**Skara Brae and the Unexpected Hero**

Prologue

The harsh wind buffeted the coach, forcing the steady rain to strike the window in unexpected bursts, startling Ben as he stared mindlessly at the scenery rushing past.

Ben’s calm and cheerful face was unrecognisable, as it contorted into a series of irritated grimaces, while his thoughts raced. His short, dark brown hair was standing in spikes erratically; a result of the countless times his fingers had been forcefully pushed through it during the journey, an unconscious movement as he tried to make sense of this maddening situation.

Over the last 24 hours his frustration had built, rising and threatening to engulf him. As he sat, staring out of the window, anger radiated from him like a flame. He cracked his knuckles in annoyance then flexed and clenched his fists, forcing himself not to scream and lash out at his parents in his fury…

Chapter One:

Oblivious to the stark scenery whizzing by Ben repeated the words in his head like a mantra.

*`Stupid school. Stupid parents. Stupid topic.’*

It was the summer holidays and he had planned to spend time with friends eating ice cream and having adventures. Instead, here he was on what felt like a never-ending expedition to visit some absolutely ancient ruins. All because the school had sent home a letter outlining the new term’s topic. As soon as his parents had read it, they got it into their heads that they `***absolutely* *must’*** visit an old Stone Age village in a remote part of Scotland. So, what had begun as a newsletter home, had become an almighty project to get booked onto a train, ferry, *and* coach during his precious school holidays so they could wander round some boring remains.

`Why did they do that? Why did Mum and Dad think that a trip to ‘no friends, no fun and no phone signal land’ would be a good idea?’ As Ben gazed disbelievingly at the shocking symbol on his phone, reminding him that he was cut off from his friends in the middle of nowhere, he could feel a storm of emotions swirling around, bubbling inside of him, and threatening to escape in a loud, high pitched scream. `*What were his parents thinking? Why couldn’t they just be normal?!’*

Every time he re-played the last few weeks’ events in his mind they felt more and more like dominoes; toppling at an increasing speed until eventually they crashed down and flattened him!

A picture containing text, whiteboard

Description automatically generated

Ben’s thoughts were interrupted by his Mum squealing excitedly.

“Look! I can see a sign! We must be close!”

Ben sighed dramatically and turned his head, silently resting it against the window, marvelling once more how his parents could be so enthusiastic about a school project. Ok, so the train and ferry rides were quite interesting, but the fact that they were so incredibly l-o-n-g took away any real enjoyment he might have felt.

Mum tapped him on the shoulder.

“Look, Ben. We’re nearly there. Can you believe it? In a few minutes we will be standing in a village built thousands of years ago!”

Ben merely shrugged and looked away, vaguely aware that the relentless rain which had greeted them as they set foot on Scottish soil, had finally stopped.

“Come on, you must admit that this is at least a tiny bit amazing. I mean, we are going to see a village which has been hidden under tonnes of sand for 43 centuries!” Mum enthused.

Realising that Mum wouldn’t let up unless he said something, he forced a smile and muttered `yeah. Amaaaaaazing.’

As the coach pulled off the road into the car park, Ben’s anger faded to reluctant acceptance. From his seat he could see a large domed building alongside more typical stone ones. He had just started to glance around for an ice cream stall or something which might make his time bearable, when he felt himself being forcefully hauled out of his seat and pulled along by the excited crowd of people hurriedly fighting to get off the coach.

A picture containing text

Description automatically generated

Once they had all finally squeezed off in a chaos of noise and movement, like a fizzy drink exploding from a shaken can, the group; including Ben and his parents, stood at the edge of the car park, huddled together to listen to their tour guide. As the guide droned on about storms and archaeologists, Ben realised that the village was still some way off in the distance. They would have to go through a visitor centre and model home before they could even begin the lengthy walk along a path - whilst fighting the cold Scottish wind and damp air - only to have a look around some broken old houses. What could be fun or interesting about that?! He would soooo much rather be out in the forest having adventures or at the very least exploring the beach which he could see just behind the faraway ruins.



His ears tuned back in when he heard the words `café, shop, and visitors centre’. Aha! A plan was beginning to form. If he could slip away from his parents, perhaps he could get out of the howling wind which made him feel cold, despite being August, and spend his time drinking hot chocolate with cream and marshmallows… Eager to put his plan into action he approached his parents.

“Mum, Dad” he whispered.

No response.

“Mum. Dad” he hissed, this time with an impatient nudge to their arm.

Nothing except for the sound of the tour guide reading from his tablet:

*“During the bleak winter of 1850, a storm raged, battering Orkney. Whilst this wasn’t unusual, this time the high tide and vicious storm winds* ripped away the sand, earth and plants *from a large mound. This uncovered the outlines of several stone buildings… Skara Brae!. Another severe storm exposed further buildings…”*

Becoming increasingly impatient, Ben tried again, this time louder: “Mum, Dad!” All eyes turned on him accusingly as his voice broke the silence of the group, which had until then been avidly listening to the guide. Uh oh.

“What?” his Mum whispered angrily, sending embarrassed, apologetic looks to the crowd.

“Can I wander round and explore?”

His Mum’s annoyed glare immediately morphed into a gentle smile. Apparently thinking that he was finally becoming interested in the trip yet unwilling to tear her attention away from the tour guide for long, she muttered: “Alright, but don’t go too far. Stay on the site and make sure you are at the café for lunch time. Remember, the coach won’t wait for us!” And with that final hissed command she turned back to the group.

Excellent. That gave him 2 hours, so where first… ice cream, hot chocolate or down to the beach…? Tempted by the sound of the waves ahead, he quickly tiptoed away from the huddle, skirting the outside of the building until he found himself alone by a great stone wall with a gate and a strange weather-beaten sign, covered in decades of moss[[1]](#footnote-1):

This walk will take you back in time **5000** **years** to the village of Skara Brae

As he stood wondering about the writing, he glimpsed a boy dashing ahead of him. As he watched, the boy leapt over the high stone wall and ran off along the crushed stone path towards the village. Instantly deciding that it would be more fun to explore the beach with another boy rather than alone, he hurried to catch up.

Ben was a fast runner; however he knew that there was no way he’d be able to jump the wall so by the time he had worked out how to operate the gate the boy had mysteriously vanished. Looking around, Ben couldn’t see where he might have disappeared to. Ahead of Ben was the path to the village and then, almost directly behind it, the sea, yet neither showed signs of the boy. Shrugging his shoulders, Ben began walking aimlessly, aware only of the cool breeze driving the salty sea air into his lungs. He was so deep in thought - imagining finding pirate treasure washed up on the beach or that he had a massive kite and was tearing along the path performing amazing jumps and twists and evoking cheers and applause from everyone who saw him - that he didn’t see the turn in the path and was dismayed to find himself plummeting deeper and deeper into a pitch-black hole.

