

# The Lightning Knight

(Sample Chapter)

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## CHAPTER ONE: WHISKEY DANGER

### Scene One

“Let me ask you a question,” I said while Yokel shuffled his notes furiously within the dimly lit tent. My thoughts were consumed by a dream from the previous night, even as the late afternoon sun baked the tent’s satin walls, splashing our belongings with reddened light. I searched for answers, unsure what to think of the perplexing visions.

“Yes?” Yokel stuttered in response and dove toward the dirt floor after his notes which leapt from his hands.

Left with only a lingering remembrance that flirted with the outer fringes of my mind, I struggled with how exactly to explain the weaving tapestry of quickly escaping imagery. A single word forced itself through to my throat and I clumsily relayed my question, “What do you know about Magic?”

“We’re minutes away from the fight, and, and you’re talking about magic?” he accused, desperately attempting to collect his meticulous notes. “I spend all this time preparing and...” He began arguing with himself before giving in to an answer. “I once had an illusionist at my, my birthday celebration. You know that, you were there.”

“I meant, like... real Magic. You know, like with Roc’s parents...” I responded, checking my surroundings even though I knew we were alone.

Yokel glowered resentfully at the remaining notes on the ground before drifting back to me. “You know Imperial Law: anyone found discussing, observing, studying, conducting or experimenting with magic or magical items will be punished accordingly.” The resuscitation of Imperial Law that governed his own internal moral code rang hollow, and I was certain he knew more than he was letting on.

“But, you must know *something* about it. If anyone would, it’d be you, ” I flattered him, knowing he couldn’t resist the temptation of proving his intellect. After a brief moment where I thought he would acquiesce to my request, he instead shook his head.

“The match in minutes! Why are we, we discussing this?” He stuttered quickly, trying to deflect. The discombobulation of his notes and my taboo questions were wreaking havoc on his analytical mind. I knew he would break sooner rather than later if I pressed. Smiling slightly, I shook my head, allowing this small victory to my oldest friend.

He tried to push through his own anxiety and collect his thoughts along with his notes but his fingers failed him once more. Fumbling for control, 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.

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

"No, it's not, not you," he stammered back, the sick smirk of defeat lurking just behind his normally encouraging expression. "The notes for your final match are here, but everything is just..." Collapsing and fighting to control his frustration, his skinny body sank under the weight of expectations he placed on himself. "It's all here, I just can't keep it all straight," he sighed, defeated so easily.

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

"But I can't just, with, with, and..." he said, frantically searching for a lifeline among the scattered information at our feet. I grasped his other shoulder firmly, pulling him around to 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.

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 desperately, eyes darting from towering adult to towering adult.

"Hi, I'm Oliver," I declared precociously. As nervous and shy as this little boy appeared, I was the complete opposite. Where his childhood provided apprehension, stress, and anxiety, my adolescence afforded me an arrogance to dive into any situation, especially those to which I was not invited. I stood there, curiously waiting for his reply, but the boy was frozen in place, as descript and unreachable as one of the monstrous stone figures mounted atop the Shears.

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

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

"Yeah, they're pretty cool. Though the frames makes 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 at the mention of his funny-looking head.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, eager to settle any tension between me and my new friend. "I wasn't trying to make fun; 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 sea dragons, so, like, what does he know?"

"You have a b-brother?" The little boy wondered, his face lighting up with renewed interest.

"Sure do! 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 dismissively 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 to myself, innocently rationalizing this strange new boy.

"Well... I'll be your brother!" I said simply. He needed a brother, and I had nothing else to do tonight.

"W-what?" The little boy responded, unsure he heard me correctly.

"You're sad because you don't have a brother, so we can be brothers!" I was adamant on this solution, my young yet rational mind coming to an acceptable conclusion. Happy with my outcome, my thoughts wandered to how I could smuggle some of the tasty lemon cakes being served to my room.

"That's not how it works, I d-don't think," the little boy replied, scuffing his small shoe into the floor, hopefulness defeated after only a moment's thought.

"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 doable if I had help...

"Well, if you don't mind hanging out with me," the little boy spoke, letting go of this mother's dress and nervously shifting around. "I can be a little..."

"Yeah, yeah, I don't mind," I said absentmindedly. My focus was now on "Operation Lemon Cakes," but it would take two to pull it off. "You hungry?" I asked slyly.

"Well, I'm allergic to..."

