

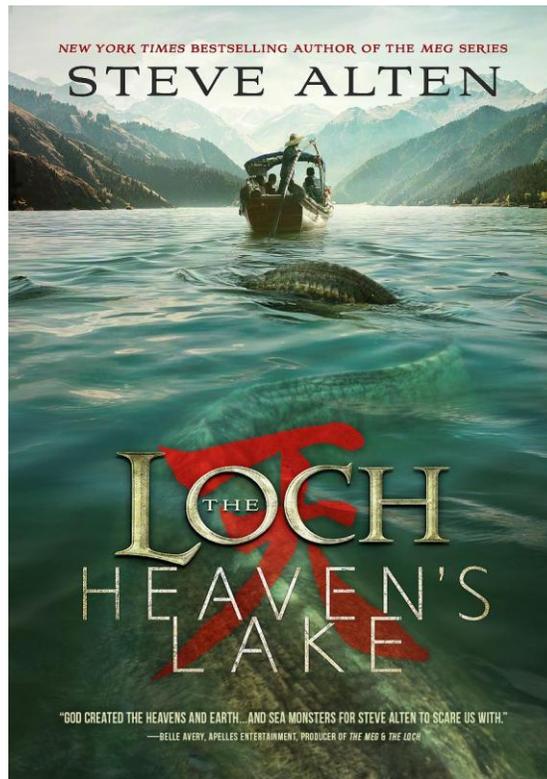
THE LOCH: HEAVEN'S LAKE

by

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SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW #2
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8

Midlothian, Scotland

Angus waited for Dr. Singh to lower the rail on his bed; the scientist assisting him as he rolled over the side and slowly regained his feet, losing the hospital gown in the process.

“Christ. Where are my damn clothes?”

“Waiting for you at a checkpoint located somewhere outside this facility, along with your cell phone and other belongings. My apologies Mr. Wallace; security is vital to our organization.”

“And how do ye ken tha’ I didnae smuggle a cell phone up my arse?”

“Our transportation crew checked you thoroughly with a body scanner before you left Dalhousie Castle.” Dr. Singh retrieved a folded stack of clothing from a chair and set it on the bed.

“Do you need help?”

“No.” Angus removed a pair of boxers from the pile. Leaning against the side of the bed, he attempted to step into the left pant leg with his left foot – Timor Singh catching him as he lost his balance.

“Take it slow, Mr. Wallace. They hit you with a fairly large dose of tranquilizer.”

“Aye. And paybacks are a bitch.”

With Dr. Singh’s assistance, Angus pulled up the briefs and dressed in the jogging suit and sneakers. He followed the Indian scientist out of the treatment room—

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

--their presence causing the section of smart corridor they were standing in to brighten in a golden hue.

They appeared to be in a tunnel, the curved walls twelve feet wide, the lights revealing little more than six paces ahead in either direction. Whatever lay beyond remained cloaked in darkness.

The effect was both disorienting and disturbing, fueling a sense of claustrophobia that quickened Angus's pulse. "Where the fook are we, Singh? Disneyworld?"

The Highlander's eyes widened as he and Dr. Singh were instantly transported to the Central Florida theme park, the sky cloudless and blue, the sun warm on their faces, the Orlando air scented with roasted peanuts from a nearby vendor.

The crowd moved past them in every direction. Targeting a nine-year-old boy walking towards him, Angus elbowed the kid in the face, his arm registering the blow as blood spurted from the crying child's nose.

"Dad, that man hit me!"

Angus looked up in time to see a kelly-green Philadelphia Eagles football jersey parting the crowd, the #92 stretched to capacity behind the black man's charging three hundred pound girth.

"Singh!"

The daytime vanished, the confines of the tunnel once again isolating them.

Angus drew a few deep breaths, attempting to calm his racing heart. "Pure dead brilliant. Can we have a go at that again?"

"As you wish."

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

“Where the fook are we, Singh? Yer mother’s vagina?”

The golden luminescence disappeared, as did the tunnel-like corridor and exam suite. They were now standing in a brightly-lit square-shaped room, its walls, floor and ceiling exceeding thirty feet, the surface patterned in white and dark squares.

This time it was the East Indian who was baffled. Placing his right palm to the nearest wall, he stated, “Authorization: Timon Singh, 4A-108. Reset holographic suite 6.”