Senses alert, warnings flashed in his mind as nothing but shadows flew by, increasingly dark as he dropped. His ears were battered by the wind as it howled past, the air around him becoming colder and damper. Ben’s body flailed desperately as he tried to grasp anything to slow his fall, grabbing wildly, yet his desire to lessen the inevitable painful landing became secondary to the piercing awareness of putrid smells. He was being assaulted by a string of odours: first the sea then an earthy smell followed by a thick smoke which began to fill his lungs, causing him to cough and gasp for breath.

Choking, his thoughts came as a jumbled mess. Until suddenly… silence.

Chapter Two:

A drawing of a cat

Description automatically generated with low confidence

As Ben regained consciousness, his immediate thoughts were of his heart which felt like it was trying to burst from his chest and his head as it pounded like drums, sending a rhythmic thudding round his head. Next, he became aware of a steady trickling down the side of his face. He tentatively raised a hand, touching the sticky wetness. Desperately hoping it was just rain yet knowing it was not, he bought his hand down and stared at the drops of dark red blood on his fingers. He must have cut his head during the fall. Yanking a tissue out of his pocket to stem the flow, Ben swiftly checked the rest of his body. His heart was beginning to settle, and he was relieved to find that the wound on his head had stopped bleeding.

Ben willed the fuzziness swimming inside of his head to clear and soon was able to carefully look around. He realised that he had fallen into the steep entrance of a passageway of some kind. The walls were made from layers of cold, slimy, grey, flat stone, piled high on top of each other and covered by mud and grass. All except for the small section that he had tumbled into, as that part had become loose sending slabs crashing randomly across the entrance, blocking it. His mind tried to make sense of how he could have been falling for so long, yet it was only a small wall (his vision having cleared, he saw that it couldn’t have been more than a metre high). His confusion was swiftly replaced by a feeling of dread which suddenly rose inside of him. *`Oh no. He was going to be in such trouble. What happened to boys that broke historical ruins?’* Images of handcuffs, jail bars and a scary looking judge banging his gavel threatened to overwhelm him. He had to get out.

A person standing in a cave

Description automatically generated

He needed to get as far away as possible so no one would know that the broken wall was *his* fault. *If* indeed it was. Maybe it was already like that… Unwilling to hang around to find out, Ben saw that his only route to escape now that the entrance was blocked, would be by climbing the slimy rock wall. He reached up and tried to pull himself out yet was still shaky and unable to get a firm grip, resulting in him repeatedly sliding down, painfully banging his hands and knees.

Ben was sat, desperately trying to will his body back to normal, and rubbing aching patches, when he became aware of a noise. It was a mumbling, grumbling sound, barely audible over the screech of the howling wind which had mysteriously intensified since his fall. What if it was a security guard? Should he run? But where to? It looked like a maze down here and he already knew that he couldn’t escape the way he had come in due to the rubble caused by his fall.

Nervous but intrigued, Ben slowly stood up and peered into the eerie darkness of the long, winding passage. His curiosity overpowering his fear, he carefully switched on the torch on his phone and entered the tunnel, his other hand on the wall, slowly feeling his way. The tunnel was cramped, possibly as narrow as a metre, and combined with the low ceiling, it meant his progress was slow as he was forced to move slowly, bent over, peering into the gloom and trying not to bang against the occasional protruding slab. The wall was cold and slightly damp, allowing him nothing to grip when the uneven floor seemingly disappeared under him.

The further into the passage he went, the quieter the noise of the wind, and louder the other grumbling sound became until he found its source. It was the boy he had seen earlier. He was huddled against one of the walls, his knees tucked into his chest and his head hanging towards the floor.

Relieved that it wasn’t an adult come to blame him for the wall’s collapse, Ben was considering what to do when he dropped his phone, the torch immediately clicking off as it hit the floor. Thank goodness for the protective screen Ben thought gratefully.

The boy slowly raised angry eyes, preparing to glare at Ben, a spiteful retort on his lips. In the same moment, Ben’s blind fumbling managed to turn the torchlight back on. Instantly, the boy began to scramble hurriedly away, deeper into the tunnel, the angry glimmer replaced by the look of deepest fear.

Puzzled, Ben tried to chase after him, but each time he stepped closer the boy would nervously shuffle back.

“It’s ok, I’m not going to harm you”

The boy was now backed into what looked to be a dead end. With seemingly nowhere to go, he knelt down, took a deep breath and raised his hands protectively over himself.

A picture containing text, mammal

Description automatically generatedUncertain how to respond to this bizarre behaviour, Ben simply stared in confusion.

“Look… I didn’t mean to…” Ben began; however he was briefly rendered speechless as in the hazy light of the torch he was able to see the boy clearly for the first time. His hair was dark and shaggy, just touching the furry cape draped over his shoulders and hanging in clumps as though it hadn’t been brushed for months. He looked to be wearing leggings yet hanging between his legs was what seemed to be an animal skin skirt, and to top it off he was wearing fur shoes (strangely giving the impression that he had a rabbit on each foot!).

“Why are you dressed all odd like that and what are you grumbling about?" Ben queried.

No response.

What was going on? After a few moments of tense silence, Ben decided that the only possibly explanation could be that this boy was one of those actors who dress up and pretend to be from the place a long time ago, what were they called… historical actors? Hmm, Ben had never come across one of these before and assumed that he was expected to join in. Summing up everything he knew so far about the Stone Age from comics and cartoons, Ben bent forward, hung his head and hands down like a monkey and replied “ug.”

The boy continued to kneel yet the look on his face was steadily changing from fear and awe to stunned uncertainty.

Feeling exasperated and recognising that his efforts had not been appreciated, Ben impatiently barked; “Would you please get up and tell me what’s wrong and how on earth I can get out of this tunnel?”

Still no response except that look of shock and doubt. Taking a deep, steadying breath Ben tried once more.

“Hi, my name’s Ben. What’s your name?”

The boy slowly lifting his head a fraction, and hesitantly replied “Hello Ben, my name is `Adhar-uiseag’ it means `Skylark’. How are you making it daylight inside the tunnels? Has the Goddess given you the great sun’s power?”

“The Goddess? But… Oh right, got it, you are in character. Ok.” With a deep breath and in his biggest booming, important sounding voice Ben said; “`Yes, the great Mother Goddess has given me power over night and day’. How was that? Oh, you can get up by the way.”

Looking awed the boy gradually sat up. “How did you get your powers? I don’t recognise you from any of the nearby villages. Where are you from?’ A look of hate crept over his face as he suddenly added; `Are you one of those leavers? Surely the great Goddess would not favour a self-centred leaver with such a gift?” His voice had turned from one full of admiration to a snarl as he hissed the final sentence.

