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Bone Quill

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ONE

The Abbey
Auchinmurn Isle
West Coast of Scotland
Ten Years Ago

The battle for control of the Calder twins' imaginations began on the afternoon of their third birthday. Sandie was enjoying the last slice of Jeannie's double-decker chocolate cake when Malcolm raced into the kitchen.

'I've found it!' he said, waving a red leather journal in front of Sandie in feverish excitement. 'Proof that Hollow Earth is real!'

Sandie's fork clattered to her plate. 'What?'

'It's all in this diary! "*The key must not be found*" – but this is the exciting part. Listen to this.' Malcolm flipped to another page. '"*After all that I have witnessed, after the horrors that have been revealed to me in Hollow Earth, I know this. The powers within are too terrible for man to control.*"

'All these months of searching, and finally this!' He began to pace in front of the French doors. 'With Matt and Em's help,

I—' He stopped, then turned and smiled at Sandie, '*We* will control Hollow Earth and then everything will be ours.'

'You're mad, Malcolm,' sputtered Sandie, dread creeping up her spine. 'I don't want everything.'

A part of Malcolm had always been wild – so focused on his own obsessions that he ignored the feelings and opinions of others. Sandie had hoped marriage would calm him, but since the birth of the twins, this obsession with Hollow Earth had been eating away the Malcolm she'd fallen in love with.

'I don't care how you squander your powers or your life, but you can't use the twins to further this madness!' she went on, her pulse quickening. 'They're too young, practically babies. Their powers are not yours to control.'

Malcolm gripped Sandie's shoulders. She flinched. 'I won't be stopped by you or anyone else,' he said coldly. 'To master Hollow Earth is my destiny.'

The next morning, Sandie was glad of the chance to breakfast quietly with Renard, while Malcolm played with the twins outside. But as she gazed out of the window at the great glass sculpture in the Abbey grounds, she noticed something strange.

The sculpture was a massive mobile of mirrors suspended from the trees at the western point of the grounds, shimmering and spinning in the changeable winds that ran along the island's coastline. Matt and Em were sprawled under the installation on a blanket with their dad, painting. But what was reflected in the mirrors was not the cosy scene that it should have been.

Instead, each shard was reflecting the swirling greens, browns and yellows of a mysterious cave mouth.

When the wind caught the mobile, the mirrored glass spun, and Sandie saw the tell-tale glow of an animation. A stabbing awareness pierced her mind.

She recognized the image.

Lasers of light suddenly shot from the cave mouth, every fragment of mirror multiplying the effects, creating a criss-crossing grid of light encasing the trees, trapping Malcolm and the twins inside.

'Renard!' Sandie screamed. 'Stop him!'

Renard Calder appeared at his daughter-in-law's side. He stared in shock at the scene unfolding on the lawn.

'My God, what's he doing?'

'I think he's using the mirrors to increase the twins' powers,' replied Sandie, her voice seared with panic. 'Malcolm has Duncan Fox's painting of the entrance to Hollow Earth, and the twins are animating it!'

'Impossible!' gasped Renard. 'That painting is locked in the vault.'

'When have locks – or even you – managed to stop your son?'

She raced through the French doors and across the wide lawn towards the trees that had lit up as if candles burned from their branches, with Renard close behind her.

'Stop!' Sandie screamed at the grid of light surrounding her children. She jabbed her finger into one of the light beams,

yelping and drawing back when a shock shot up her arm and exploded in a million red dots in her head. Desperately searching for a way through the grid to reach the twins, she called out: 'Mattie, Emmie! Come over here to Mummy!' Once. Twice. Each time louder and more insistently.

The twins never budged, never looked up, never stopped painting. Malcolm was crouching next to them with his hands resting on their shoulders, his head close to their ears, whispering to them.

Renard pinched the bridge of his nose. 'He's inspiriting them. I can feel him.'

'How could he?' Sandie raced up and down, frantically scanning the neon cage, searching for a way inside. 'It's against everything we stand for. Everything!'

