

THE OCCASIONAL

A Vanishing on Eilean Mòr

by

Daniel Middleton

Friday, December 7, 1900

Crew change, Flannan Isle Lighthouse

Na I-Eileanan Siar they're called, the Western Isles, a fistful of stones thrown across the North Sea and shunned by Scotland's nor'western shores. Beaten and bitter from storms whipping down the Minch, called *Skotlandsfjörd* in the Old Norse tongue.

And there we found ourselves, sheltering 'neath the gun'ls in a rickety skiff, and surrounded by hard men fighting icy waters into the uncertain safety of Flannan Isle. Seven of us in that tiny clamshell of a boat: four stout seamen from the tender *Hesperus*, oars rattling rowlocks like a dead man's bones, and two others like me, keepers of the light on Eilean Mòr.

Eilean Mòr, the Big Island, but only as she was compared with the fitful scattering of stones around her, and in the far finger of the Hebrides, fifteen lonely miles from Breasclete on Lewis and home.

Fear of the sea's what brought me. Not my own, mind, though's not to say I have nae fear o' her myself. Too many I seen pulled from her icy grip, drowned they were, and bloated and white, nibbled o'er by the fishes and crabs. But it's the sailor's fear I mean. Adrift in their wee

wooden worlds, and seeking for a light to guide them, flashing from a bleak finger of rock to remind them of the land they're compelled to leave behind.

Head down out o' the wind, breeches soaked through and boots full of sea wash, I'm convinced Flannan – as Eilean Mòr is called – is far north as a Christian should ort to go lest the sea turn him pagan.

And that, I'll wager, is the true history of the Norsemen.

I leaned in to one of my fellows, James Ducat, and screamed out over the wind, “*Mind me to thank young Will'm!*” I grimaced, the salt spray crusting in my beard, “If he'd nae turned out batts and puny, I'd be fair mis'rable by a fire some'ers an' out of this'ere muck, feet up wi' a thick lamb stew an' a pint, and my wife turning down the bedclothes, all warm and waitin'.” I forced a grin agin “Aye, weren't for young Will, I'd be in hell f' sure!”

Flannan Lighthouse was a seventy-five foot tower perched on the rocks highest point, Ducat was Head Keeper and William Ross First Assistant, scheduled with Ducat and Thom Marshal to a fortnight shift, he'd taken sick and been pulled from the crew.

A rain-soaked errand boy'd found me near 'bouts as I'd described, my bag packed n' ready, never knowing when the call would come, but always last minute and urgent and 'hurry yer arse down here, Donnie, the skiff's pullin' away!’

Donald McArthur, that's me. The Occasional, middlin' regular, but frequent enough.

And that's how I came to be huggin' the bottom of a leaky boat and praying to be saved an unforgiving sea.

It was salvation when the keel scraped sand and stone, grounding on the narrow beach and one o' the sailors leaping out to steady her afore we was sucked back out to sea. He held 'er

there whilst me and James and Thomas fought knee deep breakers to the beach, pausin' only to fish out our kit before stumblin' into the safety o' the beach.

I slapped a 'thank ye' on his shoulder as we scurried past, head low against the rain and grit, behind Thomas, who likewise followed James. Blind leading blind towards a narrow stair.

We passed the crew we was relievin' with nary a word, every head down and running, them towards the boat n' us away. With the outgoing was Robert Muirhead, superintendent with the Northern Lighthouses Board who'd come up through the ranks, Second Assistant, then First and finally Head Keeper afore ascending to his present station. He'd spent the whole of a shift with the three-man crew, part to check the facility and part to show the boys he still had the stuff.

Better them than me.

He shook our hands in passing, an' seemed to pause long over Ducat's, his face clouded with uncertainty before he turned into the wind and followed the rest to the boat.

No time to wonder, Ducat hurried on to the stair, me an' Thom Marshal behind. Making the cliff, we raced the few steps to the keeper's station with nary a backwards glance, leaning the heavy door shut and locking the storm outside.

Strong and sturdy as modern construction could make her, every stone and timber was ferried in an' muscled up from more'n a hundred and fifty feet below, and the lighthouse finished less than a year ago.

Her lamp was lit day after Christmas, 1899.

Lighthouse work is a hard posting, but with many a soul lost and many more trusting you for their safety, you lairnt to grit yer teeth an' do yer bit and be thankful of friends and a fire, and stout stone walls 'twixt yerself and God's wet hand.

The door closed with a click, the tempest without and us'n within.

Friday, December 7, 1900**First Night, Evening Meal**

“S’Thom,” I grinned, spooning up the last of the stew, bits of beef and carrot and taters in a thin gruel, “... afore our next posting t’gether, you think y’ might learn the difference betwixt a cook pot n’ a chamber pot?” Tearing off a chunk of dense bread, I sopped my bowl and pushed three fingers of gravy soaked bread past the smile I slipped at ol’ Ducat.

Cook first watch was Thom’s, and tradition demanded James an’ me take the piss out of him, though in truth his cooking was prob’ly better of the three.

Thom took the comments with a smile. Bowls licked clean was louder than words.

Ducat filled his meerschaum by the fire, blowin’ thick, sweet smoke, whilst outside the wind howled ‘round the lighthouse, an’ rain and sleet pelted shuttered windows demanding its fury not be ignored. I had kicked off heavy boots to warm my stocking feet on the hearthstones and settled in with a pint; Thom jobbed a poker at the loose-stacked logs, findin’ a flame there an’ lickin’ it back to life.

Ducat stared into the embers.

“D’either of you see how worried old Muirhead were?” he asked, glancing between us afore turning back with a shrug, “T’were nothin’ though, like as not. Word o’ advice maybe,” but then he looked up to study us in the firelight, “... or maybe a *warnin’*.”

The word hung above the quiet crackle of burning logs, and Thom and I both leaned in, suddenly interested. We’d been in too big a hurry to get off the beach for more’n just a nod n’ a greet.

One o' the perks of lighthouse duty was the isolation, maddenin' at times, but in the balance fourteen days wi'out a boss breathin' down n' constantly checking behind after every little thing.

What'd James heard that Thom and me'd missed?

I finished my beer and set the mug beside the hearth to lean in close, "What sort'o warning?"

I cast a glance at Thom, but he'uz in the dark same as me.

"Nothing outright," James answered, shaking his head, "... an' no note nor nothin' left in the ledger." The wind howled as though to force the door, and Ducat shrugged his shoulders, "Jus' something in his way s'all." He smiled a little, and nodded, "Prob'ly just the storm. Gawd awful time for a bloody crew change, and on top o'that new place and new fixings, less'n a year old and Old Bob responsible ... aye, prob'ly just worried we'll muck it up." Ducat slapped both palms down on the arms of his chair, as though that settled it, "Just the storm and the timin' ... I'm sure t'was all it were."