Responding purely to the penultimate question, and ignoring the rest, Ben raised his hands to calm the boy, and said “I don’t know what a leaver is. I just came here to visit and got trapped, anyway, why are you grumbling?”

The boy, obviously appeased, appeared reluctant or unable to drag his eyes away from the light of the torch, his arms warily waving in the light, as if trying to catch it. Struggling to focus, he looked at Ben.

“Sorry. You just caught me in a bit of a bad mood. My best friend and his family have decided to leave and start up their own farm somewhere away from the rest of us. He says his parents have had enough of being part of the village and want a place of their own, but I think they’re just being selfish as that means that as well as fewer workers to tend the land, I’ll also have no one else to play with. Well, except the little kids who just cry or hang onto their mothers or the ones who think they are too grown up to play and are too busy impressing the girls!” Suddenly Skylark’s face coloured, and he fell back into a bow. “I’m sorry, what would someone with such power want to know of my troubles?”

Ben was amazed by how well the boy – Skylark – acted. He was really getting into his role. Ben liked doing drama at school but knew he couldn’t be as realistic as Skylark was being! Figuring that maybe this trip wasn’t going to be that boring after all he asked.

“Look, can we stop with the power talk please? It’s just my phone.”

Once more, Skylark reluctantly came out of his bow and stared at Ben, nodding hesitantly, as if unable to believe what he was seeing.

“So, do you, uh, want to show me round then?” Ben asked.

Skylark glanced behind him. “Well, I’m supposed to be out with the sheep but… Alright. Let’s grab some food from my place first.”

Ben struggled to keep up as Skylark rushed ahead in the darkness, confidently turning this corner and that along branching passages, avoiding loose stones and seeming completely unaware of the near total lack of light. As Ben stumbled along, keeping his head down to avoid the low ceiling and aiming his torchlight as best as he could, he briefly glanced carvings along the tunnel. They appeared to be of animals and people but would disappear as he sped around the next corner or tripped over an unseen obstacle. The smoky smell which had been so overpowering at first, but thankfully dulled, now intensified as they got near to what appeared to be a dead end. There was something familiar yet very unpleasant about the stench. It wasn’t like bonfire smoke or a barbeque. It had a strangely salty twang to it and, what was worse, mixed with the burning, salty fishiness, was an odd whiff of poo!

While Ben was desperately trying not to breathe this putrid smell in too deeply, Skylark had been banging what appeared to be a rhythm on the wall ahead of them, next to another of the drawings. Abruptly, there was the sound of something heavy being lifted followed by a loud scraping noise and then slowly, incredibly slowly, the large stone boulder in front of them began to steadily move open, letting light creep into the dark tunnel.

It was with much relief that Ben found himself bending low and going through a small doorway into what looked to be a room. It was brightly lit by a fire blazing in the middle (allowing him to save his batteries and drop the arm holding the phone down). A kind of stone table stood in front of the fire and what seemed to be incredibly short beds on either side holding a straw and heather mattress and topped with animal skin covers. The bed on the right seemed slightly bigger than the one on the left but otherwise identical. Two thoughts immediately raced across his mind; 1) how can four people fit into two beds, were the big ones for adults and little for kids? and 2) did Skylark and his family sleep sitting up and why? However, there was no time for further questions as his gaze continued to take in the various extraordinary cupboards and shelves made of stone dotted around the room in addition to the two sunken stone boxes full of water. Once he had fully taken in the unusual room and its decorations, he looked up and was intrigued to see wooden beams supporting a low roof made of animal skins. Hanging from the beam was a large chunk of meat and some fish. Ben realised that the overpowering smell had been caused by this fire as there was only a small hole in the roof through which to let it escape.



Finally bringing his eyes to focus on the people in the room, considering whether it would be rude to ask if he could take a photo, he heard the woman who had opened the door shriek accusingly “What are you doing back here?” Glancing down, Ben noticed a toddler clinging on to the woman’s leg staring wide eyed at him.

“Calm down. It’s alright Mum. The sheep are fine and look, I met a newcomer. He’s magic! Look, he can control daylight!’ At this Skylark turned to Ben, waiting for him to turn his torch back on. Feeling very self-conscious and that perhaps this was taking their roles just a little too far, Ben reluctantly got his phone out and demonstrated. The woman immediately clasped her hand to her chest and began to bow.

“No please. Stop bowing. It’s just my torch!” Ben gasped, desperately embarrassed.

Looking proudly at his new friend Skylark spoke:

“We were just grabbing a snack before I showed him around. I thought he might want to see the workshop. Is Dad there?”

Visibly relaxing, yet obviously reluctant to leave her bow, the woman slowly uncurled, replying “Yes he is but first sit down and introduce me to your magical friend. My name is Crèadhadair[[2]](#footnote-2), (just call me Ady). We are honoured to meet someone so blessed by the Mother Goddess. Are you here trading or just visiting the burial chambers and standing stones?” she asked, gently moving the small child and giving her some strange dice to play with.

Having settled the child, Ady gestured for Ben to sit on what looked suspiciously like a dead deer, or it’s skin at least. As he sat, he took the opportunity to study the other woman. She was sat in a corner of the room grinding something in a large stone pot. His mums back turned briefly, Skylark quietly whispered to Ben as they sat down “that’s Nan. She’s great but terrible at grinding wheat and barley now she’s so old. Just isn’t as strong as she used to be. Mum will probably have to do it again, but at least Nan feels useful.”

Unsure how to respond to either person, Ben focussed on getting used to the flickering, smoky light of the room. He noticed that Ady was wearing a necklace made of what appeared to be bones and teeth.

A close-up of a bracelet

Description automatically generated with low confidence

Ben was just thinking how impressed he was by the realism in this historical act when Ady gave him a pottery bowl full of berries. A bowl? And one decorated with lines and swirls? But surely Stone Age people didn’t have bowls. Forgetting her question and worried that these nice people may get in trouble with their boss for not sticking to the right props he carefully thought about how he should save them embarrassment by gently pointing this out.

“Um. I hate to be a pain, but Stone Age people didn’t have bowls, especially not decorated ones like this” he gently explained.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you like it?” asked Ady, peering at him and then his bowl, her face dropping with dismay.

 

Swiftly interrupting his Mum, Skylark proudly announced; “My mum made that bowl, great, isn’t it? See those patterns? They took ages and no one else in the village can do them like that.” Ben couldn’t fail to notice how proud he looked and how widely he was beaming at her.

Keen not to offend, Ben decided to change the subject, automatically eating a handful of berries while he thought.

“You said your friend was moving away. I thought the tour guide said you all lived together?” (Ben hadn’t meant to hear what the guide was saying but some of it seemed to have entered his ears no matter how determined he had been to ignore him).

