

CHAPTER ONE

WELCOME TO BARONUNE

This summer is going to change my life forever. At least, that is what I was told before I left for this old, rundown train station. “Rundown” is a bit much but saying “it’s dirty” is an understatement.

I live out in Old Country, a small, overlooked district on the outskirts of the kingdom of Baronune. There is nothing—and I mean nothing—but sand, sand, and more sand. There’s also the occasional tumbleweed: dead tangled vines clustered together with the sole purpose to go wherever the wind takes it. I am a little envious, watching one roll through the station along with any other scraps of trash trying to escape this district.

The floor is sand. The walls are built of adobe. No color, only tan, and the sun beams through open windows scattered throughout the structure, leaving very little room for shade. I stand alone, waiting for my train to take me to the Royal District of Baronune over a hundred miles east across these barren lands. Where civilizations actually thrive.

That’s where my cousins live. I stay out here in the middle of nowhere with my Uncle Lester. He’s against the lifestyle of Baronune but thought this would be a good experience for me. A chance to explore the world outside of my codices. To do more than sit in my room and strategize the many ways to win at the game, King’s Men.

A game where you and your opponent take twelve pieces that represent knights that must use a cup of dice to progress across a board

that simulates a battlefield in attempts to make a direct attack on the opposing player.

So, it's like chess, but with decks of cards on each side that represent magic and abilities to make the game more challenging. Honestly, that was my initial plan for the summer. I wanted to perfect new ways to defeat other players so that once I started my new schoolyear I could already prove that I was not to be taken lightly—to be a step up on my unforeseen competition, or lack thereof, since not too many kids my age are as good at the game as I am.

They play too linear, only seeing the task of going for the direct approach, whereas I play to conquer the board as quickly and tactfully as possible, playing around my opponent. Even my former instructors found it difficult to play against me. I smile at this but living in a population of 50 doesn't leave much for competition.

Maybe I will discover a challenge once I arrive in the Royal District. My uncle says my cousin, Sophia, is good. At least, better at the game than he is. I usually beat him within a few minutes. I dare say I look forward to a new challenge. I can only play against myself for so long before it becomes too stale.

I roll a pebble beneath my old, worn-out loafers. The winds howl outside the windows. Whiffs of sand kick up and brush across my face, dusting my hair. I am continuously blinded to where I have to rub my eyes just so I can keep staring at the nothingness around me.

It is roughly twenty minutes since I arrived at the station. The train should be arriving soon. I saw no reason to bother my uncle with the trouble of walking me here. There's little that happens out in Old Country to be concerned for safety.

Also, I'll be thirteen by fall, so my uncle believes I can take on a little more responsibility to better shape me into a man of tomorrow. That, and he was busy manning one of the three shops that he owns.

Minutes pass, and then an hour. If I were the conductor, I wouldn't waste the time visiting Old Country, either. To come all the way out here for a few measly commoners that don't make enough to warrant living in one of the classier societies of Arcasia—a continent divided up by its three kingdoms left after the Days of Hellsfire.

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I'm not too big on our history, as we get more in-depth with that subject in the next school year. The three include the southwestern kingdom known as Baronune, where everything is born of sand, the kingdom of Woodsforge that is made up of three stone cities surrounded by rigid mountain walls that cover Northern Arcasia with its forest greens and mining systems of gold and silver, and lastly, the forbidden kingdom lost in the eastern trees is known as Dragon's Guard. The Garden of Dragons to some.

Everything I've heard about it is nothing but fairytales. Legends of enchanted creatures and mystical warriors. It is supposed to be the oldest of the lands, soaked in lore, and apparently where magic thrives. That's what my uncle would tell me before he'd tuck me into bed—when I was young enough that the concept of magic seemed fascinating.

Then I grew up, and I realized that it was all a hoax. Stories of magic are lies.

"If such a thing existed, then why do we live in such an ugly back-of-the-mind barren wasteland?" I exclaim to the ceiling, my hands held high as if expecting an answer from the heavens.

I use the word "heavens" very loosely. Needless to say, magic is fake, reality sucks, and I wish there was an end-all answer that came with the snap of one's fingers. Sadly, we all must face the truth. The world we live in is a truly unforgiving place.

Finally, I hear the whistling of the train approaching. I snatch up my pack. An old worn-out brown shoulder bag that has more pockets than necessary. It makes for good use, seeing as my ragged gray trousers can barely hold themselves up.

I use my scarf to wipe the sweat from my brow. I brought it for the occasional sandstorm since I had no idea if the train would arrive on time, and I don't need any more grain in my diet. I am already skin and bones. Thin with hardly any muscle mass. Enough to warrant being able to get in and out of bed in the morning but not to the point where I look like I'm starving.

Rations come in little hordes that being "Old Country" mostly means being on a rice-and-wheat diet, with Putt-Puk acting as our source of protein.

Imagine the most boring bowl of oatmeal but with less of a thrill to live. And don't ask what is in it. No one knows.

The train comes to a screeching halt before me—a large slab of rolling steel that has more than enough carriers for its vast number of travelers.

Me.

Just me. Alone.

Maybe three people unload from the train. An old couple and the monthly delivery man lugging off a metal wagon full of rations. Crates and containers of bread, rice, Putt-Puk, and—maybe if we're lucky—some raw meat, which will go fast because we have no means to store it once removed from its chilled packaging.

Maybe I'll finally discover what kind of icy mechanism they use to store the meat for the long trip through the high desert.

I board the train. I have my choice of seating since there's no one else here. No need for a ticket. Once I arrive in the Royal District, I will present my signed permit that will grant my stay for the summer. I just hope my cousins remember to pick me up once I'm there.

I take a seat on the soft cushion of the carrier and sit fast as the train whistles once more for its departure. Away I go, heading back east for the Royal District of Baronune, across nothing but sand, sand, and of course, sand. I'm sure the sights will excite me.



Let it be known: I hate the train. It is so boring having absolutely nothing else to do. Normally, I wouldn't mind this. I thought it would be just like being at home, with me keeping to myself in my room, focusing on strategies and tactics to win at King's Men.

In reality, it is far worse. At home, I had the company of my uncle—whether he's sitting in the front room, resting from one of his three rotating shifts of managing the shops, or when I actually take the time to visit him at work.

The train is constantly moving, the scenery is blaring heat waves, cacti, and miles and miles of sand, sand, and—yes—sand. As I said,

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exciting. Up until the point where we come to a complete stop due to a herd of baron yak that refuses to move off the track.

Baron yaks are a form of desert-dwelling mammals with sandy red fur and have a dietary complex similar to that of camels. It is against the royal law to kill or injure these creatures without a hunting license, being that they are our only source of meat out in Old Country. That's why so few of them come near our district anymore, making it pointless to go out and hunt them on our own. Not that we would want to.

They are the size of a small house, with small horns on either side of their heads and a third horn-like spike protruding from their upper hump that's the size of a small horse. So much *small* for such large creatures.

Hunting these animals is a death wish if you're not properly trained, and no one wants to take the risk. This lets the baron yak keep their distance from us. And we leave them alone, keeping the peace of the desert.

The train waits a few hours for the yaks to move on. During this time, I move between several seats where I would lie down, fall asleep, wake up miserable, rearrange myself again. I finally get to the point where I start jumping across the aisle from seat to seat as if the floor is on fire. I soon get so bored of this activity that I up the stakes and play barefoot. So that the floor feels like it actually is on fire.

By the time the train is able to move, it is well into the evening. I should have reached the Royal District hours ago. At least with the sun setting, the air is cooling down, making it a little more bearable for the remainder of the trip. It's not comfy trying to sleep in your own sweat.

The kingdom of Baronune comes into view. There's not much that is different from that in Old Country. Just take my district of fifty or so people and expand it to, let's say, a thousand.

Baronune is huge. It stretches across the southern desert of Arcasia in a circular enclosure, separating the royal streets from the baron sands with a deep, dried-up trench. I peer out my window wondering whether the water simply dried up or if it was something more complex.

At the core of the Royal District sits the king's castle, which I'm told is like three whole communities within one confined area. The rest of the kingdom seems to ooze from it like water spilling from an overflowing

cup. They say it is separated only by a twenty-foot wall made of adobe, twice as thick as any other structure that curves the outer perimeter of the castle, leaving only one entrance: a heavily guarded front gate.

The train pulls into the station, which is already far more impressive than the one back home. It is a dome structure with a glass ceiling with dozens of tracks for the different trains arriving and departing to shuttle passengers throughout farmlands and kingdoms of Arcasia.

