Cronley

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Muncie, Indiana

May, 1998

Expected date of graduation

May 9, 1998
Purpose of Thesis:

Cronley was created as a means to bring together my studies in both Creative Writing and History by employing elements of both into one novella length piece. The setting and the mythological background of the story have been fully researched to try and provide for authenticity in the sometimes unbelievable subject matter presented. The information that would not be known to the typical lay-reader is then presented in as clear and orderly a manner as possible without having the story taking on the form of a history lecture. In this way the reader is both given the enjoyment of an interesting story, but is also educated in the legends and folklore that this work draws from.
Cronley
by Andy Gage

Bless, O Chief of generous chiefs,
Myself and everything near me,
Bless me in all my actions,
Make Thou me safe forever,
Make Thou me safe forever.

From every gnuagach and ban-shoo,
From every well wish and sorrow,
From every glassip and ban-nigh,
From every fairy-mouse and grass-mouse,
From every fairy-mouse and grass-mouse

From every faith among the hills,
From every seen, hard pressing me,
From every seeing within the glens,
Oh! Save me till the end of my day,
Oh! Save me till the end of my day.

-Ancient Scottish Invocation
Excerpt from the journal of Tom McFinn, April 7.

The town is small, and the villagers insignificant. They go about their busy days leading their pointless lives. I laugh at the futility of what they see as their existence. If only they knew of the great beast that lay within their sight day after day, only hidden by nature from view. Yet it is all for a purpose. If all knew of the beast, then there would be no reason for I. No point to my existence. But that is not how it is. Instead my life is full of purpose, but empty of life. Oh the cruel irony of existence. But I shall show them, yes I shall. For when the creature finally chooses to make itself known, I'll be there, and I'll laugh. Laugh at their shack, and the crashing in of their simple lives. Their calm doldrums of everyday monotony. On that day they shall declare me right, vindicating me and my father. Then, oh then, order will be restored to the countryside.
Part I

The Town

Not much ever happened in the village of Cronley, at least that’s what they say. Even at the end of the twentieth century, it still appeared ageless. Located on scenic Loch Quinn in Western Scotland, it bore a population of only a couple hundred, not even worth a mark on the map. The several houses in the village stood like a portrait out of time. Old Victorians mixed with two story farm houses lining the chief street in town were the principle forms of residence. On one end was the Loch, tranquil and dark, even on the brightest days. On the other end stood the train station, the chief means of entrance and exit to the town. The only other buildings were a small general store, a tavern/restaurant, the church, and a small gas station with only two pumps. There wasn’t even a stop sign. No need for one. There were only a couple roads in the town and almost no cars, the gas station mostly surviving from its adjacent general store.

Everyday the same people could be seen doing the same routines. The fishermen going out to the dock to get their boats and try and catch “the big one.” The women sitting on the front porch of Mrs. Grady’s discussing the latest gossip. The parson’s wife out working in her garden, trying to get the weeds out.

To the north of the town lay the fens, and eventually mountains, traditional Scottish highlands. Only the occasional shrub would grace these windy peaks that continued upward as one went further north. To the east lay the rest of the fens, a small wooded area that clung to the shore line and disappeared into the heath after a mile or so from the water. To the south lay the loch, one of many that cut across the width of Scotland’s rocky splendor. And to the west lay
what was known as the ruins by the locals. It was here that some prehistoric people, pre-dating the Picts, had taken the naturally lying stones and caves of the countryside and constructed a Necropolis. A city for their dead. Beyond lay the straits that separated the mainland from the Hebrides and its legends of fairy lands.

Not many people came to Cronley or its surrounding area. There wasn’t much reason to. Yet, every week the 4:15 from Edinburgh would pull into the station, stopping for only a couple minutes before making the trip back to the larger city to the East. It was on this train, on a particularly nice day in the middle of September that Derek Jamison and his fiancee, Ally O’Cranst arrived at Cronley.

As the train pulled into the station, the first thing Derek noticed was how quiet the town appeared, almost like a scene from an old movie. There were only a couple people standing at the depot when he and Ally disembarked, and he could immediately tell which one was Mrs. Holiday. He and Mrs. Holiday, Brenda he reminded himself, had been in correspondence for several weeks now planning this little adventure. In the last phone conversation, she had told him she would meet them at the train station, and just to look for the little old grandmotherly figure that could double for the Queen Mother. He had laughed at this thought, but sure enough, that was the best way to describe the lady who was standing before him that very minute. She really wasn’t that old, being only in her late sixties with gray curling hair. She was dressed in a simple pair of jeans and a button-up blouse. Yet it was her eyes, blue like the crisp highland air, that struck him. Behind them lay an intelligence and gung-ho nature to rival any twenty-five year old. She had a look about her like she was ready to take on any challenge that was awaiting her.
Helping Ally down from the train car, he turned to see that Brenda had walked up behind them while his back was turned. Extending her hand, he shook it in greeting and said, “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Thank you once again for letting Ally and I come up here and stay with you. We promise not to be too much of a hassle,” he added with a grin. Ally elbowed him on that remark, but Brenda didn’t seem to notice, or at least care.

“Like I said on the phone, it’s no problem at all,” Brenda said with a smile that could have once won a beauty pageant. “Actually Jim and I are excited to be able to host two American Graduate students. We always wanted to get over to the States, but never seemed to find the time. And now, what with Jim’s leg . . .” She trailed off in thought.

“How is Mr. Holiday?” Ally asked. “I notice that he didn’t make it.”

“No,” came the reply. “His leg’s acting up again. Says the weather does it. Personally I think it’s more to do with the telly, if you know what I mean.” She smiled again. “But tell me Miss O’Cranst, . . .”

“Ally,” she said. “After all, we are your guests.”

“Okay, Ally, I was wondering what you were here studying. I know young Derek is doing his history work on Scottish mythical beasts, but what’s your interest in the ruins?”

“Just for the atmosphere I guess,” she said. “You see, I’m working on an English degree in literature. Sadly, though, I haven’t had much luck coming up with any new ideas. I was kind of hoping that the change in scenery up here could give me some inspiration. I’m originally from Ireland, and I know a few things about village life. After all, small town on a beautiful loch, mountains in the background. There’s got to be some dark secret here.”

“I hate to disappoint you, my dear, but old Cronley is about as exciting as beef and
kidney pie.”

“But you do have the barrow.”

“Aye, we do have that, but there’s not much to talk about with it, especially from the point of a fictional piece.”

“Well then it looks like I’ll just have to try and make something up. Besides, I wasn’t going to let Derek get away and have all the fun,” she said, playfully giving him a squeeze.

At that moment a porter walked up with their luggage, and they all headed toward the parking lot. Brenda’s car was one of only five in the lot, an old Reliant 3 wheeler that had obviously seen better days. Usually, Brenda would have just walked to the train station, especially on such a nice day, but since she knew that Derek and Ally would have luggage, she had opted to break out the car. Settling in, they drove the short distance to the Holiday residence, all the time talking about the local sights, or lack thereof, and the beautiful day they were having.

The house Brenda and her husband Jim lived in was a two-story that appeared modeled after a New England Cape Cod. Located on a side street near the opposite end of the village, the dormers offered a clear view of the loch and nearby forests. There was no garage, which helped to explain the rusted nature of the Reliant, mostly because of the often harsh highland weather. A breeze was blowing in from the water as they climbed out of the car and walked to the front door. Inside and to the left was the living room where Jim set half dozing in a recliner while the television showed the end of the horse races. He was older than Brenda by about five years, balding, yet still showed the vigor of a man who had spent his life in manual labor, even if he had finally gone somewhat soft in the middle. He woke with a start when they entered and pretended to be rooting for the winning horse when in reality he didn’t even know which race
was on. Brenda shook her head in annoyance and told Derek and Ally that they could place their bags by the door. With a click and a somewhat disgusted "harumph," Jim shut off the television and slowly stood up. Then, turning to the doorway, he extended his hand and limped to Derek and Ally. "So you must be the two Yanks who are going to be staying with us this week."

As he shook each of their hands, Derek said, "Mr. Holiday, I'm Derek Jamison, and this lovely lady is my fiancee, Ally O'Cranst."

"Fiancée?" Jim said with a raised eyebrow. He turned to Brenda and said, "I thought you said they were married." Brenda shrugged in mock ignorance as Jim turned back to the two Americans. "Well, we only have the one guest room. I hope you two don't mind sharing..."

"No, no problem," Derek cut in. "We already share an apartment back at Eastern State."

"I see," Jim said, his face a complete mask. "Well, we're a good Christian household, so while you're staying here, I'd rather not have any strange noises coming from your room after dark." He paused, and then breaking out a smile that could have belonged to a politician, he added, "Now during the daylight, that's another story." He chuckled at this and gave Derek a wink. Brenda shook her head in desperation and headed to the back of the house.

Ally smiled at the antics of this older couple who were allowing her and Derek to stay with them. In a way, they reminded her of her grandparents, back before... She shuddered as she derailed that particular train of thought and joined Derek in Jim's invitation to come in and have a seat. She sat down next to Derek on a flowered couch that looked as if fall had already arrived. Jim sat back in his recliner, and pulled out a hand carved pipe from the drawer of an end table. Filling the bowl and giving it a light, he pulled the lever on his chair to put up his leg. Taking a slow draw, he let it out thoughtfully before saying, "So, I hear you're interested in the
finding at the Necropolis.”

“That’s right,” Derek said as he put his arm around Ally’s shoulder.

“All rather dull business if you ask me,” came the reply. “Yet it did give old Cronley about thirty seconds of fame on the BBC. What’s the big deal about a mess of hieroglyphics anyway, that’s what I can’t figure out.”

Although Derek wasn’t too thrilled with the belittling of this discovery, he also realized that to the average lay-person, the discovery could appear rather dull. Taking a deep breath, Derek said, “Well, I guess the biggest importance deals with the nature of finding Pictish drawings in this area of Scotland. Although there is evidence of some Pict activities in the area just to the north, those are just a couple ogam stones. This, this is possible proof of an actual Pictish settlement right in this area.”

As Derek paused for a moment, Jim cut in, saying, “Slow down there lad, you’re speaking gibberish to me. What’s an ogam stone, or a Pict for that matter?”

Ally gave a sigh, knowing what would come next. Sure enough, Derek, now fully in his element, started to talk about how the Picts were the old Celtic inhabitants of Scotland from the time of the Romans until finally disappearing from interbreeding with the invading Irish. Because of this, not much was known of the Picts, including the language. Only a couple things remained of their civilization, mostly including rock carvings and cave paintings. The rock carving included objects referred to as ogam stones which used a primitive writing style that consisted of creating line scratches on the edge of a rock. Ogam stones were found all over the British Isles, but the paintings were less frequent and much more intricate. What had been found at the Cronley Necropolis was a complete painted record of animals and, supposedly, tales dating
from the time of the Picts. The drawings were found by Brenda inside a long barrow on the far end of the ruins. This was, itself, an interesting find only because the Necropolis dated back to the times before the Celts arrived, around the same time as Stonehenge. Why the Picts had chosen to take refuge in this ancient tomb was still a complete mystery, but the pictures were plainly Pictish because of certain patterns that were included, especially a creature known only as the Pictish beast. That was the main reason Derek was interested.

The Pictish beast was a creature that bore no close resemblance to any known living being, and most likely was somehow connected to Pictish mythology. Because of this, Derek was keenly interested in anything to do with this odd creature. And odd the beast was. With a long snout and tail, it resembled some kind of wolf, yet from its head flowed two long objects. Some people said it appeared to be horns, others ears, and still others, spouts like on a whale. No two historians could agree on this part. Evidently the find in the Barrow contained several such pictures, as well as illustrations possibly depicting some forms of interaction with the beast. It was this mythical beast that had drawn Derek and Ally from the States to do Derek’s research, and it was the find at the Necropolis that had put Derek in contact with Brenda. It all finally culminated in that very living room, which sat a mere ten miles from these mysterious drawings.

By the time Derek had finished with his mini-lecture, however, it was obvious that Jim was still unimpressed and most likely a bit bored. His pipe having finally been exhausted, he sat there looking at Derek and said, “Well, I see you obviously know your stuff. Figured you did seeing how Brenda was so eager to have you up to look at the local art show. I guess the importance is just lost on the likes of me.”

“You always were an old fuddy-duddy,” said Brenda, finally emerging from the back of
the house. It was then that Derek and Ally caught the whiff of broiled fish coming from the
direction where Brenda had been. “Come on, dinner’s ready. I hope you like whiting.”

At this time the group retired to the dining room to an excellent feast of fish and potatoes
prepared by Brenda. After dinner, Ally offered to help Brenda with the dishes as the men retired
once more to the living room. Jim, having resumed his seat on the throne of his castle, picked up
the remote and turned on the evening news. After a couple minutes of awkward silence, Derek
finally got the courage to ask the question that had been bothering him most of the evening.
“You don’t like me, do you?”

