

**BOONE SHEPARD
AND THE
LOOT OF LOCH NESS**
By Gabriel Bergmoser

When sitting in the corner of a small pub trying not to look suspicious, the one thing you will end up looking is suspicious. Of course, there's a difference between *looking* suspicious and *being* suspicious and when my primary intention was to find suspicious people while not looking suspicious it can be difficult not to invite suspicion.

The pub was small and dingy, with low lights and plenty of scowling folks who would have been more than believable targets of my qualms if I hadn't realised by now that that was just what Scottish people were like. Especially, as it turned out, people who lived in the small town that bordered a big lake called Loch Ness. I had arrived here earlier today after a more eventful than usual train ride, and my early lines of inquiry into the crime I was attempting to stop had been met with either stony silence or a succession of words I hadn't heard before that sounded rather unpleasant or at least, difficult to understand.

Now here I was, after a drawn-out conversation with the bewildered bartender who could not seem to grasp that I wanted coffee instead of whatever acidic alcoholic substance he tried to offer me. Eventually he had grudgingly agreed to give me what I asked for, but the mug in my hand was giving off something a little thicker than steam and greener than smoke along with a smell that had turned my own scowl as unpleasant as the ones that surrounded me.

But there was not much point in complaining, even if that fact alone was never going to stop me from doing it. No, I had a job to do here tonight, an important job, albeit one I had no idea how to start. I didn't know who I was looking for exactly, but I knew there were bad people planning on doing a bad thing, so for now I would just sit and watch and hope that sooner or later I would see something out of the ordinary. That would have been a less futile hope if just about everything in Scotland didn't feel out of the ordinary.

I gave myself a moment to listen to the surprisingly gentle, lilting music coming from the lone fiddle player in the corner. Everyone else seemed to be ignoring him, but I quite liked what he was playing. It would have been relaxing if I was in any way predisposed to relaxation. My possibly ill-advised sense of growing enjoyment was interrupted however, by the seat across from me being pulled out and promptly occupied by a man. He was short and quite old, dressed in a large coat and an expression of scornful distaste. His eyes narrowed as he looked at me. I smiled, unsure of what to say.

'I know what you're here for,' he growled.

'Is that so?' I asked.

'I just said it is so obviously it is. What are you, stupid?'

'Just surprised to be talking to someone who's apparently either a psychic or a genius yet seems like neither.'

‘Are you being smart with me, young whippersnapper?’

‘Yes, sorry, but if it makes you feel any better I’m probably only smart by comparison to you. With everyone else my intelligence isn’t much more than average.’

He leaned forward, his wrinkles deepening with his glower. ‘Arrogance is the reason nobody likes the English.’

‘Lucky I’m not English. Look sir, as much as I’m enjoying your company, do you mind tell me what it is you think I’m doing?’

‘You know what you’re doing.’

‘But I’m not convinced you do, so you’ll forgive me for holding off on feeling threatened until I know more.’

‘This isn’t a threat boy. This is a friendly warning.’

‘Why do friendly warnings never sound friendly?’ I asked. ‘But alright, fine. What are you warning me in a friendly manner against?’

‘What your types never heed friendly warnings against,’ he said. ‘Getting involved. Turn around and leave.’

‘Well there’s only a wall behind me so that would just be embarrassing and painful for me,’ I said. The man’s face reddened and I cut him off before he could start yelling. ‘All that aside, no, I’m not going anywhere. But thanks for introducing yourself to me. Now I know who to look out for.’

For a moment the man looked like he wanted to turn his vague threats into rather more decisive actions but instead, shaking his head and muttering something that sounded mildly ominous, he got to his feet and stalked off into the shadows of the bar. I stood quickly, trying to see where he had gone, but there was no sign of him. He had vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

Trying not to look disconcerted, I sat back down. It seemed the people I was hunting knew I was here, which wasn’t how I had wanted things to turn out. The element of surprise was a pretty valuable thing when going up against people far more dangerous than you were yourself, and losing it left me with precious little in my corner. Still, I had gotten myself out of more dangerous situations with even less on my side before. That didn’t mean things wouldn’t go badly this time, but it was something.

