SPECIAL SNEAK PEEK

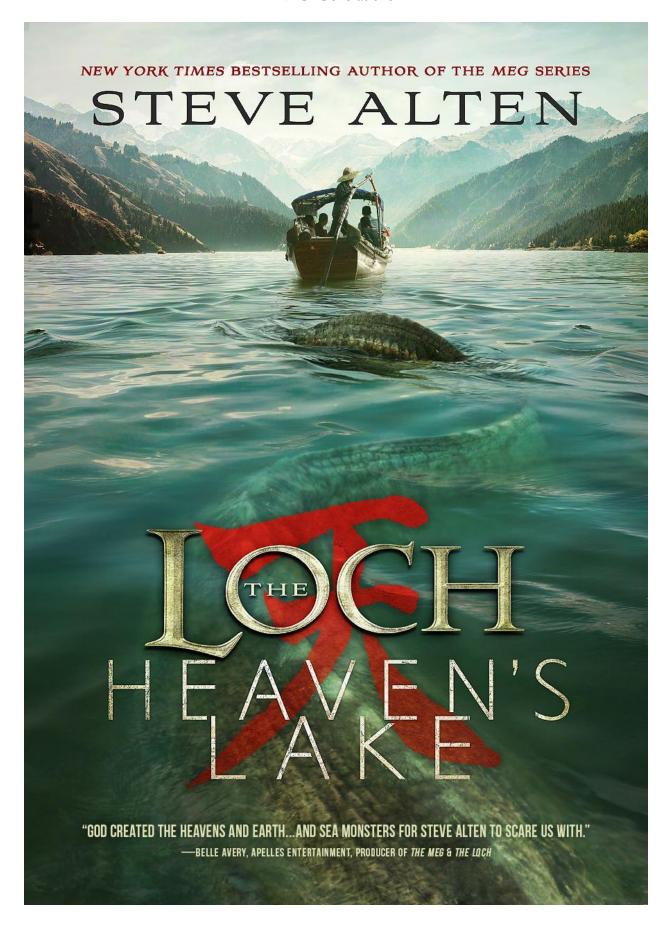
Chapters Prologue thru Chapter 4 (unedited) and a bonus!

THE LOCH: HEAVEN'S LAKE

by

N.Y. Times bestselling author

STEVE ALTEN



PROLOGUE

Dulce, New Mexico

The darkness was all-consuming. Aided by a late winter's storm, it conspired with the dense cloud cover to veil the stars and moon and heavens, effectively snuffing all light from existence. It swallowed the lake and the motorized rubber raft, its occupants unable to see their own hands as they shielded their faces from a frigid head wind blistering them with darts of hail and rain.

There were two men aboard the Zodiac and neither was whom he claimed to the other to be.

Rick Jon Anderson was seated in the bow. A big man, the Dulce resident carried two hundred pounds on his six-foot frame. A two-day stubble ran across his face in contrast to his scalpwhich he kept shaved clean. With a canvas of tattoos covering his arms and upper torso the local looked more like a member of the Hell's Angels than an Apache. The fact that he lived on the Jicarilla Reservation either meant he met the required 3/8s American Indian heritage, or he held sway over the Jicarilla Reservation's Board of Regents to which he was a voting member.

Anderson's hands were numb from gripping the bottom of the bench seat and his body was shivering—though more out of fear than the frigid temperatures. He had been tasked with locating the black Dodge Ram pick-up truck they had left on a shoreline he could no longer see. Absent a flashlight, disposable lighter or pack of matches, he might as well have been searching for icebergs.

His eyes widened as the Zodiac's bow and bow wake suddenly blossomed out of the pitch. Turning in the direction of the whining outboard engine, he saw a lone figure hunched over an open laptop, its luminous screen cutting through the night, the computer shielded from the driving rain by a plastic poncho.

"Is it still out there? Professor Krall—"

The British scientist ignored the local man's need for reassurance, his attention focused on the progress of the data uploading on his computer. Born in India, raised in England, he had attended the best schools in the United Kingdom but never seemed to fit in, his peers preferring to judge him by his ethnicity and physical appearance—his wavy black hair worn long and unkempt, matched by a five o'clock shadow. This led many of his older colleagues to underestimate his intelligence, typecasting him as a glorified graduate student rather than a brilliant academic despite his having earned three doctorate degrees in the sciences by the age of twenty-seven.

"Answer me, Charles! Is the creature still out there or not?"

The scientist looked up. He had met Rick Anderson ten hours earlier over breakfast, the interview arranged by the local man's cousin Jolette Windley the waitress he had been hitting on since his arrival in Dulce. He had introduced himself to the attractive brunette as Professor Charles Krall; he was in town for a few weeks, hired by a private British investment firm to prepare a business prospectus on Jicarilla's seven lakes. Unfamiliar with the Apache reservation, he needed to hire a local outdoorsman to assist him in collecting water, vegetation, and tissue samples from any wildlife inhabiting the lakes. Over dinner, she suggested her cousin, Rick, who was an avid fisherman.

Krall offered Anderson the job, never suspecting that Jolettewas actually a Delta Force Intel Officer. For his part, the British scientist never mentioned that the wildlife he sought tissue samples from was a thirty-foot-long water creature.

"My cousin really likes you. Be ashame to screw up what could be the night of your life."

He's desperate ... afraid. Use it.

"Of course it's still out there, Rick. Where else would it go?"

"Where is it? Is it showing up on your drone's sonar?"

"I told you, I had to divert all power from the Barracuda in order to upload tissue samples. As soon as the data finishes transmitting, I promise I will finish recharging the drone and activate its sonar array."

"How much longer?"

He jiggled the laptop's mouse, causing the sleeping screen to momentarily awaken. "We're at 82%. Figure another minute or two."

The flash of artificial light seemed to calm the local. "You knew it was here. That's what brought you to Dulce."

"There is no here. Dulce is not a real lake; it is a man-made reservoir as you astutely pointed out during your interview. The animal that chased after us was not birthed in these waters, nor is there an aquatic-based food chain in place among any of the seven lakes that could support a biologic as large as—"

"What about humans?"

"As a food source? While lions and tigers and sharks may occasionally feast on a human, man has never been, nor will we ever be, a part of any animal's diet."

"Tell that to those tourists who died two years ago at Loch Ness."

"That was an entirely different lake and creature."

"Yeah? Well whatever that thing was that attacked sure seemed intent on eating us. Had you not blasted it with that sonic noise thing I doubt we would have survived."

The local had a point. The biologic chosen for tonight's demonstration clearly had no human restraints hardwired into its DNA.

The screen blinked on, indicating the data upload was now complete. Closing the computer, the biologist unzipped his jacket pocket and removed a pair of ski goggles equipped with night vision lenses. He strapped them in place over his eyes, causing the darkness to bloom into sheets of olive-green, the lake an ominous dark gray abyss. Reaching for the car battery squeezed between his feet, he flipped the toggle switch, diverting power from his laptop to the drone.

Nicknamed "Barracuda" for its resemblance to the predatory fish, the remotely-operatedunderwater drone was three feet long from the tip of its triangular snout to the propulsion unit and rudder which made up its tail assembly. Fourteen inches in diameter and streamlined like a torpedo, the neutrally-buoyant craft could handle depths of 900 feet, had a range just short of two miles, and could reach speeds exceeding forty knots. Housed in an acrylic tube anchored to the starboard side of the Zodiac, the drone was designed to safely acquire tissue samples from biologics. Located inside its spring-loaded snout were three rotating collection tubes. Any soft tissue impact with the Barracuda exceeding 20 pounds psi was enough to engage the razor-sharp teeth-like blades anchored inside its snout and excise a finger-sized bite from its target.

The scientist waited until the recharging battery reached 30% before he powered on the drone's active sonar, sending a loud *PING* racing through the depths. The sound wave reverberated off every object located within a two-mile radius, the time and strength of the return signal converted into an electrical signal—

—the sonar's sweeping hand illuminating the creature.

It had been shadowing them as they had followed a course to the south, the man-made reservoir shaped like the state of Florida sans its panhandle. As it had in their earlier encounter, the sound wave spooked the life form. As he watched, the biologic raced to the east—and disappeared.

"What the hell?"

"Krall, can you see it?"

"Standby." Unable to locate the creature, the scientist released another PING—

—the sound wave painting the shoreline directly ahead of them as it screeched out a warning.

"...bloody hell."

Before he could veer away the Zodiac's bow struck the man-made lake's eight-foot-high embankment, the effect a result of local authorities having recently drained nearly 20% of the

reservoir's volume. The sudden impact launched Rick Anderson head-over-boots from his bench

seat, hurling him back-first and upside-down against the moss-covered wall of rock.

The British scientist didn't fare much better. With nothing to grab onto, he found himself

airborne, flailing head-first through the olive-green void, the embankment blooming in his

vision. Kicking out his legs, he managed to snag one of the middle seats with his right foot, only to

bash his face against the portside inflatable, the painful collision breaking his nose and shattering his

night vision goggles, casting him into darkness.

"Krall? You okay?"

"No." He snorted a mouthful of blood, gagged, and spit it out.

"Can you smell that?"

"My nose is broken, I can't smell anything."

"I can. I smelled the same scent when the creature surfaced."

"Anderson, the creature's gone. The sonar spooked it."

"You're wrong. You think you're so clever, don't you Dr. Singh? That's right, I know who

you are. You're Timon Singh, Noble Prize-winning geneticist. You disappeared off the face of the

Earth nine years ago before you could get to Oslo to collect your money. What happened? Did you

find the needs of the private sector too ... ahh! Ahhh!"

Timon froze. His pulse raced, his body trembled. More unnerving than Rick Anderson's

screams was the abrupt silence that followed—as if nature had suddenly been placed on mute. The

only sounds were small waves lapping along the bottom of the inflatable raft and his pounding heart.

He registered a strange tapping on his ski jacket. For a surreal moment he ceased shaking as a

soothing warm rain rolled down his neck and into his undergarments.

And then he realized it was blood.

Very slowly, he slid his right hand into his pants pocket. Feeling the rental car's remote starter,

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he pressed the alarm.

The incessant horn blasts and flashing headlights vanquished the darkness, revealing the monster. Intelligent and amphibious, it had been lying in wait atop the embankment next to the pickup truck. Leaning over the ledge, it had plucked the local sportsman from the embankment by his head, its scalpel-sharp teeth—4-to-5-inch-long needles—puncturing the man's neck, shoulders, and chest, the blood spurting as if from a fountain.

Suspended six feet above the water, Rick Anderson's legs thrashed and kicked wildly at the night, the dying man in agony.

Timon's limbs shook in terror as the beast glanced down at him with one of its jaundice yellow eyes and hissed.

The funnel of light cut through the sleet-laden night, blinding the hideous predator. It shook its massive head, whipping its bizarre mane of tendrils to and fro, each oily cord-like whisker as long as a grown man's arm and as thick as a thumb. As the monster screeched in protest a barrage of eight-inch-long tranquilizer darts struck its neck like a swarm of giant mosquitoes, burying the elixir held within their syringes into a patch of flesh behind the fish's gill slits.

The diamond-shaped head rolled up twice before collapsing out of Timon's sight line with a resounding *thud*.

Before he could gather his thoughts, a team of soldiers dressed head to boots in black parkas and matching jumpsuits were dragging him up the steep embankment. He was wrapped in a thermal blanket, one of the commandoes demanding his attention.

He reached into his pocket and handed him the truck's remote—the horn alarm silenced as

he was led to the back of an awaiting van. Just before the door slammed closed and the syringe pierced the marine biologist's neck his eyes locked on to a gated exit, the track lighting illuminating a ten-by-twelve-foot sign.



FIVE MONTHS EARLIER ...