"Perfect! I need your help. What did you say your name was again?" I pulled him over to the wall behind a suit of armor, as a loud clang sounded against the stone floor where a servant slipped on a cloth I had laid and dropped a silver platter.

After the ringing subsided, the little boy finished his 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, those same spectacles sliding down the bridge of his nose. Pushing them back up with my index finger, I smiled. "Okay, Yok, here's what we're going to do. You don't need all this, you never have. You're the best tactician I know." I walked over to the stool and began to armor up. "Give me the rundown."

"Right," Yokel said with a smile as he straightened his shoulders. "Your final match is against Sir Declan, a true knight and one of the Old Guards for the King of Mercyhold. He won this same tournament when he was our age forty years ago, but hasn't won it since. According to my sources, he's a hometown hero, and this is the farthest he's advanced in over twenty-five years. 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 three minutes."

"So, wait him out and then take him on the back fifteen points?" I searched, 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.

Bursting into the tent like an enigmatic tornado, Roc began yelling in a panic, "What are you two doing?! Ollie, you were due in the ring ten 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 explained hastily as he snatched my helmet with his enormous hands and shoved me out of the tent into the blinding light of day. Yokel trailed close behind, his portfolio of unneeded notes still out of order.

Bouncing off fans and spectators as we rushed toward the ring, I heard Yokel spewing more tactics for my match as I fidgeted inside my armor. The heavy steel never allowed for the full range of motion I so desperately desired. Belonging to the most famous smithing family in the South hadn't afforded me any unique advantages in this regard. Always engaged with others' requests my father never bothered to work on the problems I found most important.

Roc pulled my shoulders around and craned down to look me in the eyes. "You ready? You win this and you're undefeated this summer. Can't think of a better way to start off your career," he noted. "And I bet Rose would love to be courting a..."

Ignoring his last comment, I pushed out of the conversation with a joke: "And 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 in the Kandahart Circuit, truth be told, I was a bit spent. My mind wandered briefly, back to my dream and the lingering questions...

BONGGGGG!

The sound of the opening gong snapped my attention back to reality and to an immediate clash of sword on sword. Sir Declan saw my mind wander, taking an opportunity to introduce himself forcefully to shouts of delight from onlookers.

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 wasn't a court knight in name only, but one who'd seen his share of fighting for his kingdom, and for his own life. My admiration faded quickly into 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 of tempo, Sir Declan began to embrace the unexpected, improvising deftly into Form Two, a basic attack every swordsman mastered early in their career. However, he took the position and stretched it, sprinkling hints of more advanced techniques to throw off my guard. Immediately perplexed, I struggled to counter each small manipulation of the assault he conceived.

A quick glance to the scoring wall showed twenty flags to my lowly eight, 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 this knight's brilliant tactics. Sixteen years and I convinced myself I had learned and mastered all there was to know about the thirty sword fighting techniques. Sir Declan, however, stoked a fire within me once more, and 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. This strategy was bold, unfamiliar, and tested successfully against every opponent, bringing him to this final match today.

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. The nimbleness and energy he had started the match with had faded, and his moment to collect himself was one moment too long. I pounced on the opportunity, binding his fate. He had relied on the wide point margin to afford a break from our waltz, but my quick succession of slashes and forward thrusts broke through, turning his strategy into a handicap. His simplified tactic never translated to 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 seemingly 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 different actions I could take. A thrust in one action might lead to my defeat, while a parry and slash would lead to victory. I saw it all clearly before me, as well as the path to victory. Sir Declan, I was sure, saw it too.

The final sound of the gong rang loudly, and the audience was silent as they vied for a look to the scoring wall. A red flag posted, and an exuberant crowd burst into cheers and woops. Exhausted and utterly stunned, Sir Declan knelt to the ground, his armor rising and falling viciously with each breath he tried to collect. It had been a clean match, with Sir Declan scoring the last point on my final missed thrust. I stood there, victorious no more, and smiling all the same.

Roc and Yokel jumped into the ring, rushing toward me for answers. "What happened? You had him!" Roc questioned, confused as to why the outcome was not in our favor. I didn't answer but rather spied Sir Declan across the ring, still on one knee.