The temperature shifts several degrees cooler as we pull into the station. The kingdom must have its own cooling system, which would be nice to have in Old Country for those hot summer days.

The citizens of Baronune flock in and out of the station. Maybe a little over a hundred? Does this constitute as a slow day? My train comes to a screeching stop. I grab my pack and hop off. I am clearly out of place.

Everyone is dressed to the nines: the women are wearing long fancy coats, flowing scarfs, and carrying single-handed leather trunks, while the men are wearing fashionable hats to match the rest of their attire. Their shoes are dirty but still glimmer with profession, much like specks of glass in the sand reflecting off the sun.

Then there's me, standing amongst the crowd in my torn-up rags from the depression that is Old Country. A brown shoulder bag full of underwear and socks to survive the summer, and a scarf of my own that is now serving its original purpose to keep me warm. It's a bit colder in here compared to home.

"West! West!" I hear coming from afar. "Westley Jameson!"

A girl's voice carries over the heads of the shuffling passengers. My train whistles and it is almost as if the sound clears a path to the source of the voice calling my name. The girl is small, with bobbed black hair that makes me think of a cupcake—oddly enough. Maybe I'm hungry? Her hair has a shine to it that resembles the stars racing across a moonless night sky. She's wearing a beige coat with a dark gray skirt, knee-high socks, her own loafers that are a reflective black, and a white collared blouse tucked under a grey vest.

She jumps and waves to get my attention. Honestly, with the train's will seeming to part the sea of people, she is hard to miss. I make my way over to her and she hugs me immediately.

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“Gods, West! I haven’t seen you in years!”

“It’s been five,” I struggle, as she has quite the grip on me. In my restraint, I hug her back. It seems to be the way to properly get her to release me. I regain my natural ability to breathe. “How have you been, Sophia?”

“Great! I am so excited!”

I can *hardly* tell.

She continues, “I get to be your tour guide during your stay here. You’re my responsibility, *young man*.”

“Young man? I am 20 seconds older than you.”

She’s smiling proudly at me from her comment. I’m told our mothers were twins. It was sheer coincidence that they went into labor at the exact same time. I beat my cousin in the race of childbirth by 20 seconds, yet she still acts like she’s the older one. She fans away my remark and plugs her nose, giving her a nasal voice.

“Come on, let’s get out of here. It is so crowded and stinky in here.”

I hadn’t noticed, but I’m unfamiliar with this place. Sophia takes me by my hand and leads me through the crowd. I am worried we might get separated with how fast she’s running, but yet again she has a tight grip on me. I have no idea how to get her to release me this time.

Once outside, I am briefly blinded. Inside, the station was dimly lit with light fixtures hanging from where the iron walls meet the dome glass ceiling. Outside, the setting sun warps the sky from a sapphire blue to a kaleidoscope of orange, purple, and green. The restful sky looks so soft, I could sleep on it as if lying my head upon its fading cloud cushions.

The shade and shadows fill the crafted desert streets. They are paved so finely to where the dirt and grain look layered by hand like a carefully iced cake. Okay, maybe I am hungry. The Baronooners casually make their way up and down the streets with not a care in the world, much like that tumbleweed from before.

The cool of the approaching night lightly kisses my cheeks as a soft breeze whizzes through my short, dusty brown hair. I’m reminded of how I made no attempt to brush or comb it before leaving today.

In my efforts to take in the settings of my surroundings, Sophia tugs me down the road in haste. I’m left to think we’ll be arrested for

being out before nightfall. It is as if someone has shouted, “*You better be getting home before that sun sets!*”

“Sophia? What gives?”

“Come on, you were supposed to be here hours ago! We’re going to be late for dinner!”

“Don’t I need to show someone my permit for being here?”

“That’s only if they ask. No one cares about one little kid that’s visiting during the summer!”

If she says so. Somehow, I feel this is going to come back and bite me later. We hurry through the narrow alleys and broad sandy roads until we make it to her place. A three-story complex that is roughly two houses wide.

Sophia comes from a large family. Aside from her mother and father, she lives with five brothers and sisters who are all older than her. Her aunt and uncle visit often enough that they practically live there, too; that’s not including their seven kids all of whom are under the age of five. Some are adopted.

Just a few of the reasons why I was happy to remain at home this summer. The lack of vacancy adds to why my uncle and I rarely visit. That, and he really doesn’t like the kingdom.

Sophia’s home interior is amazing. Lavish carpeting covers the floors with eastern designs from Dragon’s Guard. If magic did exist, I could truly believe they could take off and fly.

There are three different chandeliers. One is in the living room after entering through the front door. It casts a radiant glow across the surrounding furniture and center table piece. The second is in the dining room, hanging white with sparkling crystals, separated from the living room by a parting wall. I know the remaining chandelier is in the hallway on the second floor. It’s smaller than the other two.

The second floor is where all the kids sleep, and where the guest rooms are. The third floor is the master bedroom, entirely for Sophia’s parents. There is art displayed on the living room walls. Portraits of the three districts that make up Woodsforge, and one that I believe to be Dragon’s Guard. It consists of old temples and a golden serpent that decorates its frame.

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“Hey, everyone! West is here!” Sophia screams, finally letting go of my hand.

I half expected a grand welcoming. My distant family rushing out to greet me. Instead, I got what sounded like a choir of hellos echoing from the second floor. Sophia’s dad is still at work, and her mom seems to be in the kitchen. I couldn’t tell if she’s putting the dishes away because I’m late for dinner or just now bringing them out because, well, I’m late for dinner.

“Welcome, Westley!” Sophia’s mom calls from around the corner.

Sophia leads me into the kitchen, taking me left, past the dining room and the stairs reaching down from the back of the living room. We enter the doorway into the kitchen. While large, it was the barest part of the house. Just a lot of counter space, a sink for the dishes, shelves for the plates, and jars where the eating utensils are kept in.

Sophia’s mom stands in the middle of the kitchen in an elegant white dress with a just as enriching white apron. The Royal District is good for their riches despite the kingdom being at the edge of the desert, just shy of meeting the great sea beyond the Commoner Districts.

She greets me with a smile much like her daughter’s; of course, she’s years more beautiful, and every time I see her it is like seeing my mother for the first time all over again.

“Hello, Aunt Janis.”

I can hardly find my voice. My sweaty hand slips from Sophia’s grasp. I never got to know my mother. She died when I was young. And my father, well, we don’t talk about him.

“How was your train ride, dear?”

“Uh...” Where do I begin? “Hated it, to put it short.”

“Well, yes, there’s not much to look at out there, now, is it?”

“That, and the baron yaks delayed the train.”

“Well, that explains it. We just figured the conductor didn’t want to make the trip out to Old Country.”

“I guess I am lucky that they were delivering rations today.”

“Speaking of which,” my aunt begins before turning to hand Sophia and me our plates. She ushers us out into the dining room, “how is that brother of mine?”

“He’s good. Always busy, managing three different shops and all,” I say as I watch her repeatedly entering in and out of the dining room. She brings with her a different pot full of food. We have vegetables, three different types of meat, steaming mashed potatoes, a loaf of bread, and trays of gravy, butter, as well as...

“Is this Putt-Puk? Why does it look so...?”

“Bland?”

“Delicious!” I say, as it looks fuller of life than what I’m used to.

“Oh. Well, I did my best. Honestly, if we hadn’t made it, then it would have gone to waste. We rarely require the need for the more *lesser* of the rations.”

My aunt says rather disappointedly and with disgust. At this point, I am having a hard time paying attention. I haven’t had a full meal in years. I think this becomes abundantly clear as I’m too busy filling my face rather than answering questions. Even Sophia is astounded to how fast I am wolfing down my food.



After dinner, I am quick to change the scene to the living room. I challenge Sophia to a few games of King’s Men. The first couple were a little difficult as it took me some time to figure out her playing style, but once I did...

“Again?” Sophia gasps. “You beat me *again*? That’s seven straight games!”

“I know. I’ve been keeping count.”

“How do you keep winning?”

“Well, it wasn’t easy at first. You’re good, but I’m just more...”

“More what?” She leans in curiously. “How else can you play?”

“Well, if you practice like I do, then you find there are more inventive ways to play around your opponents.”

“How often do you play?”

“Every day. For hours. Until I get bored and take a walk around the district. Then I come home and play again,” I reply.

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Sophia regards me in awe. She's well aware that there is not much to do out in Old Country, but it's not exactly normal for someone to devote so much time to what some consider a simple board game.

"Don't you have friends or hobbies?" she asks.

"No. I beat all the other kids in the district, so they don't want to play me anymore. And there's not really much else to do."

"What about what all the other kids do for fun?"