Nothing happened.

The scientist switched hands. “Authorization: Timon Singh, 4A-108. Reset holographic suite 6!”

Still no response.

“Don’t get mad at it, laddie. Perhaps this is what the inside of yer momma’s baby cannon looks like?”

“You jammed the system. How did you know—”

“Yer not the only Einstein in Scotland, Singh. My Zachary – by the time he reached third grade he was outsmarting me and the teachers in his Grammar school. Keeping one step ahead of a boy genius – it’s nae easy.”

“What did you do?”

“Usually I relied on distraction, sort a like a magician does tae fool his audience. When that no longer worked, I basically jist lied.”

“What do you mean – you lied?”

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

His mother had brung home one of these colorful 3-dimensional square puzzles... whit do yea call 'm?"

'You mean a Rubik's Cube?"

"Aye. Took him a few days tae master it; next thing I ken is he's challengin' me tae a race. I agreed, only he had tae leave me be whilst I worked so he couldnae steal my technique. I beat him six ways tae Sunday before he figured oot I was peeling off the stickers. Anyway, whit say we get on with our business."

Dr. Singh led him out a camouflaged door into a well-lit corridor, the floor composed of a black rubber-coated padding that added spring to their step.

"This I like. Where are ye taking me?"

"To school."

* * *

The classroom was part lab, part holographic suite. Having never been a cat lover, Angus had little patience or appreciation for the pair of genetically modified kittens nibbling on his socks, their baby teeth needle-sharp, their skin's fluorescent pigmentation glowing scarlet-red under the ultraviolet lights.

Dr. Singh had an assistant remove them before he started a holographic presentation.

Angus found himself floating in space, a blue planet rotating slowly before him, identical to Earth except that there was only one landmass surrounded by a massive ocean.

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

“This is Earth, the way it looked 4.5 billion years ago. Life first began in this immense primordial ocean we named the Panthalassa some 3.5 billion years ago as a single-celled organism. It remained that way with very little change over the next 3 billion years. And then, 540 million years ago, multi-cellular organisms appeared and life suddenly took off as Mother Nature discovered the art of genetic manipulation in what became known as the Cambrian Explosion.”

The view from space nose-dived into an undersea world inhabited by trilobites and corals, jellyfish and mollusks, sea scorpions and squids.

“Among these new species was a small animal that possessed a unique feature – a backbone which separated its brain and nervous system from the rest of its organs. The experiment proved successful, ushering in the Devonian Period: The Age of Fish.

“The first of these vertebrates were filter feeders as they had no jaws in which to seize prey. Because their internal skeletons were composed of cartilage, many species grew a thick armor-like, bony shield that covered their heads as a means of protection. Others developed senses that allowed them to see, taste, smell, hear, and feel within their watery environment. And then, some 80 million years after the first fish appeared, a revolutionary feature came into being—a set of biting jaws.

“It would be an innovation that would lead to mass diversification, separating predator from prey while instantly reshuffling the ocean's food chain. The planet's first true hunters evolved, and with them the wolves of the sea—the sharks. For many species of fish, the Panthalassa Ocean quickly became a dangerous place to live.

“Necessity is the mother of invention, adaptation the means to survival. One hundred and seventy million years after the first vertebrates hatched in the sea, a lobe-finned fish crawled out of the Panthalassa onto the landmass we now call Pangaea ... and gasped a breath of air. Gills would

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

evolve into nostrils and internal lungs, ventilated by a throat-pump. Within 20 million years these new animals had colonized the land and the age of amphibians had arrived.

“Adapting to a terrestrial lifestyle demanded additional evolutionary changes, propelled by the need to survive more efficiently. Limited by their need to re-hydrate and their ability to ventilate their lungs, amphibians developed a rib cage that allowed for expansion and contraction, increasing the volume of air that could be processed by the lungs. Changes in internal fertilization and the composition of the egg shell further protected the developing embryo from drying out.

“Sixty million years after the first lobe-finned fish crawled out of the sea, reptiles were born. More anatomical adaptations would follow. Positioning of the hip girdle gave some reptiles the ability to stand and run on their hind legs. Skull weight was reduced with the addition of new temporal openings that replaced heavy bone with tendon-like materials. These openings also served to increase the bite power of the jaws ... and a new subclass of reptile rose to prominence—the dinosaurs.