Matt and Em's tiny fingers were flying across their shared sketchpad. The gilt-framed painting of the cave mouth was propped next to them, beside another Fox painting of a scaly, hairless demon. Malcolm's knuckles were turning white, his fists clenched on the twins' slumped shoulders, holding them in place.

'What will his inspiriting do to them?' cried Sandie.

'I don't know.' Renard's face was white.

'Malcolm! Stop!' Sandie was crouching at the tree line, trying to catch Matt's or Em's attention, to break Malcolm's spell. 'Please! They're too young. You'll hurt them!'

The twins painted on, oblivious to the danger looming over them.

Malcolm slowly lifted his head. With eyes blazing, he looked over at Sandie, his handsome face contorted, his skin pale. Lifting his hand from Em's shoulder, he held a finger to his lips.

For Sandie the next seconds unfolded in horrifying slow motion. Matt and Em put down their paintbrushes and took each other's hands. They clambered to their feet, watching excitedly as the painting they'd been copying projected itself around them like a 3D movie, wrapping them in thick, swirling brush strokes of green, brown and yellow. At first the twins giggled at the lines of colour. But then the painting began to close in on them. Clinging to each other, their expressions quickly transformed from delight to apprehension.

'Daddy! I don't want to do this,' wailed Em.

'Make it stop,' cried Matt.

Fading into the churning colours, the twins disappeared completely. Sandie screamed and charged towards the grid. On the shards of mirrors shifting in the wind, Matt and Em's reflections appeared at the mouth of the animated cave.

'Go in! The key will be inside the cave. Bring it to me!' Malcolm shouted, shooing them inside with his hands.

'No!' Sandie shrieked.

She watched helplessly as the twins, tightly holding hands, vanished inside the cave. Malcolm's eyes blazed in triumph. Sandie collapsed on the grass. Renard was frozen to the spot.

After five agonizing minutes, the twins scrambled empty-handed from the cave. They were both crying.

With a roar of frustration, Malcolm tore up the painting.

The air seemed to open above the blanket and the twins tumbled on to the grass among the fading lines of light.

Frantically gathering them up, Sandie wrapped her children in the blanket, cooing softly to them. Blood trickled from Matt's nose. Em's eyes were red-rimmed and unfocused. Neither of them spoke. They seemed to be in a trance.

'They'll be fine in the morning,' said Malcolm, mussing Matt's hair. 'Disappointing, though. I was sure that painting was where he'd hidden the key. Maybe it's in the other one.'

Renard pulled Sandie and the twins into his arms to comfort them. Malcolm began to laugh.

'You will eventually see things my way, Sandie,' he said. 'Our children will be capable of extraordinary things when they fully come into their powers. We will find Hollow Earth together!'

Renard stared at the expression on his son's face, and then at the still-blank faces of his grandchildren. 'You will never inspirit or harm these children again as long as I live, Malcolm,' he said.

'You're an old man, Dad,' grinned Malcolm. 'I may not have long to wait.'

Renard dropped his hands to his side, sending a wave of energy towards his son and knocking Malcolm off his feet. Malcolm crashed to the ground, cutting his head, and let out a feral howl as Renard sliced into his thoughts. The older man's eyes opened wide in anguish – and Malcolm pounced.

Renard pivoted in time to catch his son's arm, twisting him into a headlock and bringing him to his knees. Snarling,

Malcolm sank his teeth into Renard's forearm, tearing at his flesh. The pain broke Renard's concentration, allowing Malcolm to pull away from his father's grip.

'These are my children,' screamed Malcolm. He wiped at the blood flowing from the cut on his head. 'I will decide their fate. Not you and not her!'

'No you will not!' said Renard, slamming into Malcolm's chest, knocking him against a tree. Malcolm's eyes slid shut at the impact.

The twins in their exhaustion were asleep, huddled in their mother's arms. Renard lunged for the sketchbook. Holding his bloody arm over a blank page, he let his blood pool on to it.

'What are you doing?' cried Sandie.

'We must bind him. Right now,' said Renard, pushing the unconscious Malcolm's hair from his forehead and letting the blood from the gash mingle on the page with his own.

