



Prologue **Cursed!**

Raindrops fell, but Professor Prune didn't even notice. He was wrist deep in bones. And they were human bones—skulls, fibulas, scapulas, and all the other bones that make up the human skeleton. He had tied a bandana over his nose and mouth to protect him from the foul odor, but his eyes still watered behind his half-inch-thick glasses. Despite the overwhelming evidence of death, the Professor was extremely excited. “Fascinating . . . fascinating,” he muttered to himself as he examined one bone after another, laying them out in the shape of a body. “Which one could he be?”

Hundreds of bones and clamshells were scattered across a volcanic plateau, high on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The

Professor's research had proven fruitful, and the mere thrill of finding the four-hundred-year-old bones would have been uncontainable, if not for his questions that were still unanswered. *Why had the bones recently become exposed? Did anyone else know they were here? Why were there clamshells at this elevation? Which skull belonged to Ratbeard?* He stopped and took a better look at his surroundings.

Raising his head to wipe the sweat from his brow, and then the fog from his glasses, the Professor realized that he had lost track of time. And he was getting wet. The usual summer evening rainfall that had begun should have told him that it was past eight o'clock. Raindrops plopped all around him. The sky was growing a much darker grey and thunder rumbled very close by. "I've got to find him!" he exclaimed, though no one around him was alive to hear.

The Professor made his way upward, through spirals of steam generated by the volcanic springs. The steam rose like ghosts, curling up through the scraggly bushes, then disappeared into the falling rain. He suspected that there were more bones in the bushes. As he parted the branches, he noticed that the leaves were turning brown along the edges and many had fallen off. And the tall grasses that normally surrounded the springs were limp and dying. He stood, looked around, puzzled. "What's going on here?"

The Professor climbed up to examine one cluster of bushes, running his hands down their woody stems. He couldn't help noticing that the foul odor seemed to be stronger at this higher elevation compared to where he'd been searching further down the hill.

As he explored the bushes, he found more of the same shells that were strewn across the plateau. They seemed old but still intact.

"Could it be? Did *he* put these here?" he asked aloud to himself while squinting to get a better view.

It was getting darker and harder to see, so he reached into his pack for his flashlight. He stopped suddenly. Through the branches of the

bushes, he glimpsed light. A phosphorescent glow seemed to twinkle in the spring that fed the stream flowing down the mountain. The spring had formed a deep, dark pool.

“What on earth?” Professor Prune pushed the branches aside, following the light. He stopped and blinked his eyes. Small bones, like a bird’s, floated among large rocks in the pool. He knew immediately that they weren’t human bones and not who he was looking for.

Just as he pulled his flashlight out of his pack to examine the bones more closely, the sky flashed a blinding white. Electricity filled the air as a zigzag of lighting struck the bones, turning them, and the pool, an eerie electric blue. As he leapt back, a deep boom rattled the Professor’s own bones. His foot landed against a round rock that rolled to the side, taking the Professor’s foot with it. The Professor lurched forward and reached out for a branch to steady himself, but the branch, weak and brittle, snapped and the Professor went sprawling.

He landed in a pile of bones and clamshells that crushed beneath the force of his fall. A fine green dust rose from the shells, seeming to emanate from their broken contours. The Professor lay still for a moment, then slowly and carefully rolled over onto his back, listening to the bones and shells crunch under his weight. He took a deep breath, sat up, and then slowly rose to a standing position. He brushed his hands over his clothing, surveying the damage. Skinned knees, torn pants, a few cuts, and a layer of green dust, which was quickly turning into a sticky goo in the rain. Nothing too serious. He turned his attention back to the blue bones, but they were gone, and a strange creature now sat on a rock that was half-submerged in the pool. The creature seemed to smolder—even sizzle—in the raindrops. *Did it just move? How could it after a hundred million volts of electricity?* he wondered.

The Professor sneezed. He felt a little dizzy. He suddenly forgot why he was there. Lying beside him in the green dust was a small metal cylinder capped with a skull, with blue stones—surely glass—set in the eye

sockets. He brushed off the dust and polished it with his sleeve. “Wonderful,” he said. “Brett will love this.” He fished a padded envelope out of his backpack and wrote his grandson’s name and address on it, to be sure he wouldn’t forget to mail it.

The Professor wished he could see his grandson’s smiles of curiosity when Brett opened the many gifts he had sent him. He wondered if his grandson had that same yearning for discovery, for adventure, that had led the Professor on journeys around the world. But the Professor couldn’t deal with that question; he suddenly felt very ill and confused. A tickling sensation ran over his forehead and down his cheeks. And when had it turned so dark? He tried to brush away whatever was tickling his face and searched his clothes with his flashlight for whatever might have been crawling on him.

Finding nothing, he directed the light to the ground, where he spotted a black feather tumbling gently around his feet in the gusty wind. He picked it up and felt a small electrical charge between his fingers. He looked around, growing more and more confused, then began to walk.

As he rummaged in his pack for a sample bag, his footsteps began to falter until he stopped moving altogether. He stood in the dark, staring at the ground. Absentmindedly, he raised his arm to scratch his cheek. “Now what was . . . screm . . . do . . . kaffe?” The Professor slowly looked around, confused by his surroundings. “Where . . . manch . . . blarn?” He looked blankly at his pack, holding it loosely in one hand, then let it drag on the ground.

He began wandering down the side of the mountain, occasionally stumbling and catching himself on branches and boulders. The farther he descended, the more erratic his steps became. Staggering, he began to slip in the loose soil and then he began to slide helplessly down a rocky ledge—and then over it. He flailed his arms in a half-hearted attempt to catch himself, but it was useless.

Professor Prune had fallen into the mouth of a cave. As he rolled down the incline, his small pickax, brushes, and shovel tumbled from his pack. He came to rest in a pile of rubble, moaning as he slipped into unconsciousness. But for one brief moment he was aware of his surroundings and in that moment he shouted one word.

“Pirates!”