

## CHAPTER ONE MAGIC WASN'T REAL

Magic wasn't real, not anymore.

Not like it used to be, or like it was in the fairytales.

Even the mention of magic was forbidden.

Or at least, it was supposed to be.

“Magic isn't real,” I repeated to myself even as doubt crept in. It was only the stuff of fairy tales and old books, and yet, it was the only explanation I could think of for my current predicament. I didn't know where I was or even how I had arrived at this dark place. Maybe this was a dream, but an intangible voice inside me contradicted that idea.

Something moved through the air, shimmering with faint light and vibrating, playing tricks with each of my senses. I smelled the charred aroma of a fire and heard the echo of soft taps of rainfall on stone. My mouth watered with something both sweet and savory, and a warm embrace coiled around my entire body. It was utterly intoxicating. I wanted it to never end.

My final sense was the one that betrayed the mirage. In one of his many attempts at imparting his wisdom, my brother once said, “Never trust what you see.” Of course, I was blindfolded in the middle of the Forest of Kel and I was nine years old, but the lesson stuck. I hated to admit it, but in this moment, he was correct. An image of a face appeared before me; a face I saw every time I closed my eyes at night. She appeared radiant and wonderful and... impossible. She was back home in Starfall City, where I'd left her, hundreds of miles away.

That's how I knew none of this was real.

The illusion collapsed and the tastes, smells, sounds, and sights disappeared. I found myself returned to the dark room, my feet bare against a cold stone surface. I searched in all directions, peering into the darkness, seeing nothing but the emptiness that surrounded me. I wasn't one to

panic, though now would have been an exceptionally fine time to do so.

“Hello!” I yelled, curious if the absence of light meant an absence of sound. My voice echoed along the stone floor, and maybe even against the walls, if this place had any.

“Can anyone hear me?” I hoped someone or something would answer my call, but none did. I took one step forward, and suddenly the ground lit up around my foot in a blaze of white light. It faded as quickly as it had burned, and by the time my eyes had adjusted, I was once again in darkness. I took one more step, lighter this time, and just as I had guessed, the illumination along the floor was not as pronounced, lasting much longer and not dazzling my eyes.

As fleet footed as I could, I ran forward, swiveling my head from side to side in search of anything. I stopped suddenly as a freestanding door with no wall nearly laid claim to my face. Before the light completely faded, I pushed open the door and entered, stumbling onto the floor of what appeared to be a library. Books and scrolls adorned the walls, and a large fire flickered and danced, lighting up the entire room.

“He’s not ready,” a soft voice echoed. The voice sounded almost familiar, although I was sure I hadn’t heard it before. I stood up quickly, looking for its source, only to find empty furniture and more books.

“He will have to be,” a second voice replied. This voice seemed weary, as if it had lost hope long ago. Or maybe I had lost hope? My chest heaved with emotions. Despair and rage pounded against my heart, but they felt foreign. Not my despair and rage, then, but someone else’s.

“Your Knights were destroyed. He was to be the first, but it’s too soon! Who will guide him?” The anger in the soft voice was rising even as my foreign feelings increased to match.

“You will,” the somber voice said as a hand pulled on my shoulder. I turned and the library shifted too, turning like a kaleidoscope until all that remained were two chairs and two people to

match the two voices. I had many questions, so I remained standing, unable to move for fear that even the slightest breath would shatter this fragile reality.

“That was not the future we saw,” the figure with the soft voice argued. It was a tall woman, dressed in an outfit I had seen only in paintings of the long-extinct Elven people. The man standing next to her took one of the seats, crossing his legs and directing a fierce look at the woman.

“We have no time left—”

“And who’s fault is that?” the woman interrupted. Her soft voice had lost its warmth and was now rather stern and annoyed.

“Um, hello? Hi, I’m Oliver. Nice to meet you both. Love what you’ve done with the place. The whole books and not books anymore thing, it’s all a real mind-bender. Quick question if you will, can someone explain what’s going on here?” I had never been shy of using my tongue even in the most precarious of situations, be it in a fight or with group of strangers or... whatever this was.