I got to my feet and, hands in pockets and an attempt at a casual look on my face that just got me even more surly stares from the other occupants of this place, I made for the door. It was a cold night and I pulled my coat a little tighter around myself as I exited the pub and cast

an eye over the expanse of the huge lake, reflected stars stretching away to the dark shapes of distant mountains.

The town itself was small, perched on the edge of the lake. Houses lined the winding road that followed the waterfront, framed by the stark shapes of hills, cliffs and mountains all around. It felt isolated, cut off from the world. The perfect place for a mystery to hide. I scanned the lake again. There was no sign of a monster or somebody trying to steal it, but just because you didn't see something didn't mean it wasn't happening.

Hands thrust deep into my pockets, I began to walk along the road that led away from the pub. It was uneven and seemed to rise and fall with the ground it was built upon. The houses and shops that lined it were dark and silent. Aside from the wind, there was no sound. Which made the footsteps behind me very obvious.

I glanced over my shoulder. The road was empty. I stopped, frowning, then kept walking, eyes forwards, listening closely. It only took a few seconds to hear the unmistakable tapping of feet. I turned fast.

Nothing.

I watched the road, thinking fast. Somebody was following me. Somebody who didn't want to be seen. Somebody who was succeeding at not being seen. The combination of those factors was not one I liked at all. I thought back to my boss, Lord Rasputin Huxley VIII, demanding I come here to investigate the crime he had received a tip off about but decided not to pass on to the authorities and silently reminded myself to kick him if I lived long enough to see him again. Then I reminded myself that I was being followed by somebody who probably did not have my best interests at heart. Employers who deserved kicks were probably not at the top of the list of things I should have been thinking about at that particular moment.

I turned and kept walking, veering closer to the houses on the right hand side of the road as I did. Sure enough, within seconds, the footsteps were back. I kept up the same pace, didn't look back then, as I neared the narrow gap in between the dark shapes of two houses, I made a sharp turn and ducked into it. I moved fast, hurrying along the narrow passage then, as fast as I could, turned on my heel, slipped a flashlight out of my pocket and turned it on.

'Exactly what do you think you're doing Shepard?' a voice demanded as the hands of my pursuer flew up to protect her eyes from the light.

I lowered the torch and worry turned swiftly to relief and then even more swiftly to irritation. 'Have you been following me?'

‘Don’t flatter yourself Shepard.’ Promethia Peters, tall, blonde, dressed in black that melted into the night, dropped her arms and fixed me with a glare. ‘When have I ever followed you anywhere?’

‘When have I ever encountered you when you *weren’t* following me?’ I asked.

‘Well what do you want me to do Shepard?’ she said. ‘You’ve got some suspicious source who for whatever reason always gives you the best stories and leaves the rest of us with nothing.’

‘That source is our boss and the reason is me being good at my job,’ I said. ‘Try the same. You’d be amazed at what opportunities start turning up.’

‘And what opportunity is this, exactly?’ she said.

‘One that was given to me and not you so it’s none of your business.’

‘Come on Shepard, I came all this way. The least you can do is tell me.’

‘The least *you* can do is leave me alone.’ I pushed past her, heading back out to the road. I had barely stepped back out from between the houses when Promethia hurried around in front of me again, blocking my way.

‘Is this to do with the monster?’ she said. ‘You know it doesn’t exist, right?’

‘I don’t know that, actually.’ I tried to duck around her. She quickly moved into my way again.

‘Hang on, hang on. Are you trying to tell me you seriously believe that a dinosaur is swimming around in a Scottish lake? Come on Shepard, I knew you were stupid but nobody’s *that* stupid.’

‘I can think of someone who might be,’ I muttered. ‘Peters, I’ve seen stranger, things, okay? I don’t know whether there is anything in that lake or not. All I *do* know is that whatever is there, someone is trying to steal, and I have to stop them.’

Promethia took a step back, surveying me with a raised eyebrow. ‘Someone is trying to steal a non-existent monster,’ she said.

‘Well if someone is willing to go to great lengths to steal it, my assumption would be that it might just *be* somewhat existent,’ I said. ‘But actually, yeah, you know what? You’re right, Peters. It’s a stupid assignment. Better you just head home. Let me deal with this rubbish job by myself.’

Promethia’s eyes narrowed. ‘It would probably make your life easier if I went, wouldn’t it?’