Jim continued to face the television, but he said very bluntly, “No, I don’t.” He paused as
if finished, but then quickly added, “Nothing personal. I’m sure you’re a wonderful guy, willing
to help out in a pinch and all. It’s just I have this thing about people who focus their whole life
on things that don’t exist in any real sense.”

“I see,” said Derek, trying to decide how to take Jim’s statement.

“You see this,” Jim said suddenly, slapping his right thigh. “This, now this is real. I lost
this leg, oh, about ten years ago. Forklift accident down in Manchester. Fool driver wasn’t
watching where he was going, had to swerve, dropped a two-hundred pound appliance on my
leg. Crushed the bone in five places. Ended up having to have the whole thing amputated from
mid-thigh down. Still can feel it every now and then though. Almost maddening really. Took
the insurance money and that’s how Brenda and I were able to move up here. This was where
she was from originally, anyway.” He trailed off in thought. “You see, until that point my entire
life revolved around that warehouse and Brenda. Go to work, come home, eat, sleep, start it all
over again. And I was happy with it. Nothing to really worry about. You see, I never even
made it all the way through high school, partially because of the war. Once that was over, I got a job and I’ve been working hard for everything I’ve ever got since. I guess I just can’t understand how a person can be successful at being a historian when all you do is focus on the unreal.”

At this Derek had to laugh. Jim looked at Derek like he was nuts until Derek said, “The terms success and historian don’t typically go hand in hand. Actually, money-wise, history can be one of the least rewarding occupations. If I wanted to be rich, I’d have gone into business. I chose history because I enjoy it, and I find the little bits of information I pick up rather interesting. I may not make much money, but Ally doesn’t care, and as long as she’s happy, I’m happy.”

Jim thought this over before he finally said, “I just don’t understand you college types.”

“Well, how about this,” Derek said, “I saw a tavern just a ways up the street. What do you say we go there and discuss this further over couple of pints.”

“Now that’s the first sensible thing you’ve said all evening,” he said, flicking off the television and getting up from his chair. Hobbling over to the hall tree for his coat, he shouted back towards the kitchen, “Brenda, me and the Yank are going out for a bit.”

“Okay,” came the reply, almost like a nightly ritual.

Derek threw on his jacket and followed the older man out into the chill evening air. It was slow going due to Jim’s dragging step. The wind was still blowing in from the loch as they walked into The Drunken Magistrate. This was the local tavern, named after the only interesting event in the area’s history. Dealing with some local English judge some 200 years prior, the details had been lost in time but the event lived on in the name of the establishment. It was a two-story brick structure with a restaurant in front, bar in back, and an apartment for the owner
on top. Jim and Derek passed on through the dimly lit dining room with its booths separated by stained glass dividers creating small areas of intimacy. Through a back doorway, they gained access to the bar room, where it appeared a good chunk of the town’s population had decided to gather. The back wall was dominated by a large mahogany bar complete with brass rails. Behind the bar hung a gilt mirror picturing the loch set amongst the forests and mountains. Centered in the mirror was a serpentine creature with a shaggy beard and horns. This was the supposed image of Quinlan, the local lake monster. To the side of the bar stood an eight foot pool table, at that moment occupied by four pleasantly drunk fishermen. Despite the obviously large number of people in the room, however, there was still plenty of space to maneuver, and Derek and Jim easily found a spot at the bar.

The bartender, a broad built, red haired, monument to the Scottish clans greeted Jim with a smile topped with a whiskey. Derek ordered a Scotch and took a glance around the room. Most of the people there he didn’t remember from the earlier drive through town from the train station. He figured they were the fishermen who had been out on the loch when he had arrived. It reminded him of a scene from an old British movie that he had forgotten the title of. He almost expected to hear a group in the corner break out in a chorus of “Mull of Kintyre.” Raising his glass, he turned to Jim, and said, “A toast, to not understanding each other.”

“To finding information on your beast,” replied Jim, clinking the glasses. At that moment a slight commotion began at the door as somebody entered the room. “Speaking of finding beasts,” Jim muttered under his breath, then to the newcomer, “How’s it going Tom? Seen anything yet?” At this some people in the bar started to chuckle.

Tom cut through the people in the bar like a man who was filled with an equal amount of
determination and marijuana. His hair was stringy and disheveled, and his clothes were much the same. One didn’t need a breathalyser to tell he had been hitting the sauce rather heavily that evening. You could see that much in his eyes, and his breath reeked of it, preceding his presence like an aura. Yet his eyes held something deeper, a wildness Derek had never seen before. Something that made Derek wonder if it was wise to push this person too far. Despite Derek’s fears, Jim continued.

“You look like you’ve probably seen plenty of creatures tonight. Mostly pink ones with large floppy ears and long noses.” The room erupted into laughter, but Tom remained oblivious to this fact.

“I’ve seen it,” he said in a hoarse rasp. The glaze in his eyes dimmed as the wildness intensified.

“Sure you have,” came a voice from the other side of the bar. “And I’m sure it offered you a drink to boot!”

“I’m telling you I’ve SEEN IT!” he repeated, his voice rising to a feverish pitch. The force of this simple statement cut through the laughter like a knife, causing it to subside.

“What have you seen?” another voice asked from by the pool table.

“The beast,” he said with an almost awed reverence. “Quinlan himself, rising from the loch and disappearing into the wood.”

“Into the wood?”

“Aye, that be right. Disappeared directly into the trees. Didn’t give me a chance to get my camera. But I’ll be waiting, waiting for it to return, and by God I’ll get a picture of that beast before this night is through. Will anybody join me?”
The room stood in silence for several moments. Finally a voice called out again. “Do you want us to bring a drink for the beast too?” The room again broke into laughter as Tom finally realized the folly of his pleas. Meagerly asking the bartender for a pint, which he quickly downed, he then disappeared from the room. With Tom’s absence, the bar returned to its former state and Derek turned to Jim, who was finishing up a whiskey.

“Who was that?” Derek asked.

“That, oh that was old Tom. Pay him no heed, he’s just been hitting the bottle again. Can’t really blame him, spending all that time at the Point would be enough to drive anyone to drink. Not that he has much common sense to begin with.”

“What do you mean?”

“Actually, you two have something in common. You’re both chasing after some mythical beast. Only difference is he thinks his is real. I tell you, at least you have the common sense to realize what’s real and what’s not.” Having finished his whiskey he called the bartender over for another.

“Quinlan?” asked Derek, eyeing the image on the mirror.

“Yea, Quinlan. Quinlan is kind of our version of Nessie, only not near as famous. Only a handful of people claim to have seen it over the past couple centuries. Tom’s father was one of them. Affected him all strange. Became obsessed with the creature. Sadly Tom was still young and impressionable at the time, and he’s had the whole quest ingrained in him all his life.

Spends most of his night camped out by the Point with his old GMC, shining the cab lights into the water. Thinks that might actually attract the beast to the surface. Got the idea from some special on the Japanese squid fishing fleet. Actually you can see his lights from the house on
most nights. Still, nobody ever really seems to mind Tom. Just do their best to stay out of his way. You see, he’s obsessed as his old man. Wants to get a picture of the beast and prove his old man right.”

“But what about tonight?” Derek cut in. “He seemed pretty serious about seeing something.”

“Probably just a deer mixed with poor lighting and one too many pints.” He paused before adding, “Things can take on strange shapes in the highland nights when the moon is not out. I wouldn’t think too much on it.” With that he finished his second drink and signaled for another.

“Yea, you’re probably right,” Derek said absent-mindly. His thoughts, however were on the poor man huddled alone by his truck with nothing but a bottle for company. Yet what was it that he had seen?

About an hour later, Derek found himself helping Jim home. Derek was never a big drinker, and after the sight of Tom, he wasn’t too interested in even having a third. When they arrived at the Holiday residence, he found Ally in their room, reading a book. It was now about eleven o’clock, and he needed to get up early the next morning. They were about to climb in bed when Ally noticed the lights along the shore from the window.

“What’s that?” she asked, staring into the darkness of a moonless and overcast Scottish night.

Derek took a look and said, “Oh, that must be old Tom. Just some guy out hunting for a lake monster.”

“A what?”
"Nothing really. Basically he's a Nessie watcher. It's just the monster isn't Nessie, but it's just as elusive. I wonder how long he'll be staying out there," he added as an after thought. Shrugging off the concern, he climbed into bed, pulling back the covers to invite Ally in. As they turned out the light and proceeded to break Jim's one rule, neither took the time to notice when the lights out on the shore line flickered, and then went out.
Excerpt from the journal of Tom McFinn, February 2.

They say the ruins have been there for ages, more time than even the trees in their ancient splendor have ever seen. They almost make it sound like they predate the beast. Ha, that is a laugh. The ruins may be ancient, but the beast is eternal. It is the reason and being for all that happens in the town and the countryside. If it were not for the beast, there would be no ruins to be discussed. It came to me finally in my dreams, the answer to the origins of the ruins. Yet I won't tell the others in the village. I refuse to tell them. They would only laugh and shove another bear in my face. So the answer to the mystery shall remain my secret. Mine alone. But if only they knew, they would quake to their very bones. Now that would be a sight I would love to see. But no, that's too much, and they'd never believe me. Why should they? They haven't in the past. But I still know, and that's what matters.
Part II

The Necropolis

The moon shone brightly through the window, reflecting off the flagstone floor and illuminating the room in a pale brilliance. She couldn't tell where she was. It was some kind of bedroom, but it appeared to belong more to a medieval manor house than anything she was familiar with. The walls were cold stone covered in faded tapestries depicting scenes of classic Rome and the time soon after the fall. Furniture was scattered around the edge of the room. Chairs, dressers, wardrobe, all built of solid oak and cherry to stand the test of time. The style was some nineteenth century mixture that combined to create a massive yet graceful appearance.

In the center of the room was a large canopied bed, the curtains hanging almost in tatters. She stood by a closet, wondering how she had got there, and where exactly she was. It was almost like a set from a fairytale, but nothing Disney would ever imagine. It wasn't like anything she had ever seen, and yet there was something almost of home about the room. The smell of a warm crackling fire, and relaxing with a book and a cup of hot chocolate on a cold winter's eve. But why would this dilapidated and ancient chamber evoke such feelings?

Before she had time to think about it any further, she saw it, hovering by the door. A hand, floating in midair. For some unknown reason, she wasn't scared, but instead she was possessed by some strange mixture of calm and curiosity. It floated against the grains of the oaken door, pale in the moonlight, the long nails blackened from a combination of age and decay. The hand obviously belonged to someone or something long decades ago, but whatever it had once been attached to was not visible to her. With all the calm and patience of someone with
a secret, it slowly beckoned to her with its index finger. Almost drawn by this motion, she found herself walking to the door with a slow and cautious tread. The hand seemed to sink into the wood-grain, always beckoning, until it finally disappeared from view. She stepped up to the door, and turned the knob. Beyond lay a long hall lined with wooden doors on either side, and terminating in a bay window which shone from the moonlight outside. The hall was filled with old overstuffed sofas and chests darkened with age. Along the walls, unlit torchieres hung between pictures of strangers who all seemed familiar somehow. And there was the hand. It now hovered in the center of the passage. She could clearly see that it terminated shortly above the wrist, giving only the briefest glimpse of a forearm. Still beckoning, it started to recede down the hall, and like an obedient pet, she followed.

All was deathly quiet as she progressed forward, even her footsteps creating hardly a pad on the cold flagstone floor. Finally the hand turned and floated through another door at almost the end of the hall. A chill cut through her body like a blast of wind from an opened tomb as her hand touched the doorknob. She jerked her hand back. She stood rubbing her hand for a second, then with all the energy she could muster, she once more reached out for the doorknob. Nothing. No jolt, no shock, no wind. Grabbing the handle, she slowly turned the knob, then cautiously pushed the door open, its hinges groaning with each millimeter. With a jerk, the door was wrenched from her grip and flung full open. The stench blasted her full in the face. Her nose crinkled up as her eyes began to water. All was dark in the room. Then with a start, it stepped from out of the shadows and into the pale glow of the hall. The horror mixed with the stench hit her full force, and she opened her mouth in a scream.

Like a bolt, Ally sat up in bed, the sheets wet with sweat. Her heart still pounded from
the memory of the dream, its throbs echoing in her ears like African war drums. All else in the room was silent. A clean quiet as still as the grave. Yet, as she sat there, the details of the dream began to blur and contort together. She could remember being scared, but not what had frightened her. Only a glimpse of matted hair, a pig-like snout, and the stench of the grave. Yet even this was fading into mere shadows. She glanced across the room at the clock on the dresser. Three a.m. Only four more hours until she needed to get up. Four long agonizing hours. She glanced over at Derek, lying next to her. He was still sound asleep. It made sense, after all. How many alarm clocks had he slept through? Somewhat calmed by his almost blissful innocence in sleep, she decided to take a short trek to the kitchen for some water. She knew she wouldn’t be able to go right back to sleep. She never could. As soon as she closed her eyes, it would come back to her. Not clearly. Never clearly. But its presence, the malevolence that radiated out of it like a black hole. It would be there, waiting. With a sigh, she went to get her drink, then returned to bed prepared for the sleepless hours that awaited.

