Bone

Quest for the Spark
Book Three

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For Paul Deane —
One more time around the park.

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Prologue
It was something he had always known might happen but had hoped wouldn’t.

The Red Dragon tried to lift his mighty head, but it was far too heavy, still clogged with sleep. The Nacht was in control now, only allowing the Dragon an opportunity to open his eyes a crack to see the horrors the evil one had created.

To show off as he always had, even as a young Dragon so very long ago, before he’d escaped into the void between the Dreaming and the Waking World.

_The Dreaming._
It saddened the Red Dragon to see what had been done to her, the darkness from the beyond now covering the once vibrant place with the stuff of shadow. And now that liquid blackness was spreading to the Waking World. He could hear the Nacht laughing as he towered above him.

“Do you see?” the black Dragon asked. “Do you see what I’ve done . . . what I’m about to do?”

“Make a very big mistake?” the Red Dragon said, his voice thick with sleep, slurring his words.

The Nacht laughed again. “No, not a mistake, brother,” he answered. “But the fulfillment of my destiny.”

The Red Dragon rolled his eyes. “Put me back to sleep if you’re going to start shoveling that business.”

The Nacht was suddenly in front of him, angry eyes glaring into his own.

“IT has already begun,” he declared. “Those with the strongest connection to the Dreaming were the first to fall. . . . I took them one after the other, cocooning them in a blanket of sleep and bringing them here.”

The Nacht reared up on his thick back legs and spread his ebony wings. The surrounding gloom lifted like a fog to reveal the most nightmarish of visions.

As far as the Red Dragon could see were bodies, all caught in the grip of an endless sleep. Holy men lay scattered among the common folk of the Valley as royalty
slumbered with Dragons — each and every one having fallen victim to the growing power of the Nacht. It was far worse than the Red Dragon could have ever imagined, but there was still a chance that the Nacht could be defeated.

For the Dreaming had seen this threat coming . . . and had planned.

“Your silence speaks volumes, brother,” the Nacht growled happily as he walked past those who slept. He stopped before what appeared to be a curtain of absolute black. “Beyond this barrier is the prize,” the Nacht purred. He raised a taloned hand and placed it against the obstruction. “The Waking World, just waiting for the darkness to flow over the land like an ocean.”

The Dragon ran his razor-sharp claws along the shadow wall, slivers of night raining down to be lost in the shadows at his feet. “Already the work has begun,” he continued. “Little by little, piece by piece, the wall is coming down.”

The Nacht laughed again, his insidious joy escorting his brother back into the embrace of oblivion.

The last thought to go through the Red Dragon’s mind before sleep claimed him once more was of one remaining chance for this nightmare to end.

The spark of a chance.

For from a spark, there often came fire.
Porter slept beneath the cool, damp earth, head and legs tucked inside his shell, dreaming of friends who had come and gone throughout the long years he had lived. The memories were like a toasty fire, keeping the old turtle warm as he hibernated beneath the forest where he had lived his many days.

And that fire was growing — the recollections brighter and more intense than they had been for a very long time, slowly rousing him from his slumber.

Eyes fluttering open, the turtle poked his head from his shell, extended his legs, and started to crawl through the dirt toward the surface. He remembered what Stillman had told him as the friends said their good-byes.

“There might come a time when we’re needed for a very important job.”

“How will we know?” Porter asked.

“You’ll know,” Stillman replied as he’d walked toward the lake where he planned to sleep. “The Dreaming will show you.”

Looks like Stillman was right, Porter thought, crawling up from the dirt. He brushed himself off and checked out his surroundings. Not much had changed in the forest swamp since he’d dug beneath the mud to sleep.

Or had it?
He felt it then, a kind of wrongness in the air — an icy chill that was the exact opposite of the warmth that had roused him from his slumber. This must be exactly what Stillman had warned him about.

Without further hesitation, the old turtle started through the woods, making his way toward the lake where his friend was likely still fast asleep.

Porter had a job to do.

He had a Dragon to wake.
Tom Elm knew that he had to sleep, but it wasn’t going to be easy.

He pulled a blanket tighter around his shoulders as he restlessly dozed in the belly of the Queen of the Sky.

Things out in the Valley had become bad.

While looking for supplies, they’d found another village, everyone in it held in the grip of nightmare.

It was some of the scariest stuff that Tom had ever seen, and what made it even scarier was that he knew it was going to get worse.

The Nacht was getting stronger, reaching out and snatching people — whole villages — from the Waking World, and from that he was growing more and more powerful.