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 slowly clap 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. Giving the moment one final pause before he gazed out into the crowd, tears streamed down his cheeks, receiving 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. As he nodded slowly to me, the full weight of the moment pushed tears to my eyes. He would never fight in this, or any tournament, ever again, and the finality of the retirement sent shivers down my spine. Rarer than meeting a near-extinct elf was seeing a knight old enough to see his hair turn the pale gray that Sir Declan sported. No, 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 could have gone to either of us, with my final choice deciding our fate. I had chosen the path I wanted, instead of the one expected of me.

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

"Where to now, Ollie? Back to Kandahart?" Yokel inquired, 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 and the parties at my uncle's house, and all the mischief the three of us managed to accomplish. I thought of my sister and mother and wondered what adventures they must have had without me. I thought of my father, undoubtedly spending his days at the Forge, as he always did.

Finally, I thought of Rose, the singular summer obsession of my heart and dreams. I thought of the girls I had rejected in Kandahart, much to Roc's chagrin. I thought of how I missed her 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 we shared as I boarded a train to leave her for three months- the same train that was currently blasting a cloud of steam as it rolled slowly to a stop in front of us.

I looked over soberly to Yokel, his figure silhouetted against a setting sun and stationary planet above.

"We're going home."

## Scene Two

"Go away!" I yelled, throwing my pillow at the door while Reagan escaped my assault with a laugh. I begrudgingly rolled from my bed, mesmerized by the cloud of dust dancing through the sunbeams sneaking past my curtains. I sighed at the thought of my recurring dreams, "Who are you?"

The answers would have to wait, however. Mere days since our return from the summer's excitement and it was already time to return to the Institute. "One last year," I whispered as my feet met the cold stone floor.

Making my way downstairs, walking fast, the paintings passed and I stared at a slightly askew portrait in the hall, answering the question regarding my father's whereabouts. While his obsessive eccentricities were often the cause of many of our arguments, they also allowed me an opportunity to track his comings and goings. My melancholy continued as I entered the kitchen, picking up a weekly periodical funded by my Mother and written by scribes at the library. The chef was hard at work, his culinary artistry left unnoticed by Reagan who perched herself on his prep table. Legs swinging playfully, she swiped a roll and tossed it to me with a smile.

Catching the soft bread, I asked glumly, "He's still at the Forge?"

"Working on some new project I believe," she confirmed.

"Mom?"

"She left early for the Shears. We received a letter with the Imperial Seal, it was about..."

"I don't want to hear about it," I snapped back instantly, a quick simmer of unbridled anger and resentment sneaking out. Seeing her expression, I apologized immediately, "I'm sorry, I just don't want to talk about him."

Reagan hopped off the table and picked up her pack, gesturing toward the door. "It's been almost five years, Ollie. He's still our brother." She was right of course, but my emotions never allowed for rational thinking when it came to him. We left the house, letting the morning sounds of our city guide us toward its heart.

A cascade of feelings rose alongside the sun, clouding my thoughts with bitter emotion. For a shred of a moment, I imagined myself in a different life, a different family. My father would be here, on my last first day at the Institute. He would have visited me this summer, bearing witness to my victories, or at least feigned interest at a bland recount of my adventures.

My mother, however, was not one to miss even the least auspicious milestones; the letter Reagan mentioned must have held substance of major concern. Without warning, the resentment at the thought of my brother began to leak back into my consciousness.

Trying to take my mind off of my brother, I focused once more on the an article I had read in the Starfall City Journal, "So who is this "Knight Angel?"

*Damn that was a great name.*

"No one knows," Reagan answered gleefully, "The City Guard is not happy about it."

"I wonder who he is?" I asked. Reagan knew more than she was letting on. She always had her pulse on the mysteries about our city.

"Who said it was a he?" She replied, before changing the subject. "So," she said jovially as she skipped beside me, "Have you seen her yet?"

I replied coyly, "Seen who?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe..." She imitated an exaggerated and passionate kiss, taking many liberties in hilarious pantomime.

"I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about," I lied, choking back my laughter and conceding a small smile.

"I thought that would cheer you up," she retorted, but her voice abruptly dropped. "Ollie..."

"Yes?" We approached Merchant's Square and Reagan became uncharacteristically quiet. Not usually one for guessing games, I played along with piqued interest.

"It's been a long summer," she said, searching for the right words.

"You're telling me? Between..."

She fell into a diatribe, "No, you don't understand, just listen. I mean, life isn't only about sports and girls and your little midnight boys' club. We aren't kids anymore and I don't think you've noticed how different everything is. How different everyone is; people change."