"What? Like *sport* things?"

"Yeah!"

"No. Too hot to be running around in that sun. That's why everyone's suffering from sunburns. We're quite pale when not constantly coated in sand and dirt. Speaking of which," I say as I remove myself from the cushion. There's a sand print left from the hours we've been playing. "I should probably go freshen up.

"Yeah. I would have suggested before dinner, but you seemed a bit...hungry."

"Hey, you try eating rice and bread for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and tell me you wouldn't be hungry for something more."

"Must have been hard to adjust when you had to live with Uncle Lester."

"I got used to it."

Literally, my mom passed nearly seven years ago. I grew up in Old Country. I let out a sigh and make my way for the stairs. I remember to thank Aunt Janis for dinner once more before I head up and find my way to the washroom. It is at the end of the hall, past all the other bedrooms.

It has grown late into the night now since I've arrived. The rest of the family went to bed shortly after, which is good. I am too drained to deal with the abundance of children. Not on day one, at least.

I enter the washroom, where there is a tub at first sight decorated with a curtain to match the eastern carpets like the ones downstairs. Wash clothes and decorative towels hang along the walls, and there is a basic sink with a mirror above it to the left.

I head straight for the tub and fancy the water to run. It's cold at first, but I'm used to that. I sink into the tub—as I'm not too tall to take a comfortable bath—and release another sigh as I let the grime and dirt from today just wash away.



A week has passed since my arrival in Baronune. I've grown quite accustomed to the new way of living with my cousins. There is a strict bathroom system that everyone follows. Outside of regular use, bathing and hygienics are kept to a minimum of five minutes to get everyone in and out in an orderly fashion.

It is, however, first-come-first-served at the dinner table in terms of seating. Being such a large household, the dining table doesn't seat everyone. Those unfortunate to sit directly in front of the food must eat in the living room. Except for the children. They automatically get to sit at the table. Otherwise, they'd never finish their meals on their own before bed.

I often found myself in the living room, eating with Sophia. I didn't mind this at all. I am quite used to the thought of being an outcast to my extended family. The distance from the table to the sofa is almost welcoming. Still, it is nice to see the warm and loving faces of others. An actual family that's basking in love and happiness. Just watching them laugh and smile with such a glow, I almost dislike my having to live out in the middle of nowhere with my uncle. I hardly get any quality time with him. He's either working or tired, or both.

Now I must watch my relatives flaunt this lavish lifestyle in front of me; leaving me to fantasize how different I would have been if I had even a glimmer of this enrichment. If I had just a spoonful of this kind of happiness.

Bedtime rolls around again. I help Aunt Janis with the dishes, as I often do, and then head upstairs after washing the last plate. I can still hear everyone from their rooms as I make my way down the hall to the washroom. I freshen up quickly and head to bed.

I stay in one of the two guest rooms that are right next to the washroom. The doors face directly across from each other. Sophia's aunt and uncle stay in the other guest room with their three youngest. In the next room sleep their oldest, along with Sophia. Across from their room and neighboring mine is Sophia's oldest sister, Janet. The remaining two rooms are shared by her other four siblings: Charles and Rich in one room and Marilyn and Grace in the other.

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Often Sophia keeps me company until one of us grows tired, but not tonight. She has to help get the kids to bed because we have a big day tomorrow. Aunt Janis and Uncle Marcus want to take everyone to the bazaar while it is still early in the summer. I am told that the closer the winter season comes, the more and more expensive and busy the bazaar is. And trying to manage a household of seventeen in a public setting is all but simple.

They want to go early to pick out some fall attire that is being sold exclusively in select markets. It's an early-bird-catches-the-worm type of deal. I lie down for bed, and the night seems to pass instantly.

I wake to the madness of the following morning. No dreams. No late-night disturbances. Just the cries and screams of children and parents rippling throughout the household. Cousin Mathis and Silvana are at the max of their capability for yelling and ordering their kids to follow instructions while the children laugh and ignore their parents in every way.

In this moment, all my envy from the night before is smothered by my pillow as I cover my face. It will be an eternity before I have kids. Sophia is at my door telling me to hurry and get ready while they round up the children. It is almost a group effort as Sophia and her siblings split into pairs to wrestle down the younglings.

I coerce myself from the bed. Since Sophia did not visit last night, I slept in my briefs. The pajamas Aunt Janis gave me sometimes itch. If I don't have to wear them, I choose not to. I slip past the madness erupting in the halls and quickly freshen up for the long day ahead.

It takes a few hours before everyone is fresh, fed, and finally ready to venture out into the district today. The sun sits high in the sky as we pile into a couple of steam-run carriages. These types of vehicles are only owned by a few families in the Royal District. The more advanced models are up north in Woodsforge. I am more used to the on-foot approach, but given how big the Royal District is, this is the best means of travel.

I watch as Uncle Marcus pours water into a fairly large container, a couple of gallons worth, and the mechanisms of the carriage come to life. He runs back to the steering column of the vehicle. I ride with

him, Aunt Janis, Sophia, and her siblings. Sophia's Aunt Silvana, Uncle Mathis, and their family take the other carriage.

They are not the smoothest vehicles. I only have the train I rode in on to compare them to, but they are efficient. We ride from the most western part of the Royal District, only a couple of miles away from the train station. The bazaar is on the southeastern side of one of the Commoners Districts, almost tucked into a corner in this circular kingdom.

The castle sits in the center, still far to our north from where we're traveling. I find myself staring up at the castle like a faraway mountain range. The structure looks as if the highest tower in the center touches the sky like the tip of a finger barely scrapping the ceiling of a house. A simply enormous foundation of adobe, iron, and sand. Its own little world-within-a-world, as none of the Baronooners are allowed on the king's grounds.

That being said, I'm told that the king rarely comes out of his castle to greet his people. Apparently, it has been so long that the citizens hardly recognize their own king. The best description Sophia could give me was that he's tall and broad, with a sandy blonde beard and hair, and a face etched from years of ruling. Fifteen to be exact.

The queen, on the other hand, resembles a young and beautiful maiden. Like a fresh fruit plucked from a tree, she looks as if she was gifted to the king from the gods. I find that difficult to believe, as divine beings do not exist, but it would make sense that a king would only choose the most beautiful to be his queen.

The sun shifts from noon to midafternoon. We reach the bazaar and everyone seems to scatter once we come to a halt. Uncle Marcus and Cousin Mathis are left to park the vehicles properly, locking them in place. They pay a young boy to keep watch over them until our return.

I step from around the vehicle, wearing a gray collared top with dark blue trousers and new glassy black loafers that bounce the sunrays off so intensely that the sand seems intimidated. My shoes refuse to get dirty no matter how much dust I kick up.

"Come on," Sophia grabs my arm. "I want to take you to one of my favorite shops."

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Before I can mutter a response, we are off again, like on the day I arrived. We race through the open streets of the bazaar. As Aunt Janis had hoped, it is fairly empty. Still busy, but mostly people passing through, no one really caring to buy or purchase anything.

We separate from the rest of the family, and I feel certain that Sophia does this often because no one cares that we split off. That or Sophia and I were off in such haste that Aunt Janis didn't get a chance to protest. As we rush off, Sophia's grip seems to slip. I stumble, not really having my own footing as she drags me everywhere.

With my balance off, I bump into someone passing by. I can tell upon contact that this is a man. His face and features are concealed under a dirty, brown hooded cloak. It is torn and shredded as it flows down to his feet. He wears loafers much like my old ones, worn to the sole. Not the normal footwear I've seen nearly every other Baronooner wearing. His gray trousers are dirty and worn out, and the looks of him remind me of the commoners who live out in Old Country.

He lingers after I bump into him. He stares me down from beneath his hood. I can't make out his face, but I hear him growling under his breath. I begin to sweat. The temperature seems to shift a few degrees hotter. That or this man's towering intimidation is really affecting my nerves.

"West!"

Sophia cries as she realizes I'm no longer in her grasp. The oxygen seems to return. I hadn't even noticed that I wasn't breathing this entire time. I was so fixated on this stranger. Sophia comes back to collect me, and she too gets caught in the gaze of the hooded man. He raises his left hand. It's bandaged up in an old kind of cloth material, only leaving his dirty fingers to be seen. He grabs at his cloak where his chin should meet the collar.

"Watch where you're going, kid," he warns and brushes past us, kicking up dirt. A brisk wind catches his cloak as he strides off. I remain fixated on this man until Sophia grabs my attention again.

"Come on, West."

"What...What was that?" I regain my breath. "I thought everyone in the kingdom was from riches of some sort?"

"No kingdom is perfect."