Thom stood and moved to the sink, pumping it full and beginning the pots n' crockery, Ducat and I pitching in more comfortable wi' cleaning than wi' worry. The scraps was set aside for later, to be scattered on the for'd slope for the petrels n' the black-legged kittiwakes, neighbors on our tiny speck of land.

Through the cleaning, we were quiet, an' Ducat, especially... somethin' bothering him, despite his dismissal.

Nothing, he'd said. But then why bring it up in the first place?

The rest o' the night passed in silence, 'round the dying fire and each to our own thoughts. What had Muirhead left without saying?

The fire burnin' down to embers, Ducat trudged the seventy-five feet o' stair to pull first watch, checkin' the kerosene and polishing the magnifyin' prism as he stared to sea, straining for any ship tha' might be out there. Then he walked to the so' east, pinin' for home fifteen mile away in Breascleite through the clear glass, but in a storm like this they was all alone.

Abandoned on Flannan's barren rock.

Even ships stayed clear in this weather, thrashed by waves and wind tossed, sailors sick an' heavin' b'low decks, but e'en that better'n the wrenching sound o' keel onto rock and the terror o' death rushing in. In a storm like this, hatches sealed tight an' a open sea t'was a blessin'.

Ducat made his first journal entry: *7 Dec 1900. Midnight: Wind and rain. Visibility poor. Naught to report.* Finished, he settled into his captain's chair and stared out t'sea.

At three o'clock, Ducat came down to wake me. I polished the lens and cranked the spring, then turned a look to sea. Nothin'.

Just after six, I sent Thom up, crawlin' back in t'tug the kivers up t'shut out the storm. Outside, the mornin' were dreary and wet, and in minutes, I was fast asleep.

Sunday, December 9, 1900

Day Three, Breakfast

There was no sun 'til dawn on the third day.

The tempest had raged all Saturday, while inside we'd hunkered down and baited the storm from behind whitewashed walls, changing watch every three hours, regular as the light itself. The lamp had burned non-stop two days and two nights, flashing four times a minute in weather so foul we dared not even douse it to trim the wick. We polished the prisms and kept the reservoir topped off, but the lamp itself never died.

The beacon was master to us all.

So a relief it was when Ducat roused us to Sunday's promise streaming in through shutters thrown open wide and carrying the shrill of seabirds, stirred from where they'd sheltered from the gale.

Isolated though she was, Eilean Mòr appeared glorious and pristine in the morning sun, the sea stretched out in every direction, her sister island, *Eilean Taigh*, south and then the scattering of smaller islands all 'round. Seven altogether, with Eilean Mòr and Eilean Taigh largest in a chain known locally as the Seven Hunters, although with naught on the island but a few sea birds, what they was supposed to be a'hunting was a mystery to me.

Tied to some legend or t'other, prob'ly; these isles was thick with legend.

Thom was having a turn in the tower, with finally sun and sky enough to trim the wick, while Ducat strolled the island for damage to the outbuildings or the stair to the beach.

The roster had me in the kitchen, where I put to what I could handle: eggs and chips and bacon, and the kettle on so a mug would be a' waiting when they come in.

"Find anything?" I asked over a shoulder when Ducat came in, chasing taters 'round a big black skillet and a pan of bannock bread, golden on the griddle and pulled away from the heat. I fished the taters out with a serving spoon and ladled 'em on a plate with the bacon.

The eggs was last, and I was careful. Brought all the way over from Lewis, they were the only hen eggs on the island and, unless we switched to gull's eggs – with their two-toned yolk and gamey flavor – these'd have to last for twelve more days.

"Wind damage," James said past a warming sip of tea as he reached to steal a strip of bacon, " 'Specially down nearer the beach."

The buildings downslope housed rescue boats and flares, blankets and rope and floaters – things we'd need to hand if e'er a ship come onto the rocks. Dangerous. A thing well prepared for, but what we prayed would never come.

That's what the light was for, after all.

"But everything's standing, more or less," he finished, "... and looking a damn sight better still'n the *bothies*."

That drew a short laugh from Thomas, who'd wandered in from the stairs. 'Bothy' was the name given any crude dwelling, usually in remote or mountainous areas, and left for common use, but what Ducat referred to was the cluster of ruins east of the lighthouse known locally as the *Bothain Chlann 'ic Phail*, or the 'Bothies of Clan McPhail.' The ruins was nothing more than the fallen walls of an old stone chapel, tiny as a dog kennel and, according to legend, built to honor St. Flannan, seventh century abbot of Killaloe in County Clare. It was the abbot what gave the isle its name.

Ruined walls and a scattering of stone were the only record that any had ever lived on the island before.

"Pray this place don't fall to ruin so quick," I laughed, "... I've no desire to become the *next* phantom!"

It were meant in jest, but a quiet fell over the kitchen. Thom quickly crossed himself, adding a banishing sign for good measure to better cover both Christ n' the pagans.

The ruins were ancient and haunted. The Phantom of the Seven Hunters, the baleful sprite was called, and said by some to be a wandering sailor, drowned dead and far from home, although Ducat held the more common belief it was the wanderin' ghost of the village priest. Banished alone to Eilean Mòr and his name lost over times, it was him who'd built the chapel,

stone by stone and hand by hand, but with naught to do with Flannan nor with any other Christian saint.

Bitter in his exile, wronged and persecuted by them that sent him here, every stone carried him one more step away from the scriptures and that many steps nearer the island's pagan ways, until eventually – or so the legend goes – he fell to necromancy and sacrifice, until he was ambushed finally and taken by a local laird, Ian McPhail, in revenge for an infant daughter, stolen and never found. McPhail took the priest and bound him, torturing him for the memory of the girl, and then throwing him into the sea from the same cliff where the lighthouse stood.

Still others maintained the young priest's innocence, insisting the priest was no more than the target of McPhail's famous temper, and the rumors no more than a fiction to justify the killing.

But it touched the romance of the Gaelic spirit – a restless ghost, falsely accused and wrongly killed – and so passed into local legend.

"It were only a joke," I tried to smile the slip away, but too late; having already trod that place convention deemed we dare not go. Not here, especially, so far from the mainland and alone that we might as well as be banished sure as the priest.

But it was too late to call back what I'd said, and breakfast was picked over without conversation or appetite, and each wandering away from the table after an uneasy meal.

The day passed without incident, tidying up and putting the stores and outbuildings to order, taking inventory of supplies and foodstuffs, and hoping the sun would shake the chill that had settled over the top of us. The clear skies should have helped, but made little difference.

By nightfall our dark mood even more pronounced.