“By this time, Pangaea had separated into two continents—Gondwana and Laurasia. As the planet's landmasses continued to break apart and drift, the Panthalass was divided into the Atlantic and Arctic Ocean basins and, eventually, the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Changes in atmospheric and geological conditions would lead to global warming and ice age cycles, affecting the inhabitants of both land and sea. The survivors evolved into the next dominant species; the weak dead-ended into extinction.

“Over the next 170 million years the dinosaurs ruled over the land while another subclass of reptiles—the placodonts and ichthyosaurs—returned to the ocean. These were the planet's first true sea monsters; *Shonisaurus*, a fifty-foot, forty-ton dolphin-like *Ichthyosaurus*; four-flippered, short-necked *Pliosaurus* like *Liopleurodon* and *Kronosaurus*, and *Elasmosaurus*, your targeted long-necked

creature.

“And then one fateful day 65 million years ago a hunk of rock entered our solar system and fell from the sky and, once again, everything changed.”

Floating in space, Angus turned to his right as the trillion ton asteroid flipped over and over in silence, the brilliant blue world in its path. He watched in fascination and horror as the iridium mass struck Earth's atmosphere like a match head scrapping red phosphorous, the friction igniting the 7-mile-in-diameter killer as it rocketed over land and sea before it plunged into the Gulf of Mexico. The impact shattered the limestone bedrock and rocked the planet, unleashing firestorms, mega-tsunamis, and millions of tons of ash and soot into the atmosphere.

“The debris from the asteroid strike blotted out the sun, causing an ice age which ended the dinosaurs' reign, allowing a new species to arise – one possessing features which allowed it to adapt to the sudden drop in temperatures.

“The first mammals had appeared millions of years earlier as small marsupial-like animals. Their size allowed them to survive the nuclear winter on much less food, their warm-blooded metabolisms and fur coats giving them an advantage when global temperatures plummeted. The mammals eventually grew larger and more diverse, filling the niches left behind by their deceased enemies. Early primates thrived, populating the branches of an evolutionary tree that would one day produce the ancestors of modern humans.”

The lights came up, the presentation ending.

Angus clapped politely. “While I enjoyed the show, was all that really necessary?”

“It serves a purpose. We want our clients to understand that nature has been manipulating

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

the genetic codes of Earth's inhabitants for half-a-billion years. Conversely, man has only engaged in this arena over the last thirty to forty years. China was the first country to produce transgenic fish, the majority of their work conducted on food species like the Atlantic salmon."

A salmon appeared, its scales swallowing Angus as it magnified, exposing its internal anatomy. Moving deeper, the hologram plunged into a blood vessel on its way to becoming a cell and finally a twisting three-dimensional helix, the strand of DNA's genetic encryption color-coded in blue, green, orange and red.

"This is an AquAdvantage salmon. It has three sets of chromosomes instead of two and was created with the addition of two specific genes found in other species of fish. The first was removed from a Chinook salmon – not as popular an eating fish as its cousin but one that grows at a much faster rate and at a younger age. The second gene was taken from an eelpout, a bottom-dwelling fish that grows all year round. These seemingly minor changes produced a fast-growing super-large salmon approved for human consumption."

On cue a chef entered, wheeling in a cart. He quickly set-up lunch, removing an aluminum top from the main course – baked salmon.

It took Angus all of five minutes to consume the meal. Wiping butter from his chin, he leaned back in his chair and belched. "That was my compliments tae the chef. As for your presentation, I don't give a shyte about glow-in-the-dark pets, muscle-bound cows, or giant salmon. Show me whit I came here tae see – proof that yer organization can concoct something that, more or less resembles one of them plesiosaurs."

"Do you mean something like this?"

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

The room darkened, the pitch enveloping Angus, Timon Singh, the chamber and its warmth. Echoes of sound appeared in the distance – a large life form propelling itself through its dark liquid world.

A pinpoint of light sliced through the void like a lance before widening into a soft gray circle that revealed the creature's powerful chest and its heaving front flippers.

“Good God, Singh, where's its head? Never mind, I see it now. Gads, look at the size of its neck – it's longer than its body. Is this thing real? What are we lookin' at?”

“The footage was taken seven years ago in a holding tank located at one of our proving grounds.”

