

## CHAPTER TWO: The Visitor

Sam pulled clothes out of the dryer and put them into a basket. When his dad traveled, Sam's normal routine was anything *but* routine. Instead, it consisted of whatever he could do to occupy his time. He hated being home alone, so he filled his days with things like goofing off at the barn with his friends. It made the time fly. But there was also the constant list of things he had to get done around the house. And if *he* didn't do them, his dad would come home, exhausted from his trip, to a mountain of chores. And that wouldn't be fair. So tonight, it was folding laundry and washing dishes.

He closed the dryer door and, as it did most nights, his mind walked down a road he feared. Solitude was tough on Sam. He needed others around him, and he knew it. It's why he spent many nights at Fenton's house during his dad's trips. But there were some nights he just needed to be home. And on those nights, as it got later into the evenings, he would dwell on what it would be like to be alone forever. Even though their birth parents were gone, Fenton and Alexis still had each other. But if anything happened to his dad, Sam would be like Darius - parentless.

Carrying the basket toward his room, he consciously shifted his thoughts from the worst-case scenario to focusing on how glad he was that his dad worked so hard. In the same way Sam found things to do, in order to divert his attention from his loneliness, Sam thought his dad poured himself into his work to distract from the loss of Sam's mom. Sam had been two when his mom died, so he didn't have much in the way of memories. In fact, he didn't have one solid memory at all. He could only recall small images of hiking in the woods and that was it. And it left a hole in his life he wished he could fill. He also knew his dad felt the same way. Even years

later, there were nights Sam could hear his father crying quietly in his room when he thought Sam was asleep.

As he passed through the living room, Sam thought he saw movement in front of the house. He got excited.

“Dad?” he called out, moving toward the open door.

But there was no answer. He pushed the screen open with the clothes basket and poked his head out. Disappointed to find no one there, he backed into the house and headed to his room. He dropped the clothes onto his bed and headed for the kitchen. As he walked back through the living room he glanced at the empty doorway, then walked over and closed the door.

He went into the kitchen, plugged the sink, poured in soap and turned on the hot water. Pulling open the fridge, he grabbed a can of soda. But he failed to account for his fingers being slick with residue from the outside of the dish soap bottle.

As he closed the door, he lost his grip on the can and it shot across the kitchen floor, banging into the counter below the sink and ricocheting back toward the fridge. The can sprung a leak on impact, and the quick exit of the pressurized contents sent the can spinning wildly across the floor. It eventually stopped bouncing, but the soda didn't stop flying. Sam stumbled backward against the sink, accidentally putting his hand into the stream of hot water. He yelped in pain, spun around and shut off the water. He yanked a handful of paper towels off the roll and then froze when he heard a voice behind him. “Quite a mess you have made, Arthur.”

Sam turned around and found himself staring at an odd little creature in a leather tunic. An extremely weathered hat sat perched on its head, resembling the type worn by Robin Hood. The creature's head barely reached the top of the kitchen table. Yet its long pointy ears stretched

above even the top of the hat, balancing the hook-like nose that hung off the front of its face. To top it off, the creature's skin was either gray or blue. Or maybe a little bit of both.

Between them, the can finished spewing its contents, covering the floor in dark soda.

"Wh..what are you?" Sam stammered.

"I am a Grink. And I need your help," replied the creature calmly.

"Help?" choked Sam.

Sam tried to figure out if he could get past the creature and out of the kitchen. The creature was little but had placed itself directly between Sam and the doorway. It didn't appear dangerous, but that didn't stop Sam's heart from hammering in his chest.

The small creature took a step forward and Sam panicked. A survival instinct kicked in and Sam did the only thing he could think of—he threw the item in his hand. Unfortunately, the paper towels didn't even make it to the creature. They drifted to the ground between the two of them, landing in the soda and instantly soaking up some of the brown liquid.

The creature took another step and Sam backed into the kitchen counter. His arms groped across the counter-top and his left hand found the dish drainer. He closed his fingers around a plastic cup and threw it as hard as he could. The creature dipped his head and the cup sailed over his head into the living room.