An uneasiness remained, sparked first by Muirhead's curious behavior and now, thanks to me, by the reminder of the Phantom. Whispered 'round hearthstones for generations, it was a tale foul enough within four warm walls, but worse here in the midst.

Twelve more days, and no way off the island.

We took our turns on the lamp without enthusiasm – one always up by the lamp – and made our journal entries with none making note of our misgivings or our mood.

Late afternoon was my time with the light. I could see Thom as cleaned out the floater shed, and was surprised to find Ducat poking about down in the bothy, although when I questioned him at supper, he refused an answer and retreated to his bed.

I checked the lamp one last time before sending Thom up, and then turned in for the night. In the light of day, there'd been little talk of phantoms, and as I snuffed the light, I tried to force the legend from my head.

I was asleep before light died full away, but the ruins found me in my dreams.

Wednesday, December 12, 1900
Day Six, Late Morning Down in the Bothies

Talk of the phantom had brung the chapel to mind, and the next few days found us spending more and more time in the ruin, picking through stones or just sitting and waiting, but for what we'd have not been able to say.

Ducat shuffled the roster for maintaining the lamp into eight hour shifts, giving us always one in the light, and two digging through the ruins.

We all knew the roster was grossly contrary to procedure – three hours on and six off was optimal for a three-man rotation – and knew old Muirhead would be furious with the change, and

so it were decided to cover the breach with notes left behind on a slate, each man transcribing them later, in the ledger and in his own hand, and according to a schedule we'd abandoned.

It was Ducat's turn in the tower, but even from down in the ruins we could feel his eyes... watching, wanting to be down there with us and begrudging ever minute he was away. When I looked up he was leaning out over the guardrail, but when I waved he just turned away.

Thom was busy stacking stones, one on top of the other in a kind of a cairn.

"For the priest," he said, reading my thoughts, and pleased when I added a rock of my own. But for the chapel itself there was naught to remember the priest, no grave nor marker save the tumbledown stacked together by the dead priest's hand. The cairn was a reminder.

"You know," Thomas began hesitantly, "... I came down last night... right over there," he nodded towards a far corner of the ruin. "Ducat was asleep, but fitful... he were muttering in his sleep as I crept outside."

And then, his voice falling to a whisper and eyes wide in a kind of awe, "... *I saw him.*"

"You *saw* him?"

His answer was a nod, as though afraid to say any more than he already had; but I pressed him. "What you saw," I asked, my voice the same hoarse whisper, "... was it ghost or man?"

The shake of the head was quick; too frightened now to answer.

I ignored him, studiously... the way you ignored a wild thing; focusing away while willing it closer. I retrieved another stone, wide as my outstretched hand and stained with black earth and lichen, placing it carefully – *reverently* – on the cairn.

The voice came quiet, far away.

"Ghost, I think, at least at first ... but when he touched me it were real as thee or me."

I turned back slowly to him and nodded; I wished Ducat were here.

“Last night,” he began, voice bare above a whisper, “while you were ...” he jerked his him back over his shoulder towards the tower, “... well, that was the *second* time ... the first was the night before.”

I hid my surprise. The night before had been Thom’s watch. To have crept down here to the bothy and left the lamp unattended ... well, it certainly explained his hesitancy.

“I know,” he said, reading my surprise, “I know ... but it were only for a moment.”

I looked back up the hill. To have come down the stairs quietly enough not to wake either me or Ducat, to slip down here in the dark ... half an hour, maybe more there and back, and that was not counting time in the ruins. An hour, at least.

A lot of bad can happen in an hour.

“You were lucky,” I said quietly, and let it go. No damage done.

“No,” Thom brightened, “Y’see, tha’s the part you don’t understand. T’weren’t luck at all ... when he shewed hisself I could *feel* it, outside o’ time we was, and with all in the world we needed.” He shot me a sly smile, “Ask how long I was ‘ere for ... g’on, ask me.”

I said nothing, beginning to wonder if he was a danger.

“*Days*,” he chortled under a cunning wink, “... hell, may’s well ‘a been *weeks*, truth t’ tell, I doan really know how long, only there was days and nighttimes – more’n I could count.” Then he leaned in close, eyes wild and shining and fierce, “... you would na’ believe the wonders he shewed me.”

Thom’s eyes glazed a bit then and he stared, far off like, as into a great distance, and there he sat for a time before coming back around as he must have that night, back to the ruins.

“When I awoke, I was terrible scared, but not by what I’d seen... scared I’d be found out ... that I’d not be allowed to return.

“When I come to, y’see, I’d no sense o’ time; no idea how long I’d been gone.” He nodded back up at the lighthouse, “I knew only that you and old Ducat were up in the station yonder, wonderin’ where ol’ Thom was while days passed down here in the ruins.” He laughed, “I was certain I’d been missed... and more certain still I’d be sent away.”

I nodded my understanding. Oft times when a keeper went off his head – and it happened enough, cast out alone for weeks an’ away from everythin’ – the whole crew’d be relieved. The one cracked’d be let go for sure, but then a review called and most likely all three would be sacked. Muirhead was fair as they come, but hard for all that, and if a crew couldn’t control one of their own, then to his mind none had any business on the light. Better to dismiss the lot and train another up from scratch, if needs be.

But Thom continued, “Thing is, though, you *didn’t* know ... neither of you, and all because it happened just like *that!*” Thom snapped his fingers suddenly, “The blink of an eye. Me away for don’ know how many days, and you and Ducat up in yer beds a’ snoring away!”

Thom slapped his knee, cackling at the image of me and Ducat up there sound asleep, and him cavorting down here with the spirits and whisked away to visions impossible to describe.

“*Speaking of Ducat ...*” he said, and turned my attention to the lighthouse, where James was outside, waving us in. It was only then I noticed the lateness the hour; it seemed we’d been here only briefly, but the sun was already lowering into night.

Ducat was calling something and pointing frantically out to the nor’east where, even from down here in the glen, heavy squall lines, dark and threatening, could be seen on the horizon.

I looked up to see the skies over Flannan were clear, but already turned to a greenish cast that whispered a storm out over the water. And it was gonna be a *big* one, a damn sight bigger’n

the one we'd run in under nearly a week ago. I squinted out at the base of the blue-black clouds, but could find no line between them and the sea.

It would make landfall tonight, and I glanced back uneasily at the roiling cloud as me'n Thom hurried back up the hill. My turn in the tower t'night, and it promised to be a bad one.

Wednesday, December 12, 1900

Day Six, The Evening Meal

Supper was spare as it had been for days - tea and biscuits – and conversation as sparse as the meal. Not for lack, we were provisioned more than well enough, but from a lethargy that had settled over the island; the only interest anyone showed anymore was in the ruins, and in the legend.

