

PROLOGUE

Three figures emerged from the old wooden barn. They stood no more than four feet tall which, by itself, wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. However, their bluish-gray bodies and long pointy ears would definitely be cause for alarm. Thankfully, the fading daylight hid their features. The barn sat tucked just over a ridge on a small hill, and as the creatures walked toward the edge of the hill the first one spoke.

"We must move quickly, while it is dark," he said. He reached up and touched one of his ears, "This land does not have Grinks and its people would not react well if they were to see us."

"But The Warriors will be glad to see us, right Glip?" asked the second, the tallest and thinnest of the three.

"I do not believe so," replied the first. "They will not know us. They have not been to our land before."

"But what about the histories?"

"And the prophecies?" asked the third, a stocky version of the other two.

"The Warriors they speak of lived long ago. These ones are young - only thirteen years old."

They reached an area where they could look down the hill toward a small city in the distance. The leader, Glip, motioned toward it. "This world is very different from ours," he said. "It is much more advanced. And there are many more people than in Decapolis."

The other two Grinks stared down at the city. Glowing lights outlined homes, shops, and dozens of other buildings. A small baseball field blazed with light as children played and parents cheered. The illuminated steeple of a church's bell tower shone for blocks. And just beyond the church, flickering lights outlined a footpath that wound through a large park.

But separated from everything else, between them and the city, stood two homes. They were at either end of a dirt road that stretched around the hill. The homes weren't far from the city but had obviously been built with the intent of living away from the hub of activity.

"They are down there," said the leader, looking at the two houses. "I will get the three."

"And we will gather the fourth," said the shorter creature.

"Yes, Horis. The portal you need is located at that park." He pointed to the park on the far side of the church.

Horis nodded, then froze, "That building with the tall spire. It looks like the chapel at King Adair's castle."

"Yes. There are many similar things." He pointed to the barn they had just exited.

"Whoa," said Horis. "It's just like the one in Decapolis." Horis looked toward the city and across to a larger mountain in the distance. His eyes grew wide. "Whoa," he said again.

Then the third Grink whispered his own, "Whoa..." Glip and Horis turned to the tallest of the three. His head slowly swiveled back and forth, taking in the entire scope of the town. The numerous lights captured his attention most of all.

"There are so many torches. How do they make them burn so bright? And how are some of them burning downward? Are they wizards? Do they have the ability to make fire burn in any direction?" He looked into the distance and saw a coastline. "Can they make it burn in the water? Under the water?!"

His mouth dropped open. "And what are those?" He pointed toward a line of cars moving down a road. "How do they make them move without horses?"

"Skoog," said the leader. There was no response as Skoog's head maintained its constant motion, trying to take it all in. "Skoog," Glip said again as he stepped in front of him, blocking

his view. Skoog tried to look around him, but then stopped and made eye contact. “There is much wonder in this world,” said Glip. Skoog nodded. “And the Warriors will think the same when they reach Decapolis.”

Skoog took a step back, “They will see our world like I see theirs?”

“In a way, yes.”

Skoog’s head started bobbing up and down. “Then we must hurry. I want to show them everything!”

Glip smiled. “Go with Horis.” He looked at the bag slung over Horis’ shoulder. “He has everything you will need. And remember, you must not be seen by anyone other than the one you are retrieving.”

Skoog nodded. “Of course! You know how good Horis and I are at spying on people and staying hidden. We will get The Warrior and meet Fingal at the park, just like you asked.”

“Good. Now go. I will meet you back at the barn.”

Horis and Skoog hurried down the hill toward the city. Glip gave them a few minutes head start, then turned toward one of the lone homes on the hill. He took a deep breath and headed toward it.

CHAPTER ONE: Beginnings

“NO! Leave me alone!”

A young boy crashed to his back, sliding on the grass. He looked up scornfully at three boys, each larger than him. He tried to get up, but one of the trio shoved him back down. The boy scrambled backward, trying to put some distance between him and the three brutes.

“Stay down, *Fenton*,” the bully said. He wasn’t the biggest of the three but was clearly the leader. “*Fenton*,” he mocked again. “It even *sounds* stupid.”

He stepped toward the boy, kicking aside a butterfly net as he did. “Did your parents not have the brains to come up with a normal name?” He lashed out with his foot, kicking Fenton in the stomach. “Oh, that’s right. You don’t have real parents. You’re *adopted*.” He glanced at the other two bullies and they laughed approvingly at his taunting.

Fenton lifted his chin, a smirk visible through the pain, “Seriously? That’s how you’re going to make fun of me? That I’m adopted, and my name sounds funny? You’re an idiot,” he laughed. “You don’t have parents either. And your name is *Darius*.”

Unprepared for this brave response, the bullies froze. The other two, Flat-top and Rings as Fenton thought of them, due to one’s haircut and the other’s numerous rings in his left ear, looked to Darius for a reaction. Fenton used this distraction to get to his feet. Darius stopped laughing, grabbed Fenton by the front of his shirt and shoved him against a tree. Fenton’s head made a hollow *thunk* when it connected.

Darius’ face twisted into a snarl and the shadows made his eyes appear completely black. “That’s right. I get to do whatever I want. No stupid parents telling me what to do.”

Holding Fenton against the tree, he pulled back his other fist to hit him in the face. But as he started his swing, a hand grabbed his wrist and stopped him

“Wha..?” Darius spun around and found himself face to face with another boy his age. A girl stood beside him.

“Stay out of this, Sam” he growled.

“Ok. Then stop picking on my friend,” replied Sam. He released Darius’ wrist and looked him in the eye. “Leave him alone and go pick on someone else.” Sam’s arms hung loosely at his

sides, but each hand balled into a fist, ready if needed. Sam walked around Darius, never breaking eye contact, to stand next to Fenton. “Better yet,” he said, “don’t pick on anybody.”