1

Drumnadrochit, Scottish Highlands Scotland

"My name is Zachary Wallace and as the inside flaps of this book's dust jacket explains, I am the marine biologist who identified, tracked down, and terminated the water creature credited with killing seventeen people at Loch Ness two summers ago. By its deeds alone this aberration of nature surely qualified as a monster—its size compatible with a forty-five foot long, ten ton Elasmosaur, a prehistoric beast that inhabited the North Sea 70 million years ago. That was the monster the so-called experts identified in a photo taken eight decades ago—a fake photo (as confessed by the surgeon who setup the shot) which spawned both a legend and a cottage tourist industry in the Highlands. As for me, I am the hero who resolved the mystery and terminated an economy, once again proving the age old adage that 'no good deed goes unpunished'.

"Want the details? Read my first memoir entitled *The Loch*. Or don't. I'll catch you up in this opening chapter with all the necessary details which (as my therapist chides me) I've allowed to define my life (as if I had a choice). Raised in the States by my American mother, I was born two weeks and twenty-nine years ago in Drumnadrochit, a sleepy Highland hamlet of nine hundred that lies on the west bank of Loch Ness by Urquhart Bay. It was in these tea-brown waters I died twice, though I truth that last rebirth was more of a metaphor, but when your existence is haunted by demons and you exorcize them by staring death in the face, that's what we Templars call a resurrection."

I hit PAUSE on the palm-size recording device, my words eliciting a vivid sense of déjà-vu.

Why does it feel like I've lived this moment before?

I had begun writing the follow-up to my bestselling autobiography following anhour-long Skype therapy session with my new therapist, Dr. Barbara Hooton, a psychiatrist based out of New York. Hooton had replacedAlex Dale, a local shrink whose practice was based in Inverness. Dr. Dale had also seen a second book as an opportunity for me to "exorcise my new demons." A week later he changed his mind following a series of incidents which began with nails driven into his sports car's tires to death threats delivered by cell phone at 3 am.

Working out of her home office in New York, Barbara Hooton shared none of these "safety concerns." Twenty years my senior, the Bronx native had twice won me over; first because she had been highly recommended by my editor, second because she reminded me of my mother. At first I assumed it was just her accent but Brandy (my wife, the former Claire Brandy MacDonald) said it was her eyes, "Yer mum—when she looks at ye, it's as if she seesintae your soul."

Glancing down at my outline, I found my place and hit PLAY on the tape recorder.

"Drumnadrochit ... the village of my birth and deaths ... a place as hard to spell as it was to grow up in. Actually, I was a pretty good speller and a damn good student. In fact—"

Stop! Don't stray from your beat sheet, you're getting diarrhea of the mouth again.

I was antsy, uncomfortable in my skin and stewing inside, once more allowing my recent career speed bumps and its related financial woes to inhabit my thoughts, creating what Dr. Hooton termed a "low pressure zone."

"Negative thoughts equal negative biology equals negative daily results. Stop spawning hurricanes, Zachary—create success!"

Staring at my notes, I grabbed the cursed pages and tossed them aside, then turned to the recorder. "My name is Dr. Zachary bloody Wallace and I am the marine biologist who resolved the legend of the Loch Ness Monster. And no, it wasn't a smiling plesiosaur like the Flintstone's pet, replicas of which can still be purchased in one of our many Nessie gift shops—if you can find one that is still open. No, this was a very real, very large predatory fish that had been penned and trapped

in Loch Ness some eighty years ago. My father and his brethren had conspired to bring me home to legitimize it, bait, and dispose of it ... which I did—nearly being eaten in the process. In doing so, I turned a thriving cottage industry into a bunch of vacant bed and breakfasts, rendered two local museums obsolete, and brought ruin to a brand-new family-owned five-star resort—all of which is how I became the most hated man in the Highlands since Edward Longshanks gave the boot to John de Balliol and declared himself ruler of Scotland. And leading the lynch mob was the most diabolical creature ever known to inhabit the Great Glen ... Angus Wallace, my father.

"What can I say about my old man that hasn't already been stated numerous times in multiple divorce proceedings, a dozen arraignments, and his own murder trial? A hotheaded braggart who never hesitated to mention his direct lineage to the late great Sir William Wallace, Angus Wallace was and always will be a man of excess—whiskey and women being at the top of that list. His ten-year marriage to my mother still ranks as his longest relationship in terms of time, not fidelity. An American gal, Andrea McKnownhad barely been out of college when she traveled to Britain with two friends and first laid eyes on my father. Twenty years her senior, Angus Wallace was brash and handsome and larger-than-life. Their courtship lasted barely six weeks before he insisted they marry. Andrea said yes, partly because there was nothing waiting for her back home, partly because she was pregnant and couldn't bear to face her mother, a strict Catholic. To this day, mom still insists I was born nine weeks prematurely instead of only three.

"Growing up in Drumnadrochit, I had two friends I could count on: Finlay 'True' MacDonald introduced himself to me on the first day of Grammar school with a punch to my solar plexus. The big redhead brutethen helped himself to my lunch."

Closing my eyes, I allowed the memory of that first encounter to lead to a second.

"Give it back to the lad now, True."

The raven-haired beauty was my bully's younger sister, Brandy. She was seven years old and assigned to the second grade along with True, who was ten and should have been starting fourth grade but for the fact that he couldn't read. I was six and should have been in first grade only my

placement test scores had baffled Emma Musk, the school headmistress. She had calledmy mother to discuss the issue a week earlier, only Angus had answered the phone.

"Mr. Wallace, your son has a very high I.Q.; he's reading at a tenth grade level."

"Then put him in the bloody tenth grade."

"Sir, he's not ready socially for that. I contacted his kindergarten teacher; she told me he had no friends. The last thing I want to do is make things harderon—"

"Life is hard. The sooner the runt learns tha' the better."

"Tossing her common sense into the issue, Mrs. Muskplaced me in the second grade with True and his sister and then gave me an assignment. 'Zachary, this is Finlay MacDonald. Whenever your teacher breaks into reading groups, you and Mister MacDonald will work together to teach him how to read.'

I soon discovered that the big lummox was not dumb, he suffered from dyslexia. It took me a while, but using rhymes I was able to improve his phonological skills which helped him recognize words and sounds.

In gratitude, True became an older brother to me—if anyone messed with Angus's runt they'd have to deal with the big redhead.

While Trueplayed the role of my protector, it was his sister Brandy who held sway over me. She could get me to climb a tree to its canopy or jump into a half frozen pond as part of an initiation into her 'club,' and it was her influence that pushed me to disregard my father and pursue my dream to become a marine biologist. As for me, I was Brandy's emotional ballast; the person she sought counsel with when things went bad. This became a more frequent occurrence after her mother died and the Crabbit became abusive. Had we remained together we'd have probably married in our teens; it was an incident on Loch Ness which occurred on my ninth birthday that led to our separation.

I was a bit of a scientist even back then, following in the footsteps of another famous Wallace, Alfred Russell Wallace—a man I immediately proclaimed to be adistant cousin. Sir Alfred

was a British scientist whose theories on natural selection predated those of Darwin. Had he ever encountered my father, I suspect he would have traced Angus's behavior back to Neanderthal Man.

Back to my ninth birthday...

"To celebrate my special day, my father had promised to take me fishing on Loch Ness. Angus showed up late that afternoon in a borrowed car and we drove to the west bank of the Ness to Aldourie Castle. On the drive over I attempted to describe the contents of a small wooden crate I had brought with me which held my latest invention—an acoustic fishing lure I had designed to entice salmon to the surface, hoping to impress my father.

"Being slightly inebriated, Angus lasted a full thirty seconds before telling me to 'Shad-up! Ye blab more than a woman.' He parked by the roadside and we walked around back of the dilapidated mansion.

"Spread out before us was Loch Ness in all its splendor. Waiting for us along the shoreline was a spirited redhead in her late teens or early twenties, her ample breasts pressing tightly against her waitress uniform. An eight-foot-long aluminum boat equipped with a 22 horsepower outboard was tied to a small dock.

"The manner in which she ran up to my father sent warning flags through my young prepubescent mind."

* * *

Zach looked up as a glint of gold on the horizon caught my eye—the setting sun dropping into a narrow band of sky separating heavy storm clouds from the summits of the Monadhlian Mountains—

—my thoughts slipping back to the tarnished childhood memory.

"Zachary, load the gear intae the boat, then wait on shore for me tae return. I won't be long."

"Wait for ye? You're not coming?"

'I'm comin'—quit yersmilin', girl. Jena here borrowed her brother's boat and wishes to speak tae me in private about a council matter. I need tae pick up bait at the general store down the road anyway, so we'll chat in the

car and I'll be back in two shakes."

"But Dad, we don't need bait. My invention—"

"Invention schmention. Did ye invent a better worm than Mother Nature then? Stop talking crap and wait here. And didnae go oot in that boat alone or there will be hell tae pay."

* * *

I jumped out of my dream as the first heavy droplets of rain lashed against the other side of the window. Taking slow, deep breaths, I attempted to excise my emotions from the memory.

After a few minutes thought, I hit RECORD on the tape recorder.

"Thirty minutes passed. I remained at the dock to witness the sun dip below the mountains, the temperature with it. I headed up to the road to escape the cold breeze coming off the water, surprised to find the girl's car parked out front. As I drew closer I could hear her squealing inside ... then I saw my old man's hairy ass bobbing up and down in the backseat, no doubt testing the vehicle's suspension system.

"I can't say I was shocked at catching my father in the act of committing adultery. My mother had heard rumors and somehow had accepted them in the same vein that the wife of rock star might accept her husband's infidelity while on tour. What affected me far more was the audacity of Angus cheating on my mother while I waited for him to take me fishing on my birthday.

"Seething with emotion, I sprinted back to the pier. Climbing in the boat, I untied the bowline and carefully made my way back to the motor, the aluminum craft teetering beneath my shifting weight. Gripping the engine's start-up cord, I yanked hard ... and again. And again.

"Nothing happened. Nor would it with no petrol in the tank.

"Refusing to be denied, I grabbed an oar and started paddling, my anger outweighing any fear I might have normally felt. I remember thinking, "if something bad happens to me—good! Let it be on Angus's head."

"It took me a good twenty minutes to paddle halfway across the mile-wide lake. By now ominous storm clouds were hanging low over the Great Glen as if they had come to watch the

show. Wasting no time, I reached beneath my seat and removed my invention from its custom-made storage crate.

"The acoustic lure was a water-tight sphere roughly the size of a volleyball which contained a battery-operated tape recorder and volume booster. The secret to its potential success was its bait—a recording I had borrowed from a nature series. For tonight's concert I had prepared several insect selections, the first entitled 'A Swarm of Mosquitoes.'

"I started the tape, resealed the lure, and attached a three-pound weight to a small chain dangling from an eye-bolt mounted along the sphere's southern pole. Choosing a starting depth of thirty feet on the guide rope, I released the device which quickly sank into the tea-brown water, making a quick mental note of the time.

"Six minutes and twenty seconds later my boat was surrounded by salmon. It was a feeding frenzy—the forty-pound beasts literally leaping out of the lake, their mouths snapping on empty air.

"How do I describe the moment? Satisfaction? More like a rebirth. For as long as I could remember I had lived in fear—a fear that I would never amount to anything. My father called me a useless runt ... an embarrassment to not only him but the entire Wallace clan. This was the identity I grew up with, delivered by a parent whose love I sought during his moments of sobriety; whose presence I ran from when his inner rage was fueled by alcohol. Bound to me by blood, Angus was intent on handing down the same life lesson taught to him by his own father and every Wallace sperm donor before him; that life was cruel and only the strong and unmerciful survived.

"Wrong.

"In this, my first moment of triumph, I emerged from a childhood of darkness, guided by a light I shared with Sir Alfred Wallace—a light that I could count on, a light that my father could neither extinguish nor steal, take credit for or outwit ...

"I, Zachary Wallace possessed a higher intelligence that allowed me to think outside the box ... to adapt—to succeed. While my father struggled the rest of his days, his 'runt' would leave Drumnadrochit to become a world-famous scientist.