The next morning proved to be overcast with a slight mist in the air, and this did little to help get Ally and Derek out of bed. The only thing that really did help was the fact that they were going to be seeing the ruins that morning. Ally was the first around, but Derek was soon to follow. They arrived downstairs at about 7:30 to find Brenda already finishing up breakfast. Jim was still sleeping off the previous night’s exploits, and probably wouldn’t be up for another couple hours.

After a quick breakfast the trio set out from the ruins in the Reliant. It was about an hour drive through the rugged highland terrain, something the car was never designed for. There weren’t any good roads that led to the site, only a few muddy ones that led to the edge of the
ruins. The bulk of the trip was spent in silence, partially because of the early hour, but Ally was also preoccupied with trying to remember her dream. This was the fourth time in the past month that she’d had it, and each time it ended the same way, with her waking up from a scream induced by some unknown being behind the door. She’d talked about it with Derek before, but he hadn’t been able to offer much help. Despite her dream-induced ignorance, though, she had at least figured out where the castle was. It was her family’s ancestral home in Ireland. She had discovered this when looking through some old family albums. The castle was no longer there, having burned to the ground by an electrical fire some sixty years ago. But the stories lived on. How the manor had been haunted by a spectral hand that would appear at the time of great family emergencies. The memories of the incident were still vague in her mind. The memory of her grandparents . . . But that was all in the past, and didn’t need to be dwelled on. Still, it was this hand that was beckoning to her in the dream. But beckoning her to what? In a flash the memory of the creature, the being, whatever it was, appeared in her mind, only to disappear just as suddenly, leaving only a memory of a stench and a chill that caused her body to shiver and sent her heart pumping.

Derek glanced at her, concern showing in his brown eyes. She shook her head to say it’s nothing, but she could tell he knew she had the dream again. However, there was not much he could do anyway, so there was no point in dwelling on it. Besides, the Reliant had pulled to a stop in the midst of a field of stones.

The rocks of the ruins ranged in size from small slabs only four feet across to massive boulders and pylons weighing at least several dozen tons. It always amazed Ally how these ancient people managed to move such massive stones and make such intricate structures like
Stonehenge and New Grange in Ireland. Yet the Necropolis had none of the organization or craftsmanship that the former creations had. Scattered over a hundred acres of semi-hilly terrain, there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the placement of the stone structures. If you could even call them structures. Most were nothing more than a pair of boulders placed next to each other with a larger slab spread over the two like a make shift lean-to. Some of these were still standing, while others had succumbed to erosion and collapsed in on themselves. It was beneath these structures that the prehistoric inhabitants of Scotland had buried their great chiefs and holy men. It was a truly desolate place, with only grass and moss growing on the stony ground. Not the type of place anyone would willingly choose to seek shelter in, but that was the theory of how the Pictish drawings had appeared in the barrow. And typically, Pictish art was found in places where the Celts would have spent much time. Especially such extensive drawings as had been found in the barrow. So the riddle was not only why the Picts had chosen to seek shelter in this barrow, but also why they had chosen to stay for some time. It had the archaeologists baffled.

As soon as the group got out of the car, Ally immediately regretted having worn her new sneakers. The mist had done its job to transform the grassy highland plains into one large collection of mud-holes. Derek didn’t seem to mind, and of course Brenda, who had been there on several occasions before, had brought boots for the messy nature of the earth. Brenda taking the lead, they squelched off across the fields dodging through the many boulders.

“Out of curiosity,” asked Ally, trying to make conversation, “what made you want to come back to Cronley. I understand you and Mr. Holiday used to live in England.”

“Memories more than anything,” was the reply. “I grew up in Cronley many years ago,
but like most local kids, I wanted to get out and see the world. That’s how I met Jim, when I was down in Manchester one summer. I ended up staying with him there until the accident . . .” she trailed off momentarily before continuing. “Since he was forced into retirement, we decided we might as well try to live a peaceful life in the country. I had been wanting to come back here for some time, so I suggested, on a whim, that we come up and visit the old village. Well, I just fell in love with the place all over again. Jim noticed that the old Cape Cod on the Loch was for sale, so we did some checking into our finances, and managed to scrape together enough to buy it. That was my triumphant homecoming.”

“So what brought you out to the Necropolis?” asked Derek, bypassing another large mud hole.

“Curiosity more than anything. My parents had always forbidden me to come out here. Said that it was no place for a ‘proper young’ lady to go. So, of course, now that I’m a proper old lady, I can do what I want. Besides, I had studied some history and archaeology in school and was always interested in these type of megaliths. So how could I bypass a chance to check out some in my own backyard?”

“Yet how is it that you were the first one to discover the barrow?” asked Ally. “Surely there have been archaeologists out her before. How could they have missed an entire barrow. From my understanding they’re rather large.”

“That’s right,” Brenda replied. “Quite large indeed. But have you ever seen a barrow?” Ally shook her head. “They’re basically artificial hills. Chambers made of stone and then covered with earth, with only one entrance tunnel. Look around you, what do you see?”

“Rocks, mud . . .” Ally trailed off in thought.
“Aye... and,” Brenda prompted.

“Hills,” put in Derek.

“Correct,” said Brenda. “After all, we are in the highlands, so what’s one more hill in a countryside of hundreds?”

Ally glanced around the ruins again and realized that the land was anything but level. Who knew how many barrows were waiting to be uncovered? Then a thought occurred and she said, “But what about the entrance? How is it that you found a way in that nobody else had seen?”

“Oh, now that, that was a bit of luck mixed with some help from Mother Nature,” she said repeating what she had rehearsed for the BBC. “You see, the entrance had been covered over by a slab of rock that had since been buried under dirt and grass. Well, somehow during a lightening storm, a bolt struck a neighboring pile of boulders, causing the top stone to slide down and knock a hole through the entrance. Well, I happened to be wandering the field a couple days later and found the stone sticking out of the entrance like a knife in an open wound. Always one for an adventure, I climbed into the orifice and with the little amount of sunlight shining in, I could make out some of the cave drawings. When I got back to the house, I contacted the archaeology department at the University of Edinburgh who immediately sent out some specialists. The rest I’m sure you’ve heard.”

By this time they had traversed a great deal of ground from the car, and Ally was beginning to wonder how much further it was going to be. She was about to ask when they rounded a boulder, and she saw it gaping open like a Romantic portrait of the mouth to the underworld. There was something ominously foreboding about it, and Ally almost expected to
see words carved over the entrance to the effect of “Abandon all hope all ye who enter here.” She could easily see how it could have been overlooked by any previous archaeological surveys. The barrow was not only shaped like a hill, but was also built adjacent to a larger hill, and the two seemed to flow together. Next to it stood a pair of boulders, the remains of the former uprights that had supported the jagged slab that had cut open the mound. The boulder nearest the entrance appeared split in two by some blast that had scorched the rock. The two halves had not been sturdy enough to continue to support their load, sending the top stone careening into the hill. It truly was a wonder of nature that such a thing could really happen, but there it stood, solid proof of the power of nature unleashed.

The mist was starting to let up as they approached the maw, and it appeared as if the sun might actually come out. However no sunlight was going to help where they were headed. Brenda led the way into the opening, looking more like a ten year old then her actual almost seventy as she climbed over the stone and dropped into the darkness beyond. Derek followed closely behind, with Ally bringing up the rear. Once inside Brenda pulled out her flashlight and started showing the art to Derek. Ally stood to the side, her arms wrapped around her to try and keep warm. It seemed twenty degrees colder inside the tunnel, where the darkness did little to improve the atmosphere. Brenda started telling Derek how some of the archaeologists believed that all the drawings were done by the same person. Ally joined the two historians besides the pictures, but try as she could, Ally couldn’t get interested in looking at these two dimensional caricatures of people and animals. Pulling out her own flashlight, she went further back into the tunnel to see how far it went.

The flashlight shone ahead in the gloom, illuminating more pictures and the occasional
stray stone in the path as she progressed further into the cave. The tunnel was starting to get somewhat cramped when suddenly she burst through to a large circular chamber about five meters in diameter. She recognized it as the place where some ancient chief had been buried and long since turned to dust. Shining her light along the wall, she saw even more drawings. Not seeing anything else of interest, she started to return up the path to the others. Suddenly she had the feeling that something was watching her. Turning her flashlight around the room, she let out a shriek and dropped the light to the floor. Derek and Brenda rushed to her side, shining their beams around the room. There were drawings, but nothing else.

“What is it?” asked Derek.

“I saw it,” she said, hands covering her face as she tried to regain control of herself. “The creature . . . the creature from my dreams.” She broke into sobs.

Brenda looked confused, and Derek mouthed “I’ll explain later,” then said, “Maybe you should wait outside until we’re done. The sun looked like it was coming out and we shouldn’t be much longer.”

“Okay,” Ally agreed. Derek helped her back out of the tunnel and into the sunlight.

“We’ll be out soon,” he said as he popped back in.

Once back inside, Derek explained to Brenda about the dream, and his own suspicion that Ally had the dream the night before. Meanwhile Ally was trying to come to grips with what she had seen. Surely it couldn’t have been the same being from her dreams. It couldn’t be, that was impossible. Yet she had seen it plain as day, and this time it wasn’t fading from memory like her dream. If she closed her eyes she could still see it, the look of malevolence emanating from its tiny red eyes. Below this was the tiny pig-like snout, which in her memory had always stuck out.
She could now see it set in a pocked and scarred face. Its mouth was open as if about to speak and she could clearly see its blackened and jagged teeth. A smile like a broken saw blade. It stood only three foot tall, but the look from those eyes made her feel tiny beneath its glare. It appeared to be covered in some form of sack cloth robe worn through in places showing signs of black fur tufting out. That was all she could still make out from the brief glimpse, but even that was too much. But what was this creature, and why was it haunting her?

Finding a stone that wasn’t too wet, she sat down to rest, suddenly realizing how exhausted she really was. It was from this vantage point that she saw the body, laying amidst some rubble to the side of one of the many stones. Rising from her seat, she walked over to the patch of ground which had attracted her attention. She immediately felt sick from the stench. What lay before her was a sheep, or at least parts of it. The poor creature had been ripped to shreds and then some of it had been eaten while the rest was left for the scavengers who had already set in. It lay in a pool of mud and dried blood, but from the looks of it the poor creature had been killed recently. All around were the footprints of some unknown creature. She decided to inform Derek about this. He had grown up on a farm in Montana and was familiar with several types of animal tracks. Moving to the entrance of the tunnel, she paused. Taking a deep breath, she plunged in. She found them all the way to the back in the circular chamber examining the pictures she had observed earlier. They both glanced up from their discussion when she approached.

"Is everything okay?" asked Derek, obviously surprised at Ally’s reappearance.

"Yeah, I’m fine now," she said. "I just found something I want you to have a look at."

"Okay, I’ll just be a minute," he said turning back to the artwork. Ally leaned in to see
what they were discussing. Drawn on the wall by some long dead hand was a representation of what she had come to know as the Pictish beast. It was the same four footed creature with twin horns protruding from the back of its head. Yet unlike other drawings she had seen of it, this one had actually set the beast amongst other animals and humans. It appeared that the beast was hunting some cattle and had even killed a couple of cows. There were also some men hunting the beast. Further on, however, the beast was shown attacking and killing one of the men. This was all new to Ally, and it appeared to be new to the historians as well. Yet they seemed to be oblivious to another representation of the beast showing it beneath some form of cave-like structure. It was all rather strange, but Ally waited patiently for them to finish. Thankfully, they were only there for a couple minutes longer before Derek turned back to Ally and said, “Okay, now what did you want to show me?”

Ally motioned for them to follow, and then led them outside to the remains of the sheep. Brenda, having led a long life, handled it rather well, and Derek was more curious than disgusted. Turning to Brenda, he asked, “Any idea what could have done this?”

“Nothing I’ve ever seen. We may occasionally have the odd fox or stray dog, but nothing like this. Mind you, I have heard that a few shepherds in the area have been reporting some missing sheep recently. This could be one of them.”

Derek had knelt down to inspect the tracks. “Any idea what created them?” asked Ally.

“They almost look like mountain lion tracks, only smaller.”

“But that’s absurd,” protested Brenda. “There are no big cats on the British Isles. Haven’t been for millennia.”

“Well, there is the case of the Surrey Puma,” said Derek as he stood back up.

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“Surrey Puma,” he repeated. Turning to Brenda, he asked, “Surely you’ve heard of it?” She simply shook her head in ignorance as he continued. “During the sixties there were over three hundred sightings of a creature that resembled a puma in the area of Surrey England. Supposedly killed several cattle and sheep, yet nobody ever caught it. There is one picture, but it’s not very clear.”

