

Madeline hesitated and looked back the way they had come. From their position among the tree trunks, she saw the lip of the gully. She studied it through her camera lens, bringing the scene closer. From this spot she could take all the pictures she needed, and even in the low light, something was bound to come out.

A fresh, wild peal rose from the rocks below, and Madeline knew that Reggie was right. The beast had moved faster than she would have imagined it could. The pines offered meager protection, and the rain grew heavier by the minute.

Side-by-side she and Reggie continued up the trail. Their fingers slipped over the rain-slicked rocks, and their feet slid in the mud. The thing howled behind them, and Madeline felt it coming forward, chasing after them. The precipitation had not begun soon enough to wash their scent from its den, and she imagined it drawing itself up the trail, tasting the air, the earth, the place they had sheltered beneath the pines. It sensed intruders, fresh prey for its gullet, and it would not stop until it found them both and ripped them wide from stomach to throat.

They fled through the torrent, through the murky woodland, toward the high granite walls that towered ahead of them. Reggie cut left and started down a narrow footpath along a sharp descent, and then all at once he vanished. Madeline surged forward, fearing the worst, until she saw the gaping hole in a stubby rock wall, and ducked inside.

The rain patter diminished. Madeline threw back her hood and groped the wall while she waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She listened to Reggie breathing heavily beside her.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, fine."

Light blossomed in the enclosed space as Reggie produced a flashlight from his pack. He cast its beam around the small chamber. The space narrowed at the rear into a slim passage that led deeper into the mountain. Behind them the weak light of the storm-tossed afternoon crept through the front opening.

"We can stay here until the storm blows over," Madeline said.

"We're still too exposed," Reggie decided. "We should go deeper."

"You think that thing followed us all the way up here?"

The beast howled again, and Madeline had her answer. It had not fallen far behind them.

Madeline shifted out of her pack, squeezed sideways, and let Reggie lead her down the tight tunnel. They inched along, holding their breath and sucking in their chests, before the passage widened into a chamber the size of a large bedroom.

"We can stay here," Reggie said. "Better not to go too deep without any idea what's back there."

Madeline dumped her pack against the wall and then slid to a sitting position beside it. She crossed her legs, wiped her brow, and exhaled. Reggie investigated the extent of the cavern, then he took the firewood from his pack and set it out on the ground, where he worked at lighting the kindling and soon reared a small flame. A narrow crack in the rock ceiling acted as a natural chimney.

"How many of them do you think are out there?" Madeline asked.

"Hard to say. Two or three," said Reggie. "How could things that big live up here without being noticed? People are up here all the time these days."

Madeline shrugged. "Maybe Professor Wellman can shed some light on it."

She took the dead man's notebook from her pocket and began to read, while Reggie tended the fire. He gazed into the rippling flames as they licked the air and then settled down beside the exit where he could hear if anything entered the antechamber. The enclosed area grew warm while the storm carried on outside, rocking the ground with bursts of thunder. The rainfall intensified and a steady gale whined across the coves and gaps of the stone terrain.

"Listen to this."

Madeline held Wellman's notebook open, leaned closer to the fire, and read aloud, "The true fallacy is not to believe in the unbelievable, but to have faith in humanity's ability to comprehend and control forces with which we share almost no common ground. Some have labeled my search for the Blackburn Brayer a fool's errand. They overlook the greater purpose of approaching a mystery that is inherently unsolvable as though learning the answer were merely a matter of putting together all the pieces of the puzzle in the proper order. It is not so. There is no Blackburn Brayer as such, and there never has been."

She paused, looked up from the wrinkled pages, and said, "Seems Professor Wellman had a bit more depth to him than we imagined."



“Why was he up here if he didn’t believe in the Brayer?” Reggie questioned. “That was his whole shtick.”

“Maybe he was looking for something else. There’s more,” Madeline continued. “Little has been written or recorded of it. It is the unspeakable, the intolerable, indeed, the dreaded truth—the facts that all who encounter them wish to forget. It has many names. I have heard them whispered in the tongues of many languages, but there is only one label that strikes me as apt, and that is the one by which I choose to know it. It is called the Keeper of Beasts. It dwells beyond the realms of men where abominations live, where monsters dwell, and the skies run dark with clouds of madness. And there it rules by the terrible bleating of its mighty horn.”