The man turned back to me, quickly measuring. “Quartermaines,” he spat, shaking his head. He stood quickly. “Listen to me carefully,” he said. The floor beneath him turned into a river of stars and heavens, flowing from left to right in constant motion. The man bent down and touched the floor, creating a bright point within the stream. “There is a boy, a boy from Starfall City. He is the key.”

The woman joined in, though her demeanor softened when addressing me. “But first you will win your match. We have seen it.”

“My match?”

“Against Sir Declan. You will win, and the future will solidify as we have foreseen.” Her eyes darted back to the man still kneeling in the river of stars. He looked away, shame flitting across his face. The woman continued. “You will only remember pieces of this moment. Like a dream,

this will fade, my child. You must remember to find the boy.”

I shook my head, a haze settling in that made me feel like I was about to fall over. “Find who?”

The man stood and shook me by my shoulders, staring into my eyes. “Po. You must find Po. Protect him. He is the key.”

“The key to what?” I asked as I felt the pull of the ground below me.

“The key to...” But the woman faded from view. The chairs and two figures swirled as I fell for what seemed forever, until suddenly my eyes opened to a familiar sight.

I lay on the dirt ground, my body annoyed at the clumsiness of my fall, and a faded memory flirted at the fringes of my mind. I tried desperately to hold on to it, but the more I tried to grasp the vision, the more easily it slipped through. Only two solitary words survived: magic and Po.

But magic wasn't real, and I had no idea who or what Po was.

“Di-did you fall asleep again?” Yokel grabbed my arm to lift me back up.

“Only for a moment,” I replied teasingly. I squeezed my hand and felt my uncle's necklace, which was once hot, grow cold until it turned to dust altogether. “Let me ask you a question.”

My friend was shuffling his notes furiously within our dimly lit tent. The notes leapt from his hands. “Ye-yes, Oliver?” He dove toward the ground, grasping at the pages while a single word forced itself through to my throat and I clumsily relayed my question.

“Magic. What do you know about magic?”

Yokel looked at me wide-eyed, pausing in his frantic attempt to collect his meticulous notes. “I spend all this time preparing a-and you...” He began arguing with himself for a time before giving in to an answer. “Magic isn't real, you know that.” His answer had an air of finality, but his gaze remained on the ground.

“But what if it was?” I prodded. He knew more than he was letting on; he always did. Yokel

was the most well read and knowledgeable person I had ever known, and I had known quite a few people.

“Children’s stories,” he replied almost too quickly.

“What if they weren’t?” I agreed with him, and yet I wanted to be wrong.

Yokel sighed. “We shouldn’t even be speaking of this. What if someone overheard us?”

“The Black Sun aren’t going to take us away for talking privately in a tent, Yok.”

“No, bu-but what if someone else hears you talking about... it?” That someone else, of course, was Roc. Magic was a sensitive topic around him, being that it was the reason his parents were gone. For years, High Queen Amukamora had obsessively hunted any and every hint of magic in all of Soraya. It would have been easier to collect every grain of sand from the seas, but still she persisted, and for hundreds of years she had success.

The High Queen was known to hate magic more than anyone, and she had been sent to Soraya from a distant land by the Nine Gods themselves to rid our world of it. They’d blessed her with eternal life, and she used that life to further her quest. Her Black Sun Battalion was charged with destroying all rumors of magic and all the people related to it.

Before the High Queen, all the kingdoms and queendoms of Soraya were splintered and separate. Magic was used by those who could summon it for all manner of tasks, including waging war. The legendary Knights of Nine were said to help quell those wars and protect those who used magic, but the Knights had been defeated by the High Queen and were never seen again.

Or so the children’s stories went. How much of that was true and how much was embellished was up for debate. What wasn’t, was the High Queen’s ongoing war against all things magic, even if it all seemed a fool’s errand. Magic was nothing more than lies and rumors, meant to trick those desperate enough to believe in it. But rumors, true or not, have consequences.