"SOMEBODY HELP ME!" Sam yelled.

He grabbed a plate and flung it. The creature stepped to one side and it arced past him, crashing into the wall. Sam grabbed another plate and threw it, backing sideways across the kitchen as he did.

"HELP!" he yelled again. "ANYBODY! HELP!"

But it was no use. His house stood too far away for anyone to hear him. He was on his own. As he slid across the kitchen, trying to move as far away from this creature as possible, it continued to keep itself between Sam and the door. Sam looked at the kitchen window and thought about trying to get out that way. But he knew he couldn't get it open and crawl through before the creature could grab him. Throwing things appeared to be his only option. There were forks and knives in the dish drainer, and some heavy things on the counter. If he could hit him with just one of them, he'd have a chance of getting out. And if he held off long enough, Fenton or Alexis might come back. Or better yet, his dad might get home.

He picked up a knife. "Get out of my kitchen!" He threw the knife, and then a fork and another knife. Amazingly the creature sidestepped each one and moved back to block the doorway. Sam unloaded every utensil he could get his hands on, but each one missed. He let fly with the toaster but knew it would do no good. It didn't come close. But then his fist closed around an apple. He knew this was it. Like an outfielder trying to cut down a runner at home, Sam threw the apple toward the little creature. Instead of dodging however, the creature snatched the apple out of the air and casually took a bite. As he chewed, he began walking toward Sam. Sam grabbed for another projectile and came up empty handed. The counter was bare.

Panting, Sam looked around the kitchen and realized what he had done. Silverware everywhere, broken plates on the floor, cups and bowls in the living room. And in the midst of all of it stood a short little creature in a brown, leather tunic and a very worn-out hat. Eating an apple.

Sam had no choice left but to run for the doorway and hope he could force his way past the creature. Bracing himself against the counter, he pushed off and took two steps before hitting

the puddle of soda. His foot slid out from under him and he crashed to the floor. He scrambled backwards and slammed against the wall, dashing all hope of escape.

The creature moved toward him until he stood less than a foot away. “Are you hurt?” he asked, looking down at Sam.

Petrified, Sam replied, “Am I hurt? What? No! What...Who are you?” he asked.

“As I said, I am one who needs your help.” The creature paused to emphasize his next point. “But I am not the only one who is in need. You must help us rescue Kelly. Only then can you save your father.”

At the mention of his father, Sam felt a chill in his stomach. “What do you mean, ‘save my father’? He’s fine.” He looked toward the doorway. “And he’s supposed to be home soon. When he sees you—”

The creature interrupted. “I am not worried what Verne would do if he saw me. But Sam, he will not be home soon. That is why you are needed. And every moment we delay is a moment lost. The others should be summoned and then we must leave immediately. Only with The Warriors working together will you be able to save Kelly. Then, and only then, will you be able to heal your father.”

In an instant, Sam stopped worrying about what might happen to *him*. His only thoughts were now for his dad. He stood up quickly, grabbing a knife as he did. “Heal him?” The creature backed up a few steps as Sam pointed the knife at him. “What’s wrong with him? How do you know his name?!” He took another step toward the creature. “Where’s my dad!?”

The creature shook his head and held his hands out to his sides. “I do not know where he is. And you would not understand what has happened if I told you. You must see with your own eyes. Please, come with me. We must arrive before night falls.”

Sam glanced out the kitchen window into the dark, “What are you talking about? It’s already night. This is insane. I’m not going anywhere with you!” He tightened his grip on the knife. “Get out of my house!”

The Grink opened his mouth to reply when the front door opened. Sam immediately knew something wasn’t right. His father hadn’t called out for him as he usually did. And he hadn’t heard the sound of his dad’s keys swinging around. His dad always made a show of putting his keys back into his pocket with a flourish of an old-west gunslinger, spinning them around and around his index finger until flinging them into his pocket. No, something was definitely wrong.

