

## CHAPTER NINE: An Unwelcome Ally

The group trudged single-file through the forest. Their path had been fairly straight since entering the trees so it didn't take long for things to feel monotonous. Sam wanted to move quicker, but Glip had assured him they were traveling as fast as necessary.

Meanwhile, the whole situation was stretching Alexis in ways she'd never experienced. There was an inward tension she couldn't reconcile. Part of her wanted to rush past Glip and take the lead. Kendra needed their help, and Alexis was confident she could figure out how to rescue her. But at the same time, those thoughts terrified her. Her first reaction when arriving in Decapolis had been to turn around and go home. And those survival instincts continued to tug at her. It would definitely be safer. Plus, there were older people more capable of accomplishing what they were setting out to do. Not to mention how terrified must her parents be right now.

Clinging to these safer thoughts was more comfortable for her. She wasn't normally a take-charge person. In fact, she really wished she hadn't come. Even Fenton wasn't having fun anymore. His chipper attitude had died after the bridge incident. Yes, she wanted to help Sam's dad, but the worry about her parents had eaten away at most of her willingness to stay. She resolved the tension between the two by concluding that if they hurried, they could get home quicker.

Without thinking, she asked, "Glip, is it much farther?" Instantly, her face burned red. *What am I doing? I sound like I'm five-years old.*

"Hopefully we will reach the fortress tomorrow," he replied.

"Tomorrow?!" said Sam, his head snapping up.

Sam's angry response made her feel better. At least she wasn't the only one antsy about

how long they'd been here.

"Yes," said Glip. "Hopefully by tomorrow evening. But I cannot be sure. These paths are difficult, and it is not a short distance."

"But my dad!" reacted Sam harshly. He looked at Fenton, who pulled out his watch and showed it to Sam.

"I understand your worry, Master Sam. But we are moving as quickly as we can."

He stopped walking and looked around. A copse of abnormally large trees stood a few yards off the trail. "This is where we leave the path." He pointed toward the oversized trees.

"Through there is a place where we can rest for the night and continue our journey at first light."

They circled around the large trees, pushed through branches and climbed over huge roots. Then, abruptly, they broke into a small clearing. And facing them from the tree line on the opposite side sat another Grink older than Glip. The three kids stopped in their tracks, but Glip continued forward to greet him.

Alexis narrowed her eyes and slowly took in the whole clearing, looking for others. She angled her head to the side, listening. "You hear that?" she asked Fenton.

"No," he responded, taking a half step back.

"I think there are others. In the trees behind him," she said.

"How many?" Sam asked.

"At least two." She closed her eyes completely. "And I don't think they're getting along."

Fenton started, "How do you –", but Glip spoke up, interrupting him.

"Masters Sam and Fenton, Mistress Alexis, please come meet Fingal. He is one of the most wise and esteemed Grinks alive."

They stepped forward and the elder Grink bowed slightly.

“Welcome to The Warriors who have returned. I am Fingal, the Chief Grink.

Alexis grabbed Sam’s elbow. “Returned?” she whispered.

Sam gave her a quick shrug.

Fingal continued, “It is my great pleasure to welcome you to our land. Undoubtably, there is much confusion on your part. But all will become clear as you proceed with your journey. I am sure Glip has informed you why your presence is required here. I will attempt to shed more light about things that even Glip is not aware of. In addition, I will answer questions you may have.

“Start with who’s hiding in the trees behind you,” said Alexis quickly.

Fingal smiled at her, then to Glip. “Another of the Grink Council, Clout.

Alexis shook her head and whispered, “There’s more than one.”

Fingal continued, “Our land needs your help. We believe you can free Lady Kell from Hellius who is holding her captive in the Beisan fortress.”

Sam, Fenton and Alexis stood in shocked silence. *How in the world would someone break into a fortress?* Alexis thought. The three of them had regular Nerf gun battles at the barn, and even knowing every nook and cranny of the building, as well as the surrounding hillside, it was impossible to sneak up without being seen. She couldn’t imagine trying to slip into a well-guarded fortress. Then Sam spoke up, voicing her concerns.