One of those rumors brought the Black Sun Battalion to Starfall. Everyone joked about it, children and adults alike. We all knew there was probably no such thing, but people still pretended their sword or shoe or stick was the famed magical object. The Black Sun didn't like the joke and destroyed any thought of a magical object in Starfall. In the process, a riot broke out, a building burned down in the Narrows, and Roc's parents were collateral damage. All in the name of preserving the safety of the kingdoms. Magic wasn't real because the High Queen said it wasn't. Commanded it wasn't. There were no magicians, no spellcasters, no witches or warlocks, wizards or mages. No one could do magic, and she made sure no one would ever try.

I let the dust from the necklace fall to the ground, contemplating what I knew to be true in my mind and what I felt to be true in my heart. I stared at Yokel, knowing he knew more, because of course he would. But we weren't in Mercyhold to talk about things we weren't supposed to. We were here to finish off a summer of tournaments with an undefeated season. The discombobulation of Yokel's notes and my taboo questions were wreaking havoc on his analytical mind. He would break sooner rather than later if I pressed. Smiling slightly, I bent down to help gather his notes, handing them to him and forfeiting the argument to allow my oldest friend this small victory.

Yok fumbled for control, and the entire portfolio fell once more from his desperate grip, showering the cold dirt floor with its contents. Utter defeat visibly washed over his body.

"Yok, I'm sorry," I said, giving his shoulder a friendly squeeze.

"N-no, it's n-not you," he stammered, fighting to control his frustration. His skinny body seemed to shrink even more. "It's all here, I just can't keep it straight." He sighed heavily.

"Yok," I whispered, letting my voice carry along the stale air. "Just breathe."

"But I can't just, with, with, and..." He waved frantically at the scattered information at our feet. I grasped his other shoulder firmly, pulling him around so I could peer directly into his eyes.

Cutting through the wall built against the mockery he'd grown accustomed to, I saw the young boy I met over nine years ago at a party among the high nobles, a place where neither of us felt we quite belonged, though our family names would suggest otherwise.

A small, skinny, bespectacled boy stood nervously next to his mother's hip as she mingled with the other noble families. His white-knuckled hands clung to her dress, and his eyes darted from towering adult to towering adult.

"Hi, I'm Oliver," I declared. As nervous and shy as this little boy appeared, I was the complete opposite. I stood there, curiously waiting for his reply, but the boy was frozen, as unreachable as one of the monstrous stone figures mounted atop the Shearson Library.

Undeterred, I continued to talk without waiting for an answer. Blatantly invading his personal space, I pushed his spectacles back up his small nose. "I like your eyeglasses! Do you wear them all the time? My uncle has a pair, but he only needs them when he reads, which is pretty often since he works at the library in Kandaheart. I usually see him every summer, but this summer we couldn't because Mother was busy—"

I continued to somersault my way through my entire life story, when the small boy interrupted my babbling. "M-my eyeglasses?" He seemed confused at the mention of the nearly invisible eye shields. "Y-you... like my eyeglasses?"

"Yeah, they're neat. Though the frames make your head look funny." I giggled. The frames perched awkwardly on his small nose, not unlike how they would look on his slightly older, more proportional teenage face. The young boy retreated again, his smile dissolving.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, eager to settle any tension between me and my new friend. "I wasn't trying to tease, I was only letting you know. My brother says I talk too much for someone my age, but then again, he once fell off a boat looking for water-dragons, so, like, what does he know?"

“You have a b-brother?” The boy’s face lit up.

“Yep! He’s at the Forge with my dad tonight, so it’s just me and my baby sister, but she’s already asleep.”