"People like you?" I shot back, trying to ignore the boys' club comment. *How did she know about Whiskey Danger's late night outings?*

"People like people," she snapped. "People like Rose." There it was; her roundabout words finally came to a summit. My obsessive introspection over the summer made one thing very clear to me: Rose and I were connected.

I resisted my baby sister's warning and unleashed a verbal tirade of my own. "What do you know about it? I think I know her a little better than you do. It was only three months, Rea... and it's not even like that. And... three months isn't that long of a time."

Reagan stopped abruptly, hands planted firmly on her hips, lips pursing into an all too familiar expression. She somehow acquired a gift for knowing exactly how and when to exploit any weakness in an argument, a gift she has grown to use judiciously in our family. I had to put an end to this fast.

"Just shut your... all the holes... in your face," I eventually fumbled.

Expression softening, Reagan leaned in for a hug underneath my tensed arms and my defenses crumbled.

"I just don't want you to get hurt. I realize how close you two were..."

"Are," I corrected defiantly.

"... and you're not kids anymore."

"We're only sixteen! When did life suddenly become so serious?" I challenged, giving into my frustration.

"Why are you being so hostile?" Reagan jabbed.

"Why are you being so, so... so YOU!" I retaliated with false anger, forcing us both to burst into violent laughter.

"Maybe you take this year to work on your insults, huh big brother?"

"Maybe," I quipped, awarding her this small victory.

"You know, I'm the one who should be looking out for you, right?" I said, calming down and planting a kiss on her forehead. Hoping she'd infer the apology and move on, I questioned her upcoming school term.

"Who's your Head Professor this year?"

"Professor Harwich," she replied absentmindedly.

"Bring him a candied pear and you'll be set for the year. He loves those," I offered. She smiled, and with a friendly nod, we both continued in opposite directions.

"Where did you learn that trick from?" I heard from behind my back, but I smiled without responding, the memory lifting my spirits.

The city began to stir as I reached the Narrows, the dawn finally breaking over the horizon and filling the streets and alleyways with a faint blue-green glow. Roc lived in a communal living space above a variety of shops in an enormous three-story building. I always imagined the fun of living in such a frenetic space, but Roc often described it as "a crap place full of crap people who will steal your shoes, but for

some reason, not your socks." Thinking of it now, that's probably why Roc's feet always smelled so bloody awful; presumably, he never removed his shoes, not even to sleep.

"How was your morning?" Roc asked, initiating our handshake ritual.

"More of the same," I said, wholly dejected. "Yours?"

"More of the same," he answered in turn.

We continue on our way, his long strides outpacing mine. Just shy of two meters tall, he was by far the largest student at the Institute, a measurement wholly unique among his family or so he told me.

Walking through the Narrows and back toward Merchant's Square, a small smile crept along my face. Roc and I made this same walk to school every day for the last four years; the idea of this fifth and final year was already proving to be bittersweet. We'd become nigh inseparable since we met nine years ago.

By happenstance, my mother had run into a lowly hedge knight, Sir Roclan, and invited him to one of her infamous Sun's Day dinners. Yokel and I were right in the middle of one of our more complicated pranks, desperately trying to rig up a system to drench my older brother with a bucket of water as he passed through a narrow doorway in our gardens. True to fashion, I was entangled in an elaborate net of ropes when I walked a towering eight-year-old, his quizzical gaze meeting mine as I dangled three meters in the air.

"Hey, kid, you wanna do me a favor?" I asked as I spun around in a circle uncontrollably. The kid glanced up, following the rope and tracing its path into Yokel's less capable hands. The rope started to slip and burned against Yokel's skin. Without warning, Yokel yelped and let go, sending me and my bucket hurtling toward the unforgiving stone steps far below. With mere inches separating my head from the cold stone, I miraculously jolted to a stop. Shifting, I turned my focus from my certain death to the benevolent giant holding my tether. He lowered me down gently, turning toward Yokel, who was one part embarrassed and one part amazed. I fought to recover myself quickly.

"You're strong," I mentioned, picking myself back up and looking at the bucket as it sloshed water over the brim.

"Thanks," the kid said, still unsure what to make of the situation. "What are you two doing anyway?"

"Well, it's a long story..." Yokel started until I interrupted.

"No, it's not. I have a bucket of water, I want to throw it on my brother. We're just running into some..."