"Standing in the boat, I shouted at the vacant shoreline, now barely visible in the diminishing dusk. "Bait, Angus? I told ye we didn't need bait, you stupid scumbag of a drunk!

"I remember registering several heavy collisions beneath my feet—the salmon, no doubt ... and then the boat levitated beneath me and tossed me overboard!

"Surfacing, I found myself treading in water so cold it stole the breath from my lungs. And then something closed around my upper thigh and buttocks and dragged me with it into the depths.

"Underwater, unable to breathe, my eardrums popping as I was dragged into oblivion, it was just a question of seconds before my head and chest would burst to relieve the excruciating pain coming from my waist. Looking up, I saw a bright flash along the surface ... and then the fire in my aching lungs was quenched by those tea-colored waters and I followed a soothing white light to what I assumed was heaven.

"And then somehow I was back in my body, semi-conscious and in horrific pain. Someone carried me inside and placed me on my back on an aluminum table. I could hear two men talking rapidly—the one holding me down giving the orders, the other sticking a needle in my arm ... and then I blacked out.

"I awoke in my own bed, the curtains backlit with morning light, a numb feeling coming from my hips and left quadriceps, both heavily bandaged.

"How did I manage to survive? Turns out I had been rescued by Alban MacDonald, the water bailiff and my future father-in-law. Even back then, Alban was a scary looking dude, with gruesome yellow teeth, pock marks all over his cheeks, and flaming tufts of burnt-orange hair that had never seen a comb. Angus took to calling him "the Crabbit," and we followed suit ... out of earshot, of course. To this day his frightening scowl still scares the bejesus out of me.

"Alban had been out on patrol that evening. According to the report he filed, my boat had been attacked ... by a tree.

"The bottom of Loch Ness is covered with dead trees. Over time compressed gases build up inside the trunks. When these internal pressures exceed the weight of the depths the entire tree

launches topside like a rocket. Alban said he witnessed one of these missiles of Mother Nature strike and flip my boat. As for being dragged below, apparently there was a length of barbed wire from an old fence wrapped around the trunk and my leg became entangled in it. In a state of panic, I had managed to tear my own flesh from the bone and escape. Alban dove in, hauled me to the surface and resuscitated me. He then rushed me to the nearest surgeon he knew in the area—his old pal, Doc Hornsby. The veterinarian patched me up like I was the family collie.

"This explanation checked off all the 'anything but Nessie' boxes, and my brain did the rest, burying the truth in my subconscious where I'd be forced to deal with it another day. My mother, on the other hand, elected to deal with her monster straight away. Hiring an attorney, she filed for divorce, the two of us en route to the United States before the ink was dry.

"With Angus out of the picture, you'd think things would have normalized. Normal in this case meant months of night terrors, my blood-curdling screams awakening my grandparents' household. With the help of a child psychologist they eventually passed.

"Fast-forward sixteen years. Quite the prodigy, I had earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees in marine biology from Princeton and a doctorate from Scripps. My research into deep-sea acoustic lures had been featured in several prominent journals, and I accepted a research position at Florida Atlantic University. David Caldwell, the department chair who had recruited me, was more of a social media guru than a scientist. Marketing me as Generation X's version of Jacques Cousteau led to a *National Geographic*-sponsored expedition to the Sargasso Sea—our goal—to capture a giant squid on film. Using my new acoustic lure which emulated the sounds and vibrations of salmon, Caldwell had guaranteed we'd be able to draw the legendary colossus up from the depths to the cameras mounted aboard our three-man submersible.

"On our first dive we descended beyond the recommended dive limit of 3,000 feet, activated the lure and waited. Hours later our patience was rewarded with what would be the first film footage of *Architeuthis dux* in the wild. Unfortunately, the lure not only summoned the squid but also a swarm of deep-sea denizens known only as 'the bloops.' These nasty predatory fish attacked the

squid, which panicked and tore loose our ballast tank, sending us sinking into oblivion. The depths produced a crack inching its way across our acrylic cockpit, threatening to burst open any second as we waited desperately for a drone to secure a tow-line—the underwater robot finally reaching us in four thousand feet of water.

"We ascended quickly out of the darkness and into the sunlit blue waters. Just as we closed within two-hundred feet of the surface, the damaged cockpit glass shattered and the sea rushed in, killing the pilot. Dragging the cameraman from the sinking sub, I ascended, ran out of air and drowned ... again.

"This time, I awoke in a hospital bed in South Florida to learn I had managed to haul both myself and the cameraman to the rescue divers before dying. David Caldwell publicly called me a hero; in private he blamed me for luring a giant squid too close to the sub, and with it the pilot's death and the loss of the submersible.

"Three days later I left the hospital, jobless and unaware that my subconscious had released long-dormant memories from my first near-death experience in Loch Ness. Sleep became my enemy as the night terrors from my childhood returned. Worse, I now suffered from an extreme case of hydrophobia, the mere act of wading ankle-deep in the ocean causing me to panic, my muscles tightening to near-paralysis conditions.

"In a span of a few months I had gone from being the next Jacques Cousteau to a shadow of my former self, my confidence shattered like the sub's cockpit and I quickly lost everything—my career, my fiancé and my quickly-fading sanity.

"Discovering that being inebriated kept the night terrors at bay, I began drinking to excess. Days were devoted to recovering from my hangovers, the evenings reserved for binging on cheap booze and women, both of which I found in abundance in South Beach, my new haunt.

"That was where my half-brother, Maxie Rael found me. I never knew I had a half-brother, and the punk-rock British barrister was sent with a purpose—to return yours truly to Scotland on orders from my father. It seemed that good ole dad had gotten himself into a wee bit of trouble with

the law.

"According to Max, the Wallace clan had left Angus the title to a prime stretch of waterside real estate on Loch Ness just south of Urquhart Bay. Once the zoning laws had been manipulated in his favor, our father had formed a partnership with John Cialino of Cialino Ventures. Angus would provide the land, 'Johnny C' would put up the capital to build the hotel, and everyone would make money.

"Six months into the construction phase, Angus discovered he was being ripped off by his partner, confronting him on the bluff overlooking Castle Urquhart. An argument ensued and Angus struck the younger man with a right cross. Johnny staggered backward and fell sixty feet into Loch Ness—never to be seen again.

"There was no shortage of eyewitnesses, leading the Highland Authority to arrest our ragedriven sperm donor and charge him with murder in the first. With his trial coming up in less than a week Angus had sent Max to bring me back to Scotland so he'd have both of his sons by his side in his fight to stave off the gallows and prove his innocence.

"Still seeking my father's approval, I fell for the lie—hook, line and sinker.

"But there was another reason I returned to Drumnadrochit—Brandy MacDonald.

"While my teen years were defined by long hours devoted to study and a physical regimen designed to give me a fighting chance on the football field, Brandy's adolescence was one of rebellion. Pregnant at sixteen, she found herself abandoned by both her boyfriend and her overbearing father, whose response to his daughter's loss of innocence was to cast her adrift. Brandy moved into a women's shelter, miscarried in her fourth month, and spent her remaining years of adolescence in a boarding house run by nuns. Ten years would pass before she spoke to her father again.

"When she was nineteen, Brandy met an American stockbroker and accepted his marriage proposal as a passport out of the Highlands. Seven months after the couple moved to California, Brandy was riding her ten-speed bike on a mountain highway when she was struck from behind by a

car. Her injuries were severe and she spent several weeks in intensive care—during which time her husband had an affair. A year later she returned to the Highlands divorced and lonely, with just enough money to purchase a second-hand passenger houseboat from which she barely managed to earn a living as a tour boat operator.

"Seeing her again ... well, suffice it to say it was complicated. As for my father, Angus was up on murder charges—that part was true. My presence at the trial, however, was intended to legitimize his alibi—that the fall did not kill John Cialino ... the monster did. It was all a crock of crap until the *real* creature's temperament suddenly changed and more people started dying.

"Forced to confront my deepest fears, I set out to resolve the mystery at Loch Ness—the battle nearly ending my life and that of my soul mate, Brandy—the details reported in the pages of my first memoir, *The Loch*."

* * *

"More than a year has passed. Brandy and I were married; ten months later she gave birth to our son, William. Yes ... William Wallace. This summer Angus's lakeside resort, *Nessie's Retreat*, bankrolled by the widow Cialino opened to great fanfare—but hardly a guest.

"Without the lore of its legendary monster, Loch Ness is just another lake in Scotland. Every business in Drumnadrochit and the Great Glen are on the verge of bankruptcy while I have become the most hated man in Scotland."

2

Town House, Inverness Scottish Highlands, Scotland

Situated on the River Ness which connects the Moray Firth with the North Sea and Loch Ness to the south, the city of Inverness is the gateway to the Scottish Highlands and serves as the region's governing body. Commercial and historic areas are located on the east and west banks of the river, connected by bridges. Shops, bars, and restaurants can be found on Young Street and Bridge Street, the latter of which runs east into High Street.

The two-story structure known as Town House is located on the corner of Castle and High streets, a 250-year-old time capsule of Flemish-Baroque architecture. Spiral towers present a castle-like appearance, the arched windows more of a church; the lavish entrance dominated by chandeliers and a grand staircase which leads up to the Inverness Town Hall.

Finlay "True" MacDonald ascended the steps two at a time in an attempt to circulate the blood from out of his loins. He and his new love interest, Anna McQuarrie had been going at it hot and heavy when the bagpipes had wailed over his cell-phone, the incessant ringtone destroying any hope of a mutual climax.

"Who's the devil calling you at two in the bloody morning?"

"It's business. I have tae go."

"Business? True MacDonald, ye told me you're an oil rig diver. Is there an emergency?"

"Diving's my day job. By night I'm a crime fighter."

The redhead laughed. "Who are ye then? Bagpipe-man?"

Bypassing the vacant Town Hall, True followed a short corridor to a private meeting room. An intimidating man in his twenties was seated by the closed door, his wrestler's build stretching the Metallica tee-shirt at the seams.

"Anthony Hewitt, when I recommended ye tae take my place as Sergeant of Arms it was

with the understanding you'd respect the dress code. Really lad, if ye must desecrate yerself with heavy rock at least wear a Nazareth tee."

"Fook that." The two former bouncers bumped fists.

"Now tell me, which Templar do I blame for calling a meeting at this ungodly hour?"

"That would be Bob the Brief."

True felt his pulse jump. Robert Morley, nicknamed "Bob the Brief" for his long-winded diatribes in the courtroom, had spent the last fifty years as one of the most respected solicitors in all of Scotland. For him to assemble the Black Knights ... well, it must be serious.

"All right then, Sergeant of Arms, do your duty and search me for weapons, only mind my trouser boa when ye pat me down. It's still a bit angry at bein' interrupted."

* * *

The Brotherhood known as the Black Knights was a secret sect of Templar that dated back to the time of Sir William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, the man who would unite Scotland's Highlanders with the Lowlanders to defeat King Edward Longshanks and secure their homeland's independence from England. After the Bruce's death, the Templar were charged with bringing the "Braveheart," the symbol of Scotland's freedom to the Holy Land. While en route the Templar were attacked by the Moors. One knight managed to escape with the casket holding the Bruce's heart—Sir Adam Wallace—who sought the help of the Templar living in the Scottish Highlands to protect the Braveheart from falling into the hands of the English.

With the Holy Land no longer an option, the Highland Templar came up with an inspired but risky idea; they would use the migration pattern of the Guivre, a fearsome predatory species living in Loch Ness, to play caretakers to the Bruce's heart. The journey would take them deep underground to a cavern where an aquifer connected Loch Ness to the Moray Firth and the North Sea. A steel gate was constructed to seal the passage, keeping the largest of the creatures from escaping; the Braveheart sealed in its casket along the cavern wall.

