

# The Tusk Destinies (Exerpt)

## Chapter 1

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“This is the worst smell in the world!” exclaimed Eric Wong to anyone who was listening. But no one was. His grandparents, Aiden and Nora Banks, were too busy humming away in their own world.

Usually used as a lab for the Fernite Secret Service, his grandparents’ basement had been converted to a make-shift tropical resort. Plastic palm trees, tropical flowers, and hula music filled the room. And in the centre, where Eric was stationed, was the source of Eric’s odor dilemma – a blown-up kiddie paddle pool filled with a lumpy sludge.

Using his hand a filter, the twelve-year old unsuccessfully tried to purify the humid, musky air as he inhaled. He bent over the pool, looking deep into the scum-crusted mud, then drew back in surprise as a couple of lizard eyes not attached to any lizard popped up unexpectedly on the surface.

According to his grandma, this disgusting sludge was the traditional beverage of the Fall Harvest – the most important day of the year for Fernites, like themselves.

This didn’t mean anything to Eric. He knew nothing about Fernite traditions or even what it was they harvested. It wasn’t until a couple of months ago that he even knew what a Fernite was. All he knew was that when his grandparents asked him to

come to Toronto for the Harvest Celebration over the Thanksgiving weekend, he jumped at the opportunity to escape his boring predictable life with his parents in small town Indian Head.

From across the room, Eric studied his grandma and grandpa as they ran around in fluorescent-orange, protective wet suits and metal plated golf shoes, finishing the final steps of the odorous beverage.

He had to admit they were pretty cool. Working as undercover agents, they often were away on top-secret cases and had excellent stories to tell of their adventures. But it was the fact that they weren't human, but Fernites and came from a place where potions, magic, and mystical creatures were an everyday norm, that made them literally out of this world.

Interrupting his thoughts, his grandma, Nora, loudly announced the next step of the beverage recipe: "Three cups of grated toenail clippings pickled in strawberry juice."

The words magically appeared in the air and his grandpa quickly rummaged through jars and bags in search of the unusual ingredient. He rushed it over to her in a large plastic drum. Measuring the desired amount, she dumped it into the pool. With a wave of her hand, the suspended words wavered and blurred, the next step of the recipe magically appearing in its place.

Eric, too, was wearing an orange wet suit and golf shoes. He was the designated potion-maker, but this was not as cool as it sounded. The job of the potion-maker was to mix together all the things his grandma threw into the brew and keep it moving. But you didn't do it with a spoon. You did it with your feet. Or more precisely, you did it by swishing and kicking around the sludge in the kiddie-pool.

Sweating excessively, Eric stomped around and around in the pool. He couldn't wait for this part to be done. At first it had been fun, but now the thick mud-like substance was mid-calf and hard to move. The smell was also starting to get to him.

Not that it smelled bad. It wasn't like rotten eggs or stinky gym socks. Instead it was nauseatingly sweet and intense – like being smothered in old lady perfume and then dumped into a vat of cherry Jell-o. He wrinkled his nose and grimaced at the seething, lumpy mixture. Maybe if he shuffled his feet faster, it would look less like toxic waste and more like a beverage.

“It's not toxic waste,” commented Nora from across the room, as if reading his mind. She had recently dyed her short hair tangerine to match the wet suits and the little spiky tips quivered like orange lawn on top of her head as she spoke. “This is the traditional vintage of our people. Every fall we make it on the eve of the harvest and then drink it once the moon is full. If made correctly and drunk at exactly the right temperature, you will foresee the future of the next year.”

Eric looked at the substance bubbling below his feet. Yes, drinking this would certainly cause something. Ulcers, hallucinations, diarrhea, death, but he wasn't sure about fortune-telling dreams.

“This is the last ingredient,” Eric's grandpa, Aiden, announced. He walked over and dumped a vat full of steaming, yellow-bellied slug guts into the pool. They fizzled upon contact and dissolved into the mixture.

Eric stuck out his tongue, completely disgusted.

“Aaah!” sighed Aiden loudly, plopping himself on a lawn chair in front of the pool. “It's good to relax. I'm getting too old for all this potion making stuff.”

He dangled his feet into the sludge, kicking away gently with his golf shoe.

“Nora, my love, come join me.”

“Just give me a minute here.” Eric’s grandma placed three crystal goblets and a large ladle on the squat poolside table. Slipping on a pair of zebra striped sunglasses, she nestled into the reclining plastic patio chair beside her husband.

“Oh it does feel good to sit down,” she said, resting her legs on the edge of the pool. “You were right, Aiden. Decorating the basement like a luau makes all the difference. It’s as if we’re celebrating down in the tropics like we did the first year we met.” She pulled the floor lamp closer and adjusted herself under it like a sunbather.

“Remember those days?”

“I sure do. Meeting you on the Tartamortus Case was the best thing that ever happened to me. One day we really should thank him.”

“Thank Tartamortus!” gasped Eric in disbelief, stopping in mid-stomp. “Are you nuts?” Tartamortus was, in Eric’s opinion, the vilest creature to walk the planet. Since being born out of the toxins leftover from a deadly virus a couple hundred years ago, the shape-shifting shadow creature had killed and destroyed entire colonies making him the most dangerous criminal on the planet.