"Logistical problems," Yokel added.

"Lo-gis-ti-cal?" The new kid cocked his head curiously, unable to make out what we were trying to accomplish.

"He means we haven't figured out how to get this bucket up there in a way that will fall on my brother when he walks through."

"Oh," the new kid answered cautiously. "Why are you trying to do that?"

"Because he's my brother," I defended plainly.

"Oh, right," the new kid settled, unsure if I was serious.

"What are you three doing?" My brother commanded in all of his thirteen-year-old righteousness.

"Uh..." I started, surprised at his sudden entrance. I glanced at Yokel, the bucket of water still sloshing in my very guilty hands.

"This!" The new kid yelled, deftly snatching the bucket and drenching my brother through his finest dinner wears.

"Was that him?" he whispered, checking in a bit too late on the intended target's identity.

"Sure was," I gasped, wide-eyed.

"You little... my hair... I'm going to kill you!" my brother howled, coming to the realization that it was only water and he was the largest person currently in our quartet.

"Time to go," I said, grabbing the new kid by the back of the shirt and sprinting for an escape.

"What's your name?" I asked him, as we huddled down behind a carriage, watching for any sign of my furious sibling.

"Riley Roclan," he answered, shifting uncomfortably at his surname.

"I'm Oliver, he's Yokel. What's your favorite food?"

"Uh, I don't know." He was unsure how to pass this test. "Lemon cakes."

"Favorite Knight?"

"Summer Solstice Night, I suppose."

I shook my head, "No, like your uncle."

"You know my uncle?" he questioned, his face lighting up in pleasant surprise.

"Of course, he's Sir Roclan!" Yokel said.

Riley Roclan's back straightened at the mention of his uncle's name. "Oh, uh, then I guess probably Sir Dewie of the Mountain," he answered.

"The legendary jousting?" I puzzled. It was a curiously obscure choice. Rare was it to hear a Southerner mention a Northern Tribe Jousting as his favorite knight.

"Yep, that's what I want to do when I grow up," the boy stated proudly, puffing his even then enormous barrel chest.

"Cool, cool," I pondered. Lemon cakes, Sir Dewie, and the fact that he threw water on my brother confirmed what I had known from the moment we met.

"We can help with that, right, Yokel?"

"Yes, my grandfather was teaching me some fun things with a lance the other day and..."

"Wonderful, Yokel. So, what do you say Riley Roclan? You want to become the greatest jousting this country has ever seen?" I asked confidently.

"Wait, you want to help me? Why?" He asked, confused by the offer I extended.

"Because," I said with a wry smile, "You're one of us."

Riley Roclan stared at me, then at Yokel, taking in his newfound friends with a broad smile.

"You can call me Roc."

"Like a rock? Rock? Roc... whatever. Alright Roc, but we can't help you if we don't survive the night."

"Which knight?" Roc asked genuinely, looking around for the ghost of Sir Dewie.

"No I meant... never mind. You know, if there's more than two of us we're going to need a name for ourselves," I stated, a plan forming in my young mind.

"Why?" chimed Roc and Yokel in concert.

"Because all the coolest groups have names. There's Ghost Company in the Imperial Army, or even the City Watch here in Starfall. My brother and his friends call themselves the Stonemen, but that's super dumb. We need something better."

"Something more dangerous," Roc added, excited at the prospect.

"Exactly, something more, more... Yokel, what the heck are you holding?"

"Uh, I don't know, I just f-f-found it in this carriage." I crawled over to Yokel and snatched the object from his hands- a bottle of Whiskey from Romir.

"Whiskey... Danger," I muttered to myself.

"What?" Roc asked, now sliding over to myself and Yokel.

"Whiskey Danger. That's what we call ourselves," I said, confident in my thought, the greatest in the history of eight-year-old thoughts.

"I love it!" Yokel proclaimed.

"I hate it," a voice from the front of the carriage boomed.

"RUN!" I yelled as we sprinted away from my brother and his Stonemen.

"What are you smiling about?" Roc asked as we walked past a bakery.

I slowly returned to the present. "Nothing," I replied, as he grabbed a pastry from the shop. I flipped a coin to the owner and we continued on our way.

"You didn't bring any supplies for school."

"Nah, I doubt I'll even be let in. What are the chances they make a mistake for the fifth straight year?" Roc was speaking to the clerical mistake they had been making since we first started going to the Institute. Each year his tuition was paid in full, though he never knew how.