Sophia takes my hand and leads me forward. We march at a slow pace. She seems to be catching her breath, too. It seems it wasn't just me. Maybe that man had some effect over us. It felt...odd. I can't put it into words aside from feeling like the hottest day in the desert converged into five feet of space. Okay, maybe I can put it into words.

"Look around, West. Not everyone comes from riches."

For the first time in weeks, I take notice of the shadows and alleys. Along with the darkly colored birds picking at trash, there are people wearing ragged clothing that are also rummaging through garbage. There are groups of men and women that observe us in return, looking like predators preparing to pounce on unexpected prey. For the first time in weeks, I did not feel safe in Baronune.

"Thugs," Sophia's voice finds me. "Unfortunate citizens that refuse to leave the kingdom once they run out of funds, while some are what's left of Baronooners from Old Country who braved the desert and found a way into the kingdom."

"They look sad. Miserable. Scary—for lack of a better term."

"They do what they must to survive. Just don't mind them and they shouldn't mind you."

"Shouldn't?" I glance back over my shoulder.

"Like I said, they do whatever they must to survive."

With that, we pick up our pace. No wonder she's always hurrying us around. Stay stationary for too long, and you are fresh meat.

We come to an open stand that is selling many fashionable scarves. They glitter like they have specks of gold and silver sewn into their stitching. Sophia's eyes grow ten sizes as she looks them over. Even I can't help but admire how beautiful they look. I run my hand across them. They have a slightly grainy feel to them at first as my fingers brush along the glitter, but then as my hand sinks in, it's as if I am stroking a moving stream. They are so soft.

Sophia lifts one that's as green as live emeralds. She rubs it across her cheek and then hands it to me to feel. The merchant comes to us. He's a sluggish, nearly balding middle-aged man with a protruding stomach that is revealed through his open black vest. He is wearing gray slacks—from what I can see from the opposite side of the stand—and looks the complete opposite of what he is selling. His skin is greasy, hairy, and

unhealthy as he sits in the shade. I can hear the mouthwatering flies zooming around his armpits.

“They’re all ten gold pieces each,” he says.

That’s more than we can afford. Sophia places the scarf back down in disappointment. You would have thought that she just received terrible news about her siblings or something. At most, I have three silver coin pieces just sitting in my pocket as my food allowance, but one of those wouldn’t be close to a single gold piece. Sophia had three gold pieces. Not enough. Also, not worth emptying our pockets on a piece of fabric.

“Maybe we can save up and come back by the end of summer?” I suggest.

“I’ll be gone within the next week, I’m afraid,” the merchant snorts. “I got a pass into the Garden of Dragons. Very rare opportunity these days.”

“It is fine. I don’t need it,” Sophia replies. Still, I can tell that she’d have appreciated it.

Something so simple as a scarf would have been enough to make her day. Her shoulders sink as her head dips low. This is the most unenthusiastic I’ve seen her, ever. She’s always so full of energy. I don’t know why this scarf means so much to her, but I didn’t need to. I do not like this look on my cousin. I give it one last-ditch effort.

“Can we bargain?”

“If you can’t afford it, I can’t sell it to you kid,” the merchant snorts again. “Come back with your parents or move on.”

If looking at him didn’t put a distaste in my mouth. That comment did the trick.

“Come on, West,” Sophia says as she weakly takes me by the arm.

As she leads me, it is almost as if a disappointing cloud is pulling her along, too. I want to cheer her up, but nothing comes to mind. I try to think of something to make her feel better. Maybe I can find a different stand with less costly scarves. It wouldn’t be the same, but maybe it would be enough to lift her spirits.

It becomes difficult to form a rational thought as a bellowing sound begins to ring out over Baronune. Sophia and I stop. Ravens fill the sky as they flee from the sounds.

It’s an alarm.

A loud and distressful alarm echoing from the castle, reaching out to the curvature of the kingdom. The merchant looks up in panic and immediately closes his shop. Other shops begin to do the same. Passing citizens begin to follow the ravens' lead. They start to hurry down the street. Sophia looks like a wave of different emotions hitting her all at once: confusion, fright, concern, worry. All coming to the same conclusion: panic.

"Sophia?" I hear a crashing sound from behind us. "What's going on?"

Those thugs we passed before are now getting restless. They start kicking over crates and attacking shops.

"No. No. No. This can't be happening.."

"Sophia, what does that alarm mean? Are we under attack or something?"

"No, even worse. I didn't think I'd ever see the day..." Sophia trails off. I can see the sweat crawling down her face as she's frozen in fear.

I snap to draw her attention. "Sophia! What is happening?"

"The king is dead," she pauses and turns to me. Fear fills her eyes. "The King of the Round Table Tournament has been initiated."

CHAPTER TWO

TO LIVE, FIGHT, OR RUN

“What’s the King of the Round Table Tournament?” I ask, even less excited with the ringing alarm still overhead.

I’m not one for sports. King’s Men is the only game I play, so unless there’s a gathering somewhere to sit down and compete with other players in a game of strategy, I doubt I’m going to like whatever this tournament has in store.

Sophia spies the thugs down the road, and we duck behind the scarf stand.

“The King of the Round Table Tournament is something the king came up with in case of his untimely death. A tournament to find a rightful replacement to rule over Baronune.”

“That sounds insane!” I exclaim, and Sophia covers my mouth. I’m even more taken aback than before. The king dies and immediately a tournament kicks up to replace him. How does that work? I must be transparent because Sophia keeps going.

“Look, I’m not too familiar with the rules being I never thought the king would die anytime soon. I thought I would be married and off to Woodsforge before that happened. It’s not like he’s centuries old.”

I calm down and she removes her hand from my mouth.

“Explain. Why the mass panic over the death of the king? I’ve never heard of this Round Table Tournament out in Old Country. Why is it called a round table? Is there a table that people sit at and compete against?” My brain is on rapid fire at this point. “Like, how would that work? Is it an arm-wrestling tournament? A thumb war competition?”

"You're going to draw their attention!" she hushes me in an exasperated breath as she covers my mouth again. She peeks around the corner to spy on the thugs. They must not have heard me because she looks a little at ease when she locks eyes with me again. "I'm going to uncover your mouth now. Can you promise not to yell and ask so many questions?"

I give it a moment's thought. I shake my head "no" in response. I am so befuddled and new to this that I want to know exactly what I've gotten myself into. Sophia rolls her eyes, but she removes her hand.

"I don't know too much, but the tournament was designed by the king. It's called round table because of the design of the kingdom: a giant circular battleground. Anyone and everyone in Baronune is a participant, and only one can be the king. Once you're in the kingdom when those alarms go off, then you are a part of the tournament. It's a sort of battle royale and everything goes."

My eyes widen at that. It *is* insane. By being within the bounds of the kingdom, you are automatically a part of the tournament. This is the worst thing to happen during my visit. Never have I actually wished to be back in Old Country until now.

I exhale. I realize the circumstances of the situation we're in. There's a kingdom-wide battle for the crown and right around the corner are a bunch of thugs that already look ready to rob us anyway. Now that we're within the bounds of the tournament, they've been given clearance to do whatever they want and get away with it.

"What about us? What about the ones who don't want to participate? Clearly, not everyone is out for the crown!"

"There are safe houses for those who don't want to participate."

"Great! Let's get to a safe house!"

"Well, of course, but we have thirty minutes from the sound of the alarm to get to the nearest one and..."

"—not so great."

"...I don't know where the houses are located." Sophia admits with an apologetic look on her face.

I'd find this adorable under normal circumstances, but this was not normal circumstances, and her forgetting where the safe houses are is even less great.

"How do you live here and not know where the safe houses are?"

THE KING OF THE ROUND TABLE TOURNAMENT

“I told you, I never expected this to happen anytime soon!”

“That’s—” I pause to shake my head at how ridiculous that sounds. “—not an excuse!”

“Excuse me, kids...” a voice parts into our conversation.

We turn and yelp. One of the thugs from down the road curves his head around the corner to us. We begin to panic. My heart races as we back away.

He rounds the corner and behind him are three more thugs. They crack their necks and knuckles, looking ready to brawl. Something I would very much like to avoid. I’m already not an athlete, so fighting is even further from my list of hobbies.

“Care for being our punching bags while we warm up? If we’re going to be king,” he pauses to roll his shoulder, “we need to loosen up a bit.”

“Hold that thought...” I ask, not waiting for a response.

I take Sophia’s hand this time and take off to the opposite direction of the thugs. Again, not athletic. Their leader is on us in a couple of strides. He throws a wide punch, but I guess he does need to warm up because he aims too high.