The surviving Templar swore a vow to protect the Braveheart and another, proclaiming

themselves the Order of the Black Knights of the Templar, the color signifying their pact with the devil.

For seven centuries the Guivres' presence kept intruders from accessing the caverns located beneath Aldourie Castle—until two years ago when the last of the beasts—a 47-foot female—had gone berserk from toxins in the water, forcing the present-day Black Knights into action.

* * *

True entered the private chamber, all eyes on him as he took a quick count of the men seated around a rectangular configuration of folding tables.

Jason O'Hearn, elected leader of the Black Knights and, by no coincidence Head of the Inverness Council, nodded to True as he found an empty chair. "Welcome Brother MacDonald. You are the fourteenth Knight to arrive, giving us a quorum. Let us stand and recite the oath as our forbearers did seven centuries ago."

The men stood, placing both palms over their hearts. "The Bruce is Scotland, and Scotland the Bruce. Protect the Braveheart, for freedom's sake ... the covenant of the Black Knights made."

"Thank you, brothers. Brother MacDonald, how is yer father?"

"Not well. ALS is a beast I'd not wish upon any but my worst enemy."

"Give him our best. The hour is late; let's get to the business at hand. The Chair calls upon Brother Morley."

Chants of "Bob the Brief' took the room as the white haired seventy-two-year old former solicitor stood, the elder statesman known for his dry wit. "Thank you, Mr. Chair. As always, I'll be brief. For months we've deliberated on remedies to pull our bleeding economy out of freefall—my favorite, by the way, being Brother Davies' idea to invade Ireland."

The joke drew laughs—along with a look of scorn from Angus Wallace. "It's after three, Bob. Yer jokes expired at midnight."

"Easy, Brother Wallace. Of us all, ye'll have the most to gain if my plan brings back the tourists."

"God bless ye, Brother Morley," said Calum Forest, Loch Ness's water bailiff. "Another summer like the last and *I'll* be movin' tae Ireland. Tell us yer plan."

"The plan is as simple as it is logical, Brother Forest. We bring another monster to Loch Ness and the tourists will return."

The other thirteen men joined in a chorus of groans and cuss words.

"Are ye daft, Robert Morley?" Sam Gibbs shouted, the sheep farmer's temper fueled by the lateness of the hour. "There are no other Guivre like that female. As Zachary Wallace cited in his book, she only grew as large as she did because our grandfathers sealed her in the aquifer eighty-six years ago, preventing her from leaving Loch Ness to return to the Sargasso Sea tae spawn and die."

"Gentlemen, allow me to explain. We're not going tae replace the beast with another Guivre. We're going tae create our own custom-made version of Nessie, a family-oriented aquatic anomaly more Disney than Anguilla...a creature we can control or kill off if need be."

"And where does one purchase these custom-made beasties?" True asked. "Amazon.com?" The men laughed, all but Angus.

"No, Brother MacDonald. As luck would have it, there's a place right here in Scotland that can do the job for us. Ever hear of the Roslin Institute? No? It's listed under the University of Edinburgh, even though it retained its independence, allowing it to—"

"Roslin? Never heard of it," spat Michael Murphy, another sheep farmer. "Be brief, Bob and get tae the point."

"Really, Brother Murphy? I would think that you and Brother Gibbs, above all others, would have heard of Roslin."

"Why us? We're not academics like you and yours, we earn our keep."

"And as sheep farmers, neither of ye remember hearing about an ewe named Dolly?"

"They never heard of her," True cut in, "but Brother Gibbs did date the ewe's younger sister for a time."

Robert Morley waited for the laughter to die down before he read from an article on his

iPhone. "On July 5, 1996, two scientists at the Roslin Institute in Midlothian, Scotland became the first to prove a cell taken from a specific part of the body could be used to recreate or clone an entire individual, in this case a sheep. The donor cell used to clone the successful birth was taken from another sheep's mammary gland, inspiring the scientists to name the animal Dolly, after the well-endowed American country singer, Dolly Parton.

"Through a friend of a client, I've beencommunicating with one of the top scientists at Roslin to see if it was feasible tae hire them—off the books, so tae speak, tae render us an animal that might suit our needs. His response was in the affirmative, but only if we provided healthy donor cells. All of Roslin's donor cells are locked away and strictly accounted for, but he has his own private lab off-site and access to a variety of animals that could serve as the beastie's template."

Blake Stephens, a retired high school science teacher stood to be heard. "Bob, even if ye could collect suitable cells tae create a new biologic, your plan is extraordinarily dangerous—a million things could go wrong with yer Frankenstein's monster. How many did the last beast kill, Brother Wallace before yer boy finally slayed her?"

"No less than a baker's dozen, not counting Johnny C.," Angus replied.

"Objection," Morley cried out, as if he was back in court. "Listen tae me, all of ye.Genetic engineering involves modifying certain genes to create an entirely new organism. Or, in our case, an animal that would draw the crowds back tae Loch Ness ... a far more docile creature that resembled the one our Nessie shops used tae sell by the thousands."

The retired barrister's comment sent the room buzzing with side conversations.

Christian Keane waved from across the room, the Inverness Courier reporter and youngest knight in the chamber demanding to be heard. "Bob, the animal tae which ye speak is called Elasmosaurus. It was a species of plesiosaur; a long-necked ancient sea dinosaur that died off 65 million years ago. The only reason the public ever referenced that creature traces back to April of 1934 when the *Daily Mail* chose to publish Dr. Robert Wilson's photo of a long-necked beast. You sir, the most educated man in his room, certainly know that photo was staged. So tell us, where

would Roslin's scientists get plesiosaur DNA from which tae create such an animal?"

"Brother Keane—"

"And don't tell me from the blood of 65-million-year-old mosquitoes, preserved in amber. That may have worked in the *Jurassic Park* movies, but how did those eggheads in *JurassicWorld* manage to get Mosasaur blood from a sea creature? Did the mosquitoes slip inside one of Brother MacDonald's deep dive suits to go underwater and take a bite?"

Jason O'Hearn glanced at Robert Morley and shook his head as a debate broke out among the Generation X members, their inclusion into the Black Knights forced by the recent retirements, illnesses, and deaths of five Templar in the last eighteen months. The leader waited another thirty seconds before he repeatedly struck his gavel until the chamber quieted. "Brother Keane, sit down. Brother Morley?"

"Is it possible to clone an extinct marine reptile like a plesiosaur? Not likely, as Brother Keane rightly points out. Could my contact at Roslin create a water creature that *resembled* a plesiosaur? We're scheduled to meet soon; I expect he'll have an answer for us then."

That set the room abuzz once more—

—until Mason Oliver stood, the Catholic priest gazing at his fellow Highlanders as if they had just been caught plotting against Jesus. "Listen tae ye. Yer like a pack of jackals, ready and willing tae resurrect our economy on the back of another lie. I was a lad when the surgeon's photo launched a cottage industry that would forever paint the communities of the Great Glen as the world's buffoons, saddling Inverness with the roll of ringmaster to ourwarm weather circus. I had hoped this council would seek remedies to retool our people with the skills requiredtae anchor a year-round economy; instead yer ready tae sign a deal wit' the devil. If ye ask me, that's a good way to guarantee we'll go under."

"We're already under, Father," retorted Mark Breitsch, the new owner of the Clansman Hotel and Angus Wallace's chief competitor. "Angus and I own hotels, we need tourists. So do our employees, the tavern owners and barkeeps, the souvenir stores and the auto rentals and yes, even

the farmers whose goods are sold when the people have money tae spend. For eighty years we survived as a monster-seeker's paradise; in doing so we kept the oil companies and their environmental toxins out of the Great Glen. It was them that killed the Guivre, not Zachary Wallace, but ye can bet Sam and Murphy's farms they'll be back, circling each of us like a hungry pack of wolves if we don't do something drastic. Brother Morley hasn't given us the particulars of whit this might cost tae do, but in my book, a sea creature is a sea creature; if the damn thing draws a crowd so be it. Whit say you, Brother Wallace?"

Startled, Angus looked up, his thumbs blindly typing out the last words of a text message he was sending on his cell phone. "Whit say me about Bob's plan? Well—"

Father Oliver shook his head. "Are ye actually asking this scoundrel his opinion? The man tells more lies than the American president and fooks as many women."

"Aye, andbe sure taetell yer mum I said hello." Angus waited until the laughter died down. "Not sure whit lies ye might be referring tae, Father. Would tha' be the lies teld by the church tae protect a wayward man of the cloth? As for Bob's plan ... I, for one, have no interest in participating in this deceit."

"Deceit?" Robert Morley turned to his fellow knight. "If a zoo crossbreeds several species tae produce a new species which draws the crowds, is that also a deceit? If a fertility doctor artificially inseminates a woman who has ceased ovulating with a donor egg and sperm from another couple, will she love her child any less?"

"No. But if I foch the Queen and she magically gets pregnant,I seriously doubt she'd name the bastard heir to the crown."

"Wallace does not speak for me!"

"Nor for our plaid. Get us all the details and let us put it tae a proper vote."

Jason O'Hearn glanced at the text coming across his cell phone as he gaveled for quiet. "It's late and there's far more tae hear. Brother Morley, how soon can ye meet with yer contact at Roslin?"

"Give me until the end of next week."

"Excellent. I will reconvene council at an earlier hour once you've garnered the information.

Let me remind all of us that whit is said here falls under the pact of secrecy each of us swore to as members of the Black Knights. Let us end the meeting with our oath."

The men stood."The Bruce is Scotland, and Scotland the Bruce. Protect the Braveheart, for freedom's sake ... the covenant of the Black Knights made."

"Thank you, brothers. Be careful in yer travels home or wherever the late hour takes ye."

Mark Breitsch turned to Angus. "Whit are ye doin', Angus? Bob offers us a possible lifeline and ye speak oot against him? Hey, I'm talkin' to ye, old man."

"No, yertalkin' at me. Fook off."

Fists balled, the irate hotel owner went after Angus as he exited the chamber with True MacDonald—

—his path suddenly blocked by Anthony Hewitt, the immense Sergeant of Arms towering over him.

"Is there a problem, Brother Bitch?"

"It's Breitsch. And no ... there's no problem."

3

Nessie's Lair Pub Nessie's Retreat Hotel

Drumnadrochit, Scotland

The bar was located on the first floor of Angus's hotel adjacent to the outdoor pool and boating

dock. The latter had closed in late September when the weather had turned; the former when the

townspeople decided they could no longer support the father of the man who had ruined their

livelihoods.

I had moved my family into the hotel for safety reasons and quickly realized I had made

myself a shut-in. That was fine by me; the only reason we had remained in the Highlands was

because Brandy's father, Alban had been diagnosed with ALS. For the first time in her life her father

depended upon her and she refused to leave him.

I, on the other hand, needed a job. To the world outside the Great Glen I was still a

marketable celebrity—a hero of sorts to my fellow academics, and I was banking on that to guide me

down a new career path in the marine sciences.

To that end, my editor had solicited the help of Summer Wilkins. One of the top

headhunters in New York with connections to most of the major networks, Summer had all but

guaranteed I'd be the next "Bill Nye the Science Guy."

Keying open the employee entrance to the pub, I entered the bar just before 6p.m., my bi-

monthlySkype call with Summer scheduled for 1p.m. eastern time. Angus had paid for the

Highlands' version of WiFi, though the signal appeared to be no stronger than it had been at the bed

and breakfast we had moved from. I imagined a sheep wandering the field by Urquhart Castle's

ruins with an antenna strapped to its ass.

I selected my usual booth, the window's view looking out to Loch Ness. It was mid-

November and darkness had already fallen, the Highland days diminishing with each passing week.

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At precisely 6p.m. the laptop chimed with the Skype ringtone. I clicked the mouse to accept. "Hi, Summer. How are you?"

"Never had a bad day, just a few challenging moments."

"So, what have you got for me?"

