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Hollow Earth

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ONE

The Monastery of Era Mina
Auchinmurn Isle
West Coast of Scotland
Middle Ages

The book the old monk was illuminating began with these words.

THIS Book is about the nature of beasts. Gaze upon these pages at your peril for

The old monk yawned, his chin dropped to his chest, and his eyes fluttered shut. The quill dropped from his fingers, leaving a trail of ink like tiny teardrops across the folio. He was working on one of the book's later pages, a miniature of a majestic griffin with talons clutching the foot of an imposing capital G. As the old monk nodded off, the griffin leaped from its place at the corner of the page and darted across the parchment. In its haste to flee, the beast brushed its coarse wings across the old monk's fingers.

The monk's eyes snapped open. In an instant, he thumped his gnarled fist on to the griffin's slashing tail, pinning the beast to the page. He glared at it. The griffin snorted angrily and scratched its talons deep into the thin vellum of the page. The monk shook off his exhaustion, focused his mind, and in a rush of colour and light

the griffin was once again gripping the G at the top of the page.

Glancing behind him, the old monk spotted the bare feet of his young apprentice, poking out from under the wooden frame that held the drying skins to make parchment.

Something will have to be done, the monk thought.

When he was sure the image was settled on the page, the old monk crouched to retrieve his quill. He was angry with himself. He would have to be punished for this terrible lapse in concentration and go without his evening meal. He patted his soft, round belly. He'd survive the loss.

But – the boy. What to do about the boy now, given what he'd witnessed? That loss would hurt. The old monk did not relish having to train another apprentice. He had neither the strength nor the inclination for such a task. Not only that, but this boy had already demonstrated a great deal of skill as a parchmenter, and was a natural at knowing how long to soak the skins in lime and how carefully to clean and scrape them. And, at such a young age, he was already an elegant calligrapher, and a brilliant alchemist with inks. Between the two of them these past months, they'd almost completed the final pages for *The Book of Beasts*. The boy and his talents would be sorely missed.

The boy sensed that the old monk was debating his future. He could hear the weight of the monk's ideas in his head, like a drumming deep inside his mind. He associated the sound with the monk because at its loudest, when the monk was concentrating hardest, the drumming was deep and full and round, much like the monk himself.

The boy's mother was the only other person the boy could sense in his head: a feeling not unwanted, although often peculiar. Not because he missed her. Far from it. His mother and his brothers and sisters still lived in the village outside the monastery

gates. But his mother's echo in his head had helped him escape her wrath, warranted or not, many times. Quickly, the boy lifted his pestle and mortar and finished crushing the iron salts and acorns for his next batch of ink.

The old monk straightened himself against his desk. What should he do? What if he were to fall asleep again while illuminating, only the next time his dozing was too sound? He didn't dare think about the consequences of such a terrible slip. Only once before had he let such a thing happen, with tragic results. He'd been a young man and had not had the benefit of his training yet. In his nightmares, he could still hear the apprentice's screams. Oh, and there had been so much blood.

No, something would definitely have to be done about the boy.

He stared at his apprentice across the workroom now in much the same manner as he had stared down the griffin.

But the boy was courageous and smart. He knew this was an important moment in his short life. He loved everything about the monastery and didn't want to leave. He was genuinely fond of the old monk, with whom he'd worked for almost a full season – since his father had given him to the service of the monks in return for grazing rights on a prime piece of church land outside the village.

The boy knew how much such a trade was worth to his family. It was worth everything to him, too. This was a time when men, women and children believed in miracles and magic with equal faith. It was a time when kings and queens fought for their crowns with armadas and armies whose allegiance they bought with land and crops and even bigger armies. And it was a time when hope and happiness had everything to do with where you were born and who was protecting you.

Yes, indeed, the boy knew better than anything else that he had to stay with the old monk and remain part of this

ancient, holy order. So he did the only thing he knew how to do in the circumstances. He stood up and stared directly back at the old monk without flinching and with an equal measure of concentration.

The monk glared.