Sandie laid the sleeping twins down and knelt in front of Renard, her hand on his. 'We can't … the consequences if we're discovered … They don't bear thinking about.'

Renard lifted his eyes to Sandie's. His shame and sadness for what he was about to do robbed Sandie of her breath.

'We must … we must …' Renard struggled for words. 'When I tried to get into Malcolm's head to calm him, I saw the most awful things. Demonic beings clawing up from the bowels of the earth, an army of rotting corpses lurching behind them. I saw beasts battling above the sea, their massive wings churning tidal waves beneath them …' He paused, handing the page to

Sandie. ‘And I saw Matt and Em awash in their own blood. My son is a monster. He must be stopped. Do it before he wakes up!’

Malcolm groaned, his eyes fluttered. Sandie stared at the other Fox painting Malcolm had left on the blanket. The monster Malcolm had become deserved to be bound in a painting of a horrible scaly demon. Seizing one of the twin’s paintbrushes, she cleaned it with shaking fingers, dipped it into the blood on the page and began to copy the skinless monster.

Renard put his hand on her shoulder and closed his eyes. The wind picked up, the air smelled of seaweed and a hint of pine tar. The paintbrush felt hot. Sandie’s skin began to blister as she outlined the demon in Malcolm’s and Renard’s blood. Keeping the brush at the heart of the canvas, Sandie let Renard’s power surge through her animation.

The trees rustled. The waves slapped the shore. A ghostly silhouette coiled up from the page. It hovered above Malcolm’s head, tendrils snaking over him, embracing him, coating him in darkness. Malcolm slowly began to fade, his being absorbed into the animation, binding him in its form.



TWO

The Monastery of Era Mina
Auchinmurn Isle
Middle Ages

Solon sprinted down the corkscrew steps from the Abbot’s tower and out into the monastery’s courtyard. He hesitated for a moment. This place of sanctuary had been a place of death and destruction only days earlier. The cobbles that had run red with blood had been sluiced clean, but the smell of death still lingered like carrion. The occasional moans of the injured drifted from Brother Cornelius’s infirmary.

Staying beneath the wall-walk, Solon crossed quickly to the entrance to the chapel and slid inside. He scanned the three empty rows of benches facing the unadorned half-moon altar and exhaled slowly, allowing himself a moment of respite from his nagging fears. He didn’t know why he was feeling so afraid, so out of sorts – but he was. Despite having vanquished Rurik the Red and his Viking brutes, Solon sensed some of the monks were watching him; that the Vikings had disturbed a balance among the Order. Most troubling of all, deep in his

mind Solon believed that the island had been wounded that day, and somehow he was expected to heal it.

On the altar stood three wooden coffins, holding the remains of the monks murdered during the Viking attack. Their bodies had been embalmed and wrapped in strips of sackcloth, the wrappings sealed with beeswax. Only their faces were visible, waxy and pale, their closed eyes already sunken like dark craters. An apron of candles burned at their feet. They would soon join their predecessors down in the monastery catacombs.

As he was about to push through the heavy oak door behind the altar and head inside the monastery, Solon heard raised voices. He ducked behind the altar.

Tam and Rab came through the door, rags tied around their faces to mask the sickly sweet stench of embalming fluid. Solon recognized the village embalmers and was about to reveal himself when Tam spoke.

'If ye ask me, we shouldn't be worrying about the dead so much, Rab. Not after what I've heard.'

Rab's shaved head and pocked skin made him look like a troll. 'What have you heard?'

Tam dropped his voice to a whisper. 'I think the Vikings left a spy. Some of the monks saw a stranger wandering the hillside not long after the attack.' He glanced over his shoulder at the bodies before yanking Rab off to the side as if the dead were eavesdropping. 'And that's not all. The relic the Vikings were looking for? They were forced away without it. They'll be back worse than before once the stranger has spied out our

weaknesses. Mark my words.'

A gust of wind blew open the door. Solon saw the two men jump with fright.