We duck easily under his barrel of an arm and keep running. Switch. Sophia takes the lead this time. Clearly, she knows her way around these parts much better than I do.

“Where’s the safe house?”

“We have to get back to my parents! They’ll know!”

Might I point out that this has been the dumbest idea ever. To split apart from the responsible adults in a kingdom that at the drop of a hat could spring into a life-or-death tournament where anything goes. No wonder my uncle never liked the lifestyle of Baronune.

The female thug springs in front of us as if she bounced clean off the corresponding wall of the alley. She has pigtails; maybe she won’t kill us?

“I’m going to rip out your throats!”

Maybe not.

She pulls a knife out from her back pocket. That might be why she’s angry. Probably sat down wrong and...*poke*. I’d be quite angry if I sat on a knife. Not to the point that I’d want to kill some children, but—she swipes downward at us—I guess things are different here.

Sophia lets go of my hand. We stumble to either side of the alley. The she-thug loses her balance. Her own swing throws her off that she stumbles forward, hopping on one foot.

Advantage? I think yes.

I swiftly kick her in the shin. Sophia kicks her in the ankle just in time. The woman falls forward and loses her knife. Do I grab it? No.

Sophia and I scurry back to our feet while the she-thug eats a face full of dirt. We peel off down the remainder of the alley. The other thugs leap and bound over their fallen comrade and give chase. Seriously, how important is it to beat up some kids?



We try our best to retrace our steps but find ourselves in a different section of the bazaar than intended. Sophia calls for her family. I don't know if this is helping or making matters worse. More thugs pour into the streets from the alley.

Worse, definitely worse.

They snap and grab at us. We rush to get away, but just as easily as they want to fight us, the thugs turn on each other as part of the nature of the tournament. If they all want the crown, then they're all against one another. There are no sides.

A brawl explodes on the streets behind us. Thugs against thugs. We stop to catch our breath and watch the carnage unfold. They grab whatever they deem a weapon and bash, kick, and tackle one another to the ground. Some tumble through abandoned shops. Others gang up on the strong to eliminate a single threat before turning on each other the next second.

It is like watching a pack of starving dogs fighting over a scrap of meat. In a matter of minutes, the fighting comes to a stall. Exhausted thugs look up the road at us. Why had we taken this long to catch our breaths? Questions for later.

Sophia takes my hand and we're off again. At least now the thugs were too tired to chase us. I peek back. Normally I wouldn't recommend this, but I find that thinking is not coming to me as naturally when I'm in a state of panic.

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There are only three thugs after us and they are exhausted, battered, and bruised. They limp in their pursuit. I guess they wanted to eliminate the two weaker targets than fight one another again. Luckily, we still have our stamina. We tear away from the thugs and manage to find ourselves back where we started, where we first parted from our family.

We scan the bazaar. Nothing good. The carriages are gone. A few more thugs are fighting and wrecking the shops. Some merchants are trying to protect their investments but are easily outmuscled.

Meanwhile, the thugs from the previous street brawl are creeping up on us. We're lost, or more so, abandoned, in the middle of a tournament because some royal thick head decided today was the best day to kick the bucket. Couldn't he have waited, like, four more hours, when we'd all be back home and safe from this madness? Well, maybe not safe but at least with our family and out of immediate danger—since my tour guide for the summer doesn't know the important details like where the safe houses are, in case of emergencies.

"So now what do we do?" I observe the little to no options available to us.

"Mom! Dad!" Sophia cries, and I continue to find this to be a terrible idea. I scamper to cover her mouth this time.

"Not that! Let's not do that!"

She quickly removes my hand. "They could still be around. Someone could have stolen the carriages and they're left stranded like us."

"That's like the best worst-case scenario, but look around us. Wouldn't Aunt Janis be calling out and searching for us if she was still around? They had children—little kids—with them. They wouldn't stay here for too long with these thugs crawling out of the shadows. They'd have left for safety, and we need to find the next crowd of panicking people, so we can follow them to safety, too!"

Oh, look, my brain is working again because that all makes sense. Sophia isn't given time to form an argument against me. A couple of thugs crash through a shopping stand beside us. We scream. I may have sounded a little higher-pitched than Sophia.

We begin our steady retreat, only to be picked up and thrown aside by another thug behind us. We roll across the sand, grain scraping and ripping at my exposed skin. Sophia's coat absorbs most of the impact.

I wish I had known I'd be getting into street brawls today; I'd have grabbed a sweater.

I grudgingly begin to pull myself from the dirt. I glance up to find a foot coming towards my face. No shoe; just a foot. All bare and stinky, too. The thug kicks me, and I roll back several feet. That was powerful, and rice and wheat have not aided my body weight at all.

I can feel the blood inching from the corner of my mouth. Sophia screams. My blurry vision focuses, and I see another thug has her by the coat. *Now* the coat is a disadvantage.

"Sophia!"

I would have said more but I get pinned by the same stinky foot from before. The thug resembles a giant as he stands on top of me. His foot is buried in my chest. As if the pain isn't enough, the smell is killing me. I try to get free. I fail. I have nowhere near the strength to remove this mountain from on top of me.

"Sometimes," he presses harder, "you got to start small when you're working your way to something...bigger?" the thug ponders on his own words. Not smart, but heavy.

My breath is abandoning me. Correction, my breath has abandoned me. I can't think, let alone form words for a comeback. What would I even say?

"Get off of him, you brute!"

That. I would say something similar to that. Sophia demands and struggles to break free. Instead of words slipping through my lips, I have blood oozing out.

"Your girlfriend has more guts than you, kid."

"*Επ*," I think, but I am in no position to argue against his accusations or defend my single status. How is someone even supposed to prepare themselves for when something as unexpected as this entire situation hits you out of nowhere?

THUD!

Suddenly I feel my air return to me. It is hotter than before, but I'll take hot air over no air. The thug is sent flying as someone tackles him at full speed, ramming their shoulder into the thug's exposed chest.

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Sophia screams. The thug tosses her aside and rushes the stranger. My vision comes back. I look at the person now standing over me. Brown, shredded hooded cloak and gray trousers? As the thug rushes in, he swings wide.

Do they *all* punch like that?

Well, this is the second time it has failed. The cloaked man is able to match the thug's speed. He clutches his fist and, for a second, I see his bandaged right arm. In the next, he is lodging a punch straight into the thug's chest. Now able to compare.

Both thugs are twice the size of this guy, but he knocks out both of them with one hit. The thug he punched launches into another shopping stand twenty feet away. The stand shatters on impact.

In the motion of his attack, the man's hood flew off. Jet-black hair layered in sand is sticking out every which way like a bad case of bed head. Dirty stubble scraps across his chin running from his sideburns. His skin is a dark tan, almost bronze, as he turns to me. Dark furious eyes glare upon me as I feel that same heated intensity from before.

"Get out of the way, kid!"

He growls through gritted teeth. He is peeved, but is it at me for having crossed paths a second time or just simply because I am in the way of his fighting? Let's say it's the latter.

I scramble to my hands and knees until I can get to my feet. I hurry to Sophia. She's a little shaken but okay. No injuries. This stranger didn't give the thugs much of a chance to continue their torment on us before interrupting.

Taking notice of the situation at hand. The other thugs end their skirmishes to face their new challenger. The lone man turns to them. His rage falters for a second as a smirk washes across his face.

"You want the crown? Then come on!" he exclaims as he throws back his cloak. He frees his bandaged arms and crouches into a stance.

The thugs converge on him at once. Sophia and I scoot back to avoid their confrontation. The man launches forward. He uses his whole body to spear the thug directly in front of him. The impact carries the thug back several yards. The man hits the sand. He rolls back to his feet almost instantly.

Another thug is already on him, trying to gain an advantage but is too slow. The lone man recovers. He has already regained balance as he takes another stance and thrusts his palm forward. There's no contact, but something hits the thug.

A wave of heat sweeps throughout the bazaar and the thug flies back. Witnessing this, the other thugs stop dead in their tracks while the man in the cloak stands upright. The thugs look to each other baffled. The lone man is ready to keep going.

"Well...Don't stop now!" he yells and charges forward.

More heat. The temperature is rising. I can feel sweat crawling down my face, but Sophia and I haven't even moved since this fight started.

The man whirls a kick from under his cloak. He connects with the thug standing in the middle of their group with enough force that he's carried into a neighboring thug and both of them are launched several feet down the streets of the bazaar.

The cloaked man lands with ease from his kick while the remaining thug stumbles and sweats.

"W-what...?" the thug stutters. "Who are you?"

