

PROLOGUE

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The jolt against the keel came stronger this time and knocked the tiny rowboat sideways, causing Charles Darwin to cling to the bow gunwale for fear of being thrown into Loch Ness's chilly waters. Steadying himself, he shielded the lantern in his hand to keep the pelting rain from dousing their sole light source.

"Can you see what it is?" John Edmonstone asked as he strained at the oars. The freed slave's eyes were glassy with terror, and his thick Guyanese accent nearly overwhelmed his English.

Darwin angled the lantern downward, but it was no use. The loch's peat-rich water was murky under the best circumstances but completely impenetrable now that the sudden downpour had added its obscuring veil to the gloom of twilight. He swiveled his head to get his bearings.

"I can't even see the shore. Could it be that we're off course?"

Darwin received only a grim frown in reply and went back to searching for a landmark while watching for any sign of the monstrous wake they'd first encountered ten minutes ago. If they weren't able to detect the lights from the village of Drumnadrochit, they might turn in circles for hours. If the boat were upended in the frigid water, their corpses would either wash ashore or

sink to the abyssal depths of the loch.

Darwin shivered, his clothes soaked through. He longed for the tropics that Edmonstone had so vividly described during Darwin's private taxidermy instruction back in Edinburgh. He found refuge in those lessons because much of medical school training had quite bored him when it hadn't been making him ill. His stomach had threatened to empty itself every time he observed surgery on conscious patients, performed that way despite his pleas to utilize Humphry Davy's recent discovery of an anesthetic called nitrous oxide, a compound few had taken seriously once it had been dubbed "laughing gas." Only the stench of Edmonstone's beloved and pungent saltfish imported from his homeland could match the surgery's sickening effect.

With no hunting or shooting to be had in Edinburgh, Darwin had craved excitement, so it was he who had suggested an exploration of the Scottish Highlands using funds unwittingly provided by his father. Edmonstone, eager to collect new specimens for his taxidermy shop, agreed to be his companion. Their current predicament was the result of an impulsive expedition to the other side of the loch after they found a disused rowboat that the local innkeeper let them borrow.

Now stranded on the loch and under siege by some menace of the deep, Darwin was ruing the decision. To die would be a tragedy; to require rescue would be ignominious. If the Old Man heard of this illicit expedition, Darwin would never know the end of it.

An abrupt noise like a plank slapping against the water split the rain. Darwin wheeled about, but the patter of raindrops made it impossible to discern from which direction it had come.

"What in God's name was that?" he cried.

"It's the beast, Mr. Darwin. I'm sure of it."

Darwin, of course, had heard the tales of a creature living in the loch, though the rare

sightings were always made by the friend of a friend. He had quickly dismissed the stories. Even in his short time collecting marine invertebrates on the Firth of Forth, he knew that such second-hand anecdotes were completely unreliable. Direct observation was the only viable scientific method for documenting new species, and retrieving sample specimens was the only way of verifying their existence.

Edmonstone, perhaps because of his upbringing as a slave, was a more superstitious sort. Darwin admired the thoughtful and intelligent man immensely and had trouble reconciling these qualities of his character. But now that he was experiencing such an unusual event himself, he was beginning to see how beliefs like Edmonstone's could be birthed.

Darwin picked up the hatchet they'd used to cut firewood. He had never used the blade as a weapon, and it was comically small when compared to the apparently enormous dimensions of the beast circling beneath them, but it seemed prudent to wield it nevertheless.

A ghostly edifice loomed out of the fading light, and Darwin's heart pounded so hard he feared it would burst. The thudding abated only when he recognized the apparition.

He turned to Edmonstone with a smile. "It's the tower of Urquhart Castle. We've come south." The ruined stone tower stood on its strategic promontory overlooking the midpoint of the loch, majestically implacable against the miserable weather.

"Thank the Lord."

"Steer us to starboard. On our visit yesterday, I noticed a small beach where we can pull ashore until this wretched rain subsides."

"With pleasure."

The rowboat slewed around and Edmonstone pulled with even greater haste. If space had

allowed, Darwin would have helped him. Instead, he was relegated to lookout.

They were only minutes from reaching shore when the boat rocked again, very nearly foundering. This time Darwin didn't need to search for the source of the disturbance.

A massive shape rose from the water. Darwin's throat closed, making it impossible to draw a breath. A gamey odor emanated from the creature, whose outline Darwin couldn't establish because its great breadth took up his entire vision.

An appendage whirled toward him, and Edmonstone screamed something unintelligible as he swung a gaff hook at the creature. Without thinking, Darwin raised the ax in self-defense and brought it down on what he supposed to be the beast's writhing tail. The blade cut through flesh, drawing a shrill cry from the animal. A piece of the tail's tip flopped to the bottom of the boat, squirming for a moment before becoming still.

Astonished at what he'd done, Darwin looked up and saw a sight he knew he would remember no matter how long he lived.

A huge black eye focused on him, reflecting the light of his lantern like a cat's eye.

Before the creature dipped back below the water, it hesitated for a moment, long enough for Darwin to perceive what he thought was a spark of emotion in the animal's eye, a nobility in its bearing that seemed undeniable. It was reeling back not just in pain, but in confusion. The thing had not expected to be hurt. What he and Edmonstone had experienced was not an attack. The creature had merely been curious.

Then with a splash, it was gone. Only the desperate, rhythmic sound of the oars remained.

As he panted from the ordeal like a foxhound on the chase, Darwin was overcome with sadness. Hunting the abundant pheasant and grouse of England was a sport he relished. But this

was different. This beast was unknown to science, perhaps unique.

If he conveyed his story to the world armed with the tangible proof of his find, the terror he'd felt would be magnified a hundred-fold by the fearful town folk who would surely hunt down and destroy the creature. Hearing the tale of a great beast to be captured, Aberdeen whalers would swarm over the loch, harpoons at the ready. Darwin wanted to study wildlife, not exterminate it. This discovery demanded scientific scrutiny, and he vowed to return one day to continue his search.

Now was not the time, but once he calmed, he would speak with Edmonstone about the matter. Together they would determine what to do with their specimen.

The rain ceased as abruptly as it had begun, and the boat lurched toward the shore whilst Edmonstone rowed with all his might. Darwin bent and picked up the fleshy spade-shaped remains that lay at his feet. The smooth, tacky skin was warm to the touch. He tucked the specimen into his coat pocket for safekeeping until he could secure a better method of preservation.

The boat skidded up the beach, and the two men tumbled out onto the rocks. Darwin winced as the jagged stones cut into his hands, but he scrambled through the trees and up the grassy knoll with a vigor he didn't think within him.

Safely at the top of the hill, he and Edmonstone paused to catch their breath, peering at the loch to see if any sign of the creature remained. Not even a ripple of water betrayed that it had ever existed.