Skylark sadly raised his eyes, until he was looking directly at Ben, his initial hesitancy gone now the torch was off and he was in his own home. “We do. Well, we did. It’s always been that way. There used to be over fifty of us in our village. My Mum, Dad, Nan, brothers and little sister share this room, and others live with their families just like this. We’re lucky as we don’t have to share with aunts and uncles too.” Skylark immediately looked embarrassed and gabbled; “Not that I wanted them to get hurt. I mean, I wasn’t. They knew...”

His Mum threw him a reassuring look, yet her face reflected his pain.  *I wonder what happened to them*, Ben thought.

Skylark continued. “The families live together, and we all work together looking after the village, some hunt, some fish, some work the land and others work here in the village. It’s great because we all help each other and therefore we have loads of food and nice clothes and everything.” Skylark’s face became suddenly thoughtful; “I can’t even imagine what it would have been like in Nan’s day when the men all went out hunting while the women gathered food. They must have been hungry so often. Anyway,” Skylark shook his head as if breaking himself out of a fog of unpleasant thought, “recently some of the families have been getting greedy. They say that there is better land to farm in other places and they want to live by themselves. Yet, what will happen to the rest of us if the farmers or the fishermen go? Who will take their place? Where will we get our meat and fish from? Look”

Skylark moved over to one of the small tanks in the floor and stuck his hand in. When he slowly bought it back up Ben was surprised to see that he had a handful of small limpets which had been stored in a waterproof stone tub.

A picture containing invertebrate

Description automatically generated

“We can all use these to catch fish but only the little ones. Not enough for the entire family!” he spat, a look of disgust on his face.

“Enough of that my boy” clucked his mum, taking his empty bowl from him. “I’m sure your friend knows all about it if he lives nearby. Go out and show him around. If you see his family do invite them over, I have some lovely deer cooking over the fire, and they can share a meal with us before they move on.”

Ben’s head was reeling as he followed Skylark out of the room and back into the maze, his torch held out in front of him.

Chapter Three

The tunnel was low, narrow and winding and after several minutes of their crouched progress, he recognised that it connected several houses, each with a stone door and the same overpowering stench of smoke.

A person sitting in a stone tunnel

Description automatically generated with low confidence

It was strange, as Ben couldn’t remember seeing any smoke when he had left the coach, but then again, the car park was quite a distance from the village, and he had been more interested in finding a café and a toilet. Whoops. A toilet. Actually, he could really do with one right now. Ben wished he had used the toilet at the car park but had been so keen to escape from the others that he had simply fled. An action which he now regretted.

“Um, Skylark. I’m really enjoying this Stone Age business, but can I just run back to the loos and then meet up with you? I really need a wee.”

His new friend turned and looked at him with a confused expression. “What is a `loo’ and `wee’? I’m sorry but I don’t know those words. Maybe they are special to your village?” Skylark replied.

Ben was beginning to feel desperate and found himself fidgeting, rocking from side to side as the pressure on his bladder increased.

“Look mate. I mean it. It’s great all this pretending, but can you show me where the nearest toilet is please or there’s going to be a nasty puddle and your boss won’t be too impressed!”

Ben watched carefully as Skylark once again stared at him in – what appeared to be - genuine confusion. Could it be that he truly didn’t understand? But surely even in the most remote parts of Scotland people knew what `wee’ and `loo’ was. Didn’t they? Unless… The only alternative was too intense for Ben to focus on right at that minute and, feeling desperate, he hurriedly fiddled with his phone thinking he could find a photo on the internet, only to remember that there was absolutely no signal. Nothing. The display didn’t even show the time and what’s worse was that the battery was running low. Giving up on the idea of showing a photo of a toilet, Ben resorted to rather embarrassingly, miming going to the toilet.

Understanding swiftly flashed in Skylark’s eyes and he turned and sped to the nearest stone door. Repeating the strange knocking sequence, they waited while the scrape and crunching noises of the bar being lifted and stone being moved came from in front of them. Ben swiftly turned off his torch to avoid any more odd bowing.

While Skylark briefly explained their predicament to the woman inside, Ben noticed that this home was nearly identical to the other. Aware that the conversation had stopped, he saw that the woman was pointing to Ben and then to a smaller enclosed area set into the corner of the room. Red with embarrassment Ben could only stare. There was no way he was peeing in a corner!

Sensing Ben’s concern, Skylark reassuringly told him; “Our ancestors were really clever and put in drains, so we don’t have to leave the shelter during cold weather. Look!” Reluctantly Ben followed. To his astonishment it wasn’t just a corner but there was in fact a kind of toilet area and, once shown how to use it, Ben realised that he had no option.



Feeling relieved, yet slightly nervous at having gone to the toilet in the museum itself, and glad his Mum had forced him to bring his hand gel (as the only other option to wash his hands would be in the sunken boxes full of limpet, ugh) Ben felt he ought to talk to the woman who had let him in. She was sat on a boulder at the side of the room concentrating. First, she would pick up a small stick, look carefully at it, then pick up a pebble and put it onto the skin on the table in front of her. Walking towards her, he realised that she was dressed in skins like Skylark’s mum yet at first glance she appeared to be wearing no jewellery. Instead, she had an assortment of tiny bones pinned to her skins and was surrounded by oddly shaped tiny pebbles with holes in. Ben turned to Skylark and quietly, so the woman wouldn’t hear, asked what she was doing. “This is Fuaigheal-putan. It means `button sewer’. We call her Fey. She’s in charge of any sewing that needs doing. Remember I said we all have jobs? Well, my Mum makes the pottery, and Fey here sews.”

Having thanked Fey, the boys left the home and after a brief time, and much to Ben’s relief they left the damp, airless tunnels and entered the bright sunshine. Stumbling whilst his eyes readjusted to the light, he accidentally bumped straight into a very tall, and very angry looking girl.

“Oi. Watch out. Can’t you see I’m standing here?”

Skylark quickly interrupted her:

“Gearan[[3]](#footnote-3). Stop it!” he shouted, moving quickly over, and whispering into her ear. Ben could just about pick out the words light and powers before the girl’s initial frosty stare morphed into a look of awe and wonder.

Oh no, she’s going to start bowing, thought Ben quickly thrusting his phone into his pocket.

The girl was around Ben’s height and was dressed in a similar fashion to the others, her hair hanging long and lank, tangled against her tanned skin. As he looked closer, he noticed that the tops of her fingers were stained black and red, the nails short, as if bitten or regularly torn. Aware that he was staring, Ben introduced himself.

Skylark, keen to stop his sister before she could respond, interrupted “This is Gerry, she’s my sister and is always moaning. Rather than being pleased that our ancestors were so clever that we have drains, and farming and time to explore art and games, she just goes on about how women aren’t treated the same as men anymore.”