Tom moaned as he lay somewhere between being awake and asleep. Thoughts of all he had been through
on his quest to find the remaining pieces of the Spark, the now fragmented first ray of light that chased away the darkness so long ago, drifted through his mind. At first, he had been tormented by doubt, certain that the Dreaming had made a big mistake in choosing him as her champion, but now he could see how far he had come, how successful he had been. Maybe he wouldn’t be a complete failure after all.

In that in-between place, he suddenly heard the words of his father, as he explained his philosophy about turnip farming.

“Never go into an endeavor uncommitted,” Tom recalled him saying one evening as they ate their supper. “You either go in to do that job to the fullest of your abilities, or you don’t bother. Why waste the time if you’re not going to give it your all?”

Truer words had never been spoken, even though his father was talking about something completely different from saving the world from an evil Dragon.

Remembering his father’s words made Tom think of his mom and little sister, too, and how they had all been victims of the Nacht’s power. If he ever hoped to see them awake again, he had no choice but to give this his all.

He just hoped that he was strong enough for the job.

Sleep was gone, and Tom found himself suddenly very awake. Eyes adjusting to the shadows, he looked around to see where the others of the quest were. It had been raining
on the deck above, so they had all come below to sleep. The Bone twins, Abbey and Barclay, lay snuggled up next to each other. Tom was amused to see them this way — normally they were punching, kicking, or otherwise tormenting each other. Beside them, curled up in a tight ball, was Roderick. The three of them had become quite close. Tom turned his head to see Randolf sitting, his back against the wall of the ship, arms folded. At first glance the Veni Yan warrior looked as though he was awake, but as Tom listened closely, he could hear the older man’s slow, rhythmic breathing.

He glanced down at the strange stone that hung around his neck from a leather thong. The piece of the Spark was glowing softly, getting brighter and more insistent as the seconds passed.

Tom gulped, knowing what it meant. The Spark had something that it wanted to show him.

A vision.
A vision of the future.

Night had come far too quickly.

Chief Gnod of the Nurdak tribe, living within the far reaches of the rocky Southern Pawa region, sat upon his heavy throne of carved wood and waited uneasily for the screams to come.

He ran thick fingers through his long, graying beard, ears attuned to the sounds coming from outside his cabin.
The winds howled mournfully, as if aware of what was likely to come this night.

*It had been two nights since the last attacks. Would there be a third?*

A rhythmic pounding on the heavy wooden doors made him gasp and set the two hounds that rested on the floor at his feet to barking.

“Come!” the Chief bellowed as the doors leading into his quarters creaked open with a blast of freezing wind.

A slight, hooded figure floated in as if carried by the harsh breeze. Gnod scowled with disapproval.

“You were supposed to stay indoors with your mother,” he said as his daughter removed her hood to expose pale, delicate features.

“I couldn’t bear the thought of you in here alone,” Gerta said.

“I am not alone,” the Chief said, reaching down to pet the two faithful beasts. “Grimly and Boon are here with me.”

Gerta knelt to pat the two fearsome-looking hounds, who lovingly licked her hands.

“It is quiet out there tonight, Father,” the girl said. “Perhaps it is over —”

“Silence! Do not talk of it,” the old Chief snapped. He looked around, waiting for the sounds of terror that had, as of late, come in the night.

The Chief believed he knew why his people were being
attacked. It was a curse of some kind, a curse from some higher power for following the desires of the Hooded One against the Kingdom of Atheia.

They were being punished for their brazen acts of war. Punished by creatures that descended from the nighttime sky to steal away his subjects, carrying them up into the mountain caves, their screams fading off into the darkness.

“But it has been three nights, counting this one,” Gerta said, coming to stand beside him.

Chief Gnod sat, listening. “The night is not yet over.”

“But do you not think we have been punished enough?” she asked him.

“What I believe does not matter,” the old Chief said. “It is how the powers that surround us feel.”

“Then I think the powers are horrible and mean,” the young girl said, clenching her fists.

Chief Gnod recoiled at his daughter’s disrespectful words. If the powers that be were listening . . .

“Apologize!” he ordered, rising up from his chair. The hounds rose as well, watching the old ruler.

“I won’t.” Gerta stomped her foot. “And besides, even if I were to apologize, who would it be to?”

Chief Gnod’s eyes were wide as he listened to the howling winds outside.

“You speak blasphemy. Offend the gods and our torment will go on and on.”
“Do you know what I believe?” she asked defiantly. “I don’t believe this has anything to do with what we’ve done.”

“Stop!” the Chief commanded. “I will hear no more of this!”