“I’m not trying to be disrespectful, but we don’t know what you’re talking about. We don’t know who this Hellius is, or where his fortress is. We didn’t even know this place *or you* existed before today.” He gestured to Fenton and Alexis. “How can *we* help you? *We’re 13 years old!*”

“We know you are young,” replied Fingal. “But you are needed here now.”

Sam interjected, “But — ”

Glip held a hand up to stop him. “Let him finish. Then we can discuss your reservations — if you still have any.”

Sam fell silent and folded his arms across his chest.

“We know who your father is, Sam,” said Fingal. He motioned to the three of them. “And we know who you are. There are things taking place in our world that are beyond your understanding at this point.”

Fenton chuckled at this but said nothing.

The Chief Grink continued, “But what is most important for you to know is that the power to heal your father resides in our world. The woman, Kendra, has been captured by Hellius solely because she has this ability.” Sam’s features softened as Fingal spoke. “And we firmly believe the best option to rescue her is you.”

Sam unfolded his arms. “This makes no sense. But I’m listening.”

Fingal smiled, “It was foreseeable that you would not be able to fathom the situation, since you have no memory of being here before. Let me help you understand.”

*But I think I do remember being here,* thought Alexis. *Or at least somewhere like this.* But that didn’t make sense. She had lived in Cape Solid her entire life. And her parents rarely took them anywhere. In fact, the only woods she thought she’d visited were the ones above the barn. But those weren’t anything like this massive forest. Just one more thing she needed to talk with Sam and Fenton about.

“Most citizens of Decapolis fear Hellius,” continued Fingal. “He is the worst tyrant to walk our land in hundreds of years. His lieutenant is Kedor, who will follow him anywhere.

“Together they had gathered around themselves the descendants of Apollos, referring to

themselves as the Black Bloodline. When they began a revolt, King Adair determined something must be done, so he set out to imprison them all. Hellius and Kedor evaded capture, while most of the members of the Black Bloodline were rounded up and are now held in exile. They cannot aid Hellius, but he apparently no longer needs them. Even though most of the original Black Bloodline have been captured, his numbers appear to be growing faster than the king's men can round them up. We do not know where he is gaining additional warriors. But they are fully devoted to him."

As Fingal spoke, Alexis continued to stare at the trees behind him. At his next words, her ears perked up.

"That is why the four of you were brought here. He must be stopped soon, or it will be too late to keep him from conquering all of Decapolis. He has captured Kendra, which resulted in the injury to your father. We fear that if he were to discover how Kendra can heal, he will become unstoppable. In addition to his followers, he is literally creating an army. We do not know how or where, but if he succeeds, and can heal them at will, he will be unstoppable. Rescuing Kendra will be a tremendous boost to those attempting to halt his power grab."

Sam raised a hand to stop Fingal. "What do you mean, 'resulted in the injury to my father'? He was here?"

"And there are only three—" Fenton started to ask, but Sam cut him off.

"My dad's a salesman," Sam said.

Fingal smiled at Fenton, then looked at Sam. "Your father *was* here. He was injured trying to thwart the kidnapping of Kendra. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"If he was trying to stop her from being kidnapped, maybe he was in the right place at the right time," whispered Alexis to herself.

Glip, not hearing her, continued, “Helliuss himself wounded your father. He was lucky to have only been injured and not killed. Helliuss coats his sword with poison and it will kill your father soon if an antidote is not provided to him. And in answer to what Master Fenton was going to ask—”

Sam interrupted. “What does my dad need? Tell me and I’ll do it,” he pleaded.

“I have told you what must be done. You must rescue Kendra. She is the only one who has the power to save your father.”

“Is she a witch?” asked Fenton.

Fingal ignored the question and continued, “You must act quickly. No one lives longer than five days from Vipid poisoning.”

As he spoke, Alexis replayed Fingal’s words about them being brought to Decapolis. “Sam,” she said.

Sam, shocked at the five-day sentence given to his father, didn’t answer.