“That is rather odd,” said Ally, “but how could a cat of that size hide in the Scottish Highlands. It’s mostly open hills, right?”

Brenda’s face had taken on a look of concern. “Not really,” she said half-heartedly. “There are old tales of people being able to disappear for weeks at a time in these hills. If something doesn’t want to be found, there are plenty of places for it to hide.” She pulled her coat on tighter as the wind started to pick up.

“Well, I think we’re done here,” said Derek. “I don’t want to be around when whatever did this comes back for its left-overs.” The others agreed and they all trotted off through the mud to the car, unaware that they were being secretly watched by a pair of glowing blue eyes.
Excerpt from the journal of Tom McFinn, May 3.

Even as a child, I knew of the beast. My father would tell me of it every night, and it would come to me in my dreams. Its horns were bright red like fire, and its skin was gray as an ancient tombstone. The wrap of its beard hung from its snout, tangled and unkempt. It would never speak, but instead disappear back into its habitat. I knew not where it lived, but I longed to go there and see it more closely. To understand it. As I grew older I became more aware of the cruel and cynical nature of this wretched world in which I was trapped. The laughter, the jeers, they were all too much for my tender youth. But I held on and persevered like my father before me. I didn’t need them. I have all I need with my quest, and I shall succeed. Just this past eve I saw movement along the shore lines. Surely the time is soon when my father’s vindication, and my own as well, will ring true through the countryside.
Part III

The Beast

Jim was once more in his chair when the trio arrived back from the ruins. While they had been off gallivanting about the Necropolis, he had spent a relaxing morning in front of the television. He raised his hand in greeting as they walked into the house.

"I see you've had an active morning," scolded Brenda, as she removed her muddy shoes.

"Active as I like to get," came the reply. "How were the ruins Derek? Everything you'd hoped they be?"

"Very interesting indeed," replied Derek. "However, at the moment I'm more interested in what we found on the grounds outside the barrow."

"What?" Jim asked curiously. Derek briefly explained about the sheep and the footprints, but Jim was just as puzzled as Brenda had been as to what could have caused them.

"Probably the same creature that got poor Tom," Jim finally said. Brenda and Derek looked at him with a mixture of ignorance and surprise. Noticing their faces, he added, "You haven't heard?"

"What happened to him?" asked Derek, remembering the half crazed man from the bar last night.

"It's all over the village," said Jim. "Some fishermen spotted his truck this morning, but from what they could tell, it wasn't in any shape to be going anywhere. Right side tires were completely flat. So, they decided to go over and see if Tom needed any assistance. The camp was in shambles, food and bottles scattered everywhere, and no sign of Tom. They went a little
further into the woods where they found him, or what was left of him. Couldn’t even make out the face. They only recognized him from the clothes he had wore the night before. Said there were animal tracks all over the place, like something big. But I guess it’d have to be big to take down an entire man.” Jim paused, letting the horror he had described to sink in. Brenda collapsed onto the couch, her face in terrified shock while Ally’s hands were to her mouth, her eyes staring in fright at the thought. Derek stood there, the model of calmness while inside his thoughts were wrapped up in knots. What could have happened to Tom? Was it the creature he had seen? Was this the same creature that had gotten the sheep?

Finally coming to grips with his thoughts, Derek said, “Has the local police department been notified?”

“If you mean Frank, yea he’s out there right now, looking over the sight and helping with clean-up. Why?”

“I want to talk to him,” said Derek. He explained to Jim his theory on the Surrey Puma.

“So you think it’s a big cat?” asked Jim, somewhat confused. “You know, I think you may be as daft as old Tom.”

“Jim,” scolded Brenda.

“On the other hand,” Jim quickly added, “there may be something to what you’re saying, and I’d rather not be attacked by some bloody cougar while walking home from the ‘Magistrate’ one night. Come on, I’ll take you to the Point.” He rose from his chair and grabbed his coat.

Ally and Brenda were content to stay at home, so Derek joined Jim by the Reliant.

“You’ll have to drive,” Jim said. “Afraid I can’t operate the peddles as easily anymore. I’ll direct you there.”
The road to the Point ran along the shore line of the loch, with forests on one side and the loch on the opposite. Ahead Derek could already see the jut of land that stuck into the body of water like a thumb. There were only a couple trees on this peninsula, and he could clearly make out the GMC and the other car that were there. As they pulled up, a tall thin man with a completely bald head walked up to the car. He was holding his cap under one arm and carried the bearing of one who had spent many years in the force. He approached Jim’s side of the car as Jim rolled down the window.

“Good afternoon Frank,” Jim said with a tilt of his head.

“Afternoon Jim,” came the reply as Frank leaned down to get level with the window.

“What are you doing out here? Didn’t you hear about the incident?”

“Actually, we’re here to see you,” said Jim. “This is Derek Jamison, the American student who Brenda was so excited about.” Derek reached across and shook hands with Frank.

“Good to meet you Derek,” he said. “I’m Frank Oxman, the constable in these parts.”

Turning back to Jim, Frank said, “Now I’m sure you didn’t come all the way up here just to introduce the boy. What’s up?”

“Derek’s fiancee found a dead sheep up at the Necropolis earlier today. He thinks it may be the same critter that got poor Tom.”

“Is that so,” said Frank, turning back to Derek. “Know much about beasties, do you?”

“Yes sir,” Derek replied. “I grew up on a farm in Montana. I’ve seen all types of damage done by predators from bears to weasels. I heard there were some tracks around where you found the body. Is it okay if I have a look?”

Frank paused to think it over for a minute before finally saying, “Can’t see any harm in it.
Personally, I’m clueless as to what we’re dealing with, and any help you could give would be greatly appreciated.” Standing back up, he added, “If you could just park over by my car, I’ll take you to the scene.”

“Thank you much,” said Jim as Derek pulled over to where the constable had indicated. Jim could tell that Derek was a bit apprehensive about sharing the puma theory with Frank, so Jim quickly added, “Don’t worry about Frank, he’s an old friend of Brenda’s. He can seem a bit rigid in his beliefs, but he’s willing to keep an open mind.” Derek nodded in understanding as he stepped out of the car. The ground was just as muddy here as it was at the ruins. The perfect ground to find tracks. Waiting for Jim to get out, Frank motioned for them to follow. He led them through the disheveled camp site. Beer cans and bottles were strewn over the landscape like a poorly kept park. A fire pit sat blackened in the afternoon sun, the fire having gone out sometime in the night. To the side sat the GMC, its overhead lights permanently darkened by the shattering of the glass. The windshield was also shattered, and inside the cab was a mixture of glass and blood. Then there were the tires on the right side of the truck. They were not only flat, but were slashed as if by some knife or claw.

Moving past the campsite and into the woods, they came to where Tom’s body had been found. Despite its subsequent removal the body’s placement was still marked in the drying mud that covered the ground. All around it were more footprints, the same pattern as seen at the Necropolis. Leaning down to get a closer look, Derek checked his memory to try and confirm his suspicions. Sure enough, these were the same four rounded toes connecting at a pad in the back.

Meanwhile Jim and Frank were discussing the placement of the body when it was found.
“Well,” said Frank, “as you can see, the torso was lying here, but somehow his arm was over in that tree.” He pointed to a pine some distance away, and then noticed that Derek was finished. “Well,” he asked, “do you think what got Tom is the same thing that killed the sheep your girlfriend found in the ruins?”

Standing back up, Derek said, “No doubt about it. Sir, you have a very dangerous animal on the loose here, and if we don’t catch it soon, it could kill again.”

“But what exactly are we dealing with?” asked Frank.

“I know this may sound rather odd,” started Derek, “but these tracks seem to belong to something like a mountain lion.”

At this comment, Frank started coughing. “What . . . do you mean, a mountain lion?” he finally sputtered out. “This isn’t the U.S. This is the Scottish Highlands. There aren’t any mountain lions up here. Where did we get us a cougar?”

“I can’t explain it,” said Derek, “but I know these tracks, and I know this type of animal. What scares me is how vicious it is. Normally you don’t find mountain lions going after something as big as a human unless it’s provoked. And I don’t think even Tom was drunk enough to provoke a mountain lion.”

“So let me get this straight,” said Frank. “You want me to tell people that we’re on the look out for a creature that’s not even indigenous to this area, and a vicious one at that?”

“Look,” Derek finally said, “Tom saw something last night, and most likely that something was what killed him. Now, I don’t know much about the local wildlife, but I do know mountain lion tracks when I see them, and that’s what I see.”

Frank took Jim by the arm and walking some distance away, said, “I don’t know about
this. Should I trust him?"

"The lad knows his stuff," replied Jim with a shrug. "It’s your jurisdiction, however."

Frank wasn’t happy with the situation, but he didn’t have anything better to go on.

Turning back to Derek, he said, "What the heck? I’ve called a town meeting this evening at the Drunken Magistrate. I planned on telling the men what we were hunting, but I think I’ll leave that up to you, Mr. Jamison."

"Me?" Derek said in surprise.

"You’re the one who’s so sure of himself. Besides, you’re the only one who seems to know anything about this creature. The meeting is at eight-thirty, but you might want to come a bit early. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a ton of paperwork to take care of." Saying his farewell, Frank walked over to his car, and left Derek and Jim alone on the Point.

"I hope you know what you’re talking about," said Jim, adding, "if only for your own sake." He turned and started hobbling to the Reliant.

"Don’t worry," Derek replied. "My Dad and I used to track down mountain lions by the dozen." As they walked toward the car, Derek noticed something black and shiny laying beneath a shrub on the path. Bending down, he picked it up. It was a book covered in black vinyl. It wasn’t too dirty, and Derek started thumbing through it.

Noticing this, Jim asked, "What did you find?"

"A journal," came the reply. "I think it belonged to Tom. It seems to have a lot of information on the loch and Quinlan."

"The ramblings of a mad man," said Jim. "You should probably give it to Frank at tonight’s meeting."
“Yea,” agreed Derek as he got into the car. They drove the short distance back to town, and informed Brenda and Ally of what had happened at the Point and about the town meeting. Afterwards, Derek spent most of the afternoon and evening writing up his notes on what he’d seen at the ruins earlier that morning. With the rest of his time, he looked through Tom’s journal. Jim was right, it did appear to be the “ramblings of a mad man.” Yet every so often there was a clarity of thought that made Derek wonder how mad Tom really was. It seemed that last night wasn’t the first evening Tom had seen Quinlan but failed to get a picture. Evidently the beastie of the loch was beginning to make regular appearances beginning a couple months back. This also explained the ridiculing response Tom had received at the bar last night. It had not been his first time asking for support. Before Derek could get much further, though, it was time for dinner. Placing the book on an end table he promptly forgot about it, and failed to bring it with him when they all left for the tavern at eight.

A crowd had already begun to form inside the establishment, and the bartender was having trouble trying to keep up with the orders. More and more people continued to pour in as the clock slowly approached the appointed time. As the chimes finally rang eight-thirty, Frank Oxman appeared at the front of the room and motioned for everyone to quiet down. Once order had been gained, he started talking.

“As most of you are aware, Tom McFinn was killed last night while out at the Point. And as some of you also know, Tom claimed to have seen something out at the Point earlier last night before he died. It is believed that it is this creature that killed Tom, and that’s why you’ve all been called here tonight.”

“But what was it?” shouted someone from the back of the room.
“For that information, I turn the floor over to Derek Jamison,” said Frank, motioning for Derek to come forward. “Derek is an American currently staying with the Holidays, and he has some interesting ideas about what it is we are hunting.” Stepping back, Frank whispered to Derek, “Okay, they’re all yours.”

Derek stepped in front of the crowd and took a deep breath before beginning. “Now, I know you’re all wondering what type of creature could have brought down old Tom and mangled him that badly. This is going to sound a bit absurd to some of you, but what I’m going to tell you is backed by my judgement and the tracks I found at the site. People, you have located somewhere in the hills around you, what I believe is a mountain lion.” The crowd broke into a confused murmur at this revelation. Derek glanced around the room, trying to gauge their reactions. It didn’t look good as he continued. “I realize you all must think I’m crazy, but I know what I saw, and those tracks clearly belong to something resembling a mountain lion, and from its actions, a fierce one at that.”

“So we’ve gone from listening to a fanatic talking about a great serpent to an American chasing a large disgruntled cat!” came a voice from the back of the room. This caused the group to start laughing until Frank again stepped forward and motioned for quiet.

Having regained the crowd’s attention, Frank said, “I know the boy may sound nuts, but I’ve been doing some checking since I last talked with him. He’s right about the tracks, so I think you had better listen to him. Seeing how Derek is the only one here who’s ever dealt with a mountain lion, we had better follow his advice, otherwise who know’s who’ll be the next to be attacked.”

