

A curse made flesh. Skinless sinews. A deathly stare.

How bizarre. This was the fourth patient who had mentioned these today. I cast my gaze outwards at the breathtakingly beautiful scenes of islands. Beyond these four walls of our mental institute, the surroundings were surely a much more hospitable environment: the Orkney Islands lay sprawled out in the greyish September evening, basking in the soft light of Scottish sunshine. In the distance, rustic villages were nestled among dramatic cliffs and windswept coasts – “Doctor!” Nurse Jane burst into my office, interrupting these ruminations, “We’ve got another one!”

The lights were swinging, and the nurses struggled to restrain her. Rushing to her side, I pulled out my stethoscope. Her pupils were dilated, and all she could manage was “That stare! That stare! That stare! Do not look in his eyes!”

Fifth one today... How bizarre.

But, if there’s one thing about me, it’s that I do love a good mystery.

While exploring a harbour port, I encountered a weathered merchant who shared a chilling tale of a monstrous creature. He claimed the beast was the source of his torment and warned that it grew especially vengeful during this time of the year. “Do not go to the woods! His presence hazes a storm! “He is called...” breaking off, the man looked around apprehensively as if the creature could haunt him right there and then. He stuttered, “the Nuck... Nuckel... NUCKELAVEE!”.

At this name, many villagers reacted with visible discomfort. Some reprimanded him for uttering the creature’s name, while others hurriedly retreated into their homes.

Intrigued, I began asking the locals about this fascinating creature. Many responded with fear, whispering prayers before slamming their doors shut.

Just as I was about to give up on my research, a discovery reignited my investigation. I discovered an archaic book in the town’s library, its pages filled with ancient Scottish folklore.

After what felt like hours sifting through its brittle leaves, I found a curious page. Unlike the others, withering and faded, this one stood out. Like a palimpsest, this secret was just beginning to reveal itself.

Nevertheless, there was a portion on the page, inked with dirt and mud, almost on purpose. What could it be hiding?

The writings spoke of a location buried deep within the woods, a place obscured from most tourist maps. Could this be the Nuckelavee’s hideout? I had to find out, not only for the village, but for my patients, whose minds bore the scars of something they could not articulate.

Driven by an escalating feeling of unease and an urging curiosity, to bring justice to my patients and the merchant that I could not ignore, I began my journey.

The path ahead was no ordinary hike in the forest. Shadowy trees and forgotten trails hid the way to the fortress, and each step forward reminded me that there was no turning back from what I had gotten myself into. The eerie silence pervaded as I ventured deeper into the dark

woods.

Yet, perhaps it was paranoia, but I felt a presence always lingering over my shoulders.

The air felt dense with tension as I followed the path that led me into the woods, the ancient map clenched in my hand as I tried my best to follow the nearly undecipherable picture.

As if out of nowhere, a storm was summoned. The sunny and beaming landscape was now replaced with a sky fractured with lightning, casting fleeting glimpses of twisted, skeletal trees around me. The thunder resembled a cacophony of war drums, and the once-tangible trail dissolved into a mire of mud and chaos. I felt as though a tectonic plate was surging underneath me.

The rain almost felt like hail the way it pierced my skin. The map, my only guide, disintegrated into my trembling hands. In the darkness and debris, all directions looked identical. No compass would guide me out of this journey. Exhaustion had led to the acute fatigue my body experienced.

The forest was collapsing.

I felt as though I had reached the end.

Then came the shift.

I was enfolded by a rough, sinewy texture of a looming creature, its rough limbs forming a barrier against the storm's fury.

I steadied myself. My voice trembled, but the question urged its way out, "What are you?".

Silence.

Then, a sound. A gravelly, inhuman voice etched in melancholy, as though dredged up from the underworld.

"Nuckelavee".

My eyes widened. The organism was revolting. It looked like an amalgam of horse and man, an omen of death and calamities. How could the gruesome creature many cower upon save me from such disaster?

The Nuckelavee, as though reading my mind, led me somewhere new, a cave, hidden behind a rock face, shrouded in the forest's most treacherous corner, which no map dared record.

Or so I thought. The cave was adorned with writing, scripts, and carvings depicting what seemed to be a story.

The cave walls were etched with ancient carvings, the writings were deep and deliberate, worn by time yet stubbornly legible. The story evoked emotion, like pain carved into stone. I followed the tale with my eyes and fingers, feeling it unravel in my mind.

Long ago, there existed a revered guardian of the people. He walked amongst villagers, not to

haunt them, but to heal. In his presence, flowers flourished, disease waned, and families slept soundly, assured that their protector watched over them with silent devotion.

Nonetheless, this peace was fragile.

I saw scenes of villagers clutching at their bellies, faces contorted in agony. Children lay limp in their mother's arms. Smoke rose from pyres stacked with the dead. A once-bustling square became deserted.

In the midst of it all stood the failed guardian, depicted not as a monster but as a figure draped in sorrow. Nothing he did saved the village.

Villagers gathered in circles, frantic and panicked. Leaders and priests pointed fingers towards the figure, leading the assemblages to turn on their protector. Runes were drawn into the dirt. The same hands that once reached out in gratitude now clutched blades and torches.

They were no longer pleading for salvation. They were cursing the creature. They led chants claiming their guardian was massacring their own people.

The following image brought me chills. The once glistening and glorious-looking creature had withered. Veins pulsing, raw and exposed. He was ugly. He brought evil, not by choice, but by the curse that clung to him. The creature was forced to hide himself to save the villagers he cherished.

They chained him to his failure.

The villagers had not seen a healer who had failed, but a god who had fallen.

For that, they made him into a demon.

Yet, beneath the horror, the creature remained unchanged.

He still searched for cures. For redemption. At the height of the village's suffering, a healer would dream of a grotesque being whispering forgotten spells, revealing the names of ancient herbs. When they woke, lives once thought lost were saved.

But few remembered the truth; fewer believed it.

As I stood there in the dim light of the cave, surrounded by the remnants of a forgotten legacy, a blinding clarity pierced through me like lightning. He was not the terror many described him to be. He was a tragedy.

I turned back, but the Nuckelavee was nowhere to be seen.

I walked out of the cave. The previous deteriorated environment now bloomed with life. I knew he was long gone and life had returned.

The screams of my patients, those who had gone into the woods, emerging only to curse the Nuckelavee, came flooding back to me. They had been poisoned by the ancestral terrors.

The cave remains hidden, inaccessible to any but the Nuckelavee and the few who see past his terror. His truth remains entombed in that stone sanctuary, guarded by silence and shadow. Even if I told the world, who would believe me? The myth was too powerful. The fear, too old.

I was a man of science. But in that cave, I saw the heart of a fallen god.

The Nuckelavee had not always been a creature of nightmares.

Few now remember the guardian of Orkney. To most, the Nuckelavee remains a tale to scare children into staying indoors.

Perhaps one day, the Nuckelavee would regain his name, walk amongst us again, not hated and ostracised but loved.