‘No, of course not! I said. ‘You’re my favourite person and I absolutely want you here. I couldn’t possibly do it without you.’

She grinned. ‘Guess I’d better stay then.’

I groaned. ‘Come on Peters! Just this once, can you *please* leave me alone?’

‘Just this once can you not be a whiney sook?’ she said. ‘Shepard, I don’t know what kind of an idiot you think I am—’

‘A big one.’

‘—but I can see through your stupid lies. You’re not looking for the Loch Ness Monster.’

‘Promethia—’

‘Which means you’re either looking for that mysterious book of yours—’

‘Promethia—’

‘Or else Huxley has given you a much more exciting job to do—’

‘Promethia!’

‘What?’

I pointed over her shoulder. Promethia turned in time to see what I had seen moving out on to the Loch.

‘Congratulations Shepard, you’ve noticed a boat. You want a medal?’

‘A boat sailing at this time of night?’

‘Shepard, Scottish people are strange. I already had one come up and growl all this stuff about a friendly warning or whatever.’

‘Peters, what was on the boat?’

She turned back to me, rolling her eyes. ‘I don’t know Shepard! Boat stuff. It had a cabin and a big cage and a huge metal arm with a gigantic pincer on the back—’ Her eyes went wide. ‘Oh.’

‘Oh indeed,’ I gestured to the shore of the Loch. ‘Can we go deal with them now?’

Apparently we could, because Promethia immediately started running and I had to hurry to keep up as we ducked around the houses and smaller huts that dotted the sloping shore down to the sand and gently lapping water of the dark Loch.

‘Great work Shepard,’ Promethia said, trying to catch her breath. ‘What now? I take it we’re swimming?’

‘Well I didn’t tell you to pointlessly run down to the water,’ I said.

‘You told me we were going after them!’

‘Well what were we going to do Peters? Walk across the Loch? I figured we’d make a plan first.’

‘See Shepard, this is why I prefer to work alone.’

‘If you prefer to work alone why do you insist on working with me?’

‘Don’t be dense Shepard; nobody wants to work with you. I just tell you that so I can steal your stories.’

‘Oh my, I never suspected, what a terrible surprise.’

‘Shepard, sarcasm is the lowest form of humour.’

‘Yeah well you’re the lowest form of human, so I figured you could handle it.’

‘You know what Shepard, how about you stop being immature and try to figure out what we’re going to do about this?’

Biting back another retort, I looked along the bank of the lake, trying to think. I didn’t have to think long. ‘There.’ I pointed and Promethia turned to see the small, battered rowboat pulled up on the shore.

She laughed. ‘Brilliant, Shepard! Just brilliant. We’re going up against a much bigger boat in that.’

‘If you have a better suggestion, now’s the time.’

Promethia briefly tried to think, looked pained, then shook her head. ‘Okay, fine. Get a move on then.’

As annoyed as I was by everything about Promethia, having somebody else to row the boat with was a small mercy. Until we got out on the water and it quickly became clear that I wouldn’t be getting any help.

‘Look Shepard, it’s your story,’ Promethia said innocently. ‘I’d hate to hijack it.’

And so, muttering under my breath, I found myself straining at the oars in the tiny boat as Promethia stood at the prow, looking out into the night and occasionally yelling pointless orders mingled with insults. I was too angry and already too sore to even bother replying.

It soon became clear that the boat we were chasing had come to a halt a little further up the length of the Loch, not far from the shore. Within seconds of seeing it Promethia turned and yelled at me that she could see it.

‘Can you?’ I growled. ‘Maybe say it a bit louder so they hear it on the boat as well.’

‘So what’s the plan?’ she said. ‘Row up and tell them not to steal the monster?’

‘I didn’t think that far ahead, and I’m not going to bother asking whether you did. I think we need to get aboard somehow, and destroy that claw.’

Frowning, Promethia glanced back towards the dark shape of the boat. The claw glinted in the starlight. It was very big.

‘Okay, so we row up, and try to be quiet.’ She gave me a pointed look. ‘Then we climb aboard, try not to be seen, break the claw somehow and arrest the bad guys.’

‘We can’t arrest anyone Peters.’

‘Why are we here then?’

‘I have no idea. Alright, let’s get moving.’