“Thank you, Frank,” Derek said, regaining his confidence. “Now, here’s what we need to
do.” Derek briefly outlined his plan which called for seventeen men. These people were to be divided into four groups of four, with one additional. Each of the groups would be assigned a section of the forest, and would then work their way west to the Necropolis. Each team would have a walkie talkie and everybody would have a rifle equipped with tranquillizers. The walkie talkies were to help coordinate the groups through the seventeenth member who would be set up at the Point. If they came across the creature, they were to try and bring it down so it could be sent to the Edinburgh zoo for study. Derek then asked for volunteers, and rapidly got the men he needed. Even Jim volunteered to operate the communications base. Then, telling the rest of the people to go home and stay inside, the hunting party set out for the Point.

It was again a dark moonless night when they set up Jim in a mobile trailer that had been brought in for this purpose. Derek was to be in charge of one group, Frank, the second, and two fishermen named Steve and Andrew were in charge of the other two groups. They were to report regularly to Jim and in case of emergency. Having distributed the tranquillizer rifles that Frank had sent for from the neighboring city, the parties dispersed into the fens, ready for anything that was to come their way.

For the first half hour, all was routine, as nothing was spotted. Jim soon discovered how dull his job was, and began wandering around the trailer, just to see what they had supplied him with. First aid kit, a couple emergency flairs, a hand gun, some blankets, and even some canned rations. Nothing really of interest. At this point, it was time for Derek’s group to check in. Right on time, the voice came crackling over the two way. “Group one checking in.”

“Got you group one,” replied Jim, picking up the headset. “Anything to report, Derek?”

“Nothing, just trees and shrubs as far as the eye can see.”
“Copy,” replied Jim. Outside the trailer something knocked into the wall. “Just a minute,” Jim added.

“What?” asked Derek.

“There’s something outside. I’m going to check.” He put the headset down despite Derek’s protests. Grabbing the gun, he cautiously opened the door of the trailer, and stepped out into the darkness. He clicked on the spotlights mounted on top of the van, piercing the darkness like a blade of sunlight. Nothing. Just the trash left behind by Tom. Turning to go back inside, he heard a slight rustle from the trees.

“Who’s there?” he shouted into the night. Silence answered. He scanned the forest lines for signs of movement. It came at him from the shadows, flashing through the night like a bolt of lightening. He fired a shot at the black shape, and heard the bullet thud into something. The creature stopped in its tracks, as if wounded. Jim fired again, and took a step towards it. The creature was not moving. Turning to go back inside and radio for the others, he heard the rustle behind him too late. Turning, he saw the eyes, glowing blue like Saint Elmo’s fire before it lunged.
Excerpt from the Journal of Tom McFinn, June 4.

"The beast rose out of the water, its great shaggy beard dripping with moisture from the loch. Its hide glinted in the moonlight. It was magnificent." These were the words to the story that I had heard many times through my youth. The description was ingrained into my head to such an extent that I could clearly picture the majestic creature when my eyes were closed. Yet what I had seen before me was somewhat different. I can't explain why, but I knew it was the beast from the sheer dignity of it. Once more I was unable to get a picture of it, but I could just make out the details that stood forth in the darkness. It was standing by the loch. Father had never mentioned it having legs, but no matter. It was the beast, its lean profile showing the long snout, and tapering back from its head were a pair of horns, serene yet threatening.

But most of all, I could see its eyes as it glanced around the loch and neighboring woods. Eyes that glowed with an inner fire.
Part IV

The Journal

With the dawning of the next day the morning sun cut through the mists on the loch, melting them away, and giving everything a fresh and clean feeling. Brenda woke with the shining of daylight through her window. Turning over, she came face to face with the empty pillow that had been unused by Jim. This was what finally made her memory click in, the emotions she had withheld as she tried to get some rest after the wearisome night before. Tears running down her cheeks, she clearly remembered as Derek came slowly walking through the door at a little past one A.M. Ally had waited up with Brenda. Derek had walked in just as Ally had made a joke, and both women were laughing. The look on his face was enough to sober them up instantly. His eyes held a blank stare and he moved like an automaton instead of his normal cheerful gait.

Brenda had been too scared to react, fearing the worst. It took Ally to ask the question, “Where’s Jim?”

Pulling over a side chair, Derek sat down and bluntly said, “I’m not sure what happened. Frank and the others are still out looking, but I don’t think we’ll have much luck until tomorrow morning when the sun’s out again and we can clearly see.”

“So they still looking for the lion?” Ally asked, sharing Brenda’s fears.

“The lion, or whatever it is, seems to have disappeared, but not without first leaving its mark. We had an entire group taken out. Four sober, grown men.” He hung his head as if even he were having trouble believing it. “They radioed us for help, but by the time we got there, it
was too late. And then Jim...”

“What about Jim?” Brenda asked through hands that were pressed to her mouth.

“Right before the attack, my group reported to Jim, as was normal. However, right before we signed off, he said he heard something outside. We told him to wait and that we’d head straight over. A minute later we heard two gun shots from the direction of the Point and we started running that way. Before we could get there, however, we got the call from the group under attack. We split up, but by the time we got to the Point, it was empty.”

“Empty?” asked Brenda, her voice a mixture of fear and question.

“I’m sorry Brenda,” Derek finally said, looking up from the floor. The trailer was empty and there was no sign of him anywhere. A little ways into the woods we found his artificial leg, but it was in pretty bad shape. Other than that, we found nothing.”

Brenda let out a cry and covered her face in her hands, as Derek quickly added, “We haven’t given up hope yet. I’ve only known Jim for a day and a half now, but the one thing I picked up on is that he is stubborn and that he is a survivor. They’ll find him, just you wait and see.” Standing up and giving Ally a hug, Derek then left again to rejoin the search party.

Ally helped Brenda up to bed after that, and, somehow, Brenda got some sleep. Yet now that it was again morning, the sorrow built up once again, threatening to break out.

Putting her best mask of courage on, she made it downstairs and had breakfast cooking before Derek and Ally could stumble down. The meal was eaten in silence.

After breakfast, there was a knock at the door. Brenda looked up in anticipation as Derek left to answer it. A moment later, he returned with Frank, who shook his weary head in resignation. Brenda ran from the room. Ally followed behind, leaving the two men in the
kitchen.

"Did you find anything at all?" asked Derek, glancing after the two women.

"Only a couple spent bullets and some more of those blasted tracks. I must admit, I'm out of my league here. I've already put in a request to Edinburgh, but they can't get anyone out here until two days from now. Evidently the Prince is visiting and they need all the added security they can get. So for now, we're on our own."

"Did you find out anything from Jim's leg?" Derek asked, keeping his voice down.

"Only a few teeth marks, but I'll be honest with you. It's definitely some carnivore, but none like I've ever seen before. Near as I can tell, the thing has some kind of muzzle, but whether it's a mountain lion, a dog, or whatever, I can't say."

"Were there any other sightings last night."

"No, and actually I'm grateful for that. At this rate, everybody who's even got a glimpse of it is dead. I can't even ask them what it looks like."

Remembering the journal, Derek excused himself, then went and brought it back. "Jim and I found this yesterday after you had left the Point. It seems old Tom kept a diary of his thoughts and what he observed on the loch." Derek handed it to the constable, who flipped to a random page and started reading.

Laying it back down a couple seconds later with a disgusted look on his face, Frank said, "I always knew Tom was balmy but this is just frightening. To be so warped in his thinking... it gives me the chills."

"That was my reaction as well." Derek picked the journal back up. "However, having looked through it, I believe Tom actually saw our old friend on several occasions before the
fateful evening. It seems he started seeing the creature by the water nearly four months ago. When did you start getting reports on missing sheep?"

"About the same time," came the thoughtful reply. "So you think old Tom has been seeing this thing all along, and it finally turned on him. I mean, why didn't it attack any humans sooner?"

"That's a good question. The only thing I can think of is that maybe Tom antagonized it somehow, and now it sees all people as a possible threat."

"Does Tom ever describe what he saw?" Frank asked hopefully.

"Yes and no," Derek replied. "There are some descriptions, but from what I can gather they seem to look the same as Quinlan, and from what I've heard that Quinlan's been sighted long before there were any missing sheep. Besides, what Tom describes is something aquatic."

"Creature could be amphibious," hazarded Frank.

"Possible," Derek replied, quickly adding, "but I doubt it. We've seen evidence of this thing as far away as the Necropolis. Whatever it is, it's doing a lot of wandering on dry land, and I don't think most amphibians are prone to stray that far from water. Besides, you've seen the paw prints, no fins."

"You have a point," he agreed, Scratching his unshaven chin. "Maybe what Tom saw wasn't Quinlan after all? Maybe Tom just thought it was Quinlan because Quinlan is what he's been searching for all these years."

"It makes sense," replied Derek. "But that doesn't explain the descriptions Tom is giving. From what I can see, Tom is describing the same thing pictured on the mirror at the Drunken Magistrate. Unless he just exaggerated the details to match the picture."

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“Well that would be kind of hard to do since Tom provided the sketch for the mirror only two months ago. So it’s possible . . .”

“That Tom’s picture of Quinlan might actually look like what’s been doing the killing around here,” Derek finished, putting the pieces together. “But why put the creature in the loch? From the sounds of his journal, he’s only seen the beast near the shore line.”

“Probably the influence of John, the tavern owner,” Frank replied, standing from the dining room chair. “You know, I’ve never really got a very good look at that mirror before. What do you say we check it out.” Derek nodded in agreement. Headed for the door, Frank quickly shouted back, “Oh, and bring the journal. We should see what other liberties John may have taken with the art work.” Derek grabbed the journal, and letting Brenda and Ally know where they were going, they headed down the street to the local tavern.

The bar was closed at this early hour, with chairs still stacked around on the table tops. Yet Frank’s influence as constable allowed them access to the back room. Frank leading the way around to the back of the bar, they stood looking at the picture of the lake creature cast in gold leaf before them. Derek glanced through the journal for the entries where he remembered the beast being mentioned. Finding one, he compared it to what hung before him. The same long snout, the long curved horns flailing back from its head like a pair of pigtails. The small eyes described by Tom as “two fiery pits of blue fire that were like looking into power incarnate.”

The beast also walked on four legs soundlessly through the forest, never making its appearance known until its shadow was clearly caught in the meager light from the distant camp fire and the village some miles away. There wasn’t much else, until Derek noticed one important omission. Nowhere in Tom’s description was there mention of the shaggy beard hanging down from the
muzzle. Pointing this out to Frank, Frank mentioned that the beard was one of the more traditional traits associated with Quinlan. Otherwise, the picture on the wall was a match for what Tom had seen on the shores of the loch during those overcast nights.

“So the beast looks something like this,” Frank said, using his hand to cover the beard.

The creature’s legs were invisible beneath the water line by the artist, but without the beard, it was unmistakable. Shining on the mirror was a perfect gilt representation of the Pictish Beast. Derek turned and leaned across the bar as he tried to connect his thoughts. It had been different when all they were dealing with was a mountain lion, or even Quinlan. Sure, such creatures were unknown in this area of the world, but the Pictish Beast! Nothing was known about this creature except as shown in Pict drawings and other art work. How could you hope to understand a completely unknown beast? Still, there were some things that did not make sense. Why hadn’t anybody spotted this creature sooner? It had to have come from somewhere. It was all so unbelievable, but something was definitely attacking the people and livestock of Cronley. The situation had definitely turned more serious, and of the few facts they did have, they knew the beast was fierce and able to take down grown men without any trouble. Finally, catching his breath, Derek elaborated on all the thoughts he had just had. Frank stood listening placidly, his face an emotionless mask.

When Derek had finished, Frank finally said, “Maybe the situation isn’t as bad as you think. We now have a better idea what we’re dealing with. Sure, it’s a mostly unknown of creature, but we’re no longer treating it like a simple mountain lion. What we need to do is find out anything at all about this creature. Where it came from, what it eats, how it spends the day, and most of all, how to stop it.”
Derek nodded along with Frank's reasoning as a slight beeping sounded from Frank's pager. Walking to the nearest phone, Frank dialed the number displayed on the little view screen. After a brief conversation that Derek couldn't make out, Frank hung up the phone.

"They found Jim," he said.

Derek felt a mixture of relief and dread sweep through him, causing a hurricane of other emotions. "How is he?"

"He's not conscious at the moment," came the reply. "Seems to have a nasty lump on his head, possibly from hitting a stone or tree. Other than that, just a few scratches and bruises. For some reason the creature didn't like him."

"Thank God for that," said Derek. "Have they told Brenda yet?"

"No, that's to fall on me," Frank replied, not relishing the job. After all, Jim was alive, but he wasn't in perfect health either. And what with Jim's age, a coma could be even worse.

"Come on, I need to get back to the Holiday's to tell Brenda the news."

