

Forty.

First thing in the morning, they asked the crone who ran the inn how they could get to Baramore. But she said it was not possible without a boat. And all the boats in the district had been destroyed. Unless they wanted to swim, of course. Or they might be lucky with the tide and get over by the ford.

‘Ford?’, Fiona said.

The crone said that there had been a ford to the north side of the island for as long as anyone could remember. But it all depended on the tide, which depended on the moon of course. Among other things.

‘If the tides are at neaps you might not get over at all’, she said. ‘Some years the bank moves, some years it disappears altogether. Then it comes back again. But when the tides are small you might not see the bank at all’.

‘Could we wade?’, Fiona asked.

But wading was not safe, for there was no way of knowing where the shallows were and the deeps were, and the current could be very strong, and there was no way of seeing where the patches of deep, drowning mud and quicksand were to be found.

‘You must wait till you see dry land right across the sound’, the crone said, ‘a crossing is not possible otherwise’.

They told the crone that they would be back again at dusk, and she said that she would have food ready for them. Charlie asked to use a telephone but there was none in the inn. The crone said that the nearest might be in the hotel at Salen, if it was working. But they told her that the hotel there had been destroyed. She did not know this; she had not left Acharacle since the Protectorate

began, and they had established their huge hunting preserve that first winter.

In the morning, Charlie and Fiona drove out to Kentra and Ardtoe. The Edinburgh policemen had still to wake up, and they left them sleeping where they were. At the end of the road, the shore rocks were sculpted round and smooth, as if something from the very ancient past might casually appear from behind one of them. Behind the rocks, the sea was smooth and blue. To the south, the water was slowly receding over Kentra bay, and great banks of mud and sand were beginning to appear at the margins of the land. But as long as there was a skin of water to be seen, there was no way of knowing how deep it was, or what cataclysmic dips and cliffs it could conceal.

Then they drove back to Acharacle and took the narrow road by the river to Sheilfoot. Here a number of cobbles had been hauled on the banks, but when they looked, all had had one or two planks smashed to ensure that they would not float. Then they went back to Shiel Bridge, and took the road to the castle. Most of the mouth of the river had already dried out in banks of mud and sand. The islet on which the castle sat had also dried, and they walked out to it. From the walls of the castle, Shona was so close that it seemed it could almost be touched.

The drove back towards Shiel Bridge. At the bridge, they met Morrison and Findlay, who had driven to find them. Both cars then headed for the head of the loch at Ardmolich. There the road became very narrow and they crept along the north shore of the loch. At the pier beyond Kinlochmoidart the metalled road gave out and a stone track began. They followed this track as far as it would take them, to a point on the mainland about a hundred yards across

the water from Shona. Here, at the absolute end of the road, was a stone boathouse with a steeply-pitched slate-stone roof.

At one end of the boathouse was a half-track hill vehicle, of the sort used for taking huntsmen to the hill, and carcasses in season back to the larder. A set of gigantic antlers was fixed to its radiator grille. Charlie felt the engine block, but it was cold and dead. At the back of the boathouse, a precipitous footpath led straight up the mountain side. In the light of day, the steepness was terrifying.

Morrison took one look and said, 'That's for deer. No human would ever get up that. Or down. Not a hope'.

Inside the shed, they found the remains of a dinghy. Someone had smashed in a couple of planks with an axe. Findlay found the axe at the far end of the shed, where he hefted it as if he might heft a club. The channel was a flat glass of water. A heron stood on the shore, utterly still. Somewhere in the mountain, a wild animal shrieked in terror, and the noise echoed away into the hills.

Morrison said, 'It will be dark in an hour'.

Fiona said, 'How deep is it? It can't be as deep as all that, can it?'

But there was no way of knowing. They stood for half an hour, even longer, watching the tide on the beach and it never seemed to move at all.

Charlie said, 'They are not here. Nobody could get over there. They never came here. And if they did, they have gone. We have lost them'.

They waited for another half hour, by which time it was without question beginning to get dark. Still, there had been no sign of the

tide moving on the beach, no sign of it rolling back to unveil a magic path which would take them to the island.

They waited for ten minutes more but soon it would be too dark to drive the cars back down the track towards the head of the loch. They could wait no longer. They got into the cars and set off at once. The glare of the headlights seemed wildly out of place, somehow, almost sacriligious in such a place.

Within five minutes, they had gone. At that moment, a deer came down from the side of the mountain and sniffed at the half-track. Then it moved to the edge of the water. It sniffed the air and cast a glance into the growing dusk at each end of the channel. Then, ever so calmly, it trotted into the water and crossed the ford to Shona.

At no point on the crossing was the water deeper than three inches, or perhaps four at the absolute maximum.