Darius blew out his breath in disgust and jerked his head toward the street.

“Come on guys, let’s get out of here. It just turned into Dorksville.” He walked around his two followers and headed across the grass.

Flat-top shouldered Fenton, knocking backward into the tree again, and followed Darius. Rings, who was walking past the girl, laughed as Fenton yelped.

With a gentle tap of her left foot, the girl bumped Rings’ right foot as it came off the ground. His foot swung behind his left leg, colliding with his ankle as he took his next step. Tripping himself, he lost his balance and tumbled forward, grabbing the back of Flat-top as he went down. The two of them landed in a heap on the grass.

Darius looked back and glared at them. “Get up you morons.”

Flat-top pushed Rings off him and jumped to his feet, his hands clenched. Rings looked back at the girl as he picked himself up. She cocked her head and smiled sweetly at him.

Fenton knew the kid was stuck. He couldn’t say or do anything. He had just been bested by a girl but couldn’t admit it in front of Darius. Rings turned away quickly and pushed Flat-top toward Darius.

With one final dig, Darius looked at the girl, “Hey, Alexis. Too bad *you* weren’t the one who grabbed my hand. I would have liked that.” He winked at her and turned away.

“You wish!” she said.

Darius just laughed. “Someday,” he called over his shoulder. “Just wait. You’ll realize how awesome I am.” His two buddies slapped Darius on the back in agreement.

Grrr,” Alexis growled. “He drives me so nuts!” She went over to Fenton and checked his head, “You’re bleeding.” Her eyes blazed with fire as her gaze shifted to where the bullies walked through the park. “This has happened too many times.” She bent down and picked up a golf ball-sized rock. She straightened and took aim.

“Don’t,” said Sam.

She ignored him and let the rock fly. It whistled through the air, crashing through tree branches fifteen feet to the left of Darius and his crew.

Darius turned at the sound. He kept walking as he watched the rock bounce off branches and tumble to the ground. Without breaking stride, he glanced back at Fenton and laughed.

“You throw like a girl” he snorted.

“That’s it!” she said. Her arms came up into a boxer’s pose and she started walking toward him.

Sam’s hand grabbed her arm. “It’s not worth it.” He smiled at her and laughed. “Plus, we already know you could take him.”

Fenton nodded in agreement.

Alexis sighed in resignation and looked at Fenton, “So what happened *this* time?”

“Nothing.”

Alexis pursed her lips.

Fenton waved her off. “Honest! It was nothing. Darius was just being a jerk again.” He turned to his rescuer, “Thanks, Sam. I owe you another one.”

“No problem,” said Sam. “Just glad we got here when we did.”

Fenton straightened his shirt, “I could have stalled a little longer.”

Alexis reached up and tapped the tree. “Is that what you call this? Stalling?” She put her hands on her hips.

“Stupid sister,” Fenton muttered. “Let’s just go home,” he said. The other two nodded in agreement and, led by Sam, the three of them walked away, talking and laughing as they went.

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Sam and Alexis walked together as they made their way up the road that lead away from their town, into the hills. They crested a rise and stopped where the road branched to the right and left. The two of them waited patiently for Fenton who had fallen a few yards behind.

“Why...do...you guys...always want...to walk...so fast,” he huffed between breaths.

“If you went outside more often, maybe walking home wouldn’t be so hard,” teased Alexis.

“Well...maybe...if you...didn’t...” Fenton shook his head. “Never...mind.”

Sam chuckled and said, “Meet you guys at the barn tomorrow?”

“Won’t you want to hang out with your dad?” asked Fenton.

“No. We’ll catch up tonight. Plus, he’ll probably want to rest most of the day. He’s usually wiped when he gets back. It’ll be fine.”

“OK,” said Alexis.

Fenton nodded in agreement.

“Great. See you in the morning,” said Sam.

“Later, Sam,” said Fenton. He grabbed his sister’s arm and pulled her toward the road on the left. “Let’s go, Alex.”

Alexis smiled at Sam again, “See you at the barn.”

Sam watched them for a moment, then turned toward his home. For the moment, their two houses were the only ones on this hill above Cape Solid. They sat halfway to the top, at opposite ends of two dead-end roads. The distance was enough to provide privacy, but close enough to be within sight of one another.

Cape Solid sat nestled in a valley between this hill and a small mountain littered with shallow caves. A large grocery store sat on one side of the town, a department store on the other. In the middle of the town, surrounded by a few hundred homes, a couple dozen stores, and two large parks stood a quaint church. The crowd at the baseball field roared as the crack of a bat echoed up the hill. At the sound, Sam glanced back toward the town. He thought he saw an odd glow at the other park, but it disappeared as he peered toward it. Other than the baseball field, the rest of the town was quiet.

But in contrast to the small-town feel were the outskirts of the town. On both ends of the town sat construction sites. Dozens of homes and other assorted buildings were in different stages of completion.

Sam knew their town was growing. Buildings were being constructed as quickly as plans could be approved. And with this growth, he and his friends knew sooner, rather than later, they would have to share their hill with other homes and other families. But until then it belonged to them, including the barn situated over the next rise.

From Sam’s house you could just see the peak of the barn. It belonged to Sam’s dad, somehow connected to the property they owned. But his dad never went there. He had it periodically inspected for safety and had told the kids as long as it remained safe, they could

have it to themselves. That suited them just fine. When they played there, it was their own world. Their sanctuary. It was secluded enough to feel as if they were in a far-off land.

Thinking about the barn and looking forward to tomorrow, Sam smiled as his friends walked away.

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."

Erik & Josh Ernstrom
mortsnre@gmail.com
@Mortsnre