They found Brenda trying to do laundry as Ally was trying to keep Brenda's mind off of Jim. Frank gently broke the news that Jim had been taken to the local doctor's. Brenda couldn't have been held back as she hurried out of the house and down the street to the residence of Cronley's one physician. The others followed along behind.

Dr. McCam's office was in a side room of his house. For the most part he specialized in physicals, flu, and the occasional case of chicken pox or allergies. Otherwise, he was merely the stopover on the way to the hospital to the northwest. One of the older houses in the village, dating back to the turn of the century, it was kept in rather good repair from the gables to the porch. Brenda was on this porch and about to ring the bell when Dr. McCam opened the door,

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clearly expecting her arrival. A plump older man with a head of unruly hair, Dr. McCam seemed to belong more to a laboratory than to a Doctor’s office. He invited her and the others in, and took them into the side room where Jim was lying on a couch, wrapped in a blanket with bandages around his head. He didn’t look in too bad of shape, but it was unnerving for Derek and Ally to see the flat blanket space that would have been occupied by Jim’s false leg.

“How is he?” asked Brenda as she knelt beside him.

“I’ve done all I can for him,” said Dr. McCam, as plainly and professionally as possible. “Really it’s mostly up to him to come out of it. He doesn’t show any signs of hemorrhaging and near as I can tell, he could wake from this coma at any minute.”

“It’s probably best if we leave him without all this fuss,” hinted Frank, motioning to Ally and Derek.

“It would be better,” agreed Dr. McCam, quickly adding, “but if Brenda would want to stay . . .”

“Thank you Doctor,” she replied, sitting down next to the bed where she could hold Jim’s hand.

Frank led the others out into the waiting room of the house. Taking a seat on a Queen Anne settee in the room, he said, “We’ve done all we can for Jim, now it’s up to us to make sure this creature is stopped. We’ve already lost five villagers, and we’ve nearly lost a sixth. At this rate, in nearly two months the village won’t have enough people left to attend a church function.”

“I agree the situation’s bleak,” said Derek, “but I’m not quite sure what we can do to help. We’re no longer dealing with a mountain lion, and I’m not really sure what it is we are dealing with. It seems to resemble the Picitch Beast, but you can’t have an expert on that
creature. It’s completely unknown other than the few drawings done by the Picts.”

“That’s where you’re not quite accurate,” said Frank. “We have one good piece of
information. Tom’s journal. Thanks to that book we were able to ascertain what the creature
looked like. Tom may have been crazy, but he did pay attention to this beast. Anything we can
get from his journal will be a bonus, and you’ve already acquainted yourself with some of it.
Plus, you’re the closest thing we have to an expert on these mythological creatures, so like it or
not, you’re the best thing we have.”

“So what should I do?” asked Derek.

“Go back and look through the journal. Anytime Tom mentions seeing the beast, I want
you to copy down the details. This creature has to have a weak spot. It can’t be alert twenty-four
hours a day. Most importantly, any information that can explain why it would suddenly attack
Tom, as well as why it killed four grown men and yet left Jim pretty much unharmed.”

“And what about me?” asked Ally.

Frank looked at her, really noticing her presence for the first time. Realizing this, Derek
said, “Frank Oxman, this is my fiancée, Ally O’Cranst.”

Exchanging greetings, Frank asked, “The O’Cranst’s from Munster?”

“That’s correct,” she said.

“I remember visiting your family’s castle as a child,” he said. “My father was a friend of
the family. Shame about the fire.”

“Yes, a shame,” she said, trying to avoid encouraging the subject.

“And then the poor people living in there, they must have been your grandparents.” Ally
nodded her head, trying to block out the memories. “They had managed to escape the fire only
to die all those years later in the ruins.”

The memories came flooding into Ally’s mind. She clearly saw the ruins, nothing then but a burnt out shell, but to the eyes of a five year old, a place of adventure. She couldn’t remember why her grandparents had brought her out there, but somehow she had gotten into the semi-stable structure. She was wandering around the remains of the upper floor when it had appeared to her, floating in mid air like a dream. But this was no dream, this actually was the spectral hand that haunted the O’Cranst manor house. Curiosity had won out over fear, and being a child she found herself following the beckoning apparition. It led her through the crumbling structure, somehow guiding her to the only stable part of the building. Unknown to her, her grandparents were searching for her through the ruins. While in the room where the hand had first appeared, the floor gave away and both were killed. The hand had led Ally to safety, but if she had never wandered off in the first place . . .

“Yes, tragic,” she whispered.

“Well, anyway,” said Frank, looking at his watch. “We have a lot to do here, so I better get going. Oh, and Miss O’Cranst, you can help Derek. I have a feeling he has his work cut out for him.

Derek and Ally returned to the Holiday residence and immediately got to work reading the journal. It was nearing six o’clock by the time they had finished, and they had only managed to gather a couple of interesting notes. The most important was that Tom had only seen the beast after dark, so it was most likely nocturnal. It also seemed to be near the loch at these times, most likely getting a drink from the chilly waters. This could mean the creature didn’t live closer to any other source of water. But that was all they could get, and even this was conjecture. Tom
never had got a good look at the beast so the only thing they had to go on was the image at the bar.

Finishing their work, they decided to check on Jim and Brenda. They found Frank there, and told him what they had deduced. Frank had then told how he and several other men had searched the woods again, but with no results.

Ally went to check on Jim, and found Brenda sleeping in her chair. The past day had worn on her, and Ally could really see Brenda’s age for the first time since meeting this strong lady. “How is he?” Ally asked.

“He’s okay,” she said, glancing over to his sleeping form. After a moments thought, she added, “Have you had much luck today?”

“We found out a bit more on the creature, so we should be better prepared for it now.”

“But what is it?” Brenda asked, fear hovering over her voice.

“We’re not sure, but it’s nothing we’ve ever seen before. It moves like a mountain lion, yet it’s fifty times more dangerous. It’s nocturnal, and its main distinguishing features are a large pair of horns that sweep back from its head and a pair of glowing blue eyes.”

A groan arose from Jim as consciousness slowly returned. Then, as if in a dream, he started muttering, “No... stay back, stop looking at me...”

Brenda leaned over and placing her hand gently on Jim’s shoulder, softly said, “Jim you’re safe. It’s Brenda. The beast is gone.”

Ally rushed to bring the others into the room. Dr. McCam was by Jim’s side in a moment, looking him over. Jim, now awake tried to shove the Doctor away, saying, “I’m fine now... you can stop hovering over me.”

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“Yea, he’s back to normal,” said Frank with a laugh. Then more seriously, he added,

“Jim, I need you to tell us anything you can about what happened.”

Jim, rubbed his head pausing at the bandages in surprise and thought. “It came out of the darkness like a ghost, its eyes . . . those eyes . . .”

Regaining his train of thought, he continued, “. . . the blighter jumped right at me, but I managed to shoot it. That I’m sure of . . . I saw it fall back. I shot it again. Somehow, the thing still managed to jump me.”

“After putting two bullets in it?” asked Frank skeptically.

“Maybe there were two beasts?” guessed Jim.

“No,” replied Frank. “There was no sign of a second one, and no body found from the one you shot.”

“But that means . . .” concluded Derek.

“It means the beast took two direct hits and still had enough energy to jump Jim and then take out the other four,” finished Frank.

Jim looked confused at this comment, and Frank explained what had happened right after Jim’s brush with the beast. Jim swore under his breath.

“How can we stop it?” Ally asked. “Bullets didn’t even seem to slow it down.”

“They did for a minute,” pointed out Jim. “Just give me another crack at him,” he added, trying to sit up. Brenda and Dr. McCam gently pushed him back down.

“No Jim,” Frank said, sadly. “You need to get some rest.” Dr. McCam nodded agreement as Frank added, “Don’t worry, we’ll get this thing. We now know what we’re looking for.”

Resignedly, Jim agreed to his fate, and Brenda chose to stay with him. Ally returned to
the Holiday residence, while Frank and Derek went to the Drunken Magistrate. A group of villagers with shotguns had already assembled, and within a half hour they had separated into groups of eight, each disappearing into the wilderness of the fens. The moon was shining brightly that night, turning everything into a gray scale former representation of itself. As the night drew on, the reports continually came to the base camp, now located out of the tavern. Yet despite their thorough efforts, even going as far as the Necropolis, all was quiet. An unnatural peace had fallen across the hamlet of Cronley. But the calm was to be temporary as everyone knew. They finally called it a night at about 3 AM, with the moon mockingly looking down at their efforts from its lofty dome.
Excerpt from the Journal of Tom McFinn, September 8.

It was foolish for me to think I would get any help from those madmen in the tavern. They are too blinded to the truth and the honor of my quest. How could they know, but then there was the one . . . The young man who was with Jim. I have never seen him before, but I could see it in his eyes, the curiosity and the want to believe in the truth. If only those fools had not ridiculed my mission so relentlessly, I may have been able to get him to join in my victory. But that's no longer important. Tonight is the night, I can feel it in the air and the cool breeze that is blowing in from the lock.

My camera is ready, and before the dawn, history will be made and my ridicule will forever be ceased. Yet for some reason, I also have a sense of dread. This I cannot shake. It plagues me like a thorn in my shoe, threatening to unnerve me from my victory. Maybe it was the look in that stranger’s eyes, something of a reflection of my own, but with all the innocence still remaining. Maybe . . . but wait! I hear something moving in the woods. The time is at hand, and know with the help of my camera, my soul will finally be set free from the quest.
Part V
The Attack

She was standing in the dark barrow, yet she could see clearly, as if somehow daylight filtered through the rocks over her head. Before her floated the hand, cold, gray and beckoning. She followed it, her mind realizing both where she was and what most likely awaited her at the end of the tunnel in the circular room. However, somehow the transition from being in the ancestral castle to the cold dampness of the tunnel did not surprise her or seem at all unnatural. Her feet plodded soundlessly through the hall as the hand entered the central chamber. She followed it in, and she felt the familiar shock of cold air and the smell of rot and decay. Before her again stood the being, yet by preparing herself, she did not scream. Instead she looked with a mixture of curiosity and repugnance at the three foot creature that stared back at her with its cold red eyes.

"Who are you?" she managed to ask.

The being looked at her as if trying to reach some understanding before one word managed to escape through its serrated teeth. "Plyntos."

She was curious about this strange response, but before her eyes, the being dissolved into a fine mist which disappeared into clear air. It was then that she saw the drawings behind where it had stood. They were the same drawings that had so fascinated Derek a couple of days before. The Pictish Beast, surrounded by both animals and humans, some alive, some dead. Then she saw the answer and knew what needed to be done.

A growl came from the back of the cave, and she slowly turned to see the two pin pricks
of blue light glowing in the shadows. The beast stepped into view, its eyes cutting straight through to her very soul. It pounced, almost in slow motion.

Ally sat up in bed, an almost repeat performance from the dream only two days before. Yet parts were not fading as quickly this time. As her heart finally calmed down, she remembered being in the barrow, and discovering something in the drawings, but the answer she discovered was no longer clear. Then there was the word, echoing in her mind like a bad song. "Plyntos." Looking to the window, she noticed that it was just after dawn. Deciding there was no point in trying to get any more sleep, she eased out of bed so as not to wake Derek, dressed, and went downstairs to the kitchen, which was empty. Brenda had not come back. Having a glass of orange juice, Ally sat at the table trying to piece together the elements of her dream, but with no luck. All she had was an image of the ruins, the being that had spoken that one word, and the eyes, glaring from the shadows. There had to be a reason to this dream and the others that had come before it. Why had the hand led her to the ruins, and always to this odd creature that seemed as ancient as the Necropolis? Her mind switched to her memories from the castle. The hand had been there too, leading her from the dangers of the room to safety. Could this be the case now as well? All this raced through her mind when Derek finally came down.

"You’re up early," he commented, pulling up a chair at the table. "The dream?" he asked, his voice full of compassion.

"Yes and no," was Ally’s reply. "It was somewhat the same, yet there were some differences..." she trailed off in thought.

"Like?" he prompted.

"Well, for one, it wasn’t the castle, instead I was in the barrow. Also, for the first time I
had memories of the previous dreams so I was able to prepare myself for when the being appeared. I wasn’t scared this time. Somewhat repulsed, but not scared. Then it said something to me and disappeared.”

“What did it say?”

“Plyntos.” He shrugged in ignorance, as she continued. “Anyway, behind it were some of the drawings from inside the cave. The ones dealing with the beast. Something clicked, and it all made sense. Then, the beast appeared out of nowhere. That’s when I woke.”

“But why would your dream suddenly switch to the barrow?” asked Derek. “I don’t know much about dreams, but it almost sounds like it’s trying to tell you something.”

“It could be trying to help us,” she replied. She told him her theory about the hand, and its connection with protecting her back at the castle when she was five. “Maybe the being is trying to tell us something about the beast. Some way we can stop it.”

Derek thought about this for a moment when he remembered something he had read about some years back. “There are tales from Ireland . . .” he began. “But that’s myth and legend. Something the monks made up to appease the Celts.”