Over supper, Thom drew into himself and offered nothing more about what had happened that first night in the bothy, seeming hesitant to make any mention in front of Ducat, who was himself uncharacteristically quiet and close. Several times I glanced up to find him staring at Thomas, a frown indicating he was bothered about something, but about what he didn't say and I didn't trouble to ask. If he suspected anything about Thom abandoning his post, it might explain the silence – the actions of any, good or bad, would reflect on Head Keeper – but the quiet brooding suggested it was something deeper.

And then it struck me: Ducat wasn't just angry at Thom... he *resented* him! I had no basis for my suspicion, but seeing the way Ducat was sitting there, leaning forward onto the table all glaring and sullen, biscuits scattered out like a discarded hand of Rough and Honours... there was no other explanation.

“*Bad storm coming, eh?*” I forced a smile to try to break the mood of the table, “Truth be told, I'll be glad of the change myself – gettin' tired o' s' much fine weather.” I reached over and

punched Ducat lightly on the arm, hoping to jostle him out of his temper, only to have him pull it in close instead, as though daring me to touch him again. I continued on as though I hadn't noticed, "Too much fair weather ain't good for a lighthouse man, s'what I say." I glanced over at Thomas, trying to pull him into the conversation, "What say you, Thom?"

Thom started abruptly and looked up confused, as though I'd wakened him from a dead sleep. "Wha'?" he asked, bewildered, "... what was it you were sayin'?"

I sat back, frustrated in my efforts on the one side by Ducat's bitter mood and on t'other by Thom's being away some'ers else, and took a long, hot pull of my tea and looked back and forth between them, defeated by their mood and worried about the danger... not from *bougles* 'n ghosts and long-dead priests, but from one another.

The three of us crowded in together here for a fortnight shift, two weeks with no escape an' still eight days more to round out our shift an' a bad storm howlin' out t'sea. What I'd said about the weather was in jest o'course; fair was always better'n foul, the rain and wind good for nothing but keeping a body indoors, crowded in close t'gether ... add the mood of the table to a mix like that and there'd be trouble.

I'd heard tell of keepers going mad out o' their minds, an' two year ago up on Tabart Ness, there'd even been a killing. *God's blood, don't let it come to that.*

I finished my tea in one long draught, refilled it from the kettle and walked over to the far wall, where I took the winding key down from a peg and swung open the glass face o' the lighthouse clock, and slidin' the key home in the rightmost hole, wound her tight – but not *too* – afore moving to the left an' doing the same.

To a keeper, winding the chronometer was a ritual strictly observed, and important as minding the spring in the lamp: once a day and reg'lar as clockwork, and kept to with unerring

regularity. Minutes lost was miles lost... an' men maybe lost at sea. Fixing longitude by taking a azimuth to compare against the almanac – *'long by chron'* it was called – required an unwavering precision and every maritime chronometer, at sea or on land, was maintained religiously.

Finished, I snapped the clock face closed and returned the key to the peg, then fished out my heavy steel pocket watch to check her against the chron. The lighthouse clock was accurate to the minute, showing mine t'be a bit slow. I tugged at the stem and twisted 'er, running up the minute hand to match true time as I turned back to Thom and Ducat.

Nary a twitch from either of 'em; still as stone and right where I'd left them.

"*Nine o'clock,*" I announced to Ducat as though he were listening, "Early yet, but guess I'll head on up. Take the hours as a gift t'you or three you can owe me ... any way's same to me." Mine wasn't due 'til midnight, but alone in the tower was better'n sittin' down here w' these two.

Ducat said nothing, only continued to stare across at Thom.

I turned and started for the stairs, done with 'em both and spittin' back over my shoulder, "*Get on t'bed then b' gawd if you can't be civil! Two feudin' school boys is how yer acting!*" Neither moved; I shook my head as I made the first step and called back one last time, "Go ahead'n sit there then, starin' at one another... but by god, if you're there still in the morning, then damned I'll be if I don't knock both your heads together!"

I left them where they were and made my way up the winding stair. Just me and the lamp 'til six a.m., but more company from that cold hunk o' glass and tin than I'd have got w' either o' them two.

Thursday, December 13, 1900

The Morning of Day Seven

I had no idea how long Thom and Ducat sat there starin' like that, but they was there still at one-thirty when I made a run to the privy. A honeypot was kept out on the walkaround, but with a bad storm coming and no way of knowing when I'd be allowed that comfort again, I reckoned the trip down was worth it.

They was still there ten minutes later when I climbed back up. *Stones*. Just where I'd left 'em near five hours before.

I didn't say a bleedin' word.

Just shy of three o'clock the storm washed finally washed ashore, savage winds and sleet and freezin' raindrops the size of pigeons slapping the tower like fists full of gravel. It was the first day's storm all over, but *worse*, heavy clouds lit by lightning all 'round and stretching to the horizon in every direction.

The few fair days we'd had was done.

I walked circuits behind the glass, straining through the rain-streaked panes for ships or signs of ships, and thankful that none was seen. I wasn't much taken by the sea even on a good day – 'lighthouse work's nautical enough for me,' I'd said oftentimes enough to any who'd listen – but a storm like this'n was enough to make me forget even the smallest envy for the sailor's life.

Safe and warm and dry. That was the life for me.

Looking to the sou'east, a flash caught my eye – not to sea, where I'd have expected it, but instead right here on the island. I pulled my cuff down into my fist and made a swipe at the inner glass, trying to scrape a hole in the fog.

Something downslope, I was certain, down near the ruin... but now only darkness.

Reflection of something, I tol' myself; Must a'been... 'cause what I *thought* I'd seen made no sense. A great bonfire and people dancin' 'round ... aye, near a dozen, hands joined t'gether in a circle 'round the fire.

But it were only a flash, I old mysel', and poorly seen A flash, and then they was gone.

Ne'ertheless, I leaned in and turned this way and that, not trying to find the fire again so much – I was certain now it were only in my head – but lookin' to find the glint of light or reflection that'd put it there to start with.

But again, nothing.

In time, with ne'er a repeat of flash nor fire – let alone a ring o' dancin' sprites – I turned back to my lamp, wiping her down and polishing the lens, making my notes and straining for ships beyond our little world of Eilean Mòr; ships floundering, maybe, or in distress.

Nothing.

I stayed that way 'til sunup, strain' out beyond the breakers but seeing nothing more, and then went down to find Thom and Ducat finally in their bunks, backs turned out to one another, as though making a point of not talking, even in their sleep.

Feudin' schoolboys. And a full 'nother week to go before relief.

