

## **Chapter 1**

It took a moment for Jacob to take in the unusual landscape. To his left a veritable forest of majestic trees dressed in lush green foliage sat neatly arranged in evenly spaced rows. Their branches swayed in a steady autumn breeze and yet not a single leaf fell. The ground reminded him of a golf fairway, a sea of meticulously maintained lime green grass spread out in all directions. Looking forward an empty paddock rose to the top of a not too distant hill. The sky, a stunning vivid maroon sunset complimented by a velvet hue, gave him reason to pause.

A white picket fence snaked to the horizon at a right angle to where he stood, or should have been standing, for he floated a few feet on the air. A minor adjustment had his sneakers touch the dirt. A bell rang and Jacob shook his head. Wards. The old man had setup a warning system. He would be running now, unable to stop. Not exactly the ideal situation and Jacob chastised himself for not checking first. He needed to be careful for the elderly were often susceptible to fright and he could cause more harm than good. He liked helping people and besides he could really do with the money.

He need not hurry for he had plenty of time. Snared within a trap of his own mind his mark would not wake for several hours. Jacob hesitated for he had no idea which direction to head. He closed his eyes and stretched out with his thoughts. He searched in a sweeping circle until he recognised the familiar touch of another. He could be there in an instant if he chose to however that may not prove wise. Instead he walked quickly at first and then slowed as he approached.

With a mental tweak he reduced in size and demeanour to that of a 14 year old boy. His objective appeared remarkably similar to the real world. Messy patches of white hair hung above a pair of drooping long ears while glasses sat on a slightly bent and pointed nose. He wore black leather shoes, a thick pair of suede trousers with a flannelette shirt and braces running over each shoulder.

Jacob drew near. His one size too large rainbow coloured t-shirt swayed from side to side as it matched his steady gait. He wore shorts underneath and bony thin knees protruded. His exposed skin looked olive in the twilight making his teeth and eyes stand out. "Hi."

"You can't be here. No one comes here this is a dangerous place."

"Really? Looks nice enough to me. Got any gum?"

"Bubble gum? ... Nope. I've got no teeth see and what would I want with gum. Be on your way now sonny, it's not safe I tell you," replied the half bent man as he waved with his walking stick.

"Can we talk a bit? I'm in no hurry?"

The man stilled himself as if he would say something else before he quietly replied "There's nowhere to sit and I've got to be on my way."

Jacob thought for a second and pointed past him. "What about there? That looks like a good spot?"

The man turned and ambled to the bench seat. He half fell onto the wooden surface as he said "I can't stay long."

"That's okay. So like umm where're you heading anyways?"

"Anywhere, nowhere. Not here that's for sure."

"What's so wrong with here? Looks nice enough to me."

“The shadows. Can’t you see? If you look at the right time there’s something there. My eyes aren’t what they use to be but I can feel it watching me. ... When you look—”

Jacob looked around as he replied “Nah nothing, honest.”

“What would you know you’re only a boy?”

“I tell you what, how’s about I give you something that might help?” said Jacob as he pulled a stone from his pocket and held it up into the light.

“What is that?”

“A river stone from a place far away from here.”

The man chortled as he asked “What can a stone do? I don’t have a slingshot and it’s big. Big and fearsome.”

“Here I’ll show you,” replied Jacob as he took the man’s hand and placed it over the smoothed surface.

Instantly everything shifted for the pair looked on high down at the bench. Their life energies flickered silvery white. The forest sat off into the distance and only the white fence line gave any sense of distance.

The man wrenched his hand away and asked “What? ...How? What was that?”

Jacob smiled. “A sight stone. It shows every living thing for miles and miles in all directions. You say there’s something out there and this proves there’s not. We’re the only ones here. ... Simple.”

“Where did you get it from?”

“It was a gift from my mother, when I was very young.”

“Remarkable.”

“With this you won’t need to run anymore, you can see you’re all alone. ... Here try again, I’ll show you how to use it proper like.”

The man looked warily at the small object as Jacob said “It can’t hurt you honest. It’s easy to use once you know how.”

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Jacob escaped the trance with familiar ease. He had never once become bored or bothered by it. He savoured the feeling of bliss. The transition always felt the same. The intensely private moment of solitude before the world again descended. His senses raced back into his body and he felt cold. The wooden floor boards offered little comfort and he stretched out stiff legs. He sat for a few moments as his heart rate climbed to normal and breathing regulated.

He ate a biscuit and drank from his water bottle. He stood and moved as quietly as possible, navigating the foreign house in the dark. He collected the cash off the kitchen table. He sighed before he turned and slipped out the front door.

He had sold his sight stone for a measly \$200.