“What legends?” asked Ally.

“Tales of beings called the Tuatha de Dannon. They supposedly were the inhabitants of the British Isles before the Celts arrived. There was a great war and the Celts managed to banish the Tuatha. However the Tuatha didn’t go very far. They simply went underground, so to speak.” Ally looked at him curiously as he explained. “Supposedly they still exist under the hills of Ireland, and maybe some of the other Celtic countries. Basically the Fairy kingdoms of the Celts. But those were just myths like Tir na nOg and the Banshee. They have no basis in
real life.”

“And the beast does?” asked Ally. Derek looked at her strangely as she continued.

“What if one of these Tuatha beings is trying to contact me and tell me how to stop the beasts. What if this is their way of trying to help us, through my dreams. I only wish I could remember what it was about the drawings that caught my attention.”

Derek sat in silence for a minute before saying, “Do you think you might remember more of the dream if we were to go to the barrow?”

She shrugged in response, then said, “I don’t know. I guess it could.”

“Well,” continued Derek, “I say we check in on Jim and Brenda, then make a trip out to the ruins.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” said Ally, concern creeping into her voice. “The sheep wasn’t that safe out there.”

“Yea,” agreed Derek, “but it’s light out, so we should be fine.”

Ally agreed to this point, and they set out immediately for Dr. McCam’s home. Inside they found Frank. Evidently Jim had finally gone to sleep, and Brenda had retired to a guest room at about two-thirty. Deciding it best not to disturb them, Derek told Frank about his and Ally’s plan.

Frank looked skeptical. “So you’re going out there because of a dream?” He shook his head, then muttered, “Crazy Americans. Oh, well, we don’t have anything better to go on. Let me know if you find anything.” As the couple walked through the door, he quickly added, “Be careful though. We don’t know for sure if the creature is nocturnal. It may not have any qualms about getting some sun.” Derek gave Frank the thumbs up sign in reply before shutting the door.
Using the Holiday’s Reliant, Derek and Ally made good time to the Necropolis, and within an hour and a half, they were standing at the gate of the abyss looking in. The sun had disappeared beneath the thickening clouds by this time, and a cold wind was blowing across the hills. Ally paused before going in, but switching on the flashlight she finally entered, Derek following behind. Ignoring the drawings along the tunnel, they went straight to the back room.

“It was standing there,” she said, pointing to a spot to the side. Derek inspected the art on that wall, while Ally turned around to look at the rest of the room. On the opposite side from the drawings under examination was the stone slab that once supported the body of the original inhabitant, the unknown chieftain whose final resting place this was. However, something seemed amiss about the stone. The block was set away from the wall by about two feet and behind it was a small opening, barely three foot square. Peering down it she saw nothing but darkness that receded into the neighboring hill. She was about to mention this to Derek when he called her over.

Once she had returned to his side, he said, “You’re sure these are the drawings you saw?” He motioned to the wall. Before them were the images of the four-footed horned creature that had lately come to haunt their thoughts so much. “It just looks like scenes of the beast hunting, defending itself, and hiding in its cave.”

She looked over the drawings, then with a flash of recognition, she pointed to the bottom one. “That’s it. That’s the one.” It was the drawing that Derek described as the beast hiding in its cave, and he repeated this interpretation as a question.

“But what if it’s not there by choice?” she asked, her excitement growing.

“What are you saying?” Derek asked, still confused.
"Look at the drawings," she said. "The first one shows the beast being hunted by humans. The second depicts the hunters being killed by the beast, something we can sympathize with. But what if, instead of finally killing it, they managed to capture it. Buried it in some cave. Maybe even this barrow."

Derek thought about this for a second. There was something that was trying to click together in his mind. Suddenly, it came to him. "Tom started seeing the beast almost four months ago," he stated. "The same time that Brenda found the barrow. Could it be... No," he shook his head in frustration. "This is ridiculous. These drawings are millennia old. Nothing could have survived and bred down here. Not for that long without fresh air, food or water. It couldn't survive."

"It has to be, it all fits together so well," said Ally, excited by the possibilities. "We don't know anything about this beast. How can we say it couldn't have survived?"

"Look Ally," Derek said as gently as possible, "I want to believe you, but you're talking nonsense. There's no way something could live that long."

"Do you have a better theory?" she asked reproachfully.

Sighing in resignation, he admitted, "No." He thought the matter over for a minute, but it still didn't sit well with him. She did have a point, though, and they had nothing better to go on. Finally, he managed to state his greatest concern on her theory. "Ally, if what you're saying is true, then it could be almost impossible to kill this creature."

"But we don't need to kill it," she said, stating what she saw. "If we can just imprison it again like the Picts did all those years back..."

"Yes, but if this is where they imprisoned the beast, how did these paintings get here?
They were done afterwards, yet anybody who would have been in the chamber would have been killed by the beast.”

Ally hung her head in response. She knew it made sense, it fit together too well. But then again, could it be just a series of coincidences that her mind had strung together? A mind that was always weaving the impossible together into fiction. Could she be over-analyzing the situation. A beast that had survived from the time of the Picts? Shaking her head, she finally said, “Okay, so what do we do now?”

“No, we need to get in touch with Frank and let him know about this,” said Derek.

“Like you said, your theories are the best we have, even if they are far fetched. Then from that point, I don’t know.”

They turned to leave when they heard the growl, low like the hum of a motor boat. Turning to the back of the room, Derek saw twin orbs of blue light staring back at him. Grabbing Ally’s hand, he shouted, “Run.” She needed no further encouragement. Dashing out of the circular chamber, they could hear the plodding of the creature’s feet as it bounded after them. Up ahead was the entrance to the tunnel, daylight filtering through into the dark abode. Adrenalin pumped through their veins as they made the final jump for the entrance, the beast right behind. Ally went through first, Derek closely following. He was mostly out of the hole when a cry escaped his lips. With one final burst of energy, he flung himself clear of the hole, his pants ripped and bloody. Ally ran to his side as the low growl again emanated from inside the tunnel. A tuft of brownish black hair appeared briefly at the entrance only to disappear just as quickly with a cry of pain.

Derek looked to the sky, and saw the sunlight filtering through the overcast sky overhead.
“Its eyes,” he said, “trying to catch his breath and fight the pain in his legs. “It’s been locked in that cave with no light for centuries. Of course it would be nocturnal. It can’t stand any form of light.”

Ally nodded in agreement as she stared at the open gash in the hill. It was like a wound, a wound that needed to be sealed as soon as possible.

“We need to find Frank,” Derek said as he tried to get to his feet. Pain coursed through his legs as he attempted to put his weight on them. By now his jeans showed splotches of blood soaking through. Collapsing back to the ground, Derek tore the sleeve off his shirt and wrapped the fabric around each of his legs above the knee. He winced as he pulled the fabric tight in an attempt to slow the flow of blood. Ally watched, distressed at his pain. She offered her arm and helped him to his feet. As he wobbled back and forth from the pain and the tightness of the makeshift tourniquet, Ally offered him her shoulder, and he transferred his weight onto her smaller frame. With a struggled gait they proceeded back toward the car and away from the growling that emanated from the opening behind them.

The journey back to the Reliant was long and made difficult by the rough terrain. Overhead the sky continued to darken from an increase in clouds. Derek paid little attention to this, however, his mind flashing back to the discovery in the cave. Could the beast really be that ancient? There were turtles that lived for over a century, and even some trees along the west coast of the United States that were said to date back to before the time of the Romans. But those were trees. This was an animal, and more specifically, a predator. That much was clear from the remains seen in the forest and at the Necropolis. Then there was the matter of its sudden attack on humans. If his theory was right about the creature being released when the
barrow was opened, why didn’t it start attacking people right away? Unless of course, if Tom
had done something to purposefully provoke it that would cause it to see all humans as a threat.
But what could Tom have done? Then Derek remembered the lights from Tom’s truck. The
lights that had been smashed.

This last thought plagued Derek the rest of the way to the car and the ride back to Dr.
McCam’s house. His bleeding had stopped by this point, and now his legs were throbbing with a
dull pain, and he was beginning to lose feeling in them. Ally kept an eye on Derek the entirety of
the trip, her mind focused on getting her fiance to the doctor as quickly as possible.

The Reliant pulled into the driveway of Dr. McCam’s house with a squeal of tires, and
Dr. McCam ran out to see what was happening. Ally was already out of the car and motioning
him over to the passenger door. Together they pulled Derek out and took him into the room with
Jim and Brenda. Brenda helped Jim to a side chair as Derek took Jim’s place on the bed.
Grabbing a pair of scissors, Dr. McCam immediately set to work cutting away the fabric
tourniquets as well as the remanent of the calves of Derek’s jeans. Beneath the cloth, his legs
were covered in blood making Ally turn away.

“What happened?” Brenda asked.

“We were in the cave,” Ally managed to say as she hazarded another glance at her fiance.
“It came out of nowhere . . . we reached the entrance, but before Derek could get out.”

Derek moaned from the bed, “Call Frank.” Then the pain from Dr. McCam cleaning the
wounds caused Derek to grit his teeth in agony.

Brenda took the initiative and followed Derek’s request. Ally continued to watch the
progress of the Doctor from across the room. Jim offered her his hand in support, which she
gladly took. The room seemed to take on an almost deathly silence for an unbearable period. Finally Dr. McCam finished. Looking up from his work, he turned to face the anxious expressions of the others. “The wounds were mostly superficial,” he said. Ally let out a sigh of relief as the doctor continued. “Mostly scratches that extended just below the skin. There is one claw mark that extends in almost a half inch, though.” Turning to Derek, he added, “The idea of using the shirt sleeve to stop the flow of blood was a good one, however, you shouldn’t have kept it on for so long. The lack of circulation was what was causing most of the pain you were suffering. You should feel better in a few hours, however.” Ally ran to Derek’s side and hugged him.

By the time Frank showed up five minutes later, Derek was doing much better. Frank looked over the scene as if to say, “What happened.” Derek and Ally told Frank about the pictures on the wall, and the depiction of the beast in a cave. They then told of how the beast had appeared, how they were chased and Derek’s deductions about its aversions to light, and what happened to Tom.

“Old Tom had a high powered flash on his camera,” added Jim, shaking his head. “Poor fool didn’t realize it would provoke the beast. That also explains how I survived. Those were some high powered lights on the trailer. Must’ve scared the blighter off before it could get much more than my leg.”

Frank silently listened to all this, occasionally rubbing his nose or scratching his head in thought. When they had finished, he said, “So now you’re saying this beast is not only unknown of, but also it’s eternal.” He looked around the room at the faces of the people. “Now, I’ve heard some tales of fairies, banshees and lake monsters, but this definitely takes the cake. I
should have you all sent to the mental ward for even thinking any of this.”

As he paused to collect his thoughts, Derek said. “I would have to agree with you, but there is one thing you are overlooking.” Derek paused as Frank looked over to the American. “The facts, no matter what reason states, point to what Ally and I have been saying. However, whether you want to believe us or not is unimportant. What matters is that the beast is out there, and no matter what it is, we need to do something.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Frank, willing to listen to this line of thought.

“We need to seal it back in the barrow,” replied Derek. “As long as it’s trapped in there, everyone will be safe.”

Frank thought this over for a moment, and looked around the room at the faces staring at him. He paused as he looked at Jim and Brenda and considered the pain that they had been through. Finally, reaching his decision, he said, “Well, from the sounds of it, the creature is stuck for the moment anyway. I’ll tell you what, I’ll get some people together, and we can head out right now and plug it back in that hole with some dynamite while it’s still hiding from the light.”

“Are you sure that’s safe?” asked Brenda. “How can you be positive you can get it back down the small tunnel?”

“We just won’t give it any choice,” was his reply. Nodding farewell, he headed out the door.

Discussion turned to other matters for the next several minutes, focusing on Frank’s initiative and how glad they were that the killing would soon be over. Derek sat back in thought for a moment, then with a start, asked, “Brenda, what did you mean about the small tunnel? I
don’t remember anybody mentioning that. I can’t even recall seeing a small tunnel.”

“Of course you did,” she replied, hesitating. “That’s where the beast emerged from.”

“That’s right,” said Ally, realizing what Derek was getting at. “But we didn’t ‘say’ where it had appeared from, we just said it appeared. I never even got the chance to mention it to Derek. What do you know about that tunnel?”

Everybody, including Jim, stared at her until she finally flung her hands to her face in shame. Then, between sobs, she managed to blurt out, “It wasn’t supposed to happen like this... we thought it was empty...”

“Brenda,” said Jim, obviously confused. “What are you talking about. Who’s we?”

“Frank and I,” she replied. “You see, it wasn’t an accident that opened the cave.”

“What?” Jim asked, his expression echoed by Derek and Ally.