“Hmmm...I have to admit, in the past he did try to kill us,” responded Eric’s grandpa with a bemused grin.

“Many times,” interjected Nora. “And, he did say I was ‘old’ last summer.”

“Horrendous insult, I must say. Still...,” said Aiden. “I bet it would eat him up to know that something he did turned out good. I can picture the shocked look on his bony shadowy face now.”

Eric rolled his eyes, but couldn't keep from smiling. He had to admit it would be funny seeing the evil shadow creature shocked. Eric had encountered Tartamortus over the summer break and the memories were vivid nightmares in his mind. The creature smelled like rotten flesh and had eyes that penetrated your soul.

“Are you sure you don't want to join us in the moon ceremony, Eric?” asked Nora, breaking into his thoughts. “It's only a few minutes from now.”

Eric quickly shook his head, looking apprehensively from the brew to the third goblet on the tray. He had enough of the bubbling mud and now that he knew how it was made, there was no way he was drinking it.

“That's too bad. This looks like the best Harvest Cocktail we've ever made.” She closed her eyes and took a deep whiff. “Mmmm, I especially like the subtle cherry fragrance. Very intoxicating.”

“Yeah, I agree,” said Aiden. “I think the extra-aged tropical bird droppings really added something.”

Eric's stomach churned. He gazed dumbfounded at his grandparents lounging by the pool as if they were on a beach in Hawaii. They were just so weird it was hard to believe they were related to him.

He shook the sludge off his shoes and stepped out of the pool. Every muscle in his gangling, skinny body hurt and his short dark hair was plastered to his head from sweating so much. “How can you two wear these orange suits? I'm practically melting.”

“It's not only you. We're uncomfortable too,” responded Nora. She wiped a few beads of perspiration from her brow. “But there's no other alternative. The suits are made out of the most indestructible fabric in the Fernite Realm and although not the most

breathable of materials, it's best to be prepared when making the Harvest Brew. The ingredients in the drink are very powerful and eat through most things. Until they are neutralized, you have to be careful it doesn't touch exposed flesh."

"How will you know when it's neutralized?" Eric looked quizzical at the sludge. Even though he wasn't going to consume the stuff, he was still curious.

"That's easy. When it stops bubbling and the vapor turns a light pink, then it's ready." She gestured to the pool. "See it's already starting to settle."

Although still a bit on the lumpy side, the brew had transformed from its original sickening yellowish-green to light lavender. And the steam swirling across the cooling surface did have a slight pinkish tinge.

"What's it at now, Aiden?"

Eric's grandpa pulled a large thermometer out of his wet suit and dunked it into the sludge. "Ninety-two degrees," he announced, happily. "Perfect drinking temperature."

Nora clapped her hands together in glee. "Oh, this is going to be a great party. I just know it!"

She grabbed the ladle, and scooping up an oozing clump of the beverage, globbed it into one of the crystal glasses. She, then, gently topped the lavender sludge with a miniature paper umbrella, bendy-straw and a slice of pineapple.

Eric watched, impressed. The sludge looked almost drinkable under its tropical disguise.

She did the same for a second glass and handed it to Aiden.

“You’re sure you don’t want to try?” She held up a steaming ladleful in Eric’s direction.

He shook his head quickly. “No thanks. I’ll just watch this time. Maybe next year.”

“Okay. But you don’t know what you’re missing.”

Eric doubted it. In his opinion, there was no way the stuff was drinkable, and the only thing he was missing out on was a trip to the hospital.

His grandparents’ happily clinked glasses shouting “To a happy year!” Then they took a long sip of the beverage, sucking hard to get the thick mixture to pass through the straw. Eric watched anxiously. Any second now, he expected them to collapse, clutching their stomachs in pain.

“Mmmm...that was good,” said Nora, the first to down her glass. “See any visions yet?”

“Nope,” responded Aiden, smacking his lips. “Guess I’ll need another glassful.” Without waiting for Nora to get the ladle, he dipped his goblet directly into pool and filled it with sludge.

“You guys must have stomachs of steel,” said Eric. He shook his head in amazement as he climbed the stairs to the main quarters. He couldn’t wait to wash the sweet stench off. After four hours of sloshing around in the pool, he wouldn’t be surprised if it was permanently meshed into his skin and nostrils.

Shedding the dreaded orange wetsuit, he jumped into the shower and sighed. How good it felt to be clean and scent-free again. He closed his eyes, allowing the warm

water wash over his tired, achy body for a few minutes, then grabbed the shampoo bottle and squirted a small amount onto his head.

“Ahem...Sir?”

Screaming, he whirled and yanked the shower curtain around him. Water sprayed across the floor and wall, but his heart was pumping too wildly for him to care.

“So sorry to disturb.” The voice was gentle and polite. The large eyes watched him unperplexed by the chaos they had caused.

Eric gasped and tried to speak, but nothing came out.

Standing before him was a creepy-looking blue creature wearing a plaid rain poncho and matching shower cap.