“I d-don’t have any brothers or sisters.” The boy glanced toward the ground, fidgeting with his mother’s dress as she brushed him aside like a pestering fly. I studied him, this skinny, sad little boy, and wondered what was wrong. Why wasn’t he happy like me? I was always happy and, knowing no other existence for a seven-year-old boy, I was convinced he should be too. Maybe it was because I had a brother and sister and he didn’t. I would be sad too if I didn’t have them, I thought.

“Well... I’ll be your brother!” I said. He needed a brother, and I had nothing else to do that night.

“W-what?”

“You’re sad because you don’t have a brother, so we can be brothers!” Happy with my solution, my thoughts wandered to how I could smuggle to my room some of the tasty lemon cakes being served.

“That’s not how it works, I d-don’t think,” the little boy replied, scuffing his shoe into the floor.

“Who cares?” I said, starting to formulate my plan of attack. First, I could make my way around the back of the table, possibly knock something over to create a distraction, but that would mean I still needed the servant looking after the desserts to leave. It was risky but possible if I had help...

“W-well, if you d-don’t mind hanging out with me.” He let go of his mother’s dress and nervously shifted around. “I can be a little...”

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t mind,” I said absentmindedly. My focus was now on “The Great Lemon Cakes Quest,” but it would take two to pull it off. “You hungry?” I asked slyly.



“W-well, I’m allergic to—”

“Perfect! I need your help. What did you say your name was again?” I asked while I pulled him over to the wall behind a suit of armor. A loud clang sounded against the stone floor where a servant slipped on a cloth I had laid, dropping his silver platter.

After the ringing subsided, I could hear the end of the boy’s muffled response. “-mir Yokel.”

“Okay, Yok, here’s what we’re going to do...”

My mind cleared as I pulled myself away from memory and back to the young man who stood in front of me, spectacles sliding down the bridge of his nose once again. Pushing them back up with my index finger, I smiled.

“Okay, Yok, here’s what we’re going to do. You’re the best tactician I know, and I wouldn’t be here without you. You have everything you need already, right here.” I pointed to his forehead. I walked over to the stool and began to armor up. “So, give me the rundown.”

“Promise you won’t fall asleep this time?” Yokel teased as he straightened his shoulders. “Your final match is against Sir Declan, one of the Old Guards for the King of Mercyhold.” The name sounded oddly familiar, but I brushed off the feeling just as quickly as it had come.

“A real knight?” I asked. My giddy tone couldn’t be held back, but neither could Yokel’s.

“A true knight,” he responded in kind. Knights were rare in Soraya, and it was even rarer to be fighting one in a tournament like this. A win against a true knight would make me famous, even beyond Mercyhold.

Yokel continued with his rundown as he helped me lace my armor. “He won this same tournament when he was our age, some forty years ago, but hasn’t competed since. According to my sources, he’s quite the hero in this kingdom, some say legendary, even at his age. He prefers

Form Twelve for offense and Form Seven for defense, but I've witnessed him merge Forms Ten and Fourteen, and quite uniquely if I do say so. He's got strength and skill, but he's never approached longer than five minutes in any of his matches so far."

Yokel's assessment was, as it always was, thorough and concise. The best fighters in the world, whether in a tournament like this or on the battlefield, always fought using the Elven Forms of Fighting. There were twenty-four forms in all, twelve offensive and twelve defensive, and although each weapon had its own variation, they all used the same forms as their base.

Based on what Yokel was saying, the knight would use a mildly aggressive offensive attack form with a very conservative defensive attack form, which told me everything I needed to know about the man. He was cautious when attacking but would take calculated risks. The same could not be said about his defensive technique, which would take no risks at all. It made all the sense in the world how Sir Declan had defied the short life of a knight.

"So, I wait him out and then take him on the back fifteen points?" I asked, shoving my arm through the uncomfortable chest plate.

"That would be the strategic thing to do, yes, but a knight doesn't get to be his age by being predictable," Yokel acknowledged, tying my laces to an almost unbearable tightness.

Bursting into the tent like a tornado, Roc began yelling. "What are you two doing?! Oliver was due in the ring minutes ago!"

