre containers and we take turns in bombing it up, not exactly a rota as such, but if you *do* use the last one, generally you go and fill it afterwards. For heating water, we’ve been using camping stoves and the like, but we are allowed to use the National Trust toilets, which do have hot water, as long as we do it outside of their opening times. The little man in the hut will soon let you know. As far as cooking is concerned, it’s a combination of takeaways and what we’ve brought with us or bought from the village stores, so far, but of course when we start for real, it’ll be a case of bung it in the pot and boil it up! And we’ll all crap in a hole in the ground.”

“Well, at least I’m ahead of you there,” said Glasson smoothly.

After coffee, Glasson announced that he was going to have a look at the stones, at least from a distance, depending whether the little hut was occupied or not, and the man inside was available to explain to.

“We were going to have a go at putting together some huts out of this lot,” said Waterlow, in a rather aggrieved tone, indicating the stacks of hurdles.

“Oh. OK. Tell you what, I really only want to look at one particular thing. Give me half an hour, and I’ll be back to help.” With that, he loped away, before anyone could argue.

“Keen,” remarked Parker to Jenny, watching Glasson’s figure dwindle in the direction of the path to the monument.

“Hmm,” replied Jenny, “I wonder what’s so urgent it can’t wait a few hours.”

Reluctantly, they hefted the first hurdle off the pile and stood it up on its end.

THREE

Glasson brushed away a hovering dragonfly, as he cut through the short belt of woodland that screened the archaeologists' compound from the view of the tourists visiting The Nine Quines. Soon, the vista opened out, and he took in his first actual sight of the needles. He stood for a moment, breathing in the intense green scent of the warm ferns and springy grasses. Then he scrutinised each needle individually. Although he knew there would be nine, he still counted them. Already, he was keenly measuring the distances between them by eye. He *must* be right, he thought. He was *sure* he was right. It burned inside him like a fierce, brief flame. He stood a moment longer, breathing in his self-administered triumph. He noted that the curator's little hut was empty, and, mindful of his promise to help the others, he didn't go in search of the custodian, but instead turned quickly and jogged lightly back along the same path he had just trodden.

The hut-building had not got very far. The Roundhouse had apparently been erected in a day, but the people who delivered the materials had helped. It was an altogether more substantial proposition, and all of the ingredients needed for it had all come on one lorry, together with the necessary expertise and manpower. As it stood at the moment, it occupied a position of splendid isolation on the peaty grass next to the gravel compound. By comparison, Glasson's tent, which faced it directly, on the grass on the far side of the gravel, looked tiny. In fact, the Roundhouse was not so much round, as slightly oval, a bit like a rugby ball when viewed in plan. Dakin had shuddered at the thought of how historically inaccurate it probably actually was.

When Glasson returned, the position of the smaller huts was being marked out around the Roundhouse, by means of Waterlow hacking at the turf with a spade. The problem with the smaller huts, already, though, was that they lacked the structure of interior timber struts which were the main support of the Roundhouse, and it looked like simply digging the walls into the peat at ground level was not going to hold them up either. Putting large stones either side was helping a bit, but the only hut which was even at an embryonic stage was still leaning drunkenly.

“What you need is a structure to hang it off.” offered Glasson, coming up behind them.

“What we *need*, is some *help!*” said Dakin, heavily.

“Yes, I can see that,” said Glasson. “Have you ever seen a bender?”

“You’d probably have more chance of that than us, being at Cambridge an’aa,” said Parker, lapsing more broadly into Scots in his annoyance.

Glasson ignored him and continued addressing Dakin.

“Is there a budget for unexpected contingencies?”

“Laddie, this whole *enterprise* is a budget for unexpected contingencies. Why?”

“Well, if we went to the nearest timber merchant, wherever that is, and bought some 10 foot lengths of flexible dowel, you could use, say, eight per hut, drive one end into the ground, bring them all together at the top, and then interweave the panels between them. But somebody would have to authorise it, obviously. The cost, I mean.”

“It’s all very well you coming along like bloody Baden Powell and organising us all,” said Parker, still in his unfriendly tone, “what with your Portaloo solutions and your benders, who made *you* Brown Owl for the day?”

“OK,” said Glasson, evenly, “have it your own way. What do you want me to do, then?”

Dakin, however, was already dialling on his BlackBerry.

“Hello – who’s that? Robbie. Right. Is Simon Preston there?” There was a pause. “Simon, we’ve hit a wee snag with these panels, we need to get hold of some dowel from a timber yard to make a framework for each hut. No, it’ll

work, I'll show you when you come up. No, I'm not asking you to send the lorry again, I just want your OK to go and buy some from somewhere. Oh, I dunno, probably not more than a hundred of your English pounds, give or take a bawbee. We'll need some binder twine as well, but I'll make sure it's well hidden or thoroughly daubed with shit to make it look authentic before Gaeltacht get here. Right. No, we can sort it – well, tell you what, if it still doesn't work after this, we'll go to plan B, how does that sound? No, me neither! OK then. Bye.”