“SAM,” she repeated.

With a blank look he turned to her, “What?”

“Fingal said ‘Four.’”

“Four what?” asked Sam, glassy-eyed.

Fenton sighed exasperatedly, “Thank you, Alex.”

She put her hands on her hips. “He said four of us were brought here.”

“But there’s only three...” said Sam, his voice trailing off, unable to focus on what she was getting at.

Alexis shook her head in frustration and realized she needed to take charge. She looked from the Grinks to Sam and Fenton, then back toward the forest. And then it hit her. The fourth

was whoever or whatever was hiding in the forest! She turned to Fingal with narrowed eyes. “I know they’re back there,” she said, jerking her chin toward the trees. “Who’s the fourth?”

“I am,” said a familiar voice.

The three turned toward the voice. Horis and Skoog took a step backward as a figure emerged from the trees on the far side of the clearing. Shadows obscured his face, but Fenton recognized him instantly.

“Oh, no,” said Fenton with a sneer. “It’s—”

“Darius,” said Fingal. “He is the fourth warrior from prophecy who has come to aid our land in this time of need.”

“Hey Alexis,” Darius smirked. “Wanna hold my hand yet?”

Alexis scoffed.

“He’s a jerk,” said Fenton. “He tried to beat me up last night.

“We’ll do it without him,” said Sam.

“No. You cannot accomplish your task without Darius. It is all foretold in the prophecies,” replied Fingal. “He must be part of this. He is more important than the rest of you.”

Alexis spun back to Fingal. “You can’t be serious! All he ever does is bully people.”

Darius stepped from the trees, into the light from the fire. He looked at Fingal, “Thank you for confirming what I’ve been saying for years.” He laughed derisively and turned back to Fingal, “But I’m not helping *them*.”

“You are needed,” stated Fingal.

“I don’t care. You said you’d be bringing my *friends*. They’re not my friends!” snapped Darius.

“How did he even get here?” asked Alexis.

Darius glared at Horis and Skoog who were now cowering on the other side of the fire. “Those two...*things*...jumped me and dragged me here against my will.” He reached down and grabbed the handle of a short sword hanging from his belt. “I don’t know where this came from, but if they don’t take me back, I might use it on one of them.” Horis and Skoog grabbed each other and took a few cautious steps backward.

“See?” Alexis shouted at Fingal. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

Darius, Fenton and Alexis continued to argue, their anger rising. Sam, however, stayed silent, his head bowed.

As they argued, another Grink appeared from the far side of the clearing, stepping from the same area Darius had been waiting. His entrance pulled Alexis’ attention away from the arguing boys. She assumed this was Clout. He paused as Glip walked toward him. The Grink placed a hand on Glip’s shoulder as he passed, then Glip disappeared into the trees. Clout approached Fingal and the two exchanged a few whispered words. Fingal nodded, while Clout’s brow furrowed deeply. Clout pursed his lips and glanced toward the four kids with a look Alexis could only interpret as, “These are the Four Warriors?” Clout took a breath, preparing to say something, looked back at Fingal and thought better of it. He exhaled through gritted teeth keeping silent.

The boys’ argument increased in volume.

“Don’t worry, I’m not helping you!” shouted Darius.

“For once we agree,” yelled Fenton.

Then Sam raised his head, a lone tear running down his cheek, “Fenton,” he said. No one noticed over the fighting. “Fenton,” said Sam more forcefully. Alexis turned to him, saw the tear and went silent. Fenton and Darius, however, kept arguing.



“Fenton!” said Sam a third time, almost in a yell. The two others stopped arguing and turned to Sam. “My dad will die if we don’t do this,” he said. “And if *he* has to come,” he faced Darius, “fine.” His piercing eyes bored into Darius, “They say you need to help. So, you *will* help. But if my father dies because of you, I’ll hurt you in ways you’ll never forget.”

Darius took a half step back as Sam spoke, clearly intimidated, but managed to spit out, “Well, I’m not doing anything unless there’s something in it for me.”

