

## CHAPTER EIGHT: The Bridge

Fenton and the others walked through the grove and down into a long narrow valley. The forest still bordered them on their left as far as he could see. On his right stood an immense mountain. Between the forest and the mountain ran a wide river covering almost the entire floor of the valley. From this angle Fenton could see where it emerged from the mountain on the right side of the valley, traversed the length of the basin, and disappeared into the forest on the left.

*There's no way to get to the far side of the valley without crossing the river,* he thought. The river stretched at least thirty feet across, and the rapid current ruled out swimming. *What do we do now?*

As if he heard the question inside Fenton's head, Glip answered. "There is a bridge down there." Glip pointed down to the left, a few hundred feet from where the torrent disappeared into the forest. Fenton followed Glip's finger and saw a rope bridge that spanned the river. He'd been so caught up in the massive river and churning water that he'd completely missed it. The closer they got, the more detail he could see. The wooden planks looked solid enough, and the sturdy platforms at either side held the ropes taught. It hung a couple of feet above the water and swayed slightly in the breeze.

"Looks fun," commented Fenton.

"Yeah, but don't fall through," said Sam. "You'd wash away in a hurry."

Alexis looked up at the mountains at the mouth of the river. She shivered slightly as she pulled her vest closed around her. "And it's straight from the mountain, which means it's probably ice cold. You wouldn't survive if you fell in there. Even if you didn't get pummeled to death, you'd freeze."

Horis and Skoog both nodded their agreement and took up positions on either side of Alexis. Horis puffed out his chest. “Don’t worry, Mistress. We won’t let you fall in.”

The group approached the bridge and, with Glip still leading them, walked up the platform and began traversing the river. As they neared the middle, their combined weight caused the bridge to sag, but not enough to touch the water. Glip stepped off the far side, followed by Sam. Fenton, captivated by the raging torrent beneath them, stopped to look over the side and motioned the others past him. He waited until they climbed off the far end, then a huge grin spread across his face. He turned and faced them, then reached across and grabbed the rope on each side of the bridge. He jumped up and down like he was on a trampoline. The bridge undulated, splashing his feet each time it hit the water.

“Woo hoo,” Fenton shouted, “This is great, guys! Come back and try this!”

He bounced again and again, loving the weightlessness each time he launched into the air. But his joy drained away as the next few seconds turned into a lifetime. He heard Alexis scream and watched her point behind him on the bridge. Horis’ mouth opened to yell, but no sound came out. Sam dropped the diary and rushed onto the bridge toward him. Fenton watched Glip nimbly grab the diary before it hit the ground, then Fenton spun around to see what was happening behind him. He watched as the shockwave rippling down the planks launched Skoog into the air and over the upstream side of the bridge.

The little Grink managed to grab one of the ropes as he careened over the edge, but that only caused him to whip around and slam into the water. When he made contact with the surging waves he lost his grip and the torrent pulled him under.

Fenton knew he had killed him. Everything he’d thought about this adventure crumbled in an instant. The fun and games had ended. He was responsible for the death of Skoog and he

would never be able to live with himself.

He looked over the other side of the bridge and saw, to his amazement, Skoog's foot sticking out of the water as he swept past. But instead of doing something to help, Fenton froze. Amazingly, he watched Sam slide headfirst toward the water, bouncing across the planks, and grab Skoog's ankle. Sam lay prone on the bridge, his head and arms hanging into the water, holding fast to Skoog's ankle. Sam pulled with all his might and yelled for help. He hung on tightly enough to slow Skoog, but the river pulled with more force than he could counter. Sam tried to hook his leg around one of the support ropes, but it wasn't enough. The current slowly pulled him into the river right behind Skoog.

Sam's scream for help finally got Fenton moving. But he'd only taken a step toward Sam before Alexis leapt past him. She grabbed Sam's legs and held on, halting Sam's momentum toward the river. With Sam pulling on Skoog and Alexis pulling Sam, they managed to get Skoog's legs back onto the bridge, but the river wouldn't give up easily. It pulled hard on Skoog and continued to pound his body. It was a tug-of-war that the river would eventually win.

Thankfully, Fenton saw his opportunity to help. He reached into the water and wrapped his arms around Skoog's waist. Together the three of them hauled Skoog out of the water. They all crashed painfully onto the bridge, safe from the river.

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Skoog, Sam, Alexis and Fenton lay sprawled on the grass on the other side of the bridge, still breathing heavily after their ordeal. Despite the sun having dried Skoog, he continued to shiver from his brush with death. Alexis wished she had something with her to warm him up.

Glip stood over them with a worried look on his face. "Are you all ok?" he asked the

four.

“Yes,” Sam replied, without opening his eyes.

Fenton and Alexis both said “yes” between breaths. Skoog didn’t respond verbally, but looked up at Glip and nodded. Glip slowly closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. “Good. It would be unfortunate to have something tragic happen at the beginning of our journey.”

Fenton sat up. “I’m so sorry, Skoog. I didn’t mean for you to get hurt.” He stared back at the river. “I’ll be more careful from now on. I promise.”

Glip pursed his lips and then spoke firmly, “Accidents happen, Master Fenton. But,” he made eye contact with all three kids, “it could have easily been a disaster.” He paused and motioned toward the river, “This is just a river. You have rivers where you come from.” His head turned to Skoog who still shivering, then toward the forest behind them. “But here in Decapolis we have Throgs, Krogars, creatures you have never comprehended. And much worse.” Do you understand?”