"Nothing I'd raise my skirt for. Coupl'a teaching positions; one a state university, the other a private college. Neither offer meets your minimum salary requirement. I'm still in conversation with your pal at Scripps, but I think he's just being polite."

"I don't get it. What happened to all your promises of fame and fortune coming off the book tour?"

"Darlin', the book had two good weeks and fell off the bestseller list. What killed our momentum was your TODAY Show interview which hammered home the fact that, despite all the death and carnage this creature brought we still don't have a single photo or video showing details of what the damn thing looked like."

"What about the footage of the creature crushing the pen David Caldwell had erected in Urquhart Bay?"

"The monster never surfaced; effect with no cause fosters suspicion. Zack, you're a man of science, would you accept the footage as proof this thing was real? Now add in other mitigating facts—like your father's sudden acquittal—"

"He was acquitted after I produced Johnny C's remains."

"But you refused to lead the police back to this mysterious cavern where this epic battle between man and beast took place."

"We've been through this, Summer. I took an oath of silence—"

"—to who? The Avengers? The Legion of Doom? I took an oath too, Zach. But I can't get you what you want unless you stop protecting these Scottish hillbillies. The only reason your agent was able to land a second book deal was so you'd lift the veil of silence surrounding the mysterious brotherhood responsible for harboring the creature in Loch Ness. From what I'm hearing, your

editor is not happy."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning, they're thinking about canceling the deal."

"That's why my editor hasn't returned my calls."

"Let's not panic yet. Produce the sequel they're asking for and we can turn this thing around."

"Summer, it'll take me four months to do a rewrite; they won't send me my next payment until then. How am I supposed to feed my family?"

Hearing the words coming out of my mouth, I finally felt my neighbors' plight.

"We'll get you money by resurrecting your career as a scientist."

"How do we do that?"

"First, we get you the hell out of Drumnadrochit. Every day you delay just feeds the media another negative story. Next, we need to associate you with another monster ASAP—one with actual video people are talking about. Fortunately, momma's got just the thing."

She clicked her mouse, a news article replacing her face on the screen.

China's Lake Monster Sighted Again

<u>Lake Tianchi</u>: China's version of the Loch Ness Monster was caught on video by an American family visiting the popular vacation site on Thursday, marking the sixth documented appearance of one or more of these mysterious creatures since the September 22 footage taken by two college students from Jilin University went viral this fall.

Cynthia Ramsey, (age 49) was following a trail overlooking Lake Tianchi with her two daughters (Krystan age 25 and Jessica 19) and her son (Alexander 22) when they spotted two parallel wakes moving away from them along the lake's surface.

"We were following the path to the southeast, heading toward the North Korean border when my son pointed at the two objects. Whatever they were they had to be pretty darn big. We recorded them for a good fifteen seconds before they went deep."

Lake Tianchi, more commonly known to locals as Heaven's Lake, was created after the eruption of the Mt. Baekdu volcano in 946 A.D. The caldera which serves as the lake's borders is 6,000 feet above sea level. It has an average depth of 180 feet with a maximum depth of

almost 1,200 feet.

The first sighting of a water creature occurred back in 1903 when a monster described as having a head the size of a buffalo's skull allegedly came on shore where it attacked three civilians before it was shot six times and escaped into the depths. The first documented sighting of the Heaven's Lake monster was reported in 1968 by Chou Fon Yin, a staff member at the Jilin Province Weather Report Department. Chou was gazing at the lake's surface when he noticed two black-gray objects moving parallel to one another. Using his binoculars, Chou realized he was looking at two large creatures swimming in tandem. He described their heads as dog-like and estimated their wake to be over twenty feet long.

Since then there have been hundreds of sightings. On July 24, 1994 a group of more than forty tourists witnessed and filmed one of the creatures as it frolicked along the surface for a good half hour. One eyewitness, Meng Fanying described its movements as "seal-like."

More recent sightings include a report filed on July 11, 2005 by Zheng Changchun and his daughter and son-in-law, all having claimed photographing a dark water creature with a head "the size of an adult ox." Scientists who doubt such a monster exists question whether Heaven's Lake possesses suitable flora and fauna to feed such a large species. Still, seeing is believing and Jilin officials are thrilled with the record number of visitors to their park.

"Okay. So how does this resurrect my career?"

Summer's face returned to the screen, replacing the news story. "In two days, the Chinese Academy of Sciences will announce the formation of an international investigative board made up of scientists from China, Russia, the U.S., Canada, the E.U., and Australia. This board will serve as judges of an international contest to determine the species of these mysterious lake creatures and how they came to reside in a glacier lake. Ten "Team Nations' made up of the top scientists fromeach country will then be selected to come to China in March to investigate Heaven's Lake. China and North Korea—the host nations, are already in. Figure the United States, Russia, and several E.U. nations will be added over the coming weeks."

"You think you can get me on the U.S. team?"

"With you carrying dual citizenship, not a chance. However, I have a contact on the selection committee who says he can get you in using your Scottish birth certificate."

"I'm being recruited as a member of Team Scotland? Wow."

"Is that a problem?"

"More of an irony. Where and when do I need to be in China and for how long?"

"The producers want everyone checked in at one of the sponsor's hotels in Changchun by noon on Marchthe twelfth. You'll receive a day of orientation and then scientists, cast and crew will be bused to the tent city being set up in the Tian Shan Mountains. Zach, this is not just a scientific endeavor, it's a competition. Each team will have two weeks to investigate Heaven's Lake and submit a working theory to the judges as to what these creatures are and how they came to be. The top three submissions selected will make the first cut and go on, to the bottom seventeams we say 'sayonara."

"That's Japanese."

"Whatever. What's important is making the cut which guarantees you \$30,000 in prize money...less my fifteen percent. The competition ends two weeks later ... hopefully when one of these critters has been cleanly captured on film and matches the species in your thesis."

"And what if that happens on Day One?"

"Then you kick back for a month and wait until the formal announcement."

"What's the winner receive?"

"The winning team will split \$100,000. If Team Scotland is just you then it's all yours, less—"

"-your fifteen percent, I know. So, there's no payout unless I place in the top three?"

"None. However, all Team Nation participants will receive freefood and lodging."

"What about airfare?"

"For that, we'll need to find you a sponsor."

"Forget the Highlands; the only thing they'll sponsor is my public lynching."

"Don't be so negative. From everything I've heard and read, this will be a huge global event.

Remember, the host nations are China and North Korea.My friend told me Beijing really pushed

Kim Jong Un hard to co-hostas a way to depressurize the nuclear missile tests and resume talks."

"Wow, this really is a big deal. I owe you."

"Actually, you owe my pal on the selection committee. He'll introduce himself when the time is right. For now, I need you to man-up."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I need the old Zachary Wallace back—the brilliant scientist who risked life and limb to learn the truth about a legendary lake monster, not this whiny version that allows the Drumnadrochit douche bags to blame him for their lost revenues. Do you think your crappy hometown hamlet is the first tourist trap to ever declare bankruptcy? Maybe they should have put some money away when the beast was feeding off their guests and there wasn't a vacant room to be had. No one put a gun to their headsand told 'em to spend it. And your father was sure ready to cash in on your bravery. Or did you forget how he suckered you into returning home to save his sorry ass from the gallows."

"You're right. Thanks, Summer."

"Thank me by getting to Heaven's Lake and resolving the identities of these creatures before the other eggheads can figure things out—

"—only this time don't kill off the main attraction."

4

Heights of Woodside Westhill, Inverness

The black 2017 Jaguar XJ-series luxury sedan exited the B9006 highway and turned right, its driver

entering the exclusive community of estate homes known as the Heights of Woodside.

Each two-story mansion had its own private access road secured behind a gated entrance.

These double-wide avenues, framed by brick paver sidewalks and designer lamp posts, cut across a

snow-covered expanse of lawn to a porte-cochère and circular drive marking the homeowner's

grand entrance. Five, six, and seven-bedroom floor plans featured private balconies which

overlooked a bluff and a spectacular view of the Moray Firth.

Robert Morley didn't need seven bedrooms, six bathrooms, three reception areas, a work

shed or a five-car garage. What the attorney wanted was five bedrooms with balconies overlooking

that incredible water view. So did everyone else it seemed as property values in the Heights

continued to rise and none of the estate owners seemed interested in selling.

Refusing to be denied his dream home, Bob the Brief expanded his law practice in Inverness

to handleprobate.

Probate is a legal procedure where a court oversees the distribution of property of a person

who has died. The process begins when someone (usually a relative of the deceased) files a petition

for probate. The court will then issue an order appointing someone (usually a probate attorney,

called an executor) to represent the estate. Responsibilities include opening an estate bank account,

arranging for publication of legal notices, determining the validity of claims by creditors,

payingfuneral costs and medical bills, sending notices to beneficiaries, and selling off assets to pay

for the costs of probate which can add up quickly and take years, especially those involving large

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estates.

Morley offered his firm's services at a huge discount to any probate cases involving property in the Heights of Woodside.

He quickly discovered three of the mansions hopelessly tied up in probate, the relatives of the deceased anxious to sell and move on.

By week's end, Bob the Brief had settled all debts, using £875,000 in his retirement fund to purchase all three estates, convincing his wife (who wintered in Boca Raton, Florida) that property values in Inverness would continue to rise, enabling them to rent two of the mansions while living in the third, the income covering the mortgages on all three.

That was eighteen months ago. Since then the legendary lake monster had been vanquished, the tourists were gone, along with the two families renting their "investment homes," leaving Morley three mortgages to cover, the combined payments in excess of £24,000 a month.

* * *

Winter's late afternoon dusk was upon him as Morley approached the gated entrance of the estate he lived in. He waited impatiently while the wrought-iron barrier retracted painfully, the rusted mechanism squealing its plight to the empty expanse of acreage blanketed in snow. When the cursed object stalled, he nudged it with the Jag's bumper until he heard the telltale snap.

Happy now, arsehole, ye broke it.

Instead of backing off he floored the gas pedal, causing his rear tires to spin on the frozen asphalt, sending the luxury sedan's lighter back end whipping around its engine-dominated front until the trunk's passenger side struck one of the gate's stone pillars with a heavy *thud*, the crunch of plastic all that remained of his right tail light.

"Stupid git!"

Still unable to access a calmer mental gear, Bob the Brief's rage shifted into an all-consuming

fit of insanity when he realized his private access road had been plowed but not salted. Squeezing his abused metal steed past the partially-blocked entrance, he accelerated once more, intent on teaching the Heights property manager a lesson on safety.

He made it ninety meters before the Jag's rear end spun out; the retired attorney's slew of swearwords escorting the vehicle as it slid backwards down a 40-degree frozen winter-wonderland that was once his front lawn before burying itself ass-first in a snow drift.

Morley's face struck the deployed airbag, the vehicle's wood-paneled cockpit suddenly filled with powder. He tried his door, only to realize his car was wedged in tight on both sides.

Pressing both hands to the powder-covered car horn, he blasted the annoying sound into the night—the acoustics muffled by the snow drift.

Shyte ... if yer buried ass-backwards then the car's dual exhaust is most likely buried, too. Shut the engine down now before carbon monoxide fills the car and kills you.

Feeling for the power switch, he shut off the car.

Glad tae see yer thinking rationally again. Now locate yer phone and call the guardhouse.

He turned on the interior lights and quickly found his phone. He located the guardhouse number a split-second before the last charge bar disappeared from view, powering off the device.

"Okay then ... where's the charger?"

It was not until he remembered that his son had borrowed his phone charger two days ago and had not returned the cord to his car that Robert Morley realized he might not survive the night.

* *

Anthony Hewitt drummed his hands atop the steering wheel to the beat of the Rolling Stones' *Street Fighting Man*.

True MacDonald was slumped down in the front passenger seat, using the angle of the driver's side-view mirror to keep an eye on the entrance of Angus's hotel.