Sam turned to Fingal, “Well? Can you make it worth his while, since he obviously isn’t interested in saving my dad’s life?” As he said the last part he turned and glared at Darius who blinked a few times.

Fingal nodded and said, “Yes, there will be a great reward for the rescue of Kendra. Enough wealth to keep you happy in Decapolis for a long time. Master Darius is already aware of this and agreed.” As Fingal finished speaking, he too turned toward Darius with a staggering look of disapproval.

“You already knew about a reward?” growled Alexis. “Then why argue about it?”

“Because that’s who he is,” said Fenton.

“Just making sure they meant it,” Darius muttered snidely. Then his face broke into a wide grin. He used his thumb to point back toward the trees, “They told me if I stayed quiet back there, they’d pay me. Once we get this lady out of that fortress, they’re going to owe me double.”

At this point, Fingal motioned to the other Grink who had appeared out of the forest. “This is Clout. He is also a member of the Grink Council. He brought some things for each of you. Glip is retrieving them.”

No one spoke again due to the tension. The group remained silent until Glip stepped out of the trees. He carried several objects that were hard to distinguish in the dim light. He stepped

up to the kids and spoke directly to each one.

“Sam, a sword to use until such time as one more suited to you falls into your hands.” As he spoke he handed Sam a short sword with a sturdy hilt that fit snugly into the palm of his hand. He slowly turned it over to look at it from every angle. The leather grip seemed to be made for his hand. The blade had obviously seen battle, but still retained a sharp edge. The sight of a real sword in his hand, that he might have to use, scared Sam.

Glip moved on to Alexis. He held out another sword, but Alexis didn’t want it. She shook her head and tentatively pointed toward a quiver of arrows leaning against a tree. Glip looked to Fingal who nodded. Glip handed her the bow and quiver of arrows and said, “Trust your instincts and let them fly.”

Fenton glanced at her. “Robin Hood?”

Alexis wagged her eyebrows at him and slung the quiver over her shoulder.

He looked at the sword hanging at Darius’ side and said, “And you already have yours.”

He came at last to Fenton who waited with great anticipation. Glip handed Fenton a crooked stick about a foot in length. It resembled a dead tree limb.

“Take this wherever you go,” Glip said. “When you need light, command it and it will be provided.”

Fenton’s expression changed from excitement to crestfallen as Glip spoke, then to resentment as Darius taunted, “Hey, Fenton got a medieval flashlight.”

Fenton spun on Darius, but Sam was quicker. He stepped between the two of them and faced Darius. “Enough!” he said. “Leave him alone or I’ll find a way to keep you from ever spending that reward.” He turned to Fenton and his tone immediately changed to one of friendship. “Fenton, I need you helping *me*, not fighting *him*. Who cares if you only got a stick?

Just hang on to it okay?” Fenton nodded his agreement and pocketed the stick.

Glip reached down and touched the watch on Fenton’s wrist. “As I mentioned, not everything has a pair on this side of the portal. Your timepiece will distinguish you in ways you do not want. It would be wise of you to remove it.”

Fenton took the watch off and dropped it into a pocket, then turned to scan the other three. “Did anybody bring your phone?”

The others shook their heads.

“Shoot. I’d love to know what it would turn into or if it had a pair.

Sam looked to Glip. “What do we do now? Is there someone, or preferably a bunch of people, who can help us get into the fortress and rescue Kell?”

“At this point, there are few who know of her kidnapping,” said Glip. “She was taken while in the forest with some of her protectors. The king of our land does not even know.” He looked to Fingal. “And as this point, it is necessary to keep it that way. Otherwise there would be much bloodshed.”

“You’re kidding,” said Sam. “Nobody to help us?”

Fingal shook his head. “You go alone. Glip will show you the way. Horis and Skoog will also accompany you.”

Sam said, “And we have to wait until tomorrow?”

“Yes,” said Glip quietly.

“Fine,” said Sam. He walked over to his pack, rolled out a blanket, and laid down. Hours later, Alexis could hear him still tossing and turning, unable to sleep.