'If a spy is in our midst,' said Rab, recovering first and hiking his trousers up over his soft paunch, 'it would explain the strange goings on since the attack. Food's been getting pinched, and more than the usual—'

'Aye,' interrupted Tam, 'and my lad who empties the slop pails has seen more than one monk recently forgetting where he was and what he's supposed to be doing, as if he were under some kind of spell. I'm thinking the Viking gods cursed our island.' He pulled a pouch stuffed with smashed roots and herbs from under his shirt. 'This'll ward away the devil himself.'

'Aye,' said Rab, quickly touching the edge of the pouch before Tam settled it back under his tunic. 'But aren't we better prepared than we were? We've erected beacons along the coastline, and the Abbot has put his best archers on the wall.'

Tam scanned the chapel. 'Fat lot of good all that'll do us if a spy betrays our defences.'

Solon shifted his position, making his boots squeak on the stone flags behind the altar. Instantly, Rab lifted his hammer from his belt, and Tam slipped his knife from its sheath. They inched slowly towards where Solon was hiding. Tam was about to lean over the wooden altar table when one of the kitchen cats darted out from under a front pew.

Both men laughed and relaxed. Then they attended to the job at hand, nailing the lids on to the coffins and carrying the

dead to the crypt.

Solon stopped holding his breath when the door swung shut behind them. Until the attack, he had found the monastery of Era Mina to be a place of solace and protection. Now it was becoming a bubbling cauldron of secrets and suspicions. A cauldron that was about to boil over.



THREE

The Abbey
Auchinmurn Isle
Present Day

On the massive corkboard near the sitting-room door, there was a photograph of Matt, Em and their mother taken in front of a fountain in London a year ago, before their lives had changed. They all looked so happy, ignorant of what was about to happen. Matt stared at the photograph for a long time, trying hard to separate his longing for his missing mum from his anger at what she had done to his dad.

He felt his sister's thoughts in his head.

Mum's okay, Matt. Wherever she is, I feel that she's okay.

You don't really know that, Em.

You're right. But I trust that Mum left us for a reason. When we figure out exactly what that was, then we'll find her. I know we will.

'I'd like to be anywhere but here, in this room, in this Abbey,' said Matt aloud.

Em was finishing a panel of sketches at the drafting table

that sat in front of the sitting room's tall windows. She was creating a comic book about their recent adventures. 'How about bikes?' she offered, her eyes on her work. 'We could make a motocross track in the woods again. You and Zach are getting pretty good.'

'Maybe,' answered Matt, 'but the track's beyond the wall.'

He glanced irritably at the swirling ribbons of white fog seeping like dry ice in and around the high medieval wall that enclosed the Abbey compound. The fog was an animated force-field powerful enough to trap any intruding animation and reduce it to its base elements of light and colour.

During the day, the shield continually animated itself into any number of logical and obvious things that might be found on the high stone wall of an historic Celtic abbey. Yesterday, the postman had seen thick vines of ivy, and commented to Jeannie, the Abbey's housekeeper, on the beautiful white flowers that had somehow managed to blossom between the stones despite the thickness of the wall. The day before, a school group visiting the island had bicycled past, cheering in appreciation at the festive flags and colourful streamers threaded between the stones.

At night, the white mist oozing from the walls took on an eerie bluish tint. Anyone looking closely assumed that the vapour was the phosphorescent glow generated by spotlights anchored next to the hellhound gargoyles on the wall's perimeter.

Of course, the smoky animation was also designed to

interfere with any animations the twins might try to create in order to get outside the Abbey grounds themselves. They were not so much in prison as protective custody, but the distinction made little difference to Matt. Either way, he was trapped; and when he felt trapped, he felt powerless; and when he felt powerless, he felt hostile.

'I can't stand being cooped up any longer,' he said, flipping through a stack of video games sitting next to the flat-screen TV. He discarded them one at a time without any concentrated consideration of the titles.

'Oh, would you please stop fidgeting!' said Em. She was applying a tint to a panel of a beautiful flying stag – a peryton. 'You know we can't go anywhere.'