"Yer boss is late. Not a great first impression—jist saying."

True looked up at the swollen second and third knuckles of his friend's right hand, the flesh sporting dark red scabs. He was about to reply when movement caught his eye—a dark-clad figure exiting the hotel. "He's comin'. Remember whit I teld ye abootbein' respectful."

The driver's side back door slid open and Angus climbed in. "Smell's like a vegan's farts in here." The silver-maned Highlander glanced at the driver. "Saw you at the round table get together evening last. So you're Rachel Hewitt's kid?"

"Ye know me Mum?"

"Aye. Growin' up in Drum, everyone knew Rachel Macleish. How old are ye lad? Aboot eighteen?"

"Nearly twenty."

"Twenty? Hmm. Now let me think ... Yea, I suppose it's feasible."

"Whit's that?"

"That I'm ver Daddy."

True glanced at his younger friend. The big man was bending the steering wheel, his knuckles bleeding, his grip having stretched the skin white, tearing open the scabs.

"Yer mum ... sweet Jesus she was a nymph. She'd wait for me in the woods behind the old rugby pitch every Wednesday from late September 'til it grew too cold outside—our own little Hump Day, we called it."

Anthony's jaw was clenched tight, his blood pressure soaring.

"Ah, shyte...tha' wasn't yer mum, wit was I thinking? My humblest of apologies, Sir Anthony. There's no way I could be yer daddy."

True felt the tension ease as the big man expelled a beer and garlic-tainted breath, the excitable lad blinking back tears.

"Hump Day was Cecil Coogan's mum. Now there was a wild one."

"Cecil's ol' lady, huh? That's funny."

"Yep. See, yer mum was very careful. Her step-daddy was a preacher; she feared he'd whip her tae death if she got pregnant at fifteen. That's why she insisted I do her from behind. Arse Friday, we called it. A real responsible lass, yer mum."

Expelling a wounded howl, Anthony spun around in his seat, intent on ripping Angus's silver-haired head from his neck—

—his eyes rolling up in his head, his body trembling behind 8,000 volts of electricity as the old man struck him square in the forehead with the pronged end of a stun-gun.

For nearly two minutes Anthony Hewitt shook himself silly, attempting to override the current juicing his insides with hot magma.

"Yer friend's strong, True. Unfortunately, strong and stupid don't serve me well. Look at him ... he still thinks I split his Mum twenty years ago. Who knows? Maybe I did, but I doubt it. Back then it was the married ones always hittin' on me, not the girls."

Anthony stopped shaking. "Wait ... Ye was jist testing me?"

"Aye lad, and ye failed." Angus leaned over the driver side seat at the brawler. "Yer big, but yer stupid. The problem wit' stupid is stupid's forever. Yer also a hot head. Hot heads end up deid."

"Gimme a second chance. If True learned, I could learn."

"True wasn't a hothead, he was devious. Got tha' from his old man. His problem was his vanity. Still is."

True winked. "We cannae all be perfect."

"Please, Mr. Wallace. I need the job. My girl ... we have a child on the way. I hope tae marry her."

Angus held his hand out to Anthony, helping him up off the floor. "Can ye drive?"

"Think so."

"Then take us tae Inverness; we need tae find Bob the Brief."

Anthony buckled his seatbelt and put the van in gear, then cut across the hotel's vacant parking lot and exited, heading north on the A82.

"Whose head did ye bust open, lad?" Angus asked, noticing Hewitt's bleeding knuckles.

"Some Ned an' his pals, come over by ferry last night taeTrackies. Wasn't a brawl, I was working the door."

True translated. "There are two distinct breeds tae be found these days in Inverness;yerCruzers and yer Estate Dwellers."

"Fookin' Neds in their Fred Perry polo shirts an' spikey gelled hair ... think they own the fookin' city ... come intae our bar, insistin' on changin' the tunes ... not on my watch. Two of emgot up in my face saying, 'Yousestartin' something, eh?' I'm gonna burst ya, eh?' Always the 'eh' after each threat."

"Perhaps they were jistlookin' tae you for guidance?"

"Nah, Mr. Wallace. But I played the game. 'I don't know kind sir if I am indeed looking to engage in lighthearted fisticuffs with yourself, but it seems to me you approached me wishing to have a square go."

"Ye can get away with that in a tavern," True said, "not in the Ferry. Cross the Black Bridge and chances are one in five ye'll end up mugged, beaten, stabbed or murdered, dependent on the time of day. Merkinch, too."

"Merkinch got worse since the tourists left."

Angus nodded. "City's low on funds. First things cut are teachers, police, and firemen." Removing his cell phone, he tried calling Morley.

"This is Bob. Be brief."

Angus hung up. "Take the exit at Westhill."

Anthony followed the signs to the Heights of Woodside.

Recognizing Angus, the security guard let them in.

Snow flurries danced in their headlights as the van circled along the private road.

"Up on the right, that one's his."

"Gate's jammed open." True leaned closer to the windshield, wiping away a layer of condensation with the sleeve of his jacket. "Can ye see the road?"

"Not with all this snow."

True reached inside his coat, feeling for a zippered inner pocket from which he removed a small night-scope. "Hold this up to yer eye, Anthony. There's an elevated sidewalk outlining the access road."

The driver looked through the eyepiece, the night optics shading everything in olive-green. "I see it." He drove ahead, staying close to the walkway—

—stopping when the tire tracks veered sharply, disappearing somewhere up ahead and off to the right.

Anthony stopped the van and the three men got out. Climbing down from the road, they quickly found themselves in snow up to their waists. Even using the night-scope, True did not see the half-buried car until he was almost upon its snow-covered rear bumper.

Angus wiped the dealer's emblem clean, verifying the make, color, and model. "It's Bob's Jag."

"Front end's buried past the doors," Anthony reported.

"True, fetch the shovels in the back of the van."

It took ten minutes for True and Anthony to dig through the ice and snow to access the driver's side door. They found the retired attorney unconscious, his complexion pale, his lips blue.

"Let's get him to his house. Make sure you have his keys."

* * *

"The exhaust was backing into the car," True reported, "that's why you were unconscious when we found you. Lucky for you the battery died or you'd be dead."

Robert Morley took a healthy gulp of the copper colored liquid, the alcohol searing the lining of his empty stomach. "I had turned off the engine but it got cold; guess I must've restarted the engine and passed out. Christ, who dies in a snow drift on their own front lawn?"

"Thankfully not ye," Angus said, brushing snow from Bob the Brief's boots.

They were seated in a large family room before a stone fireplace, the flames struggling to draw fuel from the snow-encrusted logs hauled in from outside. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out upon the dark waters of the Moray Firth. There were boats out on the waterway and holiday lights.

Angus nodded to True. "You and Anthony can explore the kitchen for dinner; I wish tae speak with Bob alone."

"Come on, lad." True led his friend down a welcoming hallway set in Saturnia marble to the open floor plan of the Bulthaup designer kitchen. The center island held silver stone worktops, the back wall a Gaggenau oven, steam oven, microwave, warming drawer and a Miele coffee machine.

"All this is for one family?"

"Aye." True opened the refrigerator doors and conducted a quick inventory, removing a cardboard boxcontaining leftover pizza and beer.

* * *

"I didnae understand, Angus. Ye sure weren't in favor of my plan two nights ago. Hell, ye pissed off Mark Breitsch so badly I saw him go after ye when the meeting adjourned."

"Aye, and in public this'll be my stated position, intended tae fool those members of the Black Knights who oppose us."

"Are ye saying our Templar brethren aren't tae be trusted?"

"Tha's exactly whit I'm sayin'. Half the men in tha' chamber sit on the Inverness Council; another third are on the payroll of Father Oliver and his church cronies back in Edinburgh—all a' which is why Roslin Institute can no longer be involved, nor can you, Bob the Brief. There's simply too much at stake. Even if ye managed tae get Council's support, the public's going tae be suspicious of any new species of water creature that suddenly decides tae occupy Loch Ness, let alone one tha' resembles a long-necked plesiosaur. The less people who ken about this, the better."

"Why you?"

"For one thing, whoever is selected tae design, hatch and nurture this genetically modified lake beastie is going tae want tae be paid up front and in cash, and tha' means black market money. Johnny Cialino's connections are now mine. I can bring in the cash without involving Council. Second, whit do ye think will happen the day the first photo of Nessie 2.0 appears on social media sites?"

"The world will want proof."

"Want it? They'll bloody demand it. And which defamed son of Drumnadrochit will the world demand Council appoint tae take charge of this new scientific inquiry?"

"I imagine that would be yer boy, Zachary."

"And why him?"

"Because he done it once before."

"And?"

"They trust him. Yer boy put truth ahead of his own people."

"Aye, and he will again. Any species new or ancient that takes residence in Loch Ness will have tae be accepted as such by Zachary or this whole venture is worthless."

"And you can persuade Zachary to go along with this?"

"Ye didnae trust me, Bob?"

"Nobody trusts ye, Angus Wallace, especially yer own flesh and blood. Clearly yer only interest in this venture is creating an entity that bring back the tourists and put money in yer pocket."

"And whit is yer interest in this noble cause? Let's see, you and yer soon-tae-be ex-wife are carryin' three mortgagesjist in Woodside. Bet tha's a pretty penny due every first of the month."

Morley nodded, tears in his eyes. "All three homes are listed. Ellen's divorce attorney's goin' after everything else."

"She's filed then?"

"Hired the Berg Group. Ryan Ehrensberger's handling the divorce; his partner, Randy Greenberg is a forensics investigator and a damn good one."

"My son, Maxie is also experienced at tracking money. For instance, did ye ken there are six mansions in this very neighborhood that were sold for a third of whit yeraskin."

"Doesn't surprise me. It's a buyer's market; some people can't afford tae hang on."

"The buyer's listed as a Cayman Islands holding company. Maxie found out they're buying up Inverness properties at pennies on the dollar. Seems the CEO of this holding company is an American fellow, a former nuclear engineer from Wisconsin named Doug Dvorak."

"Never heard of him."

"Actually Bob, ye have. Five years ago Dvorak contacted you after his first cousin—a Mr. John Thorsen was arrested for involuntary manslaughter."

"One punch manslaughter ... Thorsen and his twenty-year-old daughter were in an Inverness tavern having dinner when two drunk locals started hitting on the girl. When the Thorsen's left, the thugs were waiting for them. Turns out Thorsen was a former military badass—a Green Beret, if memory serves. He made quick work of the bastards only he went too far, leaving

one bad guy dead and the other crippled. Eyewitnesses said the men had it coming. The prosecuting attorney agreed but convinced the jury that Thorsen—being a trained killer—had made a conscious choice to take things tae the next level. Judge gave him seven years ... a ridiculous sentence."

"And one yer appealing ... tha's why ye been visiting Thorsen of late. And here we thought ye was retired."

"It's pro bono work."

"Wouldnae have anything tae do with the fact tha' John Thorsen used tae work in a secret American military base tha' holds the world's most advanced genetics lab?"

Robert Morley looked up at Angus, defeat in his eyes. "You and me ... we're after the same thing."

"No we're not. You'd settle for a brief resurgence in the tourism trade and then a quick cashout of all your Cayman real estate holdings; the rest of us seek a solution that becomes a legacy."

"Whit is it ye want, Angus?"

"Ye did good, Bob, but now it's time tae let someone a bit more ruthless ride shotgun on this venture. Have ye met Thorsen's contact at Roslin?"

"No. We're scheduled tae meet next week in Edinburgh. As a show of good faith he wants £250,000 in assorted dominations."

"How much do ye have?"

"Half. Almost."

Angus reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved an old flip phone. "Call him on this; when yer through toss it in the Moray Firth. Tell him your investment banker is flying in tae meet with him, that I'll handle things from here."

DATE: October 1, 2020

FR: Steve Alten

RE: Update on The LOCH: Heaven's Lake

TO MY WONDERFUL READERS:

Thank you for our patience.