I stoked the fire and laid on a few stout logs from the firebox, giving the coals a quick poke to scare the life back in before retrieving the copper kettle. I give it a quick shake and then dashed out the dregs before fillin' it from the hand pump and settin' her back on the stove.

I laid my palm flat down on the surface. *Barely warm.* If they 'uz goin' to be up all night starin' at one another anyways, was it too much to ask to mind the fire?

The metal hinges creaked as I opened up the fire door and shoveled in some coal from the scuttle, and then I closed her back up and put the kettle on.

It were Ducat's turn at breakfast and I went to rouse him, noticing he was dressed still from the night before. Nothing remarkable there; many a time I'd fell into bed too blessed tired – or just too damn lazy – to change into proper nightclothes, but what *was* odd, though, was his boots.

Mud-caked and wet from the rain.

The storm had made land about three; Ducat's boots were evidence he had ventured out sometime after, sometime between the storm's landfall and the dawn.

Curious, I glanced over at Thom. His legs were covered, but I drew the blanket back a bit to find his boots muddy too, with flecks splashed up the legs of his breeches, high, above the knee.

Wherever they'd gone, they were in a hurry; Thom, at least, had been running.

Replacing the blanket, I turned back to Ducat and nudged the narrow wooden bed. When he stirred, I leaned in close, shaking him awake.

"Get up, you lazy bastard!" I said, but smiling, and my tone good-natured and hardy. I was hoping his earlier mood had passed.

He rolled over and raised himself on an elbow, trying to focus, almost drunkenly, through bleary eyes. Wherever they'd gone, there wasn't much time for sleep before or after.

Ducat dragged himself the edge of the bed and hefted himself upright, sitting on the edge and blinking away the muted light that slipped in from a shuttered window. Outside the storm raged on, rain like pourin' piss from a boot and promising a dreary day, cold and close.

Ducat shuddered, a dog shaking off sleep, and smacked his lips against the stale taste of morning. The absence of protest promised a better mood than the night before.

“If you can drag your tired arse t’table,” I grinned as I set out two thick cups, a can of milk and a tin of sugar, “I’ve done put the kettle on. Lamp’s been seen to – bin filled, wick trimmed, lens polished – so yon Thom there,” I nodded at the form still huddled in the other bed, blanket pulled up over his head, “can steal a few more minutes ‘fore we raise ‘im up. From the looks,” I walked over and raised the blanket on his mud-caked boots and breeches, “... I’d say he’s had a busy night.”

I said nothing about Ducat’s own appearance, but wasn’t surprised when he slid his soiled and muddy boots under the table. It was plain Thom’d been outside in the storm, and Ducat, too – I was guessing together – but Ducat tried to shrug it off.

“Stretch n’ a piss, prob’ly,” Ducat said casually, his attention focused pointedly on spooning sugar into his mug and following with the kettle.

“Piss n’ a swim more likely in weather like this,” I laughed putting any more questions behind me. At least for the time being, Ducat’s mood had improved, and I had no plans to push him back into it with questions. Even so, I wasn’t ready to let it go; something had drawn the both o’ them out in a ragin’ tempest... maybe down to where I’d seen the light.

I poured a cup and settled in opposite Ducat, but said nothing more as I stirred in the milk. I left the silence open as an invitation, but James filled it with nary a word.

So, a secret then, between just them two.

“... *an’ on the seventh day*,” I smiled, quoting scripture to change the subject, and raised my mug to James, “Halfway through th’ watch.”

Ducat nodded solemnly, eyes staring far off before raising his and toastin’ back, “To halfway through, then... seven more days and then we’re shed o’ this piss pot of an island.”

He took a long draught from the steamin' cup, the hot, sweet tea to wash away the sleep before sliding his chair back on the hard wood floor and rising to his feet. "Well," he smiled for the first time, "I don' know about you, Donnie Marshal, but I can't live tha' long on thin tea and biscuits! How 'bout you rouse young Thom there and get his ass movin' whilst I see to a *decent* breakfast?"

Poking through the pots n' crockery and cussin' while he pried at the lid of a tin of oatmeal, Ducat seemed back to his normal self, but he never said nothing 'bout what'd happened the night before.

Thursday, December 13, 1900
Day Seven, Late Afternoon Down in the Bothy

"*D'ya hear that?*" Ducat asked with a start. We'd been down in the bothy since midday, pickin' through the ruins and conjecturin' abou' the priest an' what we knew o' the legends.

Mornin' we'd been trapped inside the keeper's cottage waiting for the storm t'play herself out, James' face pressed against the shuttered windows and ear to the door as though straining to hear or see something down in the glen. Frustrated, he'd climbed up to stand with Thom for a spell, strainin' through the spyglass out o'er the sea and searchin' for a break in the weather.

Just before noon he'd found it, a spray of sunlight far out to sea, and he'd stood there like a statue, transfixed, willing it closer until finally it come overhead, rain tapering off to a drizzle, and though t'were easy enough to see there was more coming in behind, Ducat'd insisted we go down to the ruins.

“*Hear what?*” I asked, miserable and mud-splashed and soaked t’ the bone, my oilskin impossible to keep closed in the bitter, gustin’ wind. Over the rush o’ the wind and a poundin’ surf, I’d heard nothing, but there was something that’d spooked old Ducat... and *badly*.

Eyes wide in fear, Ducat’s head whipped ‘round in every direction and his naked expectation was such as I half expected someone to step in to the circle of ruins at any moment.

That I’d heard nothing seem to disturb him more than what he’d thought he heard himself, and I could sense him slipping back into his mood from the night before, quiet and brooding. He said no more, but settled instead into the lee of the ruin, the one remaining corner made of two tumbledown walls sheltering him from the wind.

But it weren’t the wind he was hidin’ from.

Peering up over the ruin, Ducat motioned me in close. “*Has Thom said anythin’ to ye,*” he whispered, eyes big and afraid, “... *anythin’ abou’ the priest?*”

Ducat seemed anxious to take me into his confidence, but wanted first to learn what I already knew.

“Only a bit,” I answered, careful with what I said and not wantin’ to spook him, “... only just that he’d *seen* him.” I left out the part about Thom also swearin’ the phantom weren’t ghost, but fleshly real. “Why ... have *you* seen him as well?”

“*Seen him?* No,” Ducat seemed relieved, “... but he does speak to me sometimes,” and his voice dropped to a low whisper as he tapped the side of his head, “... *in here.*”

It was then I realized it weren’t the priest Ducat was afraid of... it was *me*. Afraid I wouldn’t believe him, and for reasons I’d yet to fathom, it was important to him that I did.

Important to *both* of them, and that much was clear; Thom’d been as insistent the day before, and I could see now he’d been testin’ me with his confession.