"I'd say pretty good. What odds are you giving?" I asked, amused.

"Ten to one," he joked back.

"I'll take that bet. If I win, I'm not your herald this year, Yokel is!"

"Yokel!? That dinkus is literally the most annoying herald in the entire city."

I laughed as we approached Merchant's Square and made our way past the eastern side where the foreign vendors set up their shops. Directly across we spied the hundreds of daily workers, or "Rabbits", that lined up for any number of odd jobs they might secure. We would have seen Sir Roclan, but the hedge knight was usually one of the first to arrive each morning and would be long gone by the time we walked through the busy square. It's how he received his "sigil" of a rooster.

Roc punched my shoulder familiarly, "You seen her yet?"

I shot him a look from the side of my eye and he responded with an exaggerated expression, "I thought that'd be the first thing you did when we got back. The way you yammered on about your girl all summer, I thought..."

"She's not my girl," I corrected quietly.

"Ollie," he began, taking a deep breath before plunging in, "you've been pining after her for years and you haven't made a move. How many times did we have to listen about her this summer?" Roc asked, his answer nocked and ready to loose.

"Not that often-" I was interrupted with his answer, plummeting onto me like a hail of arrows.

"Every. Single. Day. Listen bro, you're the top student at the Institute, you come from one of the most powerful families in the City, hell, the entire country. You're Oliver Quartermaine! You get to be whatever you want, have whatever you want, and whoever you want. So you can be with Rose, and I can be with all the girls you turn down."

"Obviously," I replied.

Roc continued without a hint of humor, "So... MAKE A DAMN MOVE!"

"Okay," I relented.

"Okay, what?" he pressed.

"Okay, I'll make a move, this year."

"This week." Roc insisted, pushing his luck.

"Today." I squinted into the morning light. The moment had taken full hold of me, and as usual, I was in over my head. I knew I wasn't ready to test those waters yet, but for all of my supposed intelligence, Roc had outsmarted me.

*Fantastic.*

Roc's expression changed to relief. "Finally! This is going to be great. I'll be apprenticing with your father at the Forge, win the Homecoming Tourney, you'll be with Rose, and I'll be with all the rest," he proclaimed with amusement, daydreaming of those women as we arrived at the gates to the Institute.

"Hey, guys! Guess what, Roc? I'm in all your classes! We can talk strategy for the lists all day! I've been reading up on tourneys since we got back and I think if you..." Yokel squawked, running up to us with quick steps.

"Yokel, get out of here! We were having an important conversation," Roc bellowed, clearly not happy about his dreams being interrupted.

"Geeze, Roc, you don't have to yell, I was only-"

"Yokel!" Roc and I hollered in unison. Yokel skipped ahead of us, trying to avoid the reach of Roc's fists.

"Nine Gods, I hate you, Yokel," Roc muttered, shaking his head in fake anger. I knew he could never hate Yokel, which was a very good thing because Yokel would definitely be his herald this year; Roc simply didn't realize it yet. I was going to win our bet, I already made sure of that, just as I had these past four years.

"You're smiling again, dweeb," Roc pointed out.

"Yeah, I am."

### Scene Three

"So, what's the verdict?" I asked, leaning against a window in full view of the Forest of Kel. The haunting forest sat on the northwest section of Starfall City, just beyond the boundaries of the Institute's grounds. Rumors abounded that the forest was unending, with the few adventurers courageous enough to explore her deep, dark mysteries rarely returning. At least, that's what our professors threatened with an embellished punishment of detention underneath the forest's branches.

"Looks like I'm going to be graduating this spring," Roc answered as he emerged from the damp basement where the ledger-nerds kept the Institute's financial records.

"Paid in full?" I asked.

"For the entire year," he resolved, clearly flabbergasted at the fact. "I don't know how I get away with it sometimes."

"You're just lucky I guess, and I'm lucky too. Because that means-"

"Don't even say it," Roc interrupted, threatening a punch. Our attention drifted to the multitude of students filing in through the doors. A jolt of pain along my rib cage knocked me out of my internal roll call and I exaggeratedly recoiled as Roc began pointing toward a line of First Years.

Clapping his hands together and rubbing them back and forth, "Ahhh, fresh meat," Roc proclaimed. The looks on their faces were a range of emotions: some looked excited, some nervous, and some were attempting a false sense of bravery. One of them, a smaller than average freshie in the front of the line, looked up at Roc with his mouth agape.