With www.SeaMonsterCove.com launched and the second wave of content posted, , I will be able to focus more time on finishing Loch 3 (Loch 2 is Vostok). I want to thank those readers who pre-purchased a book as far back as February 2019. The LOCH (first novel of the trilogy took me 2 years to write and this new installment is taking just as long (historical fiction requires a lot of research and careful translation in the writing to make it both fun and easily understood plus this story deals with genetic code and other complex factors I need to research, comprehend, then simplify while still teaching it to you. I also can't accurately target a release date until I get an update on The LOCH movie production schedule. All new novels require publicity and the announcement of The LOCH motion picture is vital to increasing pre-orders (which I have not pushed because of the pandemic). Please understand that writing is the career that supports my family and book sales are needed to sustain me during the 2 years it takes to create the novel. (450 page novels don't write themselves, and this one is a real pageturner). Hardbacks will not be sold in stores and must be pre-ordered at the e-store on www.SteveAlten.com before December 1st, 2020. All books pre-ordered before November 1, 2020 will be signed by me personally.

QUESTION: Steve, why must I pre-order a first edition hardback? Why won't The Loch: Heaven's Lake be sold in stores?

ANSWER: The publishing industry has changed. Amazon has forced major bookstores chains like Borders, Waldenbooks, B. Dalton as well as independent booksellers into bankruptcy. As a result advances to authors (even best-selling authors) have been reduced by 50-80 percent. If your boss cut your yearly wages by 50-80 % could you still make ends meet? A & M Publishing is a real publisher which I opened with several partners in August of 2015 after reacquiring the domestic rights to MEG (#1) knowing a movie was in the works. Unfortunately, my first A & M hardback (UNDISCLOSED) was pirated by a major conglomerate which illegally published a horrible trade paperback at half the price, killing our sales. We sue and settled, but the damage was terminal as bookstores retuned 8,000 hardbacks.

This force us to change the way we do business, beginning with the hardback of MEG: Generations. Pre-selling the book directly to my fans allows me to print only what we need with costly no returns. I sell less but earn more per book, which makes YOUR COPIES far more

valuable. Five years after its pre-sale, first edition copies of MEG: Generations are selling on ebay for \$150+. That huge profit is being reaped by you - my dedicated readers, NOT ME. My mainstram publisher, Tor/Forge is now selling the trade paperback in stores and the ebook as well. None of the amazing graphic images and maps featured in the hardback are in the trade paperback (too expensive to print as it adds 40 additional pages to the manuscript).

The LOCH: Heaven's Lake will probably be A & M's last title, making it even more valuable. Hardbacks will feature maps and images, as well as a signature page!

Like MEG: Generations, the hardback will be amazing and in huge demand, so stock up and make some money!

And please please join www.SeaMonsterCove.com which has a private library of my novels, only ENHANCED versions (not for sale) that are like nothing you've ever read, as well as 7-9 original scripts that are some o my best stories which no one has read except for a few producer (one of the scripts was optioned just last week).

Finally, to reward your patience and trust... here is one more sneak preview chapter og The LOCH: Heaven's Lake!

Be sure to sign up for my free monthly newsletters for updates.

With love,

Steve Alten

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Aldourie Castle Estate Strath Dore. Loch Ness

Having smashed through the storage room's dry-wall in a fit of Gaelic rage, my father stood proudly

amid a pile of dry wall rubble by the now-exposed two-hundred-year-old iron door he had been

seeking. Calmly dusting himself off, Angus unlocked the ancient obstruction using Alban

MacDonald's key and forced it open upon its rusted hinges. "Okay then ... Andrea?"

My mother looked at him, aghast. "You knew you'd have to break through their new

construction to locate this Templar passage, that's why you brought a sledgehammer. Why didn't

you tell me?"

"Because ye might have said no and I couldnae take a chance. As for this mess, my hotel's

handyman is awaitin' Brandy's call tae come by and repair the damage. By the time we return, the

pantry should be good as new."

"Jisttae be sure, Angus, yer nae referrin' tae Matthew Konecny are ye?"

"None better. The lad practically rebuilt the place after the fire."

"Ave, and ye didnae pay him, ye cheap bastard. Insurance check should be here any day, lad' ...

bollocks. Mattie waited three weeks before sendin' his missus tae collect. She's all up in my face,

spoutin' off aboot how Matthew knows Angus set the fire—"

"What?"

"T'was an accident, Andie. Accidents is whit insurance is for."

Andrea turned to Brandy, "How much is he owed?"

"Dinnae. I'd say he'd make due with a hundred and forty pounds."

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She searched through her purse for her wallet. Pulling out a wad of bills, she handed the money to Brandy. "Make sure it looks as good as new. As for you—" she turned to her ex-husband, "Still keeping things from me? I guess some things never change. Well, I'm not going down there with you until you tell me everything ... and you can start with that iron door. Why is it there? Why did the new owner drywall over it instead of refurbishing it like he did the rest of the castle?"

"Take a breath and I'll answer. See, long before William Fraser-Tytler transformed the estate intae a castle, Aldourie was a mansion. It was built back in 1625 for a Templar who owned the land; the purpose—tae construct a subterranean level with a foundation strong enough tae accommodate the needs of the Black Knights."

"What needs?"

"The lads wanted an elevator shaft rigged to a pulley system that would allow them easy access intae the Guive's Lair."

"Then why is it sealed off from the rest of the castle?"

"Aldourie sits atop a deep crevasse favored by rodents. The decision to seal off the subterranean floor was recommended tae the new owner by his construction firm. They felt building a new wine cellar was less expensive than dealing with the rat problem."

"You never said anything about rats."

"No worries, darlin'. Our lights will keep them back. We really need tae get started; I'll explain the rest on the way."

Angus handed her one of the two backpacks he had loaded with water and flashlights. He hoisted one over his right shoulder and then located a canvas bag which held a new car battery.

"Ready?" He held the iron door open for my mother, allowing her to take the lead down a tight circular stairwell into Aldourie Castle's empty wine cellar, the heavy scent of cedar wood growing stronger as they reached the stone floor. She followed him to a solid arched wooden door

that was jammed tightly into its fame. Bracing himself he tugged, eliciting and loud creak until it finally popped open. Using his flashlight to chase any vermin back into the shadows, he located a light switch and flipped it on, the bare bulbs revealing a long narrow hall.

"Where's does this lead?"

"To the elevator." He started walking and she followed him in.

"You still haven't told me anything about the Black Knights or their mission."

"As I mentioned the Templar were the original title holders to Aldourie's ninety-six acres, all this dating back tae the year 1331 when my ancestor, Sir Adam Wallace returned tae the Highlands having rescued the Braveheart."

"I saw the movie with you years ago; I can't remember—"

"It wasnae in the movie. The Braveheart is the symbol of Scotland's freedom—the heart of our king, Robert the Bruce."

"You cut out his heart? Gross. So where did they hide it?"

"Located in the Aldourie woodlands is the entrance to a cave. The cave leads tae a chasm, the chasm tae the place where an aquifer connects the River Ness with the Loch. This juncture of waterway and cavern is known as the Guivre's Lair, and it is here that the Highland Templar chose to hide the Braveheart."

"What good is a symbol of freedom if you have to hide it?"

"Point taken. Council has plans to put it on display in the museum in Inverness as soon as they can afford a new security system. Back then things were different. The Templar knew Longshanks, the English King would send his entire army after the Braveheart if they found out where it was. So the Templar devised a plan that would use Loch Ness's water dragons—whit they called Guivre—tae safeguard the Bruce's heart.

"Each spring hundreds of pregnant female eels pass through the underground river in order tae enter Loch Ness and spawn in one of her forty rivers and streams. Once they lay their eggs the females would inhabit the depths of Loch Ness for ten years ... maybe decades—I dinnae. According tae Zachary, it's only when their biological clocks say it's time will leave the Loch through the underground river and tae return tae the Sargasso Sea tae die.

"Knowing this, the Templar constructed a gate at the mouth of the passage, the iron struts of which were spaced large enough for a normal-size eel to pass through but tight enough tae prevent the older bigger females from leaving. It was in the Guivre's cavern that the Templar hid the Braveheart."

"How many of these big females could the lair hold at once?"

"Turns oot just one. Over time the Black Knights learned that by blocking the passage, they had inadvertently created a competition tae be the one and only Queen of the Ness. From whit my father read tae me from Sir Adam's diary, tha' first season of the gate was an especially bloody one as the biggest dragons fought tae hold the lair. Things settled doon once a solitary Queen is established as she'll eliminate any younger females before they can grow too large. The last Queen—Nessie—ruled the roost for damn near eighty years."

They came to a wooden fence similar to the ones used by Highlanders to secure their sheep. This particular barrier prevented members of the Black Knights from accidentally plunging down the throat of a dark, deep chasm.

Andrea aimed her flashlight down the shaft before looking around topside. To her right, poised above the jagged slice in the geology was a six-foot-wide, twelve-foot-long wooden dock. Situated on this man-made perch was a three-sided roofed elevator car that was rigged to a series of pulleys anchored to the underside of Aldourie Castle's original foundation—the ceiling located a good twenty feet above their heads.

"Seriously? That's your idea of an elevator?"

"Were ye expectin' somethin' made by OTIS then?"

"No. Just something less out of the Flintstones. What are you looking for?"

"The log book. At the bottom of the chasm is a second car identical to this one, only right now it weighs far more. The last Knights tae ascend are required to record the amount of dead weight needed tae descend—ah, there it is."

Using his flashlight, Angus checked the last page of the leather-bound text. "What's yer current weight, darlin'."

"Last time I checked ... about a hundred and-twenty-seven pounds."

My father raised an eyebrow. "Our ability to descend and hopefully ascend depends on accurate weight differentials. Best tae be honest."

"One-hundred-and-thirty-six pounds, asshole. Happy?"

"Ye wear it well. With clothes we'll call it an even ten stone. Add my fourteen, plus one more for each of the two backpacks and that equals sixteen stone ... figure a hundred and one kilos. The cart resting at the bottom of the shaft carries twenty stone; therefore in order to descend, we'll need tae add a good thirty-one kilos."

"What's that in pounds?" She took out her phone and calculated. "Seventy pounds, give or take. How do we add weight?"

Angus aimed his flashlight at a rack of weight plates and kettle bells. He handed my mother two ten-pound weights, and then attempted to carry two larger plates—each weighing in excess of thirty pounds. Gripping the raised edge—one in each hand, he lifted and carried, grunting with the effort.

"Angus, put that down, they're too heavy."

"I can handle it."

"Our ability to descend and hopefully ascend better *not* depend upon your back holding out. Now put them down and carry one at a time."

He lowered the two twelve-kilogram plates and wiped sweat from his thick silver brows. "Ye always did wear the pants in the family."

"That's because you couldn't keep yours on. What should I do with these kettle bells?"

"Hang on tae them." With a grunt he picked up the two weight plates and carried them onto the dock. Stepping carefully inside the wobbling elevator, he set the weights down in the back left corner of the car.

"Okay, hand me the kettlebells and backpacks, and then the canvas bag, but didnae climb aboard until I say."

She did as instructed, then watched as he removed the new car battery from the canvas bag. "I thought you said the elevator is operated manually?"

"Aye. The battery is used tae power the lights." Feeling along the plywood floor behind the scale, he located the old car battery and began loosening the two wing nuts securing the cables. He then connected the red cable to the new battery's positive post and the black cord to the negative.

He completed the task by tightening the connections and then turned to Andrea. "Climb aboard, lass—here, give me yer hand. Now mind yer eyes, this will be bright."

She squeezed her eyes shut against the brilliant burst of light reflecting off the chasm wall and suddenly they were descending rapidly, one of Angus's calloused palms engulfing her hand as he pulled her into his embrace—

She pushed him back as the sound of ten thousand squeals mixed with the sickening clatter of claws along the sheer rock face—now a swarming hyperkinetic mass of oily black clumps, the rats' beady nocturnal eyes set aglow in the passing lights.