Each of them acknowledged Glip with a nod.

As the kids slowly got to their feet, Alexis turned her attention to Horis. He stood off to the side with his arms folded and his head bowed. He hadn’t spoken since they’d pulled Skoog out of the water.

“Are you all right, Horis?” she asked,

Horis shook his head but didn’t say anything.

Alexis walked over to him and knelt down, “What’s wrong?”

Horis shook his head again but didn’t look up. Alexis laid a hand on his shoulder. “Are you upset about Skoog?” Horis nodded.

“Skoog’s fine,” she said. “He got a little banged up, but he’ll live.”

“No thanks to me,” interrupted Horis.

“Is that what’s bothering you? That you didn’t help?” She gently tipped his chin up so she could look him in the eye. “Horis, it doesn’t matter who pulled him out. What’s important is that he’s ok.”

Horis’ eyes glistened. “But I’m his best friend. I—I didn’t even try to help. I just stood there.” He choked back tears. “He could have drowned, and he would have only been 300 years old. I feel so awful.” He dropped his head again and slowly kicked one foot against the other.

Skoog, having finally gotten up off the ground, walked over to Horis. He put his arm around him and said, “Horis, you are still my best friend. I know you would have helped if they hadn’t been here. You probably would have jumped in after me if you had to.”

Horis began to perk up. “That’s right. I would have jumped in.”

Fenton’s lips turned up in a little smile, “But then both of you would’ve been in the—”

He fell silent as Alexis reached out and touched his arm. He glanced at her and she gave a slight shake of her head. He didn't finish his sentence.

“If we are ready,” said Glip. “Let us get moving.”

“We’ve got a Grink Council member to meet with,” Sam said. Then Fenton heard him mutter under his breath, “Whatever that means.”

Glip replied quietly to him, “You will soon understand much more. Do not lose sight of the hope for your father. There is much for you to do. But there is also much for you to learn.”

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As they left the river, Alexis asked Skoog, “Are you hurt?”

Skoog glanced over at her, down at Horis, then back to Sam. The two of them chuckled,

“No. I’m fine,” said Skoog. He smiled broadly. “Because I’m a Grink. A little bridge couldn’t hurt me. In fact, a big bridge wouldn’t hurt me. Right, Horis?”

Horis nodded, “Yep.”

Alexis cocked her head to the side as she looked down at Glip.

“I said there are many things for you to learn,” replied Glip. “One of them is that Grinks are hard to injure for any length of time.” Alexis opened her mouth to speak, but Glip continued. “We recover quickly from everyday injuries. And yes, we die, but only after a long life. Natural death usually occurs about 1,000 years after birth. We can be killed, though. But it is rare.” He looked at the river.

“Skoog could have drowned if you had not pulled him out of the river. There is no recovery from that.”

“What about a tree falling on you? Or getting cut or stabbed?” asked Fenton.

“Blunt objects do us no harm, Master Fenton. A falling tree would do nothing more than pin us to the ground. A large fall will not hurt us unless we were to land on a sharp object. Even then, we might survive if the wound were not too serious, because we heal faster than humans. But if we were to get into hand-to-hand combat and bitten and clawed repeatedly by a Throg—”

“Or a dirt monkey!” interrupted Skoog.

Glip shook his head, “Dirt monkeys are not violent. They are more scared of you than you are of them.”

“I don’t think so,” said Skoog. “We’re pretty scared of them.”

“Dirt monkeys? Throgs?” asked Alexis.

Glip looked at her and shrugged. “Dirt monkeys are harmless little creatures —”

“Harmless?!” interjected Horis. “How can you say they’re harmless? You’ve obviously

never seen one, have you, Glip?” he said, almost accusingly.

Glip shook his head, “No, Horis. I have not.” Horis’ triumphant smile faded quickly when Glip said, “And neither have you. They do not live on our island.”

Horis dropped his head, “Oh, yeah.”

Alexis struggled to absorb all of this. *1,000 years old? Injury-free Grinks? Dirt Monkeys?* It was almost too much. She pushed those thoughts out of her head and focused on what mattered. *Sam’s dad. Keep moving forward and help his dad. Deal with all of this later - if you even need to.*

They had walked steadily uphill since leaving the bridge. Their path through the ancient valley continued without twists and turns, leaving the bridge visible far behind them. Alexis looked over her shoulder and her face lit up as she took in the view.

“Sam, look how beautiful it is,” she said. As far as she could see were green rolling hills, forested landscape and open land sprawled before her. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Skoog hugged Horis, “She likes Decapolis. She really, really likes it. This is our home, Horis, and Mistress Alexis says it’s beautiful. And why wouldn’t she? Unless, of course, she didn’t think it was beautiful. But would she tell us if she thought it was ugly? And what would we do then? I guess we could change it for her. That’s it! I’d fix it so she thought it was beautiful.” He gazed out toward the horizon and muttered, “That would take a looong time.” Fenton chuckled and patted Skoog as he walked past him.

Their path took them alongside a forest for another hundred yards, then Glip pointed toward the trees on their left. “This is where we enter.” He stepped over some broken limbs and headed down a much less-traveled path than the one they’d been on the past few hours. There was clearly a route through the forest, but it definitely wasn’t a main thoroughfare.

“This will be a safer route,” said Glip. We are less likely to be spotted by those who would do us harm. However, stay close. You do not want to get lost in here.”