He closed off the call and turned to Glasson.

“OK, Peter, the expenditure is agreed, just make sure you get a receipt that shows Value Added Tax, for our colleagues in the Department of Bean Counting, won't you. How far do you think you'll have to go?”

“Lochmarnie, probably. It's the last big place I came through on the way here, if you see what I mean. I should be able to get enough for six huts in one trip, with my landy being the long wheelbase sort.”

Dakin nodded. The Isle of Ochan, on which the Quines site stood, was not actually an island, but rather a narrow peninsula that jutted out into the sea-loch. Lochmarnie was the market town which had inevitably sprung up at the site where the neck of the peninsula joined the mainland.

“That'll take you about ninety minutes each way” said Dakin.

“Yes, but while I am gone, someone could still dig out the circular foundations for each hut site, mark their positions, gather some suitable anchor-stones, or even start mixing up some slobbydosh to seal the cracks. I'll leave it to you to suggest it to Parker!”

“Och, Stephen's just pissed off that he didn't think of it first. He's supposed to be a specialist in ancient technology, after all.”

It was mid-afternoon by the time Glasson swung back into the compound, a makeshift flag of rags fluttering from the wood sticking out of the back door of the vehicle. He was gratified to see that the larger piles of hurdles had already been split up and a smaller stack was now standing beside each of six circular outlines, delineated by freshly-cut peat. In a fit of forward planning, the cut peat had also

been stacked for drying, he noted with approval. The others were lolling on the grass in front of the Roundhouse, enjoying what must have been a well-deserved coffee break.

“The hunter-gatherer returns,” muttered Parker, more to himself than anyone, pushing his longish dark hair aside and using his hand to shield his eyes from the sun.

“You were a bit hard on him this morning, Stephen,” reproached Jenny.

“Harsh, but fair,” retorted Parker. “He gets on my wick with his ‘do this, do that’ attitude. They’re *all* like that at Cambridge, of course, they think we’ve still got an Empire and their destiny’s to run it. And what was all that about, swanning off to look at the stones, when it was *obvious* his help was needed here?”

Further discussion was curtailed by Glasson coming within earshot.

“Any coffee left?” he ventured, brightly.

“I’ll see what I can rustle,” said Jenny, getting to her feet.

“Only if it’s no trouble.”

“I was getting cramp down there anyway.”

“OK, thanks. Then I’ll have a go at bender bending.”

“Better than gender bending,” said Waterlow, with his characteristic public-schoolboy chuckle.

“Oh, I save that for the weekends,” replied Glasson, with a broad wink.

The banter seemed to have eased some of the tension, and Parker was noticeably more civil to Glasson as they worked on through the late afternoon and early spring evening. The first bender had come together surprisingly easily, with the dowels loosely tied round the top with baler twine to bring the roof together and leave a “hole” for the smoke to escape. Glasson had fitted the pre-woven hurdles in place and, as predicted, there was enough flexibility in the thin wands to take on the curvature of the individual round-house, although the “seams” would indeed need caulking with some kind of daub, at least in an attempt to make them wind and weather-proof.

Once they had seen how Glasson had constructed the basic bender, the others were able to split into pairs, Jenny and Parker, Dakin and Waterlow, and begin work on the other five circles, leaving Glasson to finish the first.

alone. By the end of the day, one hut, the first, was more or less complete, and the others had most of their panels in place, with only one set of foundations as yet untouched. Dakin stood up and called a halt.

“OK, that’s enough for one day. I’m knackered, and I am old and unfit, and, as luck would have it for you lot, I’m in charge. I declare a truce.”

“In which case...” said Glasson, leaving the sentence unfinished as he trudged over to his land rover. They watched him come back carrying two bulging supermarket carriers.

“Here’s a contribution to the Bacchanalia,” he concluded, handing over the cans to Jenny and Parker, who accepted them gratefully, especially when it emerged that in the bottom of one of the carriers, as well as the lager, was a carefully wrapped parcel with five pieces of fillet steak, two large onions, and five fresh pannini.

“There was a supermarket on the same industrial estate, and we came in under budget on the timber,” explained Glasson. “It seemed rude not to. Don’t worry, I got the timber merchant to add the amount the shopping cost on top of the receipt for the wood.”

“Well, laddie,” Dakin commented, “all I can say is, you show promising aptitude as a hunter-gatherer.”

“It’s easier with credit cards than with stone axes though,” admitted Glasson.