

CHAPTER TEN: Fenton and the Old Lady

Fenton woke to the sound of splashing water. He blinked tired eyes and rolled his head to squint toward the noise. Horis and Skoog stood in a little creek, dipping their hands into the water and then scrubbing their bodies with their wet hands.

“It-t-t-’s so c-c-c-cold,” shivered Skoog.

Horis tried to nod, but his head only made quick jerking motions. “At l-least it w-w-woke us up al-all the w-way.”

Fenton smiled at the goofy little guys. If nothing else, they were entertaining. Then he looked at the water running quietly through the clearing. It entered from one side of the trees, flowed through a shallow bed, then disappeared into the forest on the other side with barely a sound. At first, he was surprised he hadn’t heard the creek the previous night. But thinking back about how tired they all were, plus the commotion with Darius — Darius! He sat up and saw Darius, sleeping in a sitting position, his back against a tree. Instantly, Fenton’s heart picked up speed, frustration building in him. This was going to be nothing but trouble.

He stood up and grabbed all but one of the water pouches from a stack that Fingal had left for them last night. He wandered across the clearing to the creek and knelt down to fill them.

“G-g-ood morning Master F-Fenton,” said Horis.

“Morning guys,” he replied without lifting his head. He pointed a few feet behind them. “Move into the sunlight. You’ll warm up faster.”

“Th-thank y-you, oh w-wise one,” said Skoog. As he took a step backward, he stumbled on a slippery rock and landed on his back in the sun. “Mu-much b-b-better.” Fenton shook his head, smiling inwardly.

“Y-you must b-be th-thirsty,” said Skoog seeing all the pouches.

Horis nudged him with his foot, “H-he’s filling them for ev-everyone. Th-that’s what friends do.”

Fenton glanced up and smiled at them. “Exactly.” He started to fill another pouch.

Skoog had pulled himself into a sitting position, a puzzled expression growing across his face. “Then why is one still over there?” he asked.

Fenton capped the pouch and dipped another one in the creek. “That one belongs to Darius. And as you said,” he motioned with his head to the water, “this is what friends do.”

Skoog’s hand shot to his mouth. “But...he’s not your friend?”

Before he could finish, Sam called out, “Fenton!”

“Almost done,” Fenton called over his shoulder.

“Fenton!” called Alexis in a worried voice. “You need to come over here.”

“In a second.”

“Now,” said Glip forcefully. “There is someone here to see you.”

Fenton’s grip on the pouch slipped and it drifted to the bottom of the creek. He slowly turned to see everyone else standing near their fire pit. They were all looking at an elderly woman who leaned on a gnarled staff. And she was pointing at Fenton.

Fenton stared at the woman and was instantly nervous. With her hunched back and dark cloak, he could only think one thing: *She'd better not offer me an apple.*

"I'll get the pouch," he heard Skoog squeak behind him.

"Yes," said Horis. "I'll stay here and help him."

Fenton wobbled to his feet and faced the woman who broke into a huge smile.

"Master Fenton," she croaked. "Welcome back."

His heart began to beat so loudly that he swore it was audible. He then realized his mouth was hanging open, so he consciously closed it. A moment later his eyes began to burn. It dawned on him that, once again, his eyes were as big as saucers. *How many times am I going to get wide-eyed? I hope I eventually get used to this place.* These thoughts jarred him from his shock, and he took a second to gather himself. He closed his eyes, attempted to calm his breathing and slow his pounding heart. When he opened his eyes, no one had moved.

He took a hesitant step toward the woman. "Everyone keeps welcoming us back," he said quietly. "Why?"

The woman smiled, "Because dearie, at long last you have returned to us."

"I've never been here before," Fenton said.

"But Fenton, it was you who told us to seek you out when you returned."

"Okaaay," he said hesitantly. "What do you want from me?"

The woman's face broke into a wide, toothless smile. "I want nothing from you. I have something *for you*." She nodded, standing straighter. She reached her hand into her cloak and pulled out a thin key.

She held it out to Fenton. He reached out and tentatively took it from him. He marveled at the weight of the key. Its size deceptively gave the appearance of fragility, but it was anything but delicate. He couldn't recall ever holding anything this small that weighed as much as this key did. The others took a couple steps toward him to get a closer look.

"My dad has an old key like that hanging by our door," said Sam. "He said he found it when we first moved in. He kept it because it looked cool."

Alexis stole a glance toward Fenton. "Our parents — " she started.

" — have one also," finished Fenton.

"Yeah, well I don't have one," chimed Darius. "And neither do my foster parents. So, I guess I'm not part of the cool, old-key club," he snorted. As he said this, a gust of wind blew through the clearing, spinning leaves and kicking up dust. Everyone dropped their heads and shielded their eyes for a couple seconds until it passed.

Fenton blinked his eyes and looked back to the old woman. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

But she was gone.

"Where'd she go?" Fenton spun around, as did the others. There was no sign of the woman. "Where'd she go?" he asked again.

“She was there,” came Skoog’s shaking voice. “Then there was wind. Then she was not there.” Fenton turned to Skoog, who clutched a dripping water pouch tightly to his chest.

“She’s...she’s a... witch,” he said quietly.

No one spoke until Fenton cried out, “That’s so cool!” He stepped toward Glip. “Are there more? I mean, other witches? What about guys who do magic? How powerful are they? And are they all good, like her? Or are there bad ones also?”

Glip silenced his questions with a raise of his hand.

“I do not know.”

“But — ”

“I repeat. I do not know. To all of your questions.” Glip’s gaze fell on Fingal and Clout. They shook their heads in unison.

Fingal gave Fenton a hard look. “I did not know of this woman’s existence until today.” His eyes narrowed. “But she was aware of yours. Do you know how?”

“No,” Fenton said, the excitement gone.

“You are confident you have never met her before,” Fingal asked.

“Never,” said Fenton a slight waver in his voice.

“Our hope was to keep your presence unknown to our world.” He faced Glip. “We cannot risk word getting out. If she were to tell others, your mission could be jeopardized. Pack your things and go. Now.”