Ducat studied me for several long seconds, searching my face for doubt. Satisfied, he relaxed and nodded, but not at me. I followed his eyes up the rain swept slope, beyond the keeper's cottage and higher, to the lighthouse itself ... and there stood Thom Marshal, alone on the walkaround, oblivious to the biting wind and straining down to see what Ducat'd found.

When he saw the verdict – and that's sure what it was – he nodded back himself and turned, as though to someone standin' there beside him, to engage in an impassioned conversation, gesturing wildly and pointing down to where we two sat, though he was on the tower alone.

“What...?” I started, only to be cut off sharply by Ducat.

“*Sssssh!*” he waved me down to silence, leaning forward against the wind and straining to hear. He sat that way for minutes, nodding, his expression changing in turns from smiles to concern, and then finally confusion as he strained against the rising tempest to make out a conversation I could not hear, leaning hard forward lest the words be lost on the gatherin' wind.

Shut out from whate'er it were Ducat was hearin', I glanced back up the hill to find the catwalk deserted; finished, Thom'd gone back inside.

“*Quick!*” Ducat barked suddenly, scurrying to his feet and taking off at a run, pausing on the rain-slicked slope only long enough to turn and shout back over his shoulder, “*God's blood! Hurry yerself, Donnie... or we'll miss it!*”

Without the vaguest notion off what 'it' was, I leapt to my feet and hurried after him, and just as I did, the sky opened up and the storm fell down on us again in earnest.

Thursday, December 13, 1900
Day Seven, Evening

Outside the tempest was renewed and there we sat, all prisoners once more of the storm, but none feelin' it more'n me. It was clear now that Thom n' Ducat had been taken full by the mischief of the island, while I alone was apart from it. The *outsider*.

Thom had seen the phantom, and Ducat had spoken to it, enough to convince them both it was more than local legend... I alone remained the only one still unconvinced, writing their strange behavior off to the storm and isolation, and more disturbin' to me than any specter.

Isolation could send a man off; I tried not to think o' the killin' on Talbert Ness.

Ducat and I had just beat the storm, and when we made the cottage, Thom was there a' waiting and motioned James over to a corner by the hearth where they both fell immediately into a hushed n' hurried conversation, glancing back uneasily over their shoulders. It was plain they was decidin' what to do about me... the *unbeliever*.

The storm peltin' door an shutters with sleet n' rain drowned out the words, but their tone and the way they was huddled up t'gether against me was disturbing.

When they'd reached some decision, Thom strolled back over, all smiles and friendly and pretendin' naught was amiss, although Ducat, who I'd known longer, hung back by the hearthstone uncomfortable and tense. It would be Thom t'make the pitch, whatever they'd decided, while old Ducat would hang back to gauge my reaction.

I weren't sure which disturbed me most, Thom's winnin' smile or Ducat's nervousness, but with the storm outside and stranded on an island a mere few acres across, I had no choice but to hear them out.

Stepping in close, Thom took my arm in a friendly way – old chums, nothin’ out the ord’ nary – and led me to the table, where I carefully chose a chair that faced Ducat... not knowing why, but wanting them both where I could see ‘em.

“James n’ me, we’ve decided to bring you in,” Thom smiled broadly and though I’d just won the prize, and glancing back at Ducat with a friendly nod, “... or more rightly, they’ve decided for us.”

I perceived a subtle shift in Ducat as though readyin’ himself to spring should I choose instead to bolt. But to *where*? Was I safer in a freezin’ storm, unprotected, than in here with the two of them? That they considered it a choice chilled me, despite Thom Marshal’s smile.

“*They’ve’ decided?*” I repeated simply. Nothing to do but hear them out.

“Aye,” Thom nodded solemnly, the smile gone, “Last night... down in the bothy, the priest an’ the rest,” and then the smile returned, as though to reassure me, “... but don’ worry, Ducat n’ me both vouched for ye, didn’ we James?” He glanced over quickly at Ducat, apparently pleased at how this was going and confusing my silence with acceptance.

Instead, it was just I found myself in an awkward place: either the legend was more’n just that and they’d both been taken, or they’d both gone stark ravin’ mad. A danger either way, but it did explain the boots an’ the mud-splattered breeches, though the bonfire an’ the dancin’ circle I was convinced still was no more’n a trick o’ the eye through rain-soaked glass.

Still it gave me an idea.

“*Y’know,*” I began, leaning in to draw Thom in close as I whispered conspiratorially, “... I saw ‘em, too ... last night. From up in the tower.” I nodded my head towards the stair.

Ducat stepped in close then and asked, “An’ did ya *hear* anything Donnie?” he asked, suddenly interested, “... w’the fire and the circle ... was there anythin’ more’n that? Music n’ singin’ maybe... or *chants*?”

“No,” I had to admit, “... nothing.” But I didn’t miss the fact that while I’d said nothing about any bonfire, somehow Ducat had known. So was that part real too, then?

When I sensed Ducat’s mood turnin’ sour again I suddenly remembered it was only Thom what’d *seen* ‘em; to be convinced I was in, Ducat required a different proof and I quickly tried to cover my lapse.

“Remember, though ... the storm was raging full by then, and there I was away up in the tower, windows bolted down tight agin the wind, so whate’er sound at might’ve been was like as not whipped away by the tempest long ‘fore it come t’me.”

Ducat seemed to consider this, and relaxed.

“Come t’think of it, though,” I said, warmin’ to the tale and addin’ it as though it were somethin’ just recalled, “... maybe there was some sounds, faint n’ fleetin’ and away far off... too far t’make out clear what they was.”

Ducat nodded and the mood in the room relaxed considerably. As far as they were concerned, not only had I *seen* the ghost, now I’d heard it, too.

James smiled at Thom as though he’d reached a decision. “What say we bring ‘im full in?” he said, walking by and laying a friendly hand on my shoulder, “You can fill in the p’ticulars whilst I brew us all a nice cup o’ tea... after all, we’ve hours t’go yet before it’s time.”

Time? I wondered; time for *what*? But I held my tongue.

The next hour was passed friendly enough over hot tea and biscuits, with Thom fillin' in the details of the happenings on the island, while Ducat listened, eye wide and alert like a young'un hearin' ghost tales by the firelight... which, in truth, I guess it was.

The story unfolded that it were Thom what was contacted first, and then Ducat only later, but *both* while they was doing their time in the tower. Why I'd been passed over was a mystery, but something I couldn't bring up for an answer without admitting that I'd lied.

First off, even with Thom, it was no more'n voices and visions, the eerie ticklin' o' the hairs on the back of his head no more than you might expect, the howlin' winds of a ragin' storm bringin' to mind the oft told tales of the phantom priest. And it was only later, that last night when he'd been drawn down to the bothy, that he'd been pulled finally and full into the dark side of Flannan Isle.