The cloaked man stands back upright. He grabs at the collar of his cloak, much like he did when we ran into him before. He smiles and holds a thumb up to his face, directing all attention to him. In that moment I could have sworn I saw an ember. A speck of orange light flick from under the nail of his thumb.

"My name is Rhodain Kayden..." the cloaked man announces.

The name seems to strike familiarity with the thug. Even Sophia seems to recognize it. She squints at him to get a better look.

Then an eruption of flames explodes from thin air. The fire sweeps across the bazaar, lighting up the stands and fallen thugs behind the man in the cloak. The thug before him flinches while the defeated ones scurry to their feet. They take off, running to who knows where, probably to find a way to extinguish the fire crawling up their pants.

The remaining thug takes a step back, shielding his face from the intense flames at Rhodain's back, but the fire starter is unfazed. It is as if the flames aren't even there, but they are. I can feel them. I can feel the heat. I can still hear the distant screams of the thugs in hot retreat.

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The slight hint of burning flesh wafts into the air. With all this fire, the last thug seems frozen. Even I have chills. He's left to face Rhodain, who hardly looks human at this point. He resembles a demon as the flames worship him from behind, a demon standing before the realm of Hellsfire itself.

“...and I am going to be King of the Round Table Tournament.”

CHAPTER THREE

SECONDS...INCHES

“Magic?” the thug asks, and I can’t tell if he’s sweating from the intensity of the flames or from fear. “How?”

“Let’s just say,” Rhodain blows out a puff of smoke, “I ate a bad chicken egg.”

The thug takes another step back, intimidated but also enraged. “That’s not fair! Magic is banished from Baronune. You’re breaking the law!”

“You’re complaining to me about obeying the law?” Rhodain chuckles. “Now that’s laughable.”

He waves his hand back and his flames disperse as easily as they came. Almost as if they were never there to begin with, but I can still feel their heat. It’s radiating from Rhodain’s body. The bazaar is scorched, and those other thugs weren’t imagining their pain.

“I’m out of here,” the thug exclaims as he finds the strength to run away. “I can’t compete with magic!”

“Make sure you run and tell all your thugs about me!” Rhodain laughs as he watches the thug scurry off. “I am Rhodain Kayden, and I will be taking that crown!” He spits an ember into the sand.

Sophia inches towards him. “Rhodain Kayden...”

The man in the cloak faces her. He sizes her up as if to determine if she is a threat or not. Sophia approaches him steadily. Her arms are at her side. She poses no threat.

“I’ve heard of you. Your name is too familiar. Rhodain Kayden, the Banished Knight of Fire.”

Sophia's words are soft but shaky. Her fright hangs onto every syllable. Rhodain's body continues emanating waves of heat. The air is becoming heavier and harder to breathe in.

"You know of me?" Rhodain asks. "Do you dare challenge me?"

Sophia cautiously stops her approach and remains still. Even I forget to breathe as I'm beating with sweat. My shirt looks like I just finished a swim in the southern sea.

Sophia shakes her head no in response, and the heat in the air starts to lift. Rhodain grabs a large yellow piece of fruit from an abandoned stand and bites into it.

"Then I suggest you kids get out of here. This tournament is not child's play. If you participate, you will likely die."

"We don't want to participate..." Sophia begins as the situation calms down.

No more thugs remain in the shattered bizarre. I can breathe easier. I can find my words once again. "What was that?"

"Magic," Sophia replies and Rhodain huffs.

"Yeah, magic," he rolls his eyes and takes another bite of fruit. "If your mind can only handle something as simple as that."

"Magic doesn't exist." I can't accept this. It's a fairytale. Something told in stories for children to understand and accept in replace of the hard truths.

"It does." Rhodain tosses what's left of the fruit over his shoulder.

"No. You're a liar. If magic was real, then why do we live in such a desolated land?"

"You're right. Magic isn't real," Rhodain admits and I laugh proudly amongst myself. I smile at Sophia, who is looking at me as if to say, "*Do not push him.*"

Rhodain wipes the fruity juices from his hands on his pants. He then remembers his pants are covered in sand and dust, and so he throws his hands in the air before regarding us again.

"Divinity's real—the gift of the gods to man that exists all around us. At least, that's what I was brought up to believe. You haven't seen it because the king banished it from all of Baronune."

"How does one man banish magic?"

"Divinity."

“Whatever. It’s not real either way,” I argue and Rhodain glares at me as if I’m starting to get on his nerves again. He hesitates but continues anyway.

“He saw it as a threat,” Rhodain glances back and we follow his gaze towards the castle. “There was once a time when Divinity flourished through all of Baronune, all of the lands. Then people got lazy. They didn’t want to work for it. Depended on knights. So, Divinity became scarce, but those who could use it—master it—became leagues above the average knight. Seeing it as a weapon that could be used against him, King Sorenson decided to make the use of it forbidden, and anyone who broke this law faced the death penalty.”

The word death hangs heavy at his lips. I find myself at a loss for words again. I grew up believing—no, telling myself—that magic couldn’t exist. With how we are forced to live out in Old Country, there could never have been a time when our desert sands were once as beautiful as described in works of fiction.

Magic has always been a lie. If it existed, then we would all live like kings...but then, what need would there be for one man to stand above all others?

I turn to Sophia. She has yet to take her eyes off Rhodain. She watches him, judging him. She called him the *Banished Knight*. I turn back to him. I analyze him. He looks like he’s been living on the streets for some time now. A few months, maybe more. Not too different in appearance than the adults from Old Country.

He’s young, maybe in his early to mid-twenties, with enough strength to fight off those thugs and make it look easy. Which it wasn’t. I can still feel the weight of that one thug’s foot pressed deep into my chest. If he has been living on the streets, how has he remained so strong? Could it actually be magic, or something else?

“Why are you called the Banished Knight?”

I ask now rubbing my chest. He watches me, letting my question sink in. He must not get asked that a lot. It must be well-known to the citizens of the kingdom.

Sophia answers me instead. “He used magic against the king.”

“I saved the king!” he roars, clutching his cloak again.

THE KING OF THE ROUND TABLE TOURNAMENT

I can feel the heat suffocating me again, if only for a moment. Sophia's accusations seem to be the first thing to graze him since his arrival.

"But what do you know? You're a bunch of kids."

"Then tell me yourself." I take a single step forward.

"Why?"

"Because we are kids," I begin, and I can feel the bazaar itself come to life as if to say, "*Well, dub.*"

Rhodain huffs at me, but I proceed, mustering the same courage Sophia had.

"You said it yourself. If we stay out here, we'll likely die. We don't stand a chance on our own, but with your help, we can make it to the nearest safe house and find our family."

No one argues this, but Rhodain looks uninterested. I haven't won him over on being our personal bodyguard. I keep pressing my persuasive skills. Something I never needed to practice out in Old Country. For the most part, we're all coming from the same rough and sandy place, so we understand one another.

"We need someone to get us there. We don't know the way and, if we try to find it ourselves, we'll likely run into more thugs. Plus, this way you get to punch more beef heads and weed out the competition for the crown."

This seems to grab his attention. I figured that if the thugs are looking for a bit of a warm-up before heading for the crown, violence must not be too common around here. So Rhodain may need more practice as well. If he's been out on the streets for as long as I expected, a couple of months or so, he may require some training. A chance to flex those magical muscles. I'm still not convinced it's real.

Rhodain turns his back to us. We seriously must not be a threat to him because I believe you'd never want to do that to your enemies. By the rise and drop of his shoulders, I can tell that he has taken a deep breath. He is observing something. The surroundings maybe? Expecting more thugs? Or maybe looking for a means to ditch us and make his way through the tournament.

“You’re in luck,” he mutters and stretches. “The nearest safe house isn’t too far from here. Dropping you off won’t take me too far away from the castle. That’s where the throne is.”

He turns to face us. He’s serious. His face is lit with determination.

“That’s where I need to go to be claimed as king. The top of the castle,” he points behind him again at the largest and highest structure of all Baronune, “where the king will sit above everyone else.”

“Fine,” I agree, letting out a brief sigh of relief. I try not to lose my composure. My body has been tense this whole time. My hands are clutching the lining of my trousers. I put all my efforts into convincing this stranger to help us. “But can I trust you, *Banished Knight?*”

I swallow a big gulp. I’m not sure how intimidating a scrawny near-thirteen-year-old boy can seem, but Rhodain’s eyes fall onto mine. Dark and heated, they beam into me as if pondering how desperate must I be to pose such a false threat.

“If you want to live, you will. And my name’s Rhodain,” he snarls as he turns and walks away. “The king is dead. He took the Banished Knight to the grave with him.” His cloak flaps at his heels.

