

CHAPTER. 1

Sparks

Kase's heart started to race. He felt alive. The horse sprinted down the narrow path, dragging the cart through the forest of crooked trees at a breakneck speed. Even though branches dangled over the edge, and the road softly wound its way through the forest, the horse seemed to be staying on course.

Instead of grabbing the reins that were flailing about on the bench beside him, Kase leaned away and sat on his hands. He glanced towards his uncle and gave him a confident grin. "I could do this all day," he said cockily. "You should just give up!"

The old wizard laughed, and stroked his greying beard. "Well, Kase, I hope we don't get hurt today, because there's no way I'm grabbing those reins," Eowin replied. He leaned forward a little more and gave the horse another slap on the rear.

It seemed to speed up, and the cart rocked back and forth even more uncontrollably. It veered left, and swerved right. Kase tried to fight the nervousness that was creeping in, but he could feel goose-bumps on his arms as the thrill of the ride started to get to him.

"Watch out for that tree!" Eowin said as he laughed and pointed. "Watch out for that one!" He laughed again and swung his arm in the opposite direction. The horse started to move more erratically; the road was getting bumpier, and the path was getting narrower. Kase tried to focus ahead instead of acknowledging his uncle. They were headed for a T-junction.

“Wooooo, do you think the horse is going to make the turn?” asked Eowin slyly, as if reading Kase’s mind. “Better grab the reins!” he added.

They needed to make a right turn in order to continue on their way, but the horse was heading into the junction too fast, and was going to hit the brush head on.

Kase turned to his uncle and met his gaze. Eowin’s brow looked calm, but his eyes shone with an evil twinkle. His hands still remained at his sides. Kase knew that the crazy old man was not going to budge.

He moved his attention back towards the approaching junction and quickly grabbed the reins. He pulled them sharply, and the horse and cart skidded to a stop.

As the dust settled, Kase hunched over in defeat and looked away from his uncle. He had lost again. He knew that the old man would not be able to hide his beaming, cocky, victorious smirk.

“Chicken,” Eowin muttered jokingly as he happily took the reins from Kase. “I’m going to miss this,” Eowin admitted as he righted the horse and cart, and continued their journey in a less thrilling fashion.

Eowin guided the horse through the rest of the forest that surrounded their farm, across the grasslands meadow, and to a hillside where the portal gateway was located.

At this particular gateway, there were five large, smooth, black boulders that surrounded a row of three triangular, grey stone doorways. The doorways were about twenty feet high, and twenty feet wide at the base, each made of two leaning pillars that met at the centre. Two stone panels, flat and upright, fit snugly between them. The grey doorways served as a connection between other portals in the rest of the realm, while the boulders acted as a shield from any outside magic. Only the power of the gateway portals was evident within the circle, for the safety of travellers as they were transported from one area to another.

Eowin led them to the first door on the left. Kase dismounted, grabbed his sac and his aunt's care package, and said goodbye to his uncle. Eowin wasn't much of one for words. Kase walked over to the door's keystone, which was used to pinpoint the desired destination of travel. It also had a slot for payment. He set the keystone for The Academy, and put in his two gold Aileron coins.

A bright, white light shone through the crack down the centre of the doorway, between the two door panels. As each second passed, the light pulsated, a sign of the portal calibrating itself for transport. Each pulse gave off a soft hum and a slight radiance of heat.

After the seventh pulse, the panels slowly slid apart with the grating sound of stone grinding on stone. The panels seemed to disintegrate into the edge of the archway, and disappeared from view as a glimmer of the other side was revealed. Kase could see the hustle and bustle of The Academy through the magical opening.

"I'm proud of you, Kase," said Eowin from atop the cart. Kase turned back to see his uncle's loving smile. "Your parents would have been proud of you, too." Eowin wiped his eye.

Kase swung his sac over his shoulder, said goodbye to his uncle again, and then walked through the portal with a confident stride.

The Academy portal gateway had ten doors that opened up into a park surrounded by tall, beige, brick walls. The park was alive, and sunshine bounced off the green grass, beautiful trees, and bright flowerbeds. There were some students lounging in the shade, others running and playing games, and new students twirling around in bewilderment as they tried to look at everything all at once. Kase didn't even hear the portal door close, because he was trying to take it all in. He suddenly felt dizzy.

"Kase!" shouted a familiar voice. He looked around, and saw his older sister running towards him. She had a big grin on her face, and buried it into his chest as she wrapped her arms around him.

“It’s nice to see you too, Cali.” Kase tried to return the hug. He had his sac in one hand and the basket in the other, so it was hard for him to embrace her.

“Look how big you are now!” Cali exclaimed as she shook her head in disbelief. The top of her head nearly reached Kase’s broad shoulders. “Your hair is so long and wavy, but you still can’t grow any on your face!” she said mockingly.

Kase laughed. “Auntie Anna sent this gift basket for you.” He was more nervous than excited at the moment.

“Are there scuffles inside? Cookies?” Cali was excited as she grabbed the basket and looked inside. She searched wildly for her favourite treats. She pulled out a jar and raised it in the air like a trophy. “Scuffles!” she exclaimed. She opened it, took out one of the cinnamon pastries, and shoved it in her mouth. “So good,” she mumbled. She ate another one, put the lid back on the jar without offering one to Kase, and returned it to the basket.

After she was done chewing, she started with some small talk. “So how are Uncle Eowin and Auntie Anna?”

“They’re good, I guess,” Kase said as he continued to look around at all the buildings, the windows, and the people.

“Still not much of a talker, are you?” Cali said, as she playfully punched him in the stomach. Kase didn’t even flinch, but Cali shook her hand. “Wow, you’ve grown. Come on, I’ll show you around.”

Cali picked up the basket and started pointing things out as they walked. “The scholar castle is straight ahead,” she explained, pointing to the tall, flat-topped structure ahead of them. The crenellations appeared more decorative than defensive. “We’ll go there first so I can drop off this basket. Over there is the main castle, where the administration, ceremonies, and cafeteria can be found.” She gestured flippantly to what was easily the largest building Kase had ever seen, just as tall as the other three, but far more sprawling.

“Next to it is the wizard castle, but you don’t have to worry about that one. Back there is the warrior castle, where you’ll spend most of your time. You can tell which one is which by the flags and banners attached to each one. The symbol of the scholar school is a midnight owl; the wizard school, a unicorn; the warrior school is a three-headed dragon; and the main castle is a peach tree.”

Cali led Kase up some stairs and into the scholar castle. Kase could hear their footsteps echo off the stone floor in the eerily quiet halls. There were a lot of students around, but most of them seemed to be mesmerised by the tiny mirrors that they were holding. Some students were even whispering into them.

“What are those things?” Kase asked, as he pointed to one of the students.

“Those things are dwarves,” Cali whispered in an embarrassed tone. “And don’t call them ‘those things’. That’s rude!”

“No, I know what a dwarf is,” Kase replied. “I meant, what is he holding?”

“Oh.” Cali laughed, and they stopped walking. “Sorry, that’s a sage mirror. It’s something that was created last year at the wizard castle. It’s so cool and innovative! I have one,” she added as she reached into her pocket. She pulled out a small mirror and gave it to Kase to look at. “Just don’t drop it. They break easily.”

Kase held it carefully and studied it. It was a rectangle the size of his hand. The edges were tapered on all four sides, but there was no frame around it. He turned it around, flipped it over a couple times. His reflection was muddled by his own fingerprints. “It looks like a regular mirror,” he said, unsatisfied.

“You have to talk to it,” Cali said with a laugh. She took the mirror back, rubbed the face of it with her sleeve to clear the smudges off, and moved it in front of her face. “Like this. Mirror, mirror, show me information on the midnight owl,” she said. Then she gave it back

to him. This time, he didn't see his own reflection, but instead saw a twirling grey cloud where his reflection should have been. Suddenly, the cloud disappeared and he saw a picture of a midnight owl with a written description underneath.

"That's incredible!" Kase said in delight.

"It's basically like having a book in your hand," Cali replied with a smile. "Draw your finger across the face of the mirror, like you're turning pages in a book."

Kase did as instructed, and the image of the midnight owl was replaced with more descriptive words. He kept swiping his finger, and looked at different pages and images on the mirror's face. He couldn't believe his eyes.

"That's a report I did," Cali said, pointing at the mirror's face with a joyous expression. "I'm one of the many students at the scholar school that have been hired for imaging and documenting all the books in the scholar library. It's a good way for me to earn some extra Aileron. Basically, the information from the library is being copied into the magical archive of the mirror, so that anyone with a sage mirror can access the information. Instead of only being able to carry a few books with you at a time, you can carry hundreds all around in your hand!"

"That's amazing!" Kase said. "People here must be reading every day with all these at their fingertips."

"People are getting smarter by using them," Cali said as she took the sage mirror back. "Check this out though." She moved closer to Kase and held the mirror in front of them. He could see their reflection looking back at them. "Mirror, mirror, capture image. Smile, Kase!"

Kase was confused, but then he saw a flash of light. An image of his confused look and Cali's gleaming smile was captured in the sage mirror. "You look like such a dork," she said as she laughed and elbowed him in the ribs.

"I'm pretty sure you're the nerd in the family," Kase shot back.

The smile on her face turned into a sneer. “I missed you, baby brother.” With a laugh, she looked at the mirror again. “Mirror, mirror, label that image as ‘Kase’s dork face’. Store that image in my personal collection.” The image disappeared, and it became a mirror once again.

“I’ve heard that this year, they’re developing sage mirrors that will be able to capture moving images! Can you imagine?” Cali’s excitement was contagious, and Kase suddenly felt the need to own one, even though he didn’t know what he would really do with it. “Come on, dork face, let’s keep going.”

Cali led him through the halls of the scholar castle and pointed out some of the lecture rooms where she attended training classes. Along the way, she stopped to talk to some of her friends and introduced him. Everyone at The Academy seemed pleasant and upbeat.

They eventually made it to Cali’s dorm room, where she ate a couple more scuffles before ditching the basket.

“Let’s go to your dorm now,” she said. “I’ll—”

Cali was interrupted by the sound of bells chiming in the distance. “Oh no, is it that time already? Come on, we have to go to your first day orientation assembly!”

They rushed back through the halls of the scholar castle and over to the main castle. There was a large crowd gathered at the entrance steps, but it was moving slowly as people made their way in. Kase was feeling overwhelmed by how many people there were at The Academy, and felt like a cow being guided into a large barn with the rest of the herd.

He felt his sister tug at his sleeve. “Come this way,” she said. She pulled him away from the middle