The boy's heart was pounding in his chest. The drumming in his head was so loud, it felt as if a vice was tightening across his ears. He was sure his head was going to burst. His nose started to bleed, dripping into the mortar he was gripping in his hands. Behind the monk, the boy could see the griffin's tail thumping against the page. But still he held his gaze.

After what seemed – to the boy anyway – to be for ever, the vice around his skull loosened, the pulsing of the old monk's thoughts stopped, and the boy thought he heard a sigh inside his head. The monk's shoulders drooped, and he turned away. The boy let out his breath and wiped his sleeve across his nose.

Ah, thought the monk, *I have neither the strength nor the inclination to challenge this boy's fortitude. Something else will have to be done to ensure that he honours the monastery's secrets.*

He turned away, his focus back on the beast.

With great relief, the boy returned his attention to the pot and his mixtures. When he'd finished creating the ink, he filled the monk's inkwell and stored the rest for another day. Then he turned to the goatskin stretched across the rack. Gently, the boy ran the tips of his fingers across the surface, making sure the skin was drying smooth and thin enough to absorb the inks. He looked again at the old monk, his body draped across his tall desk, his quill dipping in and out of the inkwell. The monk's concentration was so intense, the boy knew nothing would shift him until the final touches had been put to the page.

Soon the light was fading from the room, and the old monk

could feel his mind drifting again. Cleaning the tip of his quill, he set it inside his leather pouch, along with his other tools. Then he sealed the inkwell with a wax plug, before covering the page he was illustrating with two thin layers of vellum. Lifting the pages, he set them on a rack inside the cabinet next to his desk, weighing down the corners with polished stones. The pages he'd been working on for the past month were similarly laid out across the cabinet's broad shelves. Tomorrow, he'd begin the process of illuminating the final beast, the most terrifying of them all – the Grendel.

The monk locked the cabinet, dropping the key into the pocket of his robes. Before closing the shutters, he peered out through the wide slits in the thick stone walls, stunned for a moment by the sight of an owl and one of its young lifting from a nearby tree. *A sign*, the old monk thought, *an omen to be sure*. Of good, he trusted.

'Time for prayers, and then perhaps you and I should discuss the matter lingering before us.'

'Yes, master.'

The boy echoed his master's ritual, cleaning his tools, wrapping them in their soft, leather pouches and setting them on his workbench.

The old monk dampened the peat in the hearth and pulled on his fur cloak. Grabbing his cap and scarf from the floor, the boy tied his leather soles on to his feet and followed his master to the heavy oak door.

'Solon, you would do well to forget what you believe you saw earlier. It was only a trick of your youthful imagination.'

The boy stepped in front of the old monk and held the door for him.

'Beg pardon, master, but weren't it really a trick of yours?'



TWO

The National Gallery
London
Present Day

Twelve-year-old twins Matt and Em Calder were sitting on a hard, wooden bench. The gallery was quiet and not yet open to the public, but they were not happy. Their mum had made promises that morning about their plans for this sweltering day, and they didn't remember having to stop to look at paintings being one of them.

Setting their backpacks on the floor in front of them, the twins glared at their mother.

'Behave yourselves,' Sandie warned. 'Do not leave this bench. Do not even *think* about it. I mean it. I'll only be gone ten minutes at the most. I'll be right over there.'

She pointed to the tall, yellow-haired man in a dark suit, holding a stack of books in his arms. The man dipped his head towards them in his usual acknowledgment. Em smiled politely, but Matt turned away, more interested in a woman wheeling a trolley with a wooden crate, the size and shape of a painting, strapped to it through the next gallery. A museum guard followed close behind her. At the lift, the guard swiped a key-card across the security pad. The doors opened. Dismissing

the guard's help with a wave of her hand, the woman eased the trolley into the lift. The guard backed away, but as the doors were closing, he changed his mind, shoved his foot between them, and ducked into the lift with the woman and the painting.

'Matt! Are you even listening to me?'

Matt slumped on the bench, shoving his sister to the edge as he did so.