"But we haven't finished going over my notes and—"

"No time for that, nerd! Any longer and we'll be disqualified." Roc snatched my helmet with his enormous hands and shoved me out of the tent into the blinding light of the afternoon. Yokel trailed close behind, his portfolio of unneeded notes still out of order.

Bouncing off spectators as we rushed toward the ring, I heard Yokel spewing more tactics as I

fidged inside my armor. The heavy steel never allowed for the full range of motion I so desperately desired. I guess belonging to the most famous smithing family in the South hadn't afforded me any unique advantages. Having the most famous inventor in history as a father hadn't afforded me any advantages either.

Roc pulled my shoulders around and craned down. "You ready? You win this and you're undefeated this summer. Can't think of a better way to start off your career. And I bet Iris would love to be courting a..."

Iris. I suddenly pictured her in my head, and fragments of a vision flashed before me. Iris. Magic. Po. A door.

But there wasn't time to think about these things. I ignored his last comment and ended the conversation.

"You mean we won't have to spend the ride home listening to Yokel complain about not preparing enough."

Roc slapped the top of my helmet with gusto, pushing down my visor and spinning me around once again. "Exactly!"

Twirling my sword, I let my body relax within the metal shell. This was the last match I would have as the Summer Tournament Series concluded. Victorious in the five previous tournaments within Sunset Mountains Circuit, truth be told, I was a bit spent. My mind wandered briefly, back to magic and the mysterious Po—

**BONGGGGG!**

I snapped back to reality and to an immediate clash of sword on sword. Sir Declan saw my mind wander and took the opportunity to introduce himself forcefully, to shouts of delight from the crowd.

We circled each other, weighing one another's movements. Sir Declan appeared much nimbler than a man his age ought to, and he held his sword with a balance that confirmed his practiced knowledge. He wore the same light steel armor I did, but whereas mine was smooth and blank, his was adorned with designs and details marking his battles. In the middle of the chest plate sat an ornate blue sapphire that caught rays from the setting sun. My admiration became critique as he began his attack with Form Twelve, just as Yokel predicted.

We danced, the ting of our weapons keeping the count as the motions came naturally to us both. With a quick shift in tempo, Sir Declan began to embrace the unexpected, improvising deftly into Form Two, a basic attack every swordsman mastered early in their training. However, he took the form and stretched it, sprinkling hints of more advanced techniques to throw me off my guard. Perplexed, I struggled to counter each small manipulation of the assault.

A quick glance at the scoring wall showed twenty red flags to my lowly eight blue flags, a strategic eight-point sacrifice on Sir Declan's part that allowed him to amass such a lead so quickly. For every defensive parry and block I managed, he responded with a slight variation of the perfect counter, all within the construct of Form Two.

The simple elegance of his strategy made it hard for me to focus and not applaud the knight's brilliant tactics. Sixteen years and I had convinced myself I had learned and mastered all there was to know about the Fighting Forms. My arrogance had cost me valuable points in the match, and Sir Declan's technique had restoked a fire within me; the joy of indeterminate combat flooded through my heart. The rush of facing an opponent of such high skill and ambiguous strategy brought a broad grin to my face. His strategy was bold and tested successfully against every opponent before bringing him to this final match today. It was perfect. Simply perfect.

I almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

Sir Declan finished his sequence with a flourish, hesitating for a moment to gather his breath and composure. His five minutes were up. The nimbleness and energy he had started the match with had quickly faded, matching the faded sapphire in his armor. The moment he took to collect himself was one moment too long. I pounced. He had relied on the wide point margin to afford a break from our dance, but my quick succession of slashes and forward thrusts broke through, turning his strategy into a handicap. His simplified offensive tactic never translated into a defensive scheme, and appropriating his gambit, I began an intricate reworking of a highly modified attack myself.