Ben looked at his friend blankly, encouraging him to explain.

“You see, in the old days, the men hunted while the women gathered fruit and berries and stuff, with both treated equally as both were equally needed. However, now that we farm the land and use animals to help, men are more physically suited to those jobs. Plus now there’s more to eat and we aren’t constantly moving there are more children to look after so the women stay inside looking after them. She won’t accept that everyone is *still* equal, we have just changed now that life has changed. She sees it as some huge injustice instead of common sense and using people’s skills and abilities.”

Seething, Gerry spat; “If only my great great Grandmother hadn’t noticed that seeds would grow and told everyone! I wish she had just kept quiet!”

Fully focussed on what appeared to be a long running argument, Skylark retorted; “How can you be upset that she helped us find out about farming? Surely you don’t want to go back to the old way of wandering around, not having our own crops, living in tents, following animals and hunting them to eat? You wouldn’t have your favourite copper and bronze items either because our ancestors didn’t trade. They were too busy trying to stay alive and find food! Now we have better tools and so much more food, we have our own homes and are comfortable, plus there is now time to make jewellery and pottery and have bigger families.”

Ben listened carefully, Skylark and Gerry’s quarrel sparked words from the brochure his parents had forced him to read to appear in his mind: Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic. From what the pair were saying it sounded like they were describing the beginning of the Neolithic period. That seemed to fit in with some of the other stuff he’d seen too.

Unaware of Ben’s revelation and growing understanding, Gerry continued her rant, huffing in response “Why would I want a bigger family? I already have one brother too many!”

“You know what I meant. Would you really rather our Mum was out in fields ferreting around for food instead of doing the pottery she loves?”

Realising that her brother had won the argument this time, Gerry flicked her hair and growled “what are you doing here anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be with the sheep?”

Grabbing hold of Ben’s wrist, Skylark mumbled a reply and ran.

Chapter Four

Safely away from Gerry and her foul mood, the boys stood, laughing and panting. The continuous blasts of cool, fresh air, combined with the ability to finally stand up, away from the cramped conditions of the tunnel, allowed Ben to soak up his surroundings. Until then he hadn’t had a chance to really look around, and to be perfectly honest, he hadn’t wanted to. Yet after the strange series of events since his arrival, Ben found that his interest had been peaked.

Who were these strange people who lived in a museum?

How could everything be so real yet so odd?

While he had been catching his breath something had been nagging at his brain. What was it? Realisation dawned. It was quiet. Too quiet. Where were the familiar sounds of snapping of camera phones, the chatter of tourists, or even the distant crunch of gravel from the car park beyond. Instead, all he had heard since his fall were the sounds of the distant sea and the wind blowing forcefully onto the land. That was another weird thing. The sea had moved! Whereas before, when he had walked along the path from the coach, he could clearly see the beach the other side of the village, now it seemed to be much further away behind sandy dunes and patches of coarse, tough grass.

His focus moving from his ears to his eye, he glanced around noting the heather, thatch and turf roofs rising from the ground, the only evidence of the village beneath them. That was odd. He was sure he heard the guide saying only one of the ruins had a roof. Hmm, perhaps he had heard wrong? Yet that was just another weird thing to add to so many already. Slowly turning in a circle on the spot, trying to get his bearings, he looked for the visitor centre. Where was it?

Ben retraced his steps in his mind, working backwards from the tunnel entrance he had fallen into. He had passed over a long stone covered path, through a gate, so the building should have been… There was nothing where he looked except endless fields. Ok, let’s try again. Yet no matter how hard he tried, Ben couldn’t work out where the building had gone. What was more strange is that not very far in the distance he could see 12 enormous stones which formed a kind of circle and some big mounds of earth. Where was the main road? He remembered seeing signs to a hotel, storytelling centre (he vividly remembered that because it sounded so intriguing) and a bird of prey centre. Even the old farm building had vanished.

A horrible, unsettled feeling began to creep up on him. What was going on? How was all this possible? It wasn’t! There was only one solution yet that made no sense. What if, and he felt mad even considering this, what if everything he had seen and experienced wasn’t part of the museum, after all. An actor would have taken him to the toilets, not told him to wee in a corner of the museum, wouldn’t they?

Deciding that he should focus on one thing at a time, or he would begin to panic he looked back at the village. The way the buildings were sunken into the earth, with only the roofs standing out was so clever considering how cold it was, even in August, although, he mused, it had appeared to get a tiny bit warmer since his fall. Anyway, he couldn’t begin to imagine how bitterly cold it must get in the winter. Perhaps if he had realised how clever Stone Age people must have been, he may have been less reluctant to go on this silly trip with his parents.

He gasped. His parents! A sudden image of his parents flashed into his head. Would they be worrying about him? Looking around he could see only a couple of historical actors playing their roles, no-one else. His mind started swimming with fears. He still hadn’t told anyone about breaking the wall. What if someone from the coach came and fell but weren’t as lucky as he had been and really hurt themselves? Grabbing his phone from his pocket where he had hastily shoved it, Ben turned jerkily in every direction, moving this way and that desperately trying to get a signal so he would call his parents to warn them. Yet, no matter how hard he tried there was no signal. Nothing.

Ben felt torn between his desire to find his parents so he could reassure himself that he was not going mad, and his urge to discover where his new friend was taking him and what might happen next. After a brief internal battle, Ben decided that his parents were probably so busy with their tour guide and set of historical actors that they wouldn’t notice if he was running late and that just because he had fallen didn’t mean anyone else would.

Decision made, although guilt nagging at the back of his mind, Ben’s thoughts returned to the lack of noise and the realistic props and actors, determining that finding the answer to that mystery was just one more reason to stay just a little longer…

Turning to Skylark, intending to question him about this, he saw that his friend’s face was ablaze with excitement and pride. In an instant, Ben found himself once again being pulled, only this time it was towards a building which stood alone, away from the others. Although it wasn’t linked by tunnels, it did seem to be made from the same stone and had a roof made of heather, similar to those he had just seen. The smell of smoke wasn’t as intense here though, as, without the passageways acting as a funnel, it could rise through the small hole or door to escape rather than being forced back onto the approaching visitor. The door stood ajar, and Skylark motioned for Ben to go in first, finger to his lips.