I started to row, then, from up ahead, I heard the sound of a buzzing engine. The boat was moving. Specifically, reversing. Specifically, coming directly for us.

‘That’s not ideal,’ I said.

It was picking up speed and gaining fast. Within minutes it would reach us. ‘Grab an oar!’ I yelled, and to her credit Promethia squeezed in beside me. We took hold of an oar each and quickly started to row backwards. The boat moved, but only by what felt like inches. Ahead of us, the shadow of the bigger vessel was growing, the claw looming higher and higher above us.

And then I was shielding my eyes as the Loch came to life with the blinding glare of a floodlight. The engine stopped, but the back of the boat was only feet away now. I squinted up at it to see a dark shape standing beside the light, a dark shape that became easier to look at as he lowered the light. He was tall and thin, with a wide brimmed hat and dark eyes. Even from here I could see the grease on his pencil moustache.

‘Boone Shepard,’ he said.

‘Gideon Hathaway,’ I replied.

‘Promethia Peters,’ Promethia added.

‘I might have known a damn fool do-gooder like you would come interfering,’ Hathaway said. ‘Ain’t much you can do from there though. You’re gonna need a bigger boat.’

‘You’re gonna need a bigger brain,’ I said. ‘Do you really think this will work Hathaway?’

‘It already has Shepard,’ he brandished a map. ‘I have in my hot little hands a map that has led me directly to the hiding place of the Loch Ness Monster.’

‘Is the hiding place of the Loch Ness Monster Loch Ness by any chance?’ I asked. ‘That doesn’t seem too hard to figure out.’

‘Don’t be smart with me kid.’

‘I’m pretty sure we’re the same age.’

‘Maybe now. In about five minutes we won’t be. Because my age will be handsome and yours will be dead.’

I glanced at Promethia, who looked as bewildered by that as I felt. ‘What’s the plan here Hathaway?’ I said. ‘Catch the monster, get famous, get rich?’

‘Famous?’ Hathaway laughed. ‘Who needs that kind of trouble? Can’t have any fun if I’m famous. No, I’m gonna sell ol’ Nessie to a rich businesswoman. Wants herself something a

little exotic for a casino she's opening in Vegas. And I daresay, Miss Cane is about to get the most rare and exotic attraction there is.'

'Miss Cane obviously didn't count on Boone Shepard,' I said. 'I'm going to stop you Hathaway.'

'How?' Promethia asked.

Hathaway and I both looked at her.

She shrugged. 'Well I mean, he's obviously bad news and I want him stopped as much as you, but just... how?'

'I was bluffing Peters,' I hissed, as Hathaway's laughter filled the night. 'Just once can't you just—'

'You know what I've got over you Boone Shepard?' Hathaway said. 'A plan. A very simple one. What happens when a big claw hits a tiny boat?'

'What?' Promethia asked.

'This,' Hathaway said, and pulled a lever.

There was no time to move. From above us the claw came down, slamming into the rowboat directly in front of Promethia and me. I tried to jump out but we were jammed together too tightly and suddenly cold became freezing as we were shoved into the waters of the Loch, completely submerged by dark iciness, trying to breathe, going deeper and deeper as the claw forced us further down. Then, with a cracking sound that not even the water could muffle, we hit the sloping floor of the lake and the boat started to crack as the claw squeezed.

I managed to pull the flashlight from my pocket and turn it on. I couldn't see much in the murk, but the light was enough to make out the arm of the claw stretching skyward, the boat around us, the muddy bottom of the Loch and—

—and the big opening of an underwater cave, right beside us. An opening I barely had a second to register as the claw jerked and the boat was shoved right into it.

The claw tightened, my lungs screamed and the boat shattered. I felt Promethia drift away from me and registered that she wasn't moving. Ignoring the panic and the fear and the lack of air, I grabbed her and started to swim. I didn't even know what direction we were going as I pulled her to me and kicked hard. I could hear the claw snapping behind us as I realised we were kicking deeper *into* the cave. We didn't have time to go back. We were going to drown, no matter what.

Instinct took over. I pulled Promethia closer to me and kept kicking into the shadows of the cave, forcing us further away from the claw, forcing us forwards and upwards until —

—we emerged into sweet, beautiful air. I gasped and laughed and kept kicking, not even seeing where we were going until we hit the smooth stone edge of something. I pushed Promethia out on to it first then clambered up myself.