A small brisk of wind picks up across the bazaar. I have become a statue. Sophia pinches me and the sensation of pain frees me.

“Ow!” I wince at her.

“What are you thinking?”

“What are you doing?”

“We can’t trust him. He turned against the king!”

“Yeah, well, we don’t have many options. If we want to survive, we need him to take us to the safe house. Besides,” I pause as my eyes fall back on the cloaked man leading us away, “I’d rather be behind him and his ambitions to be king than in front of him as he burns this kingdom to ash and us with it.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Sophia, I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing,” I reply confidently with a worried smile.

I cannot disguise how frightened I am. We are two kids left alone to fend for ourselves as our kingdom becomes a battlefield. If Rhodain has the means to become king, I want to be behind him for my own safety,

having seen what he does to those who stand in his way. I still cannot help but wonder about what truly happened between him and the king.

We catch up to Rhodain. Sophia to his left and me to his right. The air around him is hot. He must be on guard. That or he really doesn't like us standing near him. He walks with steady and cautious strides. His right hand sways loose while his left-hand keeps clutched to the collar of his cloak.

"How does it work?"

"What?"

"The fire," I ask. "Where does it come from?"

"Inside," Rhodain keeps from regarding me. "Outside. It depends on what I need for the situation."

"That's pretty vague."

"A lot of people are too simple to understand the advances of Divinity these days. If you're not born with it, you should probably keep your hands clear of it."

"Were you born with it?"

His response seemed to weigh differently than the rest of his statement. Why bring that up if there isn't more to it? Besides, it's going to take more than ten minutes to persuade me on the idea of magic being more than just fantasy talk...but how else did he burn through several thugs with the flick of his wrist?

"No. I wasn't born with it. Like I told the last guy that asked me that, I ate a bad chicken egg."

"That makes no sense," Sophia argues. "There's no chicken spicy enough to give you fire magic."

My head hurts. I don't know what to believe anymore. For all I know there *is* some flaming desert hen out there that cackles louder with each egg it lays.

"Like I said, *Divinity* is not for the simple-minded folks," Rhodain replies.

I wave the comment aside. I want him to make sense of it, not throw more nonsense around. "So how does your *magic* or *Divinity* work? If you're not born with it..."

Rhodain turns and cuts me off. There's a fire in his eyes. Like a literal fire. His eyes go from their usual shade of black to resembling a black jar with a flickering flame inside. I must be testing his patience.

"You're a curious one, aren't you?" he asks rhetorically.

His body is hot, but I feel unharmed. His voice brushes over me in a state of calm, although the fire in his eyes is tense. Sophia flinches as Rhodain's movement is quick. Blink and you miss it. I did. That's how I know. He's so swift that I didn't even hear the sound of his cloak flapping as he moved.

"First it begins with sight. You must be able to see the divine particles in the air, the dirt, the trees, in everything. Once you're able to do that, then you can move on to the next level of the arts."

"The arts?" Sophia asks and Rhodain rises up.

"The Arts of Divinity, Martial, Mystic, Sacred, and Corrupted," Rhodain hesitates as he counts out with his fingers. "And they are as they sound. Martial is your basic arts, purely physical. It's for those who can't fully grasp the more advanced levels of Divinity, which brings us to the Mystic Arts."

Rhodain puts some distance between us. Sophia and I study him. We couldn't look more like children with the way we're ogling him with amazement in our eyes.

"Now you have three classes when it comes to the Mystic Arts. The lowest class as stated before is seeing the divine particles."

"So, seeing is believing?" I raise my hand.

Rhodain barks at me as if I was making a joke. I wasn't. This is completely new to me. Rhodain proceeds by throwing back his cloak and taking a different stance than before. If the cloak is continuing to get in his way, why doesn't he just take it off?

"Pay attention!"

I snap back to focusing on him.

Rhodain is waving his hand back and forth through the air. "I'm not explaining this to you again. Once I'm king, Divinity will be reinstated. The next class is manipulation. With will and control, you can shape the divine particles depending on what you're accustomed to. If you're unable to do so, you'll remain at the Martial level with enhanced

strength, endurance, and durability. If you're like me..." Rhodain trails off as fire appears from nowhere and fills the air.

He wills it around with his hand, maintaining his stance as it seems all too simple for him. He's a natural at it. A master of fire manipulation.

"But then why did you say you ate an egg if you are a natural?" Sophia asks the obvious question.

Obvious, if I was actually paying attention. I am following his flames, mesmerized. At this point, Rhodain could pull a gold piece from behind my ear and I'd be amazed. This is all new and fascinating. Sophia is still following his lecture.

"I did eat a chicken egg. I wasn't born with Divinity. I consumed it in order to use it," he answers and shifts into a different stance again. His feet are planted shoulder-width apart. He arches forward with his hands extended. "Consuming and absorbing divine particles or objects is also part of the medial level of the Mystic Arts."

Rhodain pulls his arms in. They sit at his sides at ninety-degree angles. In doing so, he draws in the heat from the air. I can feel the temperature rising again as waves of hot air brush past Sophia and me.

Rhodain draws it all into his body like a vacuum. He stops. The heat is still present but omitting from within him. His skin is almost glowing and I can see the waves of heat rippling from his arms, shoulders, and head.

"Well, that explains why you were such a hothead earlier." That time I meant it as a joke. Rhodain seems to exhale all the heat from his body. He returns to normal.

"You laugh but once you're able to master these two classes under Divinity then you'll become a literal force to be reckoned with. That's the final class, a Master of the Mystic Arts," Rhodain concludes.

I hope he wasn't expecting us to pass a test next because I did not take notes. I stand there with my jaw dropped. I have *so* many questions. Sophia beats me to one of them.

"What about the other two arts? The Sacred and Corrupted Arts?"

"The higher levels of Divinity. They far supersede those that have mastered the Mystic Arts. One could call it almost reaching the level of the gods themselves while remaining on a mortal plain. Very few can

use the Sacred and Corrupted Arts. Those who try and aren't meant for it get consumed by it," Rhodain replies grimly.

There it is again. His words being weighed down by something he isn't telling us. A memory? Something he now regrets? Whatever it is, it is personal, and he isn't willing to share it with two kids he just picked up out of the alley.

"Class is over. We need to move."

He's right. We are on a time clock. We have been walking for nearly fifteen minutes. The sunset is resting closer to the horizon as the sky turns from its vigorous sapphire to a restful amber. We would have to hurry if we're to make the safe house before it's too late.

"What happens if we don't make it to the safe house in time?" I ask as we pick up the pace.

If I sound winded, it is because I am. Between getting the snot kicked out of me and nearly suffocating on Rhodain's fiery *Divinity*, I am not fit for running. Never have been. Running in the desert leads to choking on sand with each breath. I am not one for adding more grain to my diet.

"The knights will close the doors from the inside, and they will remain closed until the next alarm rings out over the kingdom that the new king has been crowned."

"Let's hope that happens sooner rather than later," Sophia responds, keeping in step with Rhodain.

With how easily she ran me all over the Royal District, it makes sense that she can keep up with him. I can almost see steam rising from his head from her remark.

"It won't, because I'm busy babysitting at the moment."

"You truly believe you will be the king?" she asks, not noticing his temper affecting the air around us. It's getting hot out here, and Sophia is not helping.

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because I promised my sister that I would, and it's a promise..." he pauses, coming to a complete stop. We stop, too. More thugs begin flooding into the road ahead of us, "...I intend to keep."

“Rhodain, we don’t have time for this,” I remind. “We have to get to the safe house before...”

“It’s right there.”

He points fifty yards down the road to a large dome structure. Having not been raised here I didn’t realize it was a safe house. Sophia is still focused on Rhodain’s story and not paying attention to where we are.

We have taken so many twists and turns throughout the Royal District that everything seems to blend into one tan wall. I see no door. From how Rhodain explained it, I imagined there’d be a large door with Baronooners shuffling in to escape the violence. All I see are adobe walls with no windows.

“Where’s the entrance?” I ask.

“Around the front to the left. Past the goons,” Rhodain answers, setting forward. His fingers flicker as if he is ridding the sand from his fingertips. “I want you kids to wait here. This shouldn’t take long.”

“False,” I reply, grabbing Rhodain’s cloak almost automatically. I’m focused. I see the situation ahead of us. It’s true that Rhodain could probably handle the thugs, but that’s not our goal. “We should make a quick path through them. The objective is to get us inside the safe house before time is up. If we wait for you to finish fighting, we run the risk of running out of time.”