Sam dropped the knife and pushed past the creature, knocking him into the living room as he bolted out of the kitchen. Sam watched his dad stumble through the doorway and lose his grip on everything he carried. The jacket he held flopped to one side and his briefcase sprung open as it hit the floor, spilling books and papers everywhere.

“Sam...get...Alfred and...” he coughed, “...Alice.” His legs buckled and he dropped to his hands and knees. Sam noticed his father kept one hand balled tightly against his stomach.

“Dad! What’s wrong? What happened?”

Verne looked up at his son and wheezed, “Sword...poison...Alfred...can...help.” He collapsed onto his back and his body convulsed with a violent coughing fit.

Sam dropped to his father’s side, “Dad! DAD!” Verne continued to cough as Sam jumped back to his feet and ran for his cell phone in the kitchen. He dialed 911 with one hand as he ran back into the living room. He saw his dad’s cell phone lying on the ground where it had tumbled out of his briefcase and picked it up. He practically yelled into his phone when the 911 operator answered, “Please hurry! My dad is really hurt. He said something about poison.”

Without hanging up, he dialed a different number on his dad's phone.

"Come on, come on. Pick up the ph...Fenton! Get your mom and dad over here now! It's my dad... LISTEN! He just got home and something's wrong with him. He said to get your parents." He hung up his dad's phone and dropped it onto the couch as he spoke to the operator, "Yeah, yeah, I'm here. Yes, that's my address. Please hurry."

Verne mumbled, "Saaam...De...ko...plsss...Grinksss...Gl...ip."

Sam again knelt down next to his dad. "What's going on?" he cried.

Verne reached out and grasped Sam's hand. He pulled him close. Sam thought his dad's face looked like old chalk, pale and brittle. His dad's eyes were glassy, as if focused on something far away. As he pulled Sam toward him, he rasped, "Kell...ell...ee...us...Glip."

Sam then saw his father's other hand. It had unclenched and Sam's stomach rolled inside him. Dried blood covered his hand and ran down the length of his arm. It seeped from a deep gash that sliced across the entire hand, from pinky to thumb. But it wasn't the blood that made him ill. The wound was badly infected and discoloration spread out from the gash. *How did this happen?* he thought.

A chill ran down his back. One person knew his father had been injured. And he was in the house. Sam spun toward the kitchen, but the creature was gone.

ÀÀÀ

Two paramedics wheeled the stretcher out the front door and slid Verne into the ambulance. One stepped into the back with Verne, and the other closed the doors and climbed in the driver's seat. The ambulance slowly pulled away and rolled down the road toward town.

Fenton's and Alexis' father, Alfred, dressed warmly against the chilly night, had his left arm wrapped around Sam. Worry lines added to his already wrinkled face. "Let's get the others and we'll follow the ambulance to the hospital."

Sam, almost in a trance, walked into the house, pulled a jacket off the hook behind the door and walked back outside. Alfred's wife, Alice, sat on the couch, concern etched into her features.

"Let's go, children," she said to Fenton and Alexis. She stood up from the couch and motioned to the other two who sat silently against the wall. They got up and stepped around Verne's things that had been shoved aside by the paramedics. The three of them followed Sam outside and Mrs. Brumley closed the door behind them.

Sam walked to the driveway and stopped to let the others get into the car first. As he waited, Sam realized Mr. Brumley hadn't gotten to the car yet. He turned and saw Alfred walking away from the house with a curious look on his face. Sam climbed into the backseat and watched Alfred glance back at the house one more time before he slid behind the wheel.

At first, Sam worried that Mr. Brumley had seen the little creature, but quickly decided he hadn't. He wouldn't just drive away if there was some *thing* in Sam's house. It must be long gone by now. It obviously ran away when his dad came home.

*Dad. What happened to you?*

Thoughts of his injured father overwhelmed him as they drove away from the house. Sam stared straight ahead, focused on the ambulance lights in the distance.