Angus turned to his right, his eyes unable to penetrate the darkness. Someone else had entered the chamber – an American male, his voice gruff with age.

Finally we get down tae business...

“Ye didnae answer the question. Is the creature real?”

“Define real.”

“Is it a living being?”

“It was. We were only able to keep it alive for fifty-three days.”

“Can ye clone another one? If not, might we purchase its remains? A few photos in the Courier, along with eyewitness testimonials claiming they saw two or three mare jist like this one and—”

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

“—and without a plausible scientific explanation justifying the existence of a 70 million year old prehistoric species residing in Loch Ness, would your son endorse the discovery, or search for the truth?”

“Aye. The lad's honesty has become a real thorn in my side. Still, a dead plesiosaur or video of a live one will outweigh the opinion of one Dr. Zachary Wallace, especially after council bans him from the Highlands. So then, how much will all this cost us?”

“More than you have or could ever afford. Which is why we're going to do it for you... what's the expression? Scot-free?”

The lights came up, revealing a broad-shouldered Caucasian man in his late sixties with thick white hair and a matching beard. He was dressed in a black jumpsuit, a red insignia sewn into the fabric over his heart – the Greek letter Tau centered in an inverted triangle.

“Name's Rollyson... Colonel Jack Rollyson. We don't need your money, Mr. Wallace. What we need is usable DNA samples from your dead monster.”

“Ye mean tae clone the female? Why on Earth would ye want tae do that?”

Dr. Singh replied. “The key to successfully altering a life form is to start with a DNA helix that is healthy and adaptable. Unlike a plesiosaur, the Guivre is not an extinct species, it resides in the deep waters of the Sargasso Sea.”

“Then why not jist go down there and net a fresh one? Why this female?”

“First, because these are elusive, dangerous creatures and not easily located, let alone captured. Second, because – as you said, she was a female and an unusual one at that. Males are useless; females can be programmed to breed asexually, producing genetic clones of themselves.

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

Third, by trapping this female and preventing her from returning to the Sargasso to breed your secret brotherhood triggered a very powerful gene that caused her to grow to immense proportions. By isolating that gene we can use it on livestock or fish to better feed the world. Fourth, Guivres, like other eels, are actually classified as *Amphiuma* which is a genus of aquatic salamanders. Even though they are quite small these fish actually have four legs, offering geneticists like myself an infinite array of possibilities. For instance, I can isolate the gene in a Platypus responsible for giving it its four paddled feet and use that to create your plesiosaur. *Amphiumas* also possess the largest cells of any vertebrate known to man, with their erythrocytes – their red blood cells being especially large. They also have 28 times the amount of DNA as humans. If all this were not enough, we're dealing with an amphibious fish equipped with both external gills and lungs which move oxygenated water into and out of its mouth and throat or across the surface of their skin. Like many aquatic animals, they possess a well-developed lateral line which is part of their sensory system--"

"All right, doc, ye made yer point. Whit is it ye want me tae do?"

Dr. Singh nodded. "In his book, your son described his descent into Loch Ness in a JIM suit, only to have the Guivre snatch him in its jaws and drag him to its lair – a subterranean cavern which Zachary claimed to be part of an aquifer which connects Loch Ness with the North Sea. It is there that he managed to kill the creature using an ancient sword—"

"Not jist any sword; the blade belonged tae my kin, Sir William Wallace."

"If he used a sharp cutting instrument then it's possible there are usable tissue samples to be had."

The Loch: Heaven's Lake

“We know you can access that cave,” Rollyson said. “We need you to go back down there and collect as many tissue samples from the Guivre as you can. Dr. Singh will equip you with collection containers.”

“It’s been more than a year since Zachary killed the female. What makes ye think there’s any suitable remains to be had?”

“Loch Ness’s water temperatures run near-freezing even in summer. The cold should have preserved any Guivre flesh lost in battle.”

“Okay gentlemen, let’s say I provide ye with what ye need. How soon can I expect delivery of my monster?”

Dr. Singh glanced at the colonel and shrugged. “Accelerating its growth, we should be able to deliver an alpha-female by the end of summer.”

Angus’s cheekbones contorted into a broad smile. He stood and shook Timon Singh’s hand and then moved to embrace the American colonel—

-his arms passing through the hologram, ending the transmission.