Reggie shook his head. “That does not sound like the writing of a sane man. You ask me, Wellman came up here and lost his senses for loneliness and failure.”

“Maybe,” Madeline conceded. “But what if there’s a connection between this and the cairns?”

“Did he write about the cairns?”

“I haven’t found anything yet.”

Madeline flipped through the pages, scanning the spidery handwriting.

“It’s mostly pretty mundane stuff. Where he camped, what he ate, the weather. Wait, here’s something,” she said.

She did not get the chance to continue.

A great snuffling blast of ripe, humid air gushed into the chamber, fluttering the fire, and announcing the arrival of the thing that stalked them. Reggie shouted and rolled away from the tunnel. He scrambled for the gun inside his pack. Madeline jammed the notebook back into her pocket and edged toward the far side of the cave. She thrust a gnarled length of firewood into the flame until it smoked and ignited.

The beast snorted. Its rough skin scraped sharp stone in the tunnel. Reggie crawled around the fire until he bumped into Madeline, and they pressed against each other, shoulder-to-shoulder.

“How they hell did it find us?” hissed Madeline.

“Not really the question at the top of my priority list, Maddie,” Reggie growled. “What I want to know is how big the damn thing is and is it going to fit through the chokepoint on that passage?”

Reggie steadied his gun with one hand, the flashlight with the

other, and then snapped on the light. The high-powered beam blanched the delicate firelight and set the dark passage ablaze. The beast was wedged midway through the tunnel, a writhing mass of shadow, a jagged silhouette of broad, powerful limbs and sharp, lithe contours. It growled and spat. Another cloud of its foul breath vented into the chamber, and it strained forward. Its head slipped briefly into the glare of the flashlight, revealing a sallow, glaring eye—a blister of red-and-yellow humors swirling around a dead, gray center.

Bluish talons swept empty air.

The beast snarled its frustration.

Thunder pounded the outside surface of the cave. Reggie experienced a terrible, fleeting vision of the storm shaking the cavern to pieces around them, freeing the beast from its narrow prison, trapping them with it beneath an unmovable layer of granite debris.

The creature hunkered down on its belly and began to snake along the ground. The way widened along the cave floor, and the feral beast twisted and wriggled to find clearance.

Reggie thumbed open the safety and cocked the gun.

A barrage of thunder buffeted them and when it died a gentle sound caromed through the stuttering rain and the beast's heavy panting: the same ethereal music they had heard last night. The fragile urgency of the tune seemed to penetrate the hunter's thick skull. The creature drew back immediately, and in seconds the rock corridor emptied.

The song carried on awhile and then stopped.

Reggie inched toward the tunnel opening and examined it with the flashlight.



“All clear,” he said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say we just met the Blackburn Brayer up close and personal.”

“But there is no Blackburn Brayer,” Madeline reminded him. “No Mater Töd, no witch-mother to monsters.”

“You sure about that?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Then what the hell was that thing?”

“Maybe it was this thing Wellman wrote about,” Madeline said. “The Keeper of Beasts.”

“No, that thing is pure beast. It’s nobody’s keeper,” Reggie replied.

Madeline opened Wellman’s notebook and resumed reading. Reggie crouched beside the fire, letting the warmth drive the chill of fear from his body. They both knew without speaking that they were trapped in the cave for the time being. The monster could not reach them here, but outside they would be easy game.

“Here’s that bit about the cairns,” Madeline announced. “The Blackburn Cairns have been the object of constant study by local historians and of sporadic interest by anthropologists and archeologists from around the country. None of them have deciphered the purpose of the tall structures. Perhaps it is because, in the cairns, they seek some deeper insight into the past of humanity that these provocative structures cannot provide. I fear they are not manmade things, that they serve no human purpose at all, and that they shall continue to defy scientific analysis for as long as they are approached upon false premises. Those who do not believe in magic or the supernatural cannot hope to plumb the depths of such enigmas.”

“Is he suggesting these things created the cairns?”