The cave had opened out into some kind of strange, domed chamber, around a pool. Various passages seemed built into the rocks around us. I had no idea what this was or whether there was a point to it, but I didn't care. I was too glad it was here.

Then I noticed Promethia still wasn't moving. She lay on the stone beside me, mouth slightly open. Eyes closed. A whole new terror gripped me. I pinched her nose, forced her mouth open further and leant in.

'Don't you *dare* try to kiss me Shepard!'

I jerked back as Promethia sat up, coughing and spluttering.

'I wasn't trying to kiss you,' I said with mingled relief and indignation. 'I was trying to save your bloody life you ungrateful git.'

'If I want your lips to touch mine I'll ask for it,' she snapped. 'Except I won't because *nobody* deserves that to ever happen to them.'

'Oh yeah, because I was so in love with the idea of putting my mouth anywhere near you. Grow up Peters.'

Promethia, however, did not retort. She was staring at the pool we had just emerged from. I did the same, and for a moment we sat in silence, taking it all in by the glow of the flashlight.

'Where are we?' Promethia asked.

'A sacred place,' A voice from behind us said. 'A secret place.'

We both turned. The old man from the pub stood there, leaning against his walking stick as he surveyed us both.

'You!' we said at once.

'Aye,' he replied. 'Me. You two are very lucky. You've found her cave. Seems the Loch wanted you to survive after all.'

'Her?' I stood. 'Do you mean—'

'Do I?' He winked.

I reached out and helped Promethia to her feet. 'Look, if the monster *does* exist then—'

'Nobody said that laddie.'

'No, I said *if*. *If* it does exist, then Hathaway is trying to catch it.'

The man nodded. 'Aye. The fella in the fancy boat. I've seen his types before. I've seen all of your types.' He smiled. 'I must apologise for my conduct in the Moffat Arms. I can be cantankerous at times. But I saw what you were trying to do and thought I'd best save you the

trouble. Your man up there won't find anything. His types never do. You trying to stop him is just going to be trouble for yourself.'

Promethia and I looked at each other. I had no idea what to make of any of this.

'So wait,' Promethia said. 'Is there a monster or isn't there?'

'Does it matter?' the man asked.

'Obviously it matters if Hathaway is going to catch it,' Promethia said.

'There's that word again,' the man said. '*If*. Laddie and lassie, this Loch has protected its secrets for centuries. And we, its people, have always done our part without fail. You think I've not seen the likes of Hathaway before? You think she hasn't seen them? Places like this.' He gestured around, 'these are the places that allow the mystery to keep away from those who best not see it. Folks like yourselves always think you have to step in and help out. Sometimes, things are best left alone. Sometimes even the oldest secret knows how to protect itself.'

We both looked at the man. His words were repeating in my head. I did not want to leave Hathaway to his dastardly mission up there, but if the monster didn't exist... but then, if it *did*... I shook my head. I was confused and wet and cold and tired.

'Trust me,' the man said. 'This time, Boone Shepard and Promethia Peters, you're not needed. But I thank you for your offer of aid.'

Promethia opened her mouth, then closed it again. She looked around, a more considering expression on her face than I'd ever seen from her before. Then she nodded. 'Did you see Shepard try to kiss me?'

'I did not!' I snapped.

'Now that's enough,' the man said. 'You can do all your kissing on your own time. These passages can be a wee bit confusing; I'll lead you back up to the town, you can dry off and have a stiff drink at the Arms. Then you can be on your way tomorrow.'

'That sounds all very well and good,' I said. 'But I didn't try to kiss Promethia.'

Promethia turned to me. 'Shepard, stop lying. I saw it happen.'

I faced her. 'Peters, I would rather kiss the Loch Ness Monster than you.'

'That's disgusting Shepard, the Loch Ness Monster is an ancient dinosaur.'

'You don't know that Peters,' I said. 'It could be anything.' I looked back towards the man, ready to ask and disprove whatever ideas Promethia had about dinosaurs and kissing.

He was gone. We were alone in the cavern, faced with several passages and no idea which was the right one.

'This would not have happened if you hadn't tried to kiss me,' Promethia said.

I shook my head and made for the nearest passage. It was going to be a long night.