I glanced at Roc, repaying the jab to the side and motioned with my head toward the freshie, eyebrows raised. We needed a squire for this year and this kid looked like he might fit the bill.

"Better close that hole in your face, freshie, before you catch flies," Roc joked, walking over to crane his neck down.

"You're... you're... you're Riley Roclan!" the freshie yelped. Roc was as much a celebrity at the Institute as anyone, his fame coming from the fact that he'd won the Homecoming Tournament last year as an unknown, and even made it all the way to the finals in Romir. The freshie's excitement caused his whole body to vacillate back and forth and I was confident his limbs had stopped listening to his head.

"That's right, freshie, I am the great and mighty Riley Roclan. You may address me as 'mister', or 'sir'," Roc trumpeted, puffing out his chest in a familiar fashion. He was such an ass.

"You're not a 'sir'," I corrected annoyingly.

Roc murmured angrily, "I am to them."

Returning his attention back to the first-year, he continued, "And what's your name, freshie?"

"Freshie? My name? Name? Who? Uh... Freshie?" This kid needed to calm down before he hurt himself, but I could tell he would be a perfect addition to our group.

"The freshie seems to have forgotten how to speak. See, you're 'fresh meat', but the professors don't deem that appropriate, so we call you 'freshies'," Roc explained, every tiny terrified eye on him. I attempted to throw the kid a lifeline.

"Your name, buddy. Like me, I'm Oliver, this here is Roc, and you are?" I motioned kindly, trying to save him from himself. He had an air of awestruck innocence, exactly the kind of squire we were looking for.

"His name is Po," a voice declared. My heart threatened to leap from my chest.

"He's one of my Summer Students, so treat him well, or you'll be answering to me," Rose commanded, slight amusement in her tone. Our eyes met, and I thought I caught a look of distress before it was quickly masked with a quiet smirk.

Po shifted from a shade of red I thought only occurred in tomatoes to ghostly white. The kid was going to have a stroke before he even made it to his first class. Meanwhile, Roc equipped a sly grin, and looked around at all the other students whose attention hadn't wavered from their newly met hero.

"Po, is it?" He bent down and peered into Po's eyes. "That's a good strong name. No doubt named for someone important?"

"My grandfather, sir," Po replied with a timid grin that threatened to envelop his entire face.

Roc blustered on. "People are going to remember that name, and do you know why? Because you're going to be my squire and join my team. What do you say?" Roc proclaimed, raising an eyebrow to wink at Rose, and gesturing toward myself and the fast approaching Yokel.

"Hey guys, I just spoke to the clerk and..."

"Shut up, Yokel! Ahem, well Rosie, how's that for treating the freshie well?" Roc said to Rose, pointing his thumb at Po as Rose's leg wound back unnoticed.

"I told you not to call me that," said Rose, deftly making contact with Roc's shin. He jumped back, yelped, and all the freshies giggled.

"And that kids, is how you deal with a Roc."

"I was joking!" Roc insisted with slight indignation, standing like an awkward flamingo.

"So how about it Po, think you have what it takes to help Roc win the Tournament this year?" I asked deliberately so every one of the freshies clearly heard. If this kid didn't faint from excitement, he would make a decent squire yet.

Plus, this could win me some points with Rose. Nine Hells she looked fantastic. I instantly recalled a distinct memory, clear as day. Rose was in the library, arranging books and scrolls back into their stacks. She hadn't noticed me approach the end of an aisle. I lingered there, watching as she reached on tiptoe, stubbornly refusing a nearby ladder, dark hair cascading well past her shoulders.

*Nine Hells, I'm creepy.*

"New hairstyle?" I asked her, snapping back out of my memory, still waiting for Po to start breathing again.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, smiling. "Do you like it? I'm trying something new for fifth year," she responded, moving her head back and forth as her hair danced lightly on her shoulders.

*Damn, that's cute.*

"I love it," I said immediately, but maybe too immediately.

"Uh, uh, Po! So what'll it be, bud?" I recovered. After a moment's thought, Po yelled out as loud as he could,

"HELLS YES!"

The entire hall fell silent, and Roc smacked Po's back, his hand encompassing almost a third of it.

"Well then, Po, welcome to Whiskey Danger. We start training this afternoon, after last class. Don't wear anything you like."