“Wasting time coming up with an alternative plan will lead to the same result. Sometimes you have to lay it all on the line and go with your gut,” Rhodain replies, ripping his cloak from my grasp. This causes me to lose my concentration. “Never lay a hand on your king,” he orders and rushes off.

I don’t get another moment to protest. He is on the thugs in strides and a heated brawl explodes before us.



Sophia and I are left alone. Again. We watch as Rhodain fights off the thugs, clearly having the upper hand, but that’s not what we’re concerned with.

“How are we going to get past them?” she asks.

I glance between them and the setting sun. We're losing daylight, which means we're running out of time. We've got minutes, and very few of them to get past the fighting and into the safety of the structure. Or, at least, one of us does. I keep my eyes on the sky. A restful amber growing darker by the second. As if the world is shutting its eyes and turning in for the night.

"Sophia, how familiar are you with this area?"

"Uh...?"

"No time for *uh*, Sophia. We either take our chances through the alleys or wait for Rhodain to make an opening by chance. Right now, we can use him as a distraction, but there is no telling how many more thugs are waiting in the shadows."

My brain is on rapid fire. With the fighting not focused on us, I can calculate many different scenarios and outcomes, but I can only do so much. I need to know what Sophia knows. Is there a spell or *Divinity* that would let me read her mind? And if so, would it be possible to master it in a few seconds?

"I'm not exactly sure where we are," she responds, sounding frightened and concerned. The thought of us not making it must be getting to her. She's unable to concentrate.

"Sophia, I need you. Can you navigate us through the alleys?"

"No," she replies after a long pause.

Then into the fire we go. I take her hand. She is completely taken by this as we run straight into the fray.

"What are you doing?"

"No time to waste. If we can't maneuver around the brawl, we have no choice but to go through it!"

"But...!"

"Be quick and nimble. Most importantly, don't take a hit!"

We rush in. Once amongst the fighting, it's like the temperature is bottled into a small radius.

Rhodain. He must be keeping his heat within a concentrated area to keep from causing too much damage to the surroundings. I pull Sophia in close. A thug is launched at us. We jump out of the way. The other thugs are focused on the center of the fight. Good, they're not focused on us. The problem is that the center of the fight keeps shifting. Bad.

Rhodain fights like a wildfire. He's all over the place. I guess having several opponents in a single confined space proves difficult to fight the way he had done before—with precision and well-executed attacks, along with balanced footing.

Now he was one man taking on the odds, and why? For the sport of it? What is driving him to fight like this? He mentioned his sister before. If we survive. If we see him again, then maybe I'll ask him about her. Right now, I have to focus. My family comes first.

We bound our way through the chaos. We lose each other a couple of times. It is hard to maintain a grip when you never know when one thug is going to fall on you or another one is going to lunge through you to get to someone else. Every time we try to find the edge of the fighting, the whole brawl shifts and we're right back where we started. All over again.

Plus, sand and dust are getting kicked up. The street is covered in a thick cloud. Screams and grunts bounce off the walls, making it hard to communicate with Sophia. Sweat from the heat of Rhodain's magic, Divinity, or whatever you call it, crawls into my eyes. I can feel my grip on my cousin weaken.

A thug has her by the coat again. He's yanking her away from me. He can't see. The sand and sweat have blinded him as well. He mistakes her for Rhodain and bawls a fist. She screams. I quickly run a knee into his gut. The thug grunts but doesn't let go.

Apparently, I don't hit as hard as the Banished Knight. Still, I notice that he has more of Sophia's coat sleeve than her actual arm. I tug her free of her coat and we escape. The thug punches nothing but air. We crawl away, finding our way out of the dust cloud.

The safe house is in clear view again. We take off in a full sprint. My long legs keeping up with Sophia's speed. We race for safety.



I can hear them. As we gain distance away from the fighting, I can hear the residents of the Royal District. Their gathered voices pouring out of the safe house. Children crying. Parents pleading. We aren't the

only ones that did not initially make it in with the rest of the citizens at the first sound of the alarm.

“Mom! Dad!”

Sophia screams as we round the building. There’s still hope. There are still people shuffling to get inside. They wouldn’t close the doors on all of us, would they? A new sensation of panic overtakes me like a sandstorm.

My breathing is heavy, either from that or from lack of exercise. I will train like a knight if I make it out of this, I swear.

“West?”

“Keep going...”

I tell Sophia as I start to fall back. I can barely find the air to form a sentence. She lingers before me, torn. She doesn’t want to leave me behind, but she knows what’s at stake. Fear creeps down her face in the form of sweat and tears.

“West, come on!”

“Keep...” I gasp. I have nothing left. I was not made for this. I am no Rhodain, I can’t save my cousin. I can’t even save myself. “...going.”

“Get back here, you little brats!”

A bunch of thugs rears the safe house behind us. They must have broken away from the fighting and followed us. Getting beaten by one man must have made them desperate for a win, and what’s better than a few tired kids.

“Don’t close the door!” I hear someone cry out from ahead of us.

We’re running out of time. Maybe Sophia can squeeze through and still get in.

“Sophia,” I gasp and stand firm. I turn to face the thugs. My arms extended. I stand as a lone wall, a single obstacle between the thugs and my cousin. “Go!”

I scream from the top of my lungs. As long as she makes it, as long as she’s safe, I can give my will to survive for that. I know I can’t do anything to stop them, but maybe they’ll be satisfied beating me up that they’ll leave her alone. I don’t have many options. I don’t have any other options. My body is my only weapon. I will be my cousin’s shield.

THE KING OF THE ROUND TABLE TOURNAMENT

Sophia doesn't run. She can't bring herself to leave me. Please, don't let me stand here looking like a fool. I just want you to be safe. As the thugs close in, I close my eyes. I'm prepared to take the first hit.

"Hey," I hear the voice. I feel the heat. I open my eyes. Rhodain has dropped in from somewhere, putting himself between me and the thugs. "You're in the way, kid."

A wave of heat. That is all I feel as I'm launched back. Is this what flying feels like? Lateral falling? Rhodain blasts me towards Sophia with enough force that I collide with her and we're both carried back.

We hit the ground rolling. I'm not burnt, but the impact from the sand was not something I look forward to greeting again. I glance up to see Rhodain fighting off the thugs. I'd thank him, but we're within seconds of the door closing.

"Seconds..." I struggle to say. I struggle to breathe. All I can do is use the last of my strength to help Sophia up. Or is she helping me at this point?

"Come on, West. I can't leave you. I'm your tour guide, remember?" she reminds me as we support each other.

We bury ourselves into the crowd outside of the safe house. We push. We get pushed. We struggle to stay together, but Sophia won't risk losing me again. Over the heads of the Baronooners around us, I can see the iron doors of the safe house. They are heavy and coated in brown, or is the lack of sunlight making the doors look brown at this point?

The doors are closing. They're closing us out. The knights are inside, holding swords and lances to prevent anyone else from entering. Still, we push. They wouldn't turn away a pair of children, would they?

"Mom! Dad!" Sophia cries.

"Aunt Janis!" I assist. It is about all I'm good for at this point, support.

We're almost to the front. I can hear a distinct voice cut through the noise. Either that or it was because it was the one voice I was hoping to hear.

"Sophia? Westley!" I can hear her. I can hear Aunt Janis.

She is at the front of the crowd on the inside of the safe house. They are trying to fight to keep the doors open, but more knights are keeping

them back. Sophia hears her, too. She cries out in return, jumping in an attempt to be noticed.

“Mom!”

“Sophia!” Aunt Janis responds in frightened joy. She fears the same thing we do. We’re so close. We are so close. Feet? Inches? We’re almost there. “Don’t close the door! My children are out there!”

“Don’t close the door!” I try to shout, but my voice becomes one with the hundreds pleading out the same thing.

The knights are in sight. They are decorated in brown and bronze, with swords and spears stretched out to force back the many trying to get in. I cannot see their faces or eyes. They are concealed within their helmets that are shaped to look like some kind of lizard, maybe even a dragon. Do those exist? The dragons of legend? Questions for later. I must remain focused.

As I look onward, I lock eyes with one of the knights. At least, where I believe their eyes would be, as all I see are the soulless sockets of the helmet.

“Please...” I mutter.

“Mom!” Sophia cries out.

There is no response. The pleads and cries turn into rage as the shutting of iron doors echo across the Royal District. The last line of dusk cuts between the extinguishing sky and awaking night.

Cold.

A harsh breeze now washes across my cheeks. I remain frozen, staring at the doors while my cousin is a statue. She doesn’t move. She doesn’t speak. She just stands there with me under one arm, and her free arm still reaching out for the door. The iron facing of the safe house towers inches from her fingertips. Inches.