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The dark day

This is the story of a boy named Finn who lived by the sea. Finn thought he was like every other boy in the village. One day he found out he was not. That day started out like every other day for Finn.

‘Come on, lad, I want you to come fishing with me today,’ said Finn’s great uncle Keenar.

Finn said nothing. He sat and ate his porridge.

‘Go on, Finn,’ said his great aunt Tia. ‘Keenar needs your help today. He must catch as many fish as he can. The fish will swim south any day now on their journey to the Great Glassy Sea. Storm season is coming.’

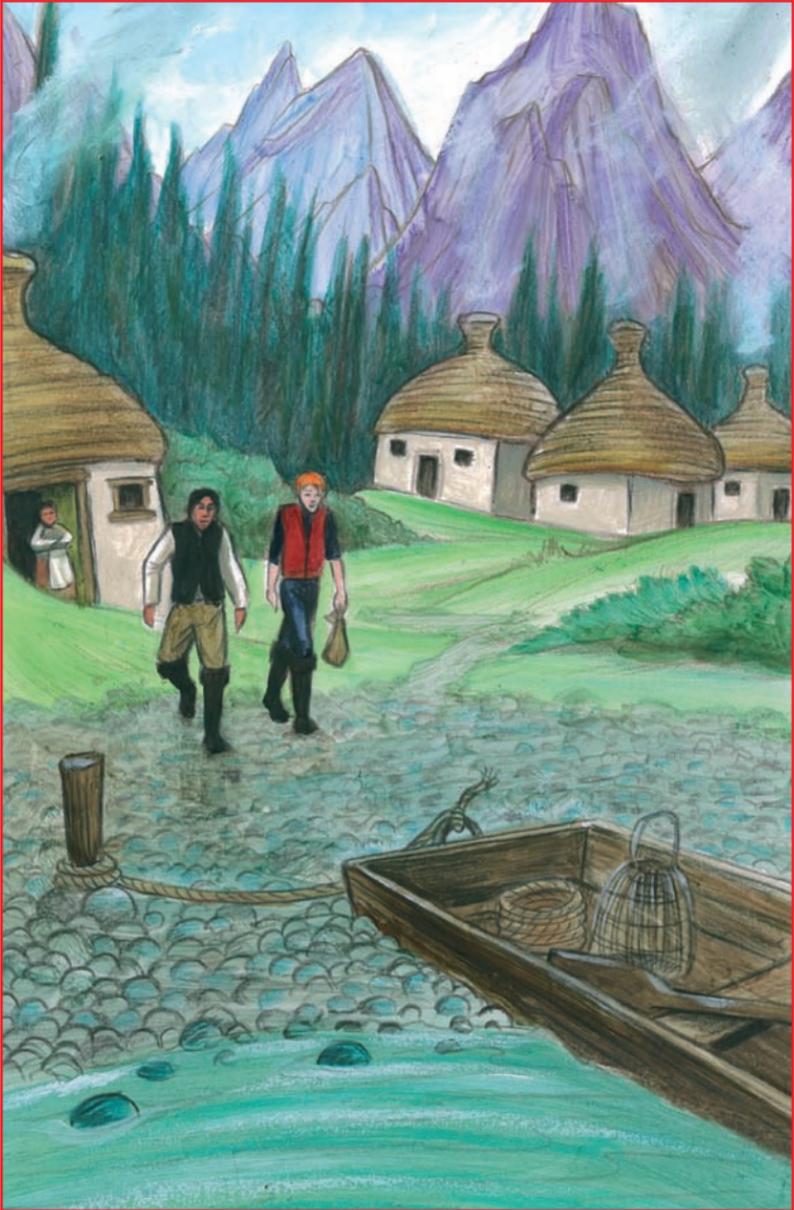
Finn said nothing. He looked out of the window of their small hut on the beach of black pebbles on the west coast of Avondel. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, and the sea was still. Yet he knew that storm season was only days away. It could start tonight. There was no fishing in storm season. And their store of fish was not full.

‘Those fish won’t wait for us, lad,’ said Keenar, standing up and pulling on his fishing boots.

Finn said nothing, but he stood up and pulled on his fishing boots too.

‘Here, take this,’ said Tia, giving the man and the boy some bread and cheese in a cloth bag.

Tia stood in the doorway of the little hut. She watched Keenar and Finn walk across the beach of black pebbles. She watched the dark-haired, dark-skinned man and the thin, red-haired boy. She sighed. Everybody in the village was dark-haired. Everybody except Finn. She sighed again as she watched them push Keenar’s boat into the water. Then she turned, went into the hut and started sweeping.