Entering the gloom, Bens eyes were immediately drawn to the fire burning brightly in the centre. It’s flames furiously flickering, leaping and jumping, sending showers of sparks in all directions. All around it were stone benches, pots of water, pebbles and tools, with thick layers of fine dust on every available surface and immediately covering Ben’s shoes. Pairs of antlers and small tusks were lying in the entrance, the dim daylight which had managed to pierce the dark doorway highlighting the traces of dried blood on the ends. Despite the unusual selection of objects in the room, he felt his gaze being drawn by an invisible force away from the familiar firelight to the distorted shapes rising and falling, creeping throughout the room. The shadows. They were everywhere. Shadows huddling in corners. Darker in some places, sending shivers down his spine, causing the hair on the back of his neck to rise and a feeling of dread to grow in his stomach. As his eyes became accustomed to the dark, eery surroundings, he became aware of a much bigger, more intense shadow. This shadow wasn’t jumping around the room, caused by the flickering flames. Instead of growing and waning in the firelight it was behaving differently, as if alive. It was huge and it seemed to be moving. Not only was it moving but it was moving towards the boys. Ben held his breath in fear, not realising what he was doing until he felt himself gasping for air. All the while panicking: what was the shadow? Why was it coming steadily towards them? And then he saw it emerging from the darkness …an enormous, beast and it was looking right at him!

Chapter Five

Ben found himself instinctively shrinking back in fear as the large, hairy creature grunted, slowly extending its huge hairy arms towards him. As it lumbered ever closer, Ben felt his pulse quicken, the blood pounding loudly in his ears causing him to freeze on the spot in terror. Barely a metre from Ben the creature suddenly stopped, grabbed something from the shelf beside him, and returned to his original position, banging and swinging sticks and bones. Adrenalin was rushing through Ben’s veins giving him the strength to finally move. He turned to the entrance ready to urge Skylark to run and was puzzled by his expression. Oblivious to the danger, Skylark’s face remained completely unchanged, the proud, excited gleam still shining as he pushed at Ben to move so that he could enter. Hoping to save his friend from the hideous sight, he grabbed Skylark’s arm and tried to pull him away. Ignoring Ben’s insistent pulling Skylark kept moving further into the dark room. Deciding that no matter how amazing this place was it simply wasn’t worth being eaten over, and that Skylark would no doubt join him as soon as he saw what was inside, Ben turned and fled. He wasn’t sure how long he ran, or where he was going. He just knew he had to get as far away as possible.

Lungs burning and breath coming in shallow rasps, Ben ran. Ignoring the temptation to turn, he pushed himself forward, drawing on every ounce of energy he could muster. His feet briefly noted the change from thick, rough grass to sand, causing him to slip and grasp onto rocks to push himself back up and on until finally, he could move no more, and he collapsed, gasping for air.

Ben’s panicked route had taken him away from the village, over the fields and onto the beach where rocks containing narrow entrances to natural caves backed onto the sea wall. He had slipped into the nearest crevice, hoping that he could hide here safely until he felt able to gather his bearings and work out how to return to the safety of the café and his parents.

Slowly, Ben’s heart began to return to its usual pace, quietening the thudding which had been in his ears and chest. With the silence a shameful realisation dawned… he had left Skylark to a terrible fate! A sudden intense feeling of guilt overwhelmed him. Sitting feeling miserable, torn between fear and confusion, Ben’s ears began to tune back to the sounds of the world around him. Alongside the roaring wind and crashing waves, he felt sure he could hear his name being called. Straining to focus on the voice being ripped away by the relentless sounds of the wind, Ben was puzzled and relieved to realise that the voice was Skylark’s. But… How could he have escaped that awful, gigantic beast? The feelings of shame again arising, like bile moving from his stomach up to his throat, threatening to overpower him, Ben made a decision. If his friend had survived, despite being abandoned and left trapped with a monster, then Ben had to help him and bring him to the safety of the cave.

Carefully sliding through the gap in the rocks, Ben struggled to open his eyes as the wind was now gently whipping up piles of sand and throwing them in all directions. Squinting, he could just see Skylark’s outline, and, with a quick grabbing movement, Ben reached for him and pulled him to safety.

“Why did you run?” Skylark asked, anger and confusion in his voice. “One minute I was introducing you and the next you had disappeared.”

“Introducing me? Why on earth would I want to be introduced to a hideous, ferocious monster?”

Puzzled, Skylark raised an eyebrow and peered curiously at Ben. “What monster? No one else was there. Just you, me and my dad. I know he was in a bad mood but...”

Understanding flooded through Ben, and with it waves of embarrassment, bringing unwanted heat to his cheeks and making him hang his head, unable to meet his friend’s eye. It all made sense now. The bones, stones and sticks, the fire, Skylark’s lack of fear. What he had thought was a monster due to the size and shadow was actually his dad; hot, sweaty, and covered in animal skins!

“I’m so sorry. I thought… Well, it doesn’t matter.” Ben’s eyes awkwardly dropped to the floor.

“Nah, it’s ok. I am just surprised that someone with magic powers could be scared” Skylark teased.

Realising that all was forgiven, Ben agreed to return to the village. As they walked back over the white, sandy beach, Ben marvelled at how clean it was, and totally devoid of any litter. He guessed there must have been a whole team of litter pickers working daily in order for it to stay that perfect. His mind wandered to memories of places he had visited in Cornwall and Wales, where even the best kept beaches had the occasional crisp packets and empty cans strewn around.

During the walk the boys chatted. At first it was clumsy, neither boy knowing what to talk about until Ben asked Skylark about his village.

“How long have you lived here. Um worked here?” Ben was unsure which word to use as either Skylark was an amazing actor or… He gulped.

“What do you mean? My family have lived here since my great, great, great grandparents built the village. Maybe even before then.”

Ben had moved three times already in his life due to his parent’s jobs, so he was initially surprised by this response, but assumed Skylark was just staying in character. Trying a different approach whilst simultaneously hoping to answer a question which had been bugging him, he asked.

“Why is the sea so far away from your village?”

Puzzled, Skylark stopped walking and turned to face Ben. “Far away? Don’t you mean close? Stories say that when my ancestors first lived here the sea was two fields away, but now it is just one. My parents think that the Mother Goddess keeps reclaiming land so that we might have more seafood to eat.”

Ben had no time to reply to this weird statement as they had now arrived back at the workshop. Thinking this might be a good opportunity for a photo, Ben began pacing the entrance, looking for the best position.

“Hey” Skylark called as he began to enter the building.

“Yes?” replied Ben, still looking around.

Skylark’s face erupted into an enormous grin; “You’re not scared, are you?”

“No, of course not. Not now I know. But I wanted to take a selfie. Do you want to be in it with me? It’d be so cool to show my friends.”

Skylark’s dirty, tanned face took on a look of confusion.

“Selfie?”

“Yeah, you know” Ben turned so that they were stood together with the workshop framed behind them. Just as he was about to press the button Skylark shrieked and began looking around desperately.

“What’s wrong?” Ben asked

Stuttering and continuing to look in all directions Skylark stammered a response “How did you put yourself into that box and who was that beside you?”

“It’s ok, look, it’s just a camera. See? If I turn it this way it shows the village, or this way, I can see me. Do you want a go?” Ben passed the phone over to Skylark, hoping that it wouldn’t get dropped by his friends’ shaking, nervous hands.