“When Frank and I were kids we would always go out and play in the Necropolis even though we were told not to,” she said. “That was how we first came across the barrow. We discovered that the hill was solid stone a little way in, but we couldn’t get any further. Well, once Jim and I moved back here, Frank and I got reminiscing one evening, and he mentioned about blowing a hole in the hill to see what was inside. We hoped to find some long buried art treasures, maybe done in gold or silver. Instead all we found were drawings. We even moved the burial slab in hope of finding some secret passage. We did uncover the tunnel, but we never had the courage to examine it very far. I finally decided to take advantage of what fame I could, and contacted the people in Edinburgh. Now I wish I’d never lain eyes on that bloody hill.”

She stopped to catch her breath and ended up sobbing again. Jim put his arm protectively around her, not sure what to say.
"But why make up the story?" asked Ally.

"Because tampering with archaeological sites is illegal," said Derek calmly. He then added, "Well now we know how the Picts managed to make those drawings after the beast had been captured. Now, if Frank can manage to get the beast back in there and the opening closed."

Brenda nodded, "Then it will all be over."

"I just hope Frank can take care of it before the storm hits." Jim nodded to the window.

The implications of his statement caught the other three. They could see the dark thunder clouds advancing over the hills toward Cronley. It was going to be a violent storm, and most likely all would be placed in darkness by its ferocity. A darkness to rival any moonless night.

Realizing there was nothing that could be done during the storm, Derek and Ally set out as soon as it had passed. Driving through the country lanes, they arrived an hour later at the Necropolis where they found several parked cars. By now the rain had slowed to a mist, and the sky was getting lighter by the second. Traveling as quickly as possible, Derek and Ally started for the barrow. By the time they arrived, however, they could tell they were too late. They journeyed back to Cronley in silence.

It was after seven by the time Derek and Ally returned to town from the Necropolis, and for the fourth consecutive night, Derek found himself amongst a large assembly of villagers at the Drunken Magistrate. Stepping to the front of the room, Derek looked over the crowd. It had only been two nights before when Frank had introduced Derek to the villagers. Now, Derek’s mind flashed to the scene that had awaited him and Ally several hours before at the Necropolis. There had been nothing left of Frank’s group but a handful of broken bodies, of which Frank’s was still missing. The entrance to the barrow had been sealed, but worst of all, tracks clearly
showed the beast heading away from the barrow, and into the woods. It had once more disappeared into the wilderness. Now as he stood before the restless crowd, he felt apprehensive. Before the meeting could start, the news of Frank’s failed attempt had circulated amongst them, and there was now a great deal of mumbles and curses floating among the villagers. Glancing toward the bar, he felt a sharp pain course through his leg as he sighted the mirror with its inaccurately aquatic depiction of the beast they were after. Regaining control of himself, Derek said, “I’m sure you have all heard the news on Frank, so I won’t bother to go into details. Suffice it to say, Frank’s group was wiped out to the last man. If we are to stop this creature, we need to act fast, and act now.”

“How?” came the cry from several members of the crowd.

“We have learned a few new facts about what we are dealing with,” replied Derek. “The beast lives in the Necropolis, near the recently uncovered barrow. Most importantly, however, we now know that the beast cannot stand light in any form. That’s why Tom was killed, and that’s how Jim was spared.” He paused to let this sink in, before continuing. “What I’m proposing is one final attack to capture the beast, and to reseal it in the barrow where it belongs.”

Sounds of discontent broke out amongst the villagers. Sounds that were echoed by Derek’s own sense of reason. Attempting to calm the crowd, he continued. “I’ll need ten men to accompany me. We won’t let the beast take us out like it has in the past. Each man will be equipped with a high powered flash light as well as a rifle. I will warn you, however, the only effect rifles have had on the beast so far, is to slow it down. Do I have any volunteers?”

Derek held his breath as he waited for responses. The men were talking among themselves, and the sounds of the conversations were not encouraging. Suddenly a voice cut
through the room, silencing everyone. "Count me in." Derek scanned the crowd and recognized the massive frame of John, the bartender. Derek smiled at the sight of this burly Scotsman who was willing to join the attack. With John's enlistment, the other nine were quick to follow.

As the group made the trip to the Necropolis, Derek contemplated what might have happened. Somehow the beast had managed to sneak out before Frank's group could set off the explosives. How was no mystery. The arrival of the storm and its darkness was enough to allow the beast free reign over the countryside. And now, with darkness pending, the creature would once again be able to roam wherever it wanted. Derek found himself shivering at the thought.

Upon arrival, Derek sent half the men on to the barrow to clear an opening, while he joined the others in following the tracks into the woods. Using a cane to keep up with his group, he paused on the path to look into the sky. Darkness was falling rapidly. Up ahead he could make out where the others had stopped to examine the tracks, which terminated near a small pile of boulders. Shining a light into the pile, Derek hazarded a look. Nothing. Somehow the creature had out-maneuvered them and disappeared without a trace. Derek had the group spread out, and search for any further tracks. There were none to be found. Perplexed, he led the others back to the Necropolis, where they found work almost finished on reopening the barrow. This was just as the sun set behind a hill.

Flipping on his flashlight, Derek had the men set up a perimeter around the tomb in order to help them know when the beast was to make its appearance. The sounds of crickets rang through the night air as each man watched the surrounding landscape with fear. Derek held position closest to the entrance of the barrow. Scanning the horizon, he felt a change come over the landscape. Silence descended over the Necropolis. The calm of nature awaiting eminent
death. Then, from the south it came echoing over the countryside. The call of a wolf, baying to
the moon, but with a deep-throated growl. Shining his flashlight around the surrounding foliage,
he saw nothing but woods. Silence once again returned to the Necropolis.

Derek felt his stomach tighten up as he motioned for the group to spread out a little.
There had to be tracks somewhere. It’s not like it could disappear into thin air. But could it?
Derek tried to chase this thought out of his mind but with little luck. How could he say that it
couldn’t teleport, or become invisible, or whatever? Up until that morning he never would have
considered the beast being that ancient, but now he had come to accept this fact as if it were
normal. But then there was nothing normal about the beast. “No,” he told himself. “If you keep
thinking like this, all you’re going to do is drive yourself mad.” His mind flashed back to the
image of Tom at the bar only a couple nights back. The wild glare in Tom’s eyes, tinged with
obsession over his beast. Derek knew he couldn’t let the same thing happen to himself,
otherwise, he would dead like Tom. This helped to calm Derek slightly, but still, there was no
sign of any tracks, and things were deathly silent.

Derek again shined his flashlight around the edge of the woods, when a form dropped
from out of the trees like a demonic angel. The light caught it full force, giving them the first
clear view of their prey. Its dark gray horns were set low against its brownish black fur. As it
growled at the intruders they could just see inside its mouth, the many fangs glistening with
drool. It stood four foot tall at the shoulder, but its bristling hair added another three inches. Its
eyes glowed in the beam of Derek’s flashlight. Eyes like two bluish black coals that shone from
a fire deep within.

The beast bounded into the woods, attempting to get away from the ferocity of the light.
The others shone their flashlights through the thicket, trying to catch sight of it. There was nothing to be seen. Then, with the same sense an animal has when it is about to be attacked, Derek turned to his right and heard the growl just as the beast lunged toward him. With a crack, a bullet whizzed through the air and knocked the beast off trajectory. Derek looked in shock at the creature which now lay prostrate before him. Derek turned to his right and saw Frank, his clothes ripped and covered in blood and dust. The constable was standing like an image from a military statue with his rifle raised. “Sorry I’m late,” Frank said. “I’ve been trapped in the barrow.”

“Well, I’m glad you could make it,” said Derek as he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning he saw the beast attempt to rise only to meet with a bullet as Frank fired again. This slowed the beast down but still it continued to rise to its feet. Derek swung his flashlight full force toward the creature. The beast tried to turn, but it was caught in a cage of light that surrounded it on all sides. Slowly the men maneuvered it toward the barrow.

Derek felt a surge of adrenalin course through him. He could see the pain and anger in the creature’s eyes. They were glaring directly at Derek, like a blast of cold air that cut straight to the bone. The group guided the beast into the opening of the barrow, one by one following it in, Frank continuing to keep his rifle trained on the snarling mass of fur and fangs.

Reaching the darkness of the cave, the beast bounded down the tunnel to the circular room in back. Cautiously the group crept to the entrance, Derek with his cane bringing up the rear. Derek’s heart pounded in his chest. If the creature could disappear into the shadows of that large chamber, it could ambush them. Shining their lights around, they found the back chamber empty. The beast had to have entered the tunnel. Keeping his light trained on the back wall at
all times, Derek motioned for the men to advance. Above their footsteps came a sound that echoed through the chamber nearly making Derek’s heart stop. The growl of the beast coming from behind them. Derek spun around and lost his balance in the process. Sprawling on the ground, he found himself facing the glowing eyes of their hunter. But how was that possible? There was no way they could have passed it.

The other members of the team were equally surprised, but instinctively refocused their lights on the threat at hand. Derek was reaching for his flashlight when the answer came to him with a howl. Swinging his head around he saw the beast, the one they had been following, emerging from the back tunnel! The two mythological creatures had the group trapped. Derek watched as the beasts paced around the edge of the room like a pair of lions, their deep throated growls echoing in the closeness of the cave. Above the growling, however, was a deeper rumbling that seemed to emanate from the direction of the small tunnel. It grew in strength and clarity until it sounded throughout the chamber.

“Plyntos!” The word reverberated through the ancient walls of the cavern. Derek looked up from the threat at hand, his mind confused at the sudden utterance of this word from some unseen source. There was nothing emerging from the tunnel, only empty air. Then Derek noticed the beasts. They seemed to be looking expectantly into the air. With a roar like thunder, the voice repeated itself. “Plyntos!” Still, Derek could not tell where the voice was coming from. He watched as the beasts ran to the small tunnel and disappeared within.

He sat in shocked silence for a moment, then said, “Quick, close the opening.”

The men shoved the stone slab into place. “What happened?” Frank helped Derek to his feet.
“I don’t know,” Derek said slowly. “Did you hear the voice?” Frank nodded. In Ally’s
dream Plyntos had been the word the strange being had spoken. But what did it mean? With an
ear piercing howl, the beasts called out from behind the slab. There was the sound of a thud as
the creatures rammed the block. The stone held. “Well, don’t worry about it,” Frank said with a
sigh. “It’s finally over.”

Derek nodded in agreement, still puzzling over the mystery of the voice. With a man on
each side, the men led him out of the barrow and into the night air.

Behind them, nobody noticed as a three foot tall creature with piercing red eyes appeared
momentarily by the slab and then dissolved into the darkness.

When the group arrived back in Cronley, there was a celebration at the Drunken
Magistrate as everyone cheered at the news of the capture of the beasts. Even Jim and Brenda
were there for the event. Ally threw her arms around Derek as he was brought in by the other
survivors, and the group sat in a booth to the side.

“I don’t get it,” said Derek to the others at the table. “The beasts had us cornered. Then
when that voice spoke out they disappeared like guard dogs.”

“What was it the voice said?” asked Jim.

“Plyntos,” said Derek.


“Do you know what it means?” asked Derek as he took a drink of whisky.

“It sounds almost like a corruption of Plantos, the Welsh word for children.”

Ally sat to attention at this comment. “You mean these were that being’s children?”

Brenda thought about it for a second before saying, “Maybe in the same way you would
consider a favorite pet a child.”

"Either way, they’re gone,” said Jim, raising his glass. “A toast to Plyntos.”

“And to the Tuatha,” added Derek as the others clinked glasses with him. Only Ally seemed deep in thought, a condition that was to last the rest of the evening.

Later on, a moment of silence was held for the villagers who had lost their lives to these creatures. It was also decided by the townsfolk that the next morning the entrance to the barrow was to be redynamited, thus permanently sealing the beasts back in the hole. Derek and Ally had chosen to leave long before this, however, both exhausted from their long day.

Getting ready for bed, Derek said with a laugh, “Well, I must say, you did find the excitement you were looking for.”

“You mean for inspiration?” she asked, thinking back to her original reason for coming to Cronley. He nodded. “I don’t know,” she continued. “I may use this for my thesis story, but I’m not sure if I want to remember it all. Besides there is one thing that still bothers me.”

“What’s that?” asked Derek as he climbed into bed.

“The being in my dreams said children . . . but how many children were there?”

Derek felt a chill run through his spine as he thought of this. Shaking the feeling off, he said, “I doubt the being would have called the beasts back if there were still some creatures out there.” At least this was what he wanted to believe.

“I guess you’re right,” she finally said.

Turning off the light, Ally joined Derek in bed as the moon shone in through the faded yellow curtains of their room. Outside, all was quiet once more in the hamlet of Cronley. Peace had again descended. Yet if one listened hard enough, they could almost imagine they heard the
sound of an unearthly howl echoing across the fields from the direction of the Necropolis. But
then that was probably just the frayed nerves which had worn thin in the villagers whose
nightmare had finally ended.