It were then he'd discovered the legends were true, that isolation and anger had driven the young priest mad, and his discovery down on the low cliffs of the remains of a temple – this part had been left out of the tales by generations of Christians – that'd started his fall into the pagan ways. Druid it might have been, or older, but it was on these same ruins that he'd built his chapel, stone by stone and bit by bit... homage not to St. Flannan as people thought, but to something much older. Something far *stronger*.

Over the years his power had matured through pagan rites, resurrected through trial and error and fed by blood, animal sacrifice at first and then, as he grew more confident in his power, children stolen from neighboring islands, his practice of the old religion unchecked and followed as far as he dared on his own. And then one night he'd slipped east onto to the Isle of Lewis, a hidden skiff following the tides, there to steal the infant child of a local laird... for sacrifice, but also as part of a greater plan.

Finding his daughter missing, the laird raised the clan McPhail and made all haste to the island, as the priest knew he would... but too late to save the girl. The priest met McPhail on the beach, covered in the daughter's blood and taunting the father with what he'd done. As planned, the death sent McPhail into a terrible rage and he seized the black priest and dragged him to his 'temple' – a structured rudely raised of stacked stone and mud – where he beat him near to death, cursed him and cut his throat.

He cast the body into the waiting sea, but what was meant to end the evil instead made it worse. The death in blood and violence was the dark priest's final sacrifice, and delivered him whole into the realm of the spirit, released by death, but trapped on the barren rock, alone and isolated, away from the world and cursed for centuries to wander the island's barren shores. Within that tiny world he was all powerful, as he'd intended, but the rock had become his prison, with none to turn that power to.

The lighthouse had come as a surprise when it did; new lambs delivered after all these years, ripe for sacrifice in the ancient rites, homage to the primordial gods.

#

Thom did most of the talking now, weavin' the true history of the place, an' I noticed Ducat held back an allowed his confederate to draw me in. Most of it was strange, and unbelievable had I not been there t'see the earnest passion in his face, but there was one thing he said in particular that bothered me...

"Several times you used the word 'sacrifice,'" I said evenly, "*but ...*" I did no more then but to look back and forth between them; nothing was said, but my meaning was clear.

I saw Ducat begin to fidget uncomfortably.

“No, no...” Thom said, a bit too smoothly, “It’s na like that... not what you think. Don’ forget the priest were kilt too, according to legend, but Ducat and me’ve both seen him, and he’s real as you n’ me,” he glanced over at Ducat for support, “... ain’t that so James?”

Ducat agreed eagerly, for the moment forgetting that Thom alone had seen the phantom.

“He’s t’come back tonight... *midnight*, down in the ruin... could be you’d like to come down with us,” Thom added with a casualness that seemed a little too forced.

I glanced back at the clock; just after ten... two hours, I figured, to come up with a plan, else I’d find myself down in the bothy in a bad way, everyone dancin’ and chantin’ but me.

I nodded over towards the stairwell.

“Maybe someone should see to the lamp,” I offered. The light had been checked just hours before, but if I could make it up into the lighthouse and bar the door...

“*Bahhh!*” Ducat waved his hand dismissively, “Two more hour an’ it’ll make no difference one way or t’other. But I see what you’re up to ...”

I tensed as Ducat stood up from the table. The light on Eilean Mòr was monitored by spyglass from Breasclete, twenty mile away, and flares and distress flags stored in the lantern room, although in weather like this there was scant hope of being seen. Still, if Ducat suspected what I was up to ...

But he didn’t; too wrapped up in their planning, both of ‘em.

“... wouldn’t do for the light t’go dark, now would it? Somebody somer’s sure t’see and send a boat out to check ... no sir, that wouldn’t do at all. Good thinkin’, Donald!” Ducat clapped a good natured hand on my shoulder, “ ‘Fact, I’ll see to her myself!” He glanced at the clock and then winked back at me, “Not much longer now, me boyo .”

As Ducat disappeared upstairs, the winds outside whipped against the shuttered windows with a blistering rain.

Midnight was less than two hours away.

Thursday, December 13, 1900
Day Seven, Midnight

In the two hours we'd waited the storm grew steadily worse, an' cold and wet as it were, the three of us'd soon be out there in it. After seein' to the light Ducat had thrown together a meal – cold meat, potatoes, and pickled vegetables – but we was all too wound up t'think about food and sat there on the table, untouched and ignored.

Thom and Ducat's mood had deteriorated with the weather and they was both on edge, staying close to me in case I decided to bolt... an' I would've given half a chance. Not that there was anywhere to bolt to... I was trapped on a bare piece o' rock with two madmen, an' nowhere to run.

Ducat climbed the stairs to log a final entry, his hand deteriorating in the journal notes as his madness increased, and careless of the temporary notes scrawled in chalk on a nearby slate. The entries was general enough to hold up under examination if it came t'that, but both Thom and Ducat seemed t'be of a mind they didn't matter... after the gatherin' tonight, the notes nor the journal'd make no difference; they – and likely me, too – would be gone, an' what Muirhead or any other suspected would make no difference.

In the meantime, Ducat had become increasingly nervous and as the hour approached had taken up station beside the door, between me and escape. As the hand on the chron climbed straight up t'midnight, Thom pulled hi oilskin down from the peg, tossing another to Ducat. As he reached back for mine, I cautioned him.

“All the same t’you,” I said casually as I could, “... think I might just stay behind.”

Thom glanced over at Ducat, who nodded and walked around behind to place a hand – not so friendly this time as before – firm on my shoulder. “I think we should the three of us go down this time, Donnie,” the grip tightened, “... after all, you’ve been invited, and you don’ want t’be rude now do ya?”

I looked between me an’ the door, calculatin’ my chances of escape. It weren’t no question anymore of gaining the stair, not with Thom and Ducat both on edge like they was, and besides, for the last few minutes they’d been watchin’ the door near constant, heads cocked n’ listening in the spaces between the storm.

And then I heard it, too... fancied I did, anyways. Away off in the background, beginning low and quiet, but rising with the howl of the wind ...

Chanting. Rhythmic and deep and low, the sound unmistakable as it followed the wind, wafting up from the ruins, starting’ quiet but growing louder as it fought the rain n’ the winds, the words unintelligible, but reflecting old Gaelic roots, and comin’ guttural and hard ...

Ducat felt me tense.

“He’s right abou’ the ‘skin,” he called to Thom, his other hand falling to my shoulder now as well and holding me firmly in the chair, “... jus’ leave ‘er there on the peg. Don’ appear Donnie here’ll be needin’ it after all.”

With the chanting down below blending with the wind and rising to a howling crescendo, Ducat’s hand twisted into the fabric of my coat and motioned Thom to the door.