“I have climbed some of the higher peaks of Pawa and have seen the darkness that is spreading, not only here . . . but also over the entire Valley.”

The dogs began to whine, sniffing at the air.

“Now you’ve done it,” the Chief growled, hand falling to the sword he wore at his side.

“I’ve done no such thing,” Gerta said, but there was uncertainty in her voice.

Then they heard the sounds.

They were soft at first, mixing with those of the cold winds coming down from the mountains, and grew steadily louder.

“Do you see?” the Chief asked his daughter, reaching out to pull her protectively to him.

The heavy pounding of leathery wings could be heard from outside as Grimly and Boon began to growl, snapping ferociously at the air.

Chief Gnod pulled his daughter closer as the sounds intensified — the flapping of wings and the plaintive screams of those snatched up and stolen from their homes.

• • •
Tom slowly climbed the stairs from the hold onto the deck of the Queen of the Sky, the blistering effect of the Spark’s latest vision still burning inside his brain.

*What did it mean?*

He hoped that the fresh air might help clear his head. The rain had stopped, leaving the deck shiny and slick, and the sun was trying to peek out from behind an assault of heavy, dark clouds. In his mind’s eye, he again saw the image of solidified light, like a piece of jagged crystal, spinning in the darkness. The final piece that remained to be found before the Spark was complete.

The scenes that followed were like physical blows striking his head. Tom saw them in flashes: the Queen of the Sky in distress, Percival — the captain of the craft — trying to keep the sky ship from falling . . .

“Hey, Tom, you okay?” somebody asked him.

Tom turned to see that Percival had poked his head out of the wheelhouse.

“You don’t look so good,” the Bone explorer called. “You almost look as white as me . . . and that’s pretty white.”

“I’m fine,” Tom said, unconvinced by his own words. The next image was of a fearsome-looking people — warriors — clothed in heavy furs, their hands clutching battle-worn weaponry.

He heard the sounds of thumping feet and turned to
see Barclay, Abbey, and Randolf emerging from below
deck, concern on their faces.

“Is everything all right?” Randolf asked.

“Was that you screaming, Tom?” Barclay asked.

“You scared the heck out of me,” Abbey Bone ex-
claimed.

As Tom faded in and out, he saw big, black creatures
flying down from the sky, their eyes glowing red and
moutbhs filled with razor-sharp teeth. . . .

“What is wrong, Tom?” the Veni Yan asked as he
gripped Tom’s shoulder, freeing him from his vision.

Tom didn’t want to worry them. “It’s all right,” he man-
aged. He even tried to smile, but it was short lived. “The
latest vision . . . I . . . I don’t understand what . . .”

Aside from the horrible fanged things of darkness, he
saw what could only be described as a giant cat, an enor-
mous lion of some kind stalking the mountains of the
north.

“What did you see, Tom?” Percival asked. “Is . . . is it
that bad?” The Bone was nervous, and Tom couldn’t blame
him.

“A giant cat,” Tom said cautiously. “I think we’re sup-
posed to find him.”

He didn’t want to tell them about the other things he’d
seen . . . the more disturbing things.
“Roque Ja,” the Veni Yan said with understanding. “You’re talking about the beast called Roque Ja.”

The two Rats emerged from beneath a heavy tarp, where they had hidden to protect themselves from the rain.

“Did somebody say Rock Jaw?” Stinky asked.

“Please say that you didn’t,” begged Smelly. “Please have it be anything but that.”

“Well, it’s pretty hard to mistake Rock Jaw for something else,” Stinky said. “Rock Jaw . . . yep, can’t really think of anything else that sounds like . . .”

The Rats continued their banter, but Tom’s attention had already started to shift back to the memories of his vision.

He was in a cave, descending deeper and deeper.

A wall was suddenly before him, something scratching on the other side of it, picking away at the obstruction until —

“Is he well?” someone asked, and Tom turned to find one of the stranger members of their quest. Lorimar stood before him, her spirit housed in a body formed from the seed of a mighty oak tree.

Tom’s mouth opened at the sight of her, remembering something else the Spark had shown him — the most disturbing vision of them all.

Lorimar had been there, her body made up from some
strange form of plant life that glowed with an eerie incandescent light. Tom was on his knees, looking up at her. She was speaking, but for some reason he couldn’t hear her.

His confusion grew as she picked him up and forced him at the wall. He barreled through it and into the darkness on the other side.

Where the Nacht was waiting.

Tom cried out in fear and panic.

“There he goes again,” Abbey Bone said.

Tom was about to tell his friends that it was okay, that he was fine. But he never got the chance.

He passed out before the words could leave his mouth.