“I don’t know,” Madeline conceded. “But I don’t think so. They don’t seem capable.”

“Then what?”

“Well, what if the cairns don’t date back to the time when Mater Töd was supposed to have lived? They could be thousands of years old instead of hundreds. Maybe they pre-date the presence of humans in these lands.”

“So, they were built by an inhuman, now extinct race, or alien astronauts, or something like that?”

“No, that doesn’t feel right.”

“Then what?”

Madeline shrugged and returned to reading.

Every few minutes Reggie flicked on the flashlight and checked the tunnel, but the beast did not reappear. Minutes dragged into hours and still the rain pummeled the unyielding granite; thunder cracked the heavens, and it seemed the whole of the mountain had been lifted into the heart of an unnatural maelstrom. By late evening Madeline and Reggie realized they would likely be spending the night in the cavern. Even if the weather broke, it would be too dark to risk traveling down the mountain.

The last entry in Wellman's notebook had been dated the day that Madeline and Reggie set off into the woods. That night Wellman had heard something that from his description sounded much like the eerie music that had beckoned the beast away from Madeline and Reggie's tent. Wellman had tried to track its source in the dark, but accomplished only falling down a short drop and smashing his knee against a rock. It ached fiercely in the morning. That was the last thing he recorded. Soon afterward he died.

Around midnight the storm subsided.

The steady thrum of falling rain petered out and the thunder became distant and infrequent before it stopped altogether. Ozone-tinted air floated into the cavern and mingled with the smoky odor of the fire.

Madeline grew restless.

She took the flashlight and crawled along the tunnel far enough to see into the antechamber. No sign of the beast. She called Reggie to follow her and the two crept into the outer opening. Cool air flowed into the cave. Through the rift in the rock Madeline saw stars, brilliant in the lucid sky. Silver clouds raced overhead, the ragged remnants of the powerful thunderheads that had assaulted the Blackburns. The night tasted clean and brisk. Madeline stepped outside and gazed back along the rough trail. Nothing moved but shadows in the moonlight.

The world reached her senses with a preternatural clarity, and she thought of words she had just read, the musings of man who had been much more than he appeared to be. She repeated them in her mind: "The places where reality and the great mystery ajoin are rare and isolated. They are the places where those with the proper senses see two worlds as if they were one. They are wild and lonely and pregnant with a terrible beauty. But as civilization spreads and sends its outcasts before it like vermin, what will happen to these places

and the things that know them best? Will they retreat forever? Or might they lash out in defense of their territory? Or, realizing that their time has now passed, might they abandon familiar ground and withdraw into the shadowlands of the unknown, shuttering behind them the passages between that only they know how to open?"

"My God," Reggie said.

Madeline took the uncharacteristic exclamation for a comment upon the breathtaking beauty of the nightworld. But then she turned and saw what had really inspired it. Above them, perhaps another quarter mile up the trail, silent flashes of light, jolting like electrical sparks, leapt through a misty haze and defined the sketchy outline of a broad circle.

Madeline turned to Reggie and said, "Stay if you want to, but I need to see what that is."

She retreated into the cave, gathered up her things and her pack, and then reemerged. Reggie pried his eyes from the strange aurora and looked at his partner.

"Wait for me," he said.

When he had collected his gear and returned, the two of them started up the trail, finding it much easier to travel by moonlight than they had anticipated. They kept to the shadows when possible and moved as quietly as they could. Madeline led the way now, tracing the path hewn from the rock by time and wear, the only clear line to the summit. They came to a monolithic boulder thrust up from the earth and angled sharply into the darkness. The light flowed from beyond it.

Mysterious, soulful music drifted from the other side of the massive stone.

Madeline crept to the edge of the boulder and peered around it. They were very near the summit now and the entire expanse of the Blackburns stretched out into the night, rising mounds of darkness gilded with lunar ivory, a razorback of shadows that cut the midnight blue and merged with the horizon. A burst of light stung Madeline's eyes. She recoiled and clenched her eyelids shut. When her sight recovered, she squinted and took a second look.

*Find out what happens next in
The Midnight Hour: Saint Lawn Hill and Other Tales
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