After eyeing Po up and down, he added jovially, "I suppose you can keep wearing that then!"

The onomatopoeic clicking announced an uninvited guest to our small celebration. "Tck-tck-tck, ah look, boys, the little hedgeie is recruiting children because no one else will tie his boots. How utterly pathetic." Rose's eyes closed slowly and her lips pursed together as Ridhan Blackwood and his "Sharks" pushed their way through the crowd.

My heart detached itself from my chest, entered my stomach and shattered into a million tiny shards of disgust and revulsion as Ridhan walked over and pulled Rose in for a kiss on her cheek, all the while glaring at me.

Rose was courting Ridhan? Ridhan Blackwood?! I couldn't imagine a worse person in the entire world, and that was on his good days. This couldn't be... It had to be some sort of mistake. Yes, it was definitely a mistake. A ruse. A glib attempt at comedy and nothing else, because that was the only way to describe this tragedy of circumstances.

I couldn't comprehend what I was witnessing. If I hadn't seen it myself, I would never have believed it. A shared kiss months ago, the imagined future I had daydreamed, the fullness in my heart at the thought of her - it all began to crumble in an instant.

Rose tried to pull away, but Ridhan's long arms ensnared her, unwilling to release his trophy, "Oh, you didn't know, Q? Rose here is all mine. Isn't that just, tck-tck-tck, wonderful?" A sinister look and a thin smile betrayed his true self, but Rose's expression remained a puzzle to me. He pulled her in close for another vomit-inducing demonstration of affection, however, this time Rose resisted, driving Ridhan to instant fury.

"I thought I told you-" Ridhan began, raising his hand until Roc interrupted.

"Hey!" Roc exclaimed, lunging toward Ridhan without hesitation. Caught by surprise, Ridhan to let go of his prize and prepared to defend himself, but Rose intervened, keeping Roc at bay.

In my mind, I moved swiftly, pinning Ridhan up against the wall by his throat, his feet barely scratching the floor below. I would threaten him with all the pain and anguish I could imagine, and he would vow to never look Rose's way ever again. She would thank me and fall into my arms as everyone in the hall would clap at my heroism as we kissed.

Instead of action, I merely stood there, paralyzed. It was a moment of bravery that I couldn't muster, regardless of how much I wanted to. For all my prowess inside a ring, I was spineless in the moments when it truly counted, and that cowardice raked over my body like a thousand tiny bugs needling my skin.

"How dare you try to touch me, you worthless filth!" Ridhan yelled as he spat at Roc. A voice of some kind stirred deep within my mind, within the recesses of my very soul. It was inaudible, and also louder than any I ever heard before urged me to action. Yet, I still could not be brave.

Roc's courage won though, managing to escape Rose's grasp and landing a punch on Ridhan's forehead. He fell flat on his back and a chorus of groans sounded from the on-looking students gathered around the commotion. Rose shoved past me and down to her suitor but an outraged Ridhan rebuffed her.

He hollered, "Get off me you-!" but before he could finish his explicative, I snapped out of my trance and pushed Roc aside, tripping as I tried to defuse the situation and accidentally shoving Ridhan back to the ground.

"Oliver!" Rose wailed as she pushed me away.

"I didn't mean to..." I apologized reactively.

*Why was she defending him?*

"Just leave!" she cried, tears in her eyes as she reached to Ridhan for forgiveness.

"Gentlemen!" A low voice boomed from the bottom of the stairs. The High Steward approached in his gray suit, a vision of rules and punishment.

The crowd of on-looking students instantly dispersed at the first sound of the High Steward's voice, fearful of his reputation. Ridhan lay on the ground, a wild expression in his eyes as he withheld his Sharks from engaging further. I looked toward Roc and Yokel, motioning for us to leave while we still could.

Turning my head back around I caught Reagan and her friend Jocelyn, candied pears in a basket, walking in through the main doors. Reagan looked at Ridhan, still on the ground, now with his back to the wall and a trickle of blood tracing his head. A scowl of disappointment conjured upon her face as she looked back to me and I shrugged.

I walked along the torch-lit and windowless hallway toward the fifth year spire, Quartermaine Tower. Next to the sign that proclaimed my family's status, a deep bellowing voice echoed from a burly mustache bouncing off every wall of the stairwell. It was my stout, diminutive, and intimidating instructor, Professor Lortho.

"Mr. Quartermaine, follow me."