Keenar's boat was small and flat, like every other boat on the water. These boats were only found on this part of the west coast of Avondel. It took years for people to learn how to row them. The men of Finn's village could row their boats across the water as fast as most men could run on land. Every villager, even very small children, loved being out on the sea. Every villager except Finn. He got seasick.

It was all right in shallow water – Finn didn't get seasick when they went fishing in the bay. It was when they went out deeper, out past the bay, that Finn got sick.

Keenar looked at the water around the boat. He shook his head. 'We'll have to go into the deep water today, lad,' said Keenar. 'The fish have left the bay. We'll have to follow the last of the fish out past Shark Island.'

Finn hated going into the deep water. But he nodded. He sat at the front of the boat. Keenar stood at the back of the boat, rowing. He rowed by using one long oar that went deep into the water. He swept the oar from side to side. Keenar was strong. He'd been rowing boats for fifty years or more. His boat moved across the still water of the bay faster than some men can run.

When they left the bay, the water turned from green to dark blue. They were in deep water now.

Finn started to feel sick.

'Keep busy, lad. Get the sails ready,' said Keenar. Outside the bay, there was enough wind for the sail. Finn got the sail ready and gave the ropes to Keenar, who put the oar away.

Finn started to feel very seasick.

'Look at the horizon, lad,' said Keenar. 'That can help stop seasickness. Here, you sail the boat. That helps too.'

Finn held the ropes of the sail. He looked past Shark Island to where the dark blue of the sea met the light blue of the sky. Then he saw the dark clouds on the horizon. Storm season was coming – soon.

Later that day, Keenar and Finn carried two baskets of fish into the hut.

Tia smiled. 'Two baskets! Wonderful!'

Finn said, 'Can I go to the forest?' Finn loved spending time in the forest. He loved the quiet, still trees. None of the other boys from the village went into the forest. It was too dark and quiet for them. But Finn liked being alone there. He spent hours sitting and watching the birds, small animals and insects of the forest. He loved watching them building their nests and collecting their food. Most of all, he loved watching the new-born birds learning to fly.

'Yes, Finn. Go. But be back before the sun sets, please,' said Tia.

Tia and Keenar watched Finn run down the road towards the forest. His red hair shone in the afternoon sun.

Tia sighed.

'He's a good lad,' said Keenar. 'He worked hard all day. He was seasick again. But he kept working.'

Just as he reached the forest, Finn saw a group of soldiers riding towards him on the road that led to the village. There were eight of them. They rode black war horses and wore the red and black colours of the warlord Gondar. Every person in Avondel lived in fear of the warlord and his soldiers. Finn hid behind a large tree.

Then Finn saw an old man and an old woman walking along the road. It was Bentar and Nita. Finn often chopped their wood for them. They were carrying a basket of vegetables to the village. They sold their vegetables at the evening markets. Two of the soldiers stopped next to Bentar and Nita. The other six soldiers rode on.

'Stop, old man! Stop, old woman!' yelled one soldier. 'Stop in the name of Gondar, warlord of Avondel!'

Bentar and Nita stopped. They looked at the ground.

The second soldier got off his horse and marched over to Bentar and Nita.

'Tell me, does a boy with red hair live in this village?' the soldier yelled at them.

Bentar and Nita looked at each other. They looked frightened. But they both shook their heads.

'You're lying!' yelled the soldier. 'The sky readers told Gondar that the boy lived by the sea on the west coast. They said he lived within sight of Shark Island. He must live in this village. Tell me where the boy with red hair is.'

The old people didn't speak.

'Tell me now!' The soldier hit Bentar. Nita screamed and dropped the basket. Potatoes rolled across the road.

Hiding behind the tree, Finn was frightened. *Gondar's soldiers are looking for a boy with red hair? I'm the only boy with red hair in the village, he thought. The sky readers can see the past, the present and the future. What was written in the sky about me? What did they tell Gondar about me?*

He heard Nita scream again. This time the soldier had hit her.

'Where is the boy with red hair?' yelled the soldier. 'Speak!' *I have to stop this, thought Finn.*

He was about to come out from behind the tree when he heard the sound of a trumpet.

The first soldier said, 'Leave them. The others have found something. Maybe they've found the boy.'

Finn heard the trumpet again. The second soldier got back on his horse and the soldiers rode away.

Bentar and Nita started picking up their potatoes. Finn came out from behind the tree. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Let me help...'

'Finn!' said Nita. 'Run home, now! Don't let the soldiers see you, but run!'

Just as Finn started running back to the little hut on the pebbly beach, he heard thunder. He looked up. The sky was dark and full of black clouds. Storm season had come.