Even on the paper, Em's peryton pulsed with energy. She had shaded its body in a pure white and was smudging a light grey charcoal crayon across the surface to 'pop' its massive wings.

Matt turned the pad so he could examine the image. 'Aren't you afraid you'll animate that? Simon would not be happy if he had to repair another set of stained-glass windows.'

When the peryton had last appeared on Auchinmurn, it had crashed through a massive stained-glass window in one of the converted cloisters of the medieval monastery that had once stood on the site of the Abbey.

An expression of annoyance crossed Em's face. 'You may not have been paying attention in our lessons recently, but I have. If we want to continue to develop as artists, we have to learn to control our Animare abilities when we draw, so that

every drawing we create doesn't come alive. The First Rule, remember? Never animate in public.'

She turned the pad back round. 'I'm practising so that I can draw without unintentionally bringing something to life. You should be practising, too.'

'I don't need to,' snapped Matt.

Em wasn't about to admit this aloud, but her brother's assessment of his abilities was true. Matt's Animare powers were developing more quickly than hers, and although her Guardian abilities were stronger than Matt's, Em was not fully in control of her imagination all of the time. Matt, on the other hand, was much more able to disconnect, to turn his powers on and off.

You'll equal his abilities someday, Em. I know you will.

Em smiled at Zach. It was comforting to have him in her head – most of the time – and to know he was aware of how she felt, especially when sadness gripped her and she fretted for hours about her mum.



FOUR

A large picture on the opposite wall of the sitting room caught Matt's eye. 'Let's go back to London,' he said, waving at the painting. 'Just for a few minutes. I miss it. Don't you?'

Lip-reading from the couch, Zach jumped up. 'Oh, no! You're not going anywhere, and you're certainly not going into a painting.'

'Zach's right,' said Em nervously. 'We promised. No animating without supervision.'

'Forget that,' said Matt, standing the painting on the empty easel in the corner. He flipped to a clean sheet of paper on his sketchpad. 'No one will ever know.'

'I will,' signed Zach, stepping in front of the easel.

'You'd tell on us?' Matt challenged.

Em prepared to separate the boys if this escalated into a fight. 'I'm not helping you go into the picture, Matt,' she warned.

'I may not need you to.'

'You may be getting stronger, but you're not Leonardo da Vinci yet.'

'You can't stop me if I want to do it.'

'If you're so smart,' said Em, her annoyance building, 'then you should be able to tell I don't want to do this.'

'That's not true,' said Matt. He grinned at his sister. 'I know you'd like to go back to London, even if it's only for a few minutes.'

His green eyes were filled with more excitement than Em had seen in weeks.

You're not seriously considering doing this, Em.

No, Zach … okay, maybe … I can't let him do it alone. That's not … that's not me. That's not us. We help each other. We always have, and especially now with Mum gone.

'Stop talking about me in your heads,' begged Matt, pulling his fingers through his long, dark hair in agitation. 'I can tell when you do that. I'm not completely clueless about you two.'

Em stared at the picture that Matt had placed on the easel. It was a study for Claude Monet's *The Thames below Westminster*: a beautiful, richly textured painting of the River Thames. The National Gallery in London had the final painting.

She had to admit, she did miss London.

'Em. No,' signed Zach in warning. He was aware that he couldn't stop the twins on his own if they decided to act together. Their combined powers as Animare were far too strong for his fledgling Guardian abilities. If they got into trouble, he doubted he could help them.

Picking up a crayon, Matt began to copy the painting, his nimble fingers whipping across the paper. First, he sketched the outline of Westminster and the impressive gabled arches of

St Stephen's Tower, then the distinctive spire of Big Ben in the painting's soft but luminous background.

Keeping the image firmly in his imagination, Matt passed the impressive outline to Em, who glanced at Zach regretfully before grabbing a couple of pastels from the table and filling in the drawing.

'Well,' said Matt, looking at the wooden pier standing on stilts over the Thames. 'Are you going to tell on us or not, Zach?'

Zach gave a sigh of resignation. 'Not. But only if I can come into the painting with you.'