Cautiously lifting the phone, Skylark peered into the screen. As he stared at the face shown on the display, he timidly lifted his other hand and touched his face, marvelling at the way the image copied his every move. Every so often he would peer behind the screen, as if looking to see the cause of this magic effect.

After a few moments, Ben took the phone gently from him and positioned himself next to Skylark, hoping that his friend would stay still enough for a decent shot. Click.

“What was that noise?” Asked Skylark

“Oh, that’s just the sound effects. I ought to turn it off, but I like the old-fashioned clatter. Anyway, look, see.” He held the phone out so that Skylark could see the image of them with the village framed behind.

Skylark stared, an enormous smile on his face. Once more, this time more confidently, taking the phone, Skylark began experimenting; alternately taking photos of himself, Ben and the village, before eagerly stating; “we absolutely have to show Dad this. He’s amazing at making stuff. Maybe he could make one for me too.”

Feeling doubtful that the battery would last that long as it was already down to 10%, but unwilling to destroy his new friends’ hope, Ben followed him into the workshop. As they entered, Skylark’s Dad moved towards the fire, smiling.

Now he knew what to expect Ben was less scared, he realised that the man wasn’t that big at all. Nearly as tall as his dad in fact. It had just been the mix of intense smell, lack of light and overwhelming fear which had led his mind to create the huge monster, although, Ben chuckled to himself, he was rather hairy!

“Shut the door Skylark will you, that wind is really getting up and I don’t want it to put the fire out.”

As Skylark slowly pushed the door closed, Ben looked at his dad. He was dressed in a similar way to Skylark, the furry shoes and skirt-like shorts made from a reddy brown fur.

Just as Skylark opened his mouth to blurt out about the camera, his Dad spoke: “Sorry I scared you boy, the man said in a gruff but friendly voice. Do you want to see what I am doing?”

Ben cautiously walked closer, steering clear of the bright fire burning fiercely in the centre of the room, throwing out intense heat. Skylark’s Dad showed how he used a large stone which he had chipped to the rough shape of a tool and then rubbed it with a thick, rough rock to remove the chip scars from the working edge to make tools which the villagers could use for farming or fishing.  As Ben watched, he understood that the bones weren’t discarded animals from ferocious meals but were also what he used to make tools! Forcing himself to think back he remembered the guide having said something as they were parking about them using bones and a special local stone called chert to create shovels, knives and so on. Despite being a meat eater himself, part of Ben liked the fact that no part of the animal was wasted.

Ben was fascinated by the process and despite the heat and stuffiness could happily have stayed watching for hours. However, the scraping sound of the heavy stone door being opened and the resulting blast of sandy wind which flew in caused the lesson to end abruptly.

“Sorry to interrupt you, but the wind is building, and the sand is being blown heavily onto the village. It looks like there is a massive storm coming and we need to help the others get to safety.”

The man, having delivered his message, turned and left, eager to get on with the evacuation, leaving Ben to stare at Skylark and his dad in confusion.

Skylark’s Dad began hurriedly gathering tools and other useful bits while Skylark explained; “Although the village is a little away from the sea the force of the winds can bring huge amounts of sand down. If any of us were to be in our homes, we could be trapped or even worse… buried alive! We need to help get the villagers to safety and fast.”

Alarmed by the intensity of his voice and buoyed by his courage, Ben nodded.

“What do we need to do?”

A picture containing outdoor, track, traveling, dirt

Description automatically generatedChapter Six

Ben was feeling hot, tired and gritty from the constant blast of sand mixed with salty sea spray. His first reaction to the news had been to try to call for help on his phone, but as soon as he got it out of his pocket, vainly fighting the growing wind which made every movement a struggle, he realised that his phone, even if he could get a signal, would be of no help. The battery had run out.

Without the help of the emergency services and only the inhabitants to help, the villagers worked together in their efforts to move all the animals to an area shielded from the worst of the wind, forcing frightened cattle and sheep to move to safety. In the brief breaks between strong gusts, Skylark explained that although these sandstorms happened annually, they had become increasingly fierce in recent years. This had meant that not only did they have to regularly move all the animals and villagers, but the crops were becoming affected! “If it continues, my dad thinks we won’t be able to grow cereals soon as the ground will be ruined.”

Ben pretended not to see Skylark hastily wiping the tear, which was making its way down his cheek, leaving a salty trail. He was beginning to understand why he had been so upset when they had met. The combination of people moving away to form their own farms and the possibility that the land would be useless soon would have been scary, as the land, and enough people to tend it, were vital to having enough food.

The wind was now so loud that the boys needed to shout to each other to be heard despite standing close and even then, only snippets of words could be understood. Grateful to get out of the biting wind which had been lashing sand onto them, as if trying to scratch and claw away the very skin on their faces, Ben bent down and once again entered the tunnels. Villagers had worked hard ensuring that the very young and elderly were helped from their homes, but Skylark’s Nan was refusing to go despite her daughter’s efforts at persuasion.

A picture containing mountain, outdoor, smoke, background

Description automatically generated“Wow, am I thankful to see you!” said his Mum as they entered the room. “I was so worried. Your Dad and brothers are helping the last of the elderly get to safety and I really need to get your sister away but Nan refuses to leave. I don’t know what to do!” with that she slumped onto a stone, rested her head in her hands and began to sob.

Skylark’s eyes briefly lit and he turned hopefully to Ben. Can you use your Goddess magic to help us? She has given you the power of light and to capture our images, surely she will help you now?

Ben felt his gut wrench as he realised that no matter how great his phone was, it was useless against the powerful force of the sandstorm. In fact, he could think of little modern technology which could help them now. Sadly shaking his head, he told Skylark this.

Moments passed and the three of them were silent, the only noise the wind howling in the entrance of the tunnels, and the occasional crash as something came loose and struck the roofs. The roofs themselves seemed to be hanging on by a thread, every so often being lifted by a particularly strong gust.

Abruptly, Skylark seemed to grow taller, standing himself up to his full height, a gleam of determination shining in his eyes. “Don’t worry Mum. You take her to safety and Ben and I will sort Nan out. I saw Fey on our way in and I know they have a soft spot for each-other. If anyone can persuade her, she can, and she doesn’t have any children of her own to look after so she will be free.”

Reluctantly accepting the logic in his statement and making him promise that he would be quick and meet her safely with the others, Ady gave them both a final hug, scooped up his little sister and was gone, leaving Ben to stare at Skylark.

Spurred on by his Mum’s faith in him, Skylark rushed out of his home and was quickly back with the woman from earlier. Desperately trying to forget the embarrassing fact that he had been to the toilet in this lady’s room and no longer concerned over what was real and what wasn’t, but simply that they needed to get to safety and fast, Ben asked how he could help.