There was no more doubt what they meant for me as Thom flung the kitchen open to the storm and Ducat jerked me to my feet, ignoring the overturned chair as he walked me out into the storm.

Down below, the ruin was awash in the light of a great bonfire as bodies – thin and hideous and beautiful and demonic, all in turn – danced around the circle, the whole of it fadin' in and out as though the vision weren't wholly here.

Incongruously, with the wind and rain whippin' at us and howlin' and screechin' from down below, Thom paused and turned back to lock the door behind. Habit. And then he pocketed the key.

The freezing rain slashed into my eyes like tiny needles, blinding me as the wind whipped and tugged at my clothes and threatened to sweep me away. Only Ducat, holdin' me steady and guidin' me towards the light, kept me afoot on the rain-slicked slope. Prevented from shielding my eyes against the wind and rain by Ducat's strong hands, I was blind, able to only sense the brightness and the heat as we closed on the fire.

And then suddenly hands were groping and pulling at me from every side, the chanting all around and nearly drowning out the storm. I felt it as Ducat passed me along to another, my arms pulled roughly behind me and bound, my legs kicked out and sending me hard onto the muddy floor of the ruin.

Behind and beside me I heard Thom and Ducat as they, too, joined in the chanting, but above them all a single voice, cold and sonorous and leading the bastard mix of Latin and some ancient, pre-Gaelic tongue. Close to the fire and out of the rain for now, I felt hands take me and roll me over on the hard-packed earth, pressing me back into the dirt and holding me there, and then I saw him, the black priest himself, an' I found myself thinkin' Thom was right – not spirit at all, but real as any man – and the naked blade real too, thin and wicked and held point most against my breast.

I struggled uselessly against the hands as I looked beyond the mad priest to find Thom n' Ducat in the hovering crowd; Head Keeper and Second Assistant, and then here was me, Donnie McArthur, the Occasional an' odd man out.

No great mystery in th' end, I guess, about why it was they'd chosen me.

Tuesday, December 26, 1900

Relief Crew Arrives From the Service Vessel *Hesperus*

The Flannan light was reported last observed on 12 December, although the lighthouse itself, shrouded as it was in a heavy mist, would be invisible from the spotting station in Breasclete on the Isle of Lewis until weeks later, on the twenty-ninth.

Three days later, on the twenty-fifth, an American ship, the *SS Archtor* en route from Philadelphia to Leith and struggling towards the west coast of Scotland, was first to report the lighthouse down... a report, for reasons unknown, not communicated to the Northern Lighthouse Board until after the disappearance was discovered.

The rash of winter storms persisted, preventing the scheduled relief on the twenty-first, and it wasn't until noon on Boxing Day, on the twenty-sixth, that a crew from the lighthouse tender *Hesperus* was able finally to make the island. The captain noted on approach that no signal flags were flying from the lighthouse, and a signaling blast from both a siren and the steam whistle returned no response from the island. A boat crew was assembled and sent to report on conditions.

What they found was a mystery.

Not one sign of three lighthouse men – James Ducat, Head Keeper, Thomas Marshal, Second Assistant, and the Occasional, Donald McArthur – was ever found, but what they did find left them with more questions than answers: beds unslept in and food prepared but

untouched on the stove; two oilskins were missing, but a third remained behind on its peg; the lamp was out and the chron had stopped, but the door of the cottage was dutifully locked from the outside... but other than a single chair overturned in the kitchen, there was no sign of struggle or distress.

A final journal entry had been made on the thirteenth, with notes for two more days on a nearby slate, none making note of any problems. Beyond the fifteenth, nothing.

What evidence there was suggested a terrible storm had ravaged the island: the jetty was warped and its iron railings twisted like taffy; one of the storehouses was washed completely away, and floaters and mooring ropes entangled in a crane a full seventy feet above the shoreline suggested powerful, damaging winds.

Tasked with exploring the station itself, the searchers – McCormack, a sailor from the *Hesperus*, and Joseph Moore, relief keeper – never ventured down to the ruins, and so missed the bare remnants of a fire circle burned into the earth, a circle washed away over days of wind and rain, and returned only to report that, for all purposes, a full three-man crew – each one a veteran lighthouse man, and experienced – had somehow vanished of Eilean Mòr without a trace.

When a bewildered James Harvie, the captain of the *Hesperus*, telegraphed his report to the Northern Lighthouse Commissioners later that same day, he had little to offer by way of explanation, guessing only that...

'A dreadful accident has happened at the Flannans,' he telegraphed, *'The three keepers, Ducat, Marshal and the Occasional have disappeared from the Island. The clocks were stopped and other signs indicated that the accident must have happened about a week ago. Poor fellows must have been blown over the cliffs or drowned trying to rescue a crane.'*¹

On 29 December 1900, Robert Muirhead, Northern Lighthouse Board superintendent arrived on Eilean Mor to conduct his own investigation of the disappearance, concluding that Ducat and Moore – Head Keeper and Head Assistant, respectively – had gone down in the storm to see to the damaged jetty, and Donald McArthur, the Occasional, had then followed in his shirtsleeves, ‘*leaving the lighthouse unattended, in breach of NLB rules,*’ he dutifully noted. He summed up the results of that investigation in a short report:

‘After a careful examination of the place, the railings, ropes etc and weighing all the evidence which I could secure, I am of opinion that the most likely explanation of the disappearance of the men is that they had all gone down on the afternoon of Saturday, 15 December to the proximity of the West landing, to secure the box with the mooring ropes, etc and that an unexpectedly large roller had come up on the Island, and a large body of water going up higher than where they were and coming down upon them had swept them away with resistless force.’ⁱⁱ

He made no mention in his report of his examination of the island, or of a new stone cairn found recently added in the chapel ruins.

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In 1971, Flannan Lighthouse was re-outfitted and fully automated, the new acetylene lamp having a range, like the old lighthouse, of about twenty miles, but now monitored by a shore station on the Isle of Lewis, eighteen miles away.

As for the station itself, it has been recently converted into flats, although residents on the lonely and forbidding island – even with ready communication and access now to the Isle of Lewis – have remained sparse and infrequent, isolation being offered as the more likely reason,

and not the odd appearance on stormy nights of dancing lights down in the ancient ruins, or the occasional chant, low and faint and quickly swept away on the wind.

And the Phantom of the Seven Hunters, local legend among the chain of rocky islands, has passed again once more into myth.

THE END

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ⁱ This is a transcript of the actual message sent by James Harvie of the *Hesperus* to the Northern Lighthouse Board

ⁱⁱ Excerpt from his report on the Disappearance by Robert Muir to the Northern Lighthouse Board, 8 January 1911