The result was a blitz of strikes he was unable to defend, and within minutes, the scoring wall read twenty-nine red flags to twenty-nine blue flags. As we entered into a final contest of blows, we both knew what would transpire. As it had so many times before, the world seemed to slow down, if not stop altogether. Various paths illuminated before me, showing me the result of each different action I could take. A thrust on one path might lead to my defeat, whereas a parry and slash would lead to victory. I saw it all clearly before me, as well as the path to victory. But I had seen beyond that too, beyond the final flag on the wall and past the ceremony to the world that followed after. It was a world I'd seen in a river of stars. One full of outcomes I felt no control over. It was as if I had no choice in the matter, and something about that felt wrong.

So, I forged a path I had not seen.

The final sound of the gong rang loudly, and the audience was silent as they vied for a look at the scoring wall. A red flag posted, and an exuberant crowd burst into cheers. Exhausted, Sir Declan knelt to the ground, his armor rising and falling viciously with each breath he tried to collect. It had looked like a clean match, with Sir Declan scoring the last point on my final missed

thrust, but we both knew what had truly happened. It was in fact a draw, with my unseen strike scoring at the same time as his. I stood there, victorious this summer no more, and smiling all the same.

Roc and Yokel jumped into the ring, rushing toward me.

“What happened?”

“We thought you had him!”

I didn't answer but rather watched Sir Declan across the ring, still on one knee. He looked up at me and I shook my head, conceding the match to him. He was holding himself up by his sword, and with every breath he took, years of fighting released from his body like a vapor of worries and troubles. He was savoring this moment, this final match of the tournament.

The crowd began to clap slowly, and Sir Declan rose, leaving his sword and helmet standing in the hard-packed ground as he began to unlace his boots methodically and deliberately. Walking to the center of the ring, the old knight placed his boots down somberly. Allowing one final pause, he gazed out into the crowd, tears streaming down his cheeks as he received the admiration of his screaming fans. They adored their old hero, and he loved them back.

He eyed the three of us, a smile creeping along his wrinkled face. He nodded slowly and the full weight of the moment overtook me. He would never fight in this, or any tournament, ever again, and the finality of his retirement sent shivers down my spine. It was rare to meet a knight old enough to see his hair turn the pale gray that Sir Declan sported. He had chosen to leave on his own terms and in his own way, not face down on the ground but on his own two feet.

I raised my fist over my chest, beating it softly, and Sir Declan responded in kind. He knew the match should have gone to me, but I had chosen the path I wanted instead of the one everyone expected. I had chosen, and that was all that mattered to me.

We departed, leaving Sir Declan to revel in his final moments in the arena. Instead of remaining for the closing ceremony, we gathered our gear and headed straight to the station, waiting for a steam locomotive, an invention of my grandfather's, to arrive against a setting purple sky.

"Where are we off to next? We never did make it to the Northern Tribes," Yokel asked, picking up his bags while Roc leaned against the post in giddy amazement at the rumbling machine.

Peering out along the tracks, I thought back on the summer, the tournaments I had competed in, the parties at my uncle's house in Kandaheart, and all the mischief the three of us managed to accomplish. I thought of my mother for the briefest of moments before shutting that door in my mind once more. After her death I had left my life in Starfall to travel the country under the presumption of competing in tournaments. I thought the time away would help, but the thought of her stung all the same.

So instead I thought of my sister and wondered what adventures she must have had without me. I thought of my father, undoubtedly spending his days at the Forge, as he always did.

And I thought of Iris, who was the singular obsession of my heart. I thought of the girls I had rejected, much to Roc's chagrin. I thought of how I missed Iris's smile and her laugh, and the way we would spend all night talking about nothing and yet seemingly everything. Finally, I thought of the kiss she gave me as I boarded a train to leave her. The same train that was now blasting a cloud of steam as it rolled slowly to a stop in front of us.

I looked at Yokel, his figure silhouetted against a setting sun and stationary planet above, and I smiled. "We're going home."

Yet even as my voice charted our course, my mind lingered on a different topic.

Magic wasn't real.

Or was it?