'This is a lovely painting to look at while you wait,' Sandie went on. 'It's by Georges Seurat. He often painted using tiny dots instead of brush strokes.'

The twins frowned at her. In unison.

'We know,' said Em.

Sandie soldiered on. 'I appreciate this isn't what we'd got planned, but I need to take care of some business with—' She cut herself off mid-sentence and changed tack. 'How about when I'm finished with this meeting, we go swimming just like the boy in the painting?' She put her leather messenger bag over her shoulder. 'What do you say? Deal?'

'Deal,' said Em, who, in these situations at least, was always the first to agree.

Matt shrugged. 'Whatever.'

They watched their mum walk over to the yellow-haired man and settle on a similar bench in the next gallery. The man leaned close to their mother as if about to share a secret with her; in response, Sandie flipped open the sketchbook she always carried, handing the man a sheet of paper she had tucked into one of the pages.

Boring.

Turning her attention back to the painting, Em leaned forward and squinted hard, trying to see all the dots without her bottom leaving the bench, while Matt emptied his backpack

into the space between them – the pens, chalk and charcoal he always carried in a bashed biscuit tin, his iPod, headphones, two *Captain America* comics, assorted sweet wrappers, a pack of bubble gum, an empty Coke can and a sketchpad. Tearing a sheet of paper from the pad, he handed Em a pen.

She shook her head.

'Swimming would be a lot of fun,' he said. 'No one's paying any attention to us.'

Em accepted the pen, and they began to draw.

The next thing the twins knew, they were in the painting, splashing in the cool, blue water of the River Seine with a boy in a red hat. He said his name was Pierre and spoke to them in French. The twins understood. He said he had only a few minutes to bathe before he had to get back to his work.

'Is that your dog?' Matt asked Pierre, worried that the dog would have nowhere to go when Pierre returned to his job. But Pierre didn't answer the question, so Matt gave up and began splashing water on to the other men lounging on the bank. They ignored him.

Matt floated on his back for a while. He could feel Em splashing next to him. He looked up at the sky, but it wasn't there, and he thought he knew why – and then they were suddenly both sopping wet and lying in a big puddle on the floor in front of the painting in the National Gallery. Two very angry guards were rushing towards them with Sandie close on their heels. The yellow-haired man was gone.

Quickly gathering up the twins' things, Sandie apologized to the guards. 'I'm so sorry. They must have dumped their bottles of water on each other. It is really warm today.'

She glared at the twins. 'All I asked was ten minutes. Ten minutes!' She yanked both of them upright. 'Oh God, you've

no idea what you've done.'

Feeling some sympathy for the twins, one of the guards told them that since the museum was not yet open to the general public for the day, no real harm was done. The staff could get the mess cleaned up quickly before anyone else came through. He wasn't planning to take any chances though, and quickly escorted the three of them outside to the morning heat of Trafalgar Square.

A member of the National Gallery's cleaning staff was called to the Post-Impressionist room, where she soaked up the water with her mop. She had to smile to herself. Her own boys might have done much worse than a water fight if it had been them sitting there feeling hot and bored.

As she was wringing her mop out in the bucket, something on the floor under the bench caught her eye. Reaching down, she snagged a folded sheet of paper torn from a drawing pad. The drawing had to belong to one of those children because she'd cleaned this particular gallery earlier that morning and she knew she hadn't missed a thing.

Unfolding the paper, she was surprised to see a recognizable sketch of *Bathers at Asnières*. There was something off in the dots of colour around the boy in the red hat, the men languishing on the shore were distorted in their dimensions and the little brown dog had a kind of smudged-sausage look to him, but it was a very good copy indeed.

She glanced at the sketch one more time. The water of the Seine was dashed in thick blue strokes across the bottom of the paper, but the top half of the drawing was a complete blank.

No sky.

She gathered up her mop and bucket, rolled her cart towards

the exit and crumpled the paper into a ball. On her way out of the gallery, she chucked it into a nearby bin.

She could have sworn she heard a splash.