Between the three of them they tried every trick, plea, and method of coaxing to make the old woman change her mind, but, for some unfathomable reason, Nan had stubbornly decided that she was too old to leave the home and that the sandstorm would just have to go around her. As time passed, the sounds of the storm outside had become more intense, bringing sand down the hole in the roof and eventually covering the fire in such a deep layer of sand that the boys could no longer keep it alight. Feeling desperate Skylark turned to Ben. “You need to go. I’ll stay with Nan. You go and find the others and wait until the storm passes. We’ll meet again soon.”

Ben could hear the words yet simultaneously recognised the lie in his voice and look of defeat in his friend’s eyes. Skylark intended to stay with his Nan no matter what, yet if the storm continued as it was that could lead to the tunnels being sealed up and who knew how long it would take before they could be rescued, if they hadn’t been buried alive.

“No.  ***I*** will stay.” The boys turned in surprise, both having briefly forgotten Fey’s presence. “You need to make sure Ben gets back to his family and if any tunnels are blocked you know how to escape whereas he wouldn’t. Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.” The firm tone of her voice and steely expression told the boys that there was no use arguing. With a last look at the women, the boys covered their mouths and noses with their arms and fled.

Chapter Seven

The wind and sand had combined to create a massive wave swirling, rising and then crashing down all around. The gusts of wind whistled and howled in Ben’s ears, the salt, sand and grit almost blinding him as he tried to shield his eyes, even then it somehow got up his nostrils, stinging and making him cough and sneeze. Following closely to Skylark, helping each-other when they stumbled, the boys joined the others fleeing. Some holding a treasured object, others a baby. Ben’s glance briefly fell on a child crying as she was torn away from a necklace, dropped and broken in the rush to leave, its pieces being slammed in all directions by the wind forever lost under an increasingly thick layer of sand.

Ben’s eyes were on the child for only a brief moment yet that was all it took. Within seconds he found himself slipping and sliding, unable to get his footing due to the gusts of sand in the air covering the floor, and with such limited visibility he could no longer see Skylark even though he could only be a meter or so ahead. Panic rising within him, Ben tried to call for his friend, but opening his mouth only allowed more sand to gush in and choke him. Feeling sick and dizzy Ben staggered forward in what he hoped was the direction of safety, desperately struggling to breathe but needing to shield his face. No matter how hard he pushed himself, the roar of the wind, sting of the sand on his skin and attack on his nose and throat soon became overpowering and everything around Ben seemed to grow dark until suddenly… silence.

Chapter Eight

For the second time that day Ben groggily found himself lying on the ground, struggling to open his eyes. He felt dazed and couldn’t remember where he was. Memories of sand and people desperately rushing for escape were mixed with strange images of broken necklaces and monsters bearing massive knives. Forcing the pictures from his mind he became aware of insistent voices. They were calling his name and sounded worried. Had Skylark found him? Had he managed to get to safety before he blanked out? Spurred on by the instinct to survive, Ben forced his eyes open but the sight which met them only caused more confusion. Stood on either side of him were his parents and a man and woman in ambulance clothes. Behind them was a police officer talking into a phone.

What was happening? Where was Skylark? How come the Policeman could get a signal but he couldn’t? Fighting to get up and away from the people, desperate to return to his friend and ensure that he was alright Ben found himself being restrained by strange, strong arms.

“It’s alright son. You’re safe now. Just relax”.

He didn’t know the voice but could tell from his Mum’s reaction that he should listen. Taking deep breaths, he began to notice his surroundings. He was not far from the ancient village but not Skylark’s village. This one was a ruin, covered in grass with crumbling walls and fences warning visitors not to enter. The sky, which had been a mass of swirling sand was now clear blue and calm, and the waves from the sea crashed down onto the beach nearby, spraying him with a light shower of salty water.

The hours which followed felt like a dream; going to hospital, having tests, the worried looks and sideways glances from his parents whenever he mentioned Skylark or the sandstorm. His parents told him that when he hadn’t turned up for lunch, they had looked for him but after hours without a sign of him and no response on his phone they had called the police and ambulance, fearing that he had been involved in an accident. It was late afternoon before they had found him, lying on the ground on the far edges of the village, covered in sand and coughing profusely. They had assumed that he must have fallen over the cliff edge onto the beach, somehow managing to get back up but too weak to find help.

His parents’ words clawed at his brain, desperately circling a thought yet not allowing him to grasp it at first, until... His phone! Of course. Eagerly asking for a charger, Ben waited impatiently for his phone to power up enough to turn on. He would get the photos up that he and Skylark had taken, then his parents would know that he was telling the truth! Eventually, after what felt like hours, the screen pinged to life. Scrolling impatiently through his photos Ben was dismayed. Where were they? Instead of the images of him with Skylark, the various floor and thumb shots created when his friend had been exploring, and the photos Ben himself had taken, there were just lots of cloudy shots of sky, sand and grass. Now what?

Epilogue

Ben never found out what really happened that day.

Doctors thought that the bump to his head may have caused him to hallucinate, dreaming Skylark and the strange events but Ben was never convinced. It had felt so real...

Later, at school, his teacher was amazed at his interest in the topic and astonished by the detail in his work. For a student who was usually so reluctant to join in lessons, he unexpectedly seemed driven by a force, pushing him to explore and share his learning. However, it was less this new thirst for knowledge which shocked her, than his reaction to the evidence of the bones of two women as well as a broken necklace. But then, little did she know that to him, this wasn’t ancient but recent history and very, very, real.

Map

Description automatically generated

House 6 – Fey’s house

House 7 – Ben’s house

House 8 – Workshop

**Did you know?**

* The people of Skara Brae would have had a varied diet. As well as fish, shellfish, barley and wheat (grown in the surrounding fields), they would have eaten; bird eggs, boar, cattle, sheep, goats, seals, red deer and possibly even beached whale!
* The village was built into a pile of poo! The midden mound which encased the village would have kept the homes warm and protected them from the extreme Scottish winter. Midden is the word used for the mixture of animal dung, stones, and bones.
* Building 7 at Skara Brae is slightly different from the others. Archaeologists have found evidence that it could only be locked from outside. This has led to theories that it was a jail or birthing room.
* Each of the 6 rooms were 36sqm. This has led to the idea that everyone was thought of as equal, however it may have simply been that this was the easiest size to build.
* The bigger bed is believed to have belonged to the males, and the smaller to the females of the family.
* Skylark’s Nan may have been as young as 30. Neolithic people didn’t tend to live much past 30, with 50 being a rare example. As people aged, evidence has arisen that many had severe arthritis.

1. * Note to illustrator – original sign* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gaelic Scottish for Potter [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Meaning `to complain’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)