Sensing something rising at them from below, she leaned out—

—Angus yanking her back as the other car passed them and raced up the fissure. "Are ye all right?"

She nodded and then pointed to an altimeter anchored to the back panel, the glowing blue numbers spinning backward toward zero.

Reaching for the two ten-pound kettle bells, Angus dropped them over the side, reducing the weight differential with the other car and slowing their rate of descent.

She held onto him, steadying him as he gripped the raised edge of one of the large weight plates and rolled it out of the car.

"Angus, if you toss out all of our ballast, how will you keep the car from lifting away the moment one of us steps off?"

"No worries." He inched his way to the back corner of the cart close to the car battery's electrical junction and raised a folded wool blanket, exposing a length of heavy chain, one end anchored to the cart floor by an eyebolt, its free end attached to a snap-hook.

Andrea looked down as the ground suddenly appeared below, becoming a patch of mattresses which rushed up at them—absorbing most of the impact of a bone-jarring landing.

Dropping to his knees, Angus reached out, feeling between two of the mattresses with his right hand which held the end of the chain. "Come on then, where are ye ... ah-ha." Locating the end of another chain anchored long ago beneath the earth, Angus snapped the hook in place over the nearest eyebolt, securing the elevator car to the bottom of the shaft. "That should do it. But jisttae be safe..."

Locating the steel plate he had dropped over the side, he dragged it onboard. He and Andrea proceeded to add a dozen more kettle bells of varying weight and sizes until the car settled deeper into the mattresses.

He held out his hand to Andrea. "Ready?"

"What about the rats?"

"No worries, darlin', their eyes are too sensitive, they won't venture intae the light. Reach inside yer backpack and remove one of the large lanterns along with a smaller flashlight. Tuck that one in yer outer jacket pocket as a back-up. "Ready?"

"What are we looking for?"

"Anythin' that looks like it was once alive." Angus led her past the bottom of the fissure. Hearing a howling of wind, they followed it, their surroundings quickly narrowing to a tunnel of rock.

"It's jist through there, maybe six meters."

Andrea aimed her lantern at the opening. "I don't know how long six meters is, but I'm feeling claustrophobic just looking at it. It's barely high enough to crawl through on our hands and knees."

"Aye, it's tight but it's the only way in. I brung gloves and kneepads; check yer backpack."

"What if the rats come?"

"We always leave a kerosene lantern burning in front of the opening; the scent combines with the light tae keep the vermin away. Here, let me have a look in yer pack." He unzipped the waterproof carry-on strapped to her shoulders and removed a pair of hard plastic knee pads and matching gloves used for rollerblading, handing them to her.

She secured the protective apparel over her hands and knees while Angus removed a brass oil lantern from his backpack. She watched him top off the kerosene from a plastic container before

striking a match to light the wick. He adjusted the flame to its highest setting and then positioned the eighteen-inch-tall device in front of the tunnel's entrance. She waited while he quickly strapped on his knee pads and gloves.

"Ready?"

"Let's just do this and get the hell out of here."

"My sentiments exactly. I'll take the lead, mind yer head." Angus secured his backpack, pulling the straps as tight as they would go, and then dropped to his hands and knees and started crawling.

Andrea gave him a five second head start and followed him in.

The plastic knee pads slid easily on the rock surface, making the going much quicker than she had anticipated. She could hear the echo of a powerful stream, and then she was through—

—the two of them standing in a cavern, their flashlights punching holes through a dense darkness. Above their heads was a curved rock ceiling adorned with dense clusters of stalactites; before them was a narrow expanse of rock separated from its equal by a swiftly moving current of black water that swept from left (south) to right (north).

Andrea took a deep breath. The air was frigid and moist, entwined with a scent of decay which turned her stomach. "What is that smell?"

Angus aimed his light across the underground river, illuminating the other shoreline. It was riddled with rocks and something that resembled a human head and upper torso.

"Angus, what is that?"

"True's dive suit, at least whit's left of it. Zachary was inside the thing when the Guivre—"

"Angus!" Her beam was aimed at the northernmost end of the cavern, its circle of light revealing swells of movement along either shoreline, the source of the stench providing a blood-drenched feast to thousands of black rats.

"Whit the hell are they eating?"

"I don't know and I don't care—Angus, we have to leave."

"Not yet." Reaching into his jacket pocket, he removed the most powerful flashlight he had brought with them, aiming the dense beam of the Imalent MS-18's 100,000 Lumens at the swarm—

-causing them to disperse into the shadows, revealing the pile of bleeding, mucous-

drenched eel remains.

Andrea gagged. "Is that—"

"A Guivre? No. Those are Anguilla, their ten-foot cousins."

"Rats eat Anguilla?"

"No, Anguilla eat rats, that's why they inhabit the cavern. Rats eat dead Anguilla; the question is whit killed them?"

She screamed—her light exposing dozens of rats racing across the rocks in their direction.

"Get back tae the tunnel; use yer light tae keep them at bay."

"What about you?"

"I'll be right behind ye, go!"

She located the cavern's exit, the passage glowing orange, the lantern Angus had left at the entrance keeping the rats out the tunnel. But they were everywhere else, their dark bodies darting along the walls and ceiling and across her path. She stepped on one and screamed, her ankle twisting painfully in the process. Refusing to stop, she hobbled to the dimly lit tunnel, her head on a swivel, her flashlight's blessed beacon clearing the way as she dropped to her hands and knees before the passage. She screamed as a moving carpet of dark fur followed her in, then shifted the flashlight in her right hand to guard her six and began crawling toward the flickering glow at the other end of the tunnel.

* * *

Angus approached the closest pile of refuse, his powerful beacon revealing details of the assault. The Anguilla had been entangled in an orgy of twenty-to-thirty writhing bodies when something had risen out of the river to attack—its jaws excising a three-foot-wide bite from the entwined torsos of its unsuspecting cousins.

Reaching to his belt, Angus retrieved his hunting knife from its leather sheath before removing the last remaining item from his backpack—a plastic specimen jar. Aiming his light, he located what he surmised was the edge of a gushing wound and used the serrated side of the blade to saw off a chunk of the mucous-laden meat. Stabbing it with the point of the knife, he shoved it inside the plastic container, using the lid to separate carcass from the tip of the blade. Tightening the lid he turned to face the river, his skin crawling as he heard the telltale change in tempo of the rushing tide—

--the course of the swiftly moving waters diverted by the sheer mass of the surfacing creature.

Returning the knife to its sheath, he clutched the container to his chest and ran, his light blazing a blinding path through the frenzy of squealing rats.

* * *

Andrea emerged from the tunnel and froze, her flashlight illuminating a veritable gauntlet of agitated vermin, the lantern's flame dancing in their beady nocturnal eyes, their moist pink nostrils sniffing the dank air, the scent of burning kerosene keeping them from launching an assault.

She grabbed the lantern by its brass handle and took several strides in the direction of the elevator shaft, the swarm of rodents refusing to give way.

And then something else caught the rodents attention, causing them to stand on their hind legs and snort the chilly breeze whistling out of the tunnel, the walls of which were now gyrating from the approaching beacon of light.

Andrea saw Angus smash the top of his head as he stood too soon in his hurried attempt to escape his rocky confines. The concussive blow sent him to his knees and she ran to his side, dragging him up by the crook of his arm—

—the howling air abruptly muted as she heard something immense enter the tunnel from the river's side.

"Angus?"

"Give me the lantern—take my light ... clear the way." He grabbed to the brass handle and shoved the heavy flashlight into her abdomen. "Go!"

She aimed the powerful beam at the rats—shocked to discover they had already fled. Turning back to Angus, she saw him toss the lantern into the dark mouth of the cave—

—the glass smashing, the lit wick igniting a swath of kerosene—

--inciting a high-pitched screech that caused Andrea's heart to skip a beat, her racing pulse testing the elasticity of her carotid arteries.

She quickly slide her left arm around Angus's waist and aimed the light in her right hand, the bright lance splitting the darkness ahead, her lower back burning as she half-dragged, half-carried the older, heavier man back to the chasm.

The three-sided lift car's exterior-mounted lights had dimmed noticeably. She watched in horror as the rats leaped from a thousand unseen perches onto the length of steel cable rising from out of the elevator's roof, the black-haired vermin snapping at one another as they scurried straight up the ninety-degree incline.

Aiming the incandescent torch inside the elevator sent more dark bodies scurrying. Ducking inside, she dropped her ex-husband on the floor. "Angus, how do I—"

"Release the anchor first ... then the weights."

"Anchor first ... right." Locating the thick chain, she traced it back outside the car to the pile of mildewed mattresses. Reaching her hand between two of them, she felt for the steel clasp and slipped the hook free.

"Ow!" Andrea yanked her hand back—along with seven pounds of wet rat, its body wriggling as it dangled from her right sleeve by its teeth.

"Oh my God, get off!" Afraid to touch it, she clubbed it with Angus's flashlight, missing with the first two strikes. The third did the trick, the rat scampering away as the car – free of its tether -- began rising away from the mattresses.

She leaped to catch it and pulled herself on board, her one-hundred and forty pounds sending it back down the crevasse. Reaching for the closest kettlebell, she slung it over the side. Then, like a woman possessed, she grabbed one of the thirty-pound steel plates and heaved it into the darkness, the sudden weight differential with the other car sending them rocketing topside.

A minute later the now-heavier second elevator car shot past them, marking the shaft's halfway point.

This time there was no warning—the heart-stopping jolt causing her to bite her tongue, the sudden impact of the elevator's reinforced padded roof striking the docking bay actually propelling them three feet off the floor—the feeling of weightlessness short-lived as they landed in a heap.

"Christ, my bloody head feels like someone took old Betsy to it."

Andrea was about to respond when she saw the lights.

They had been waiting for them for most of the last hour—eighteen members of the Black Knights—eighteen former brethren.

Angus sat up in pain, his right hand shielding his eyes from the Templars' powerful lights—

—his left slipping the specimen jar and its mangled eel contents under the back of Andrea's jacket.

"Whit were ye doing down below, Angus?"

"My sacred duty as a Black Knight, Brother O'Hearn. Perhaps ye could do the same."

"You were excommunicated from the order, Mr. Wallace. You were forbidden from being here," Mason Oliver bellowed. "And tae allow a woman—"

"Shut yer piehole, priest. I'm a Templar, not a bloody Catholic. As tae the woman, this is Dr. Lucy Darr, a scientist from the States. I dragged her doon intae the Guivre's Den tae have her render an opinion as tae whether she thought the beasties could ever return tae Loch Ness. Well, guess whit, lads—not only can they return, they have returned! Ain't that right, Dr. Darr?"

"Huh? Oh yes, indeed. We discovered another Queen occupying the cavern."

"She's a nasty one. Nowhere near the size of the last, but she slaughtered quite a few of her Anguilla cousins and then chased us back up through the tunnel, somethin' Nessie never did."

Several conversations broke out at once. "Is it possible?"

"How do we contain her without the gate?"

"Is that even necessary? We came here tae collect the Braveheart. Let's do that. Display it in the museum like we intended and be done with this Black Knight nonsense for all time."

"Did ye not hear him? If there is a new Queen present then I'll not be confronting her with a bloody sword. Get me a goddam Howitzer!"

"Wallace is lyin', Brother Murphy. And don't be blaspheming."

"A liar, am I now? Tell ye wit, priest; why don't-cha go on down and have a look fer yerselves. Unless of course, the Pope excommunicated yer balls."

Father Oliver's face turned beet-red.

Angus stood. "Come on, Dr. Darr. We'll leave these geniuses tae deal with figurin' oot how tae collect the Braveheart from the new Queen. Jist didnae be askin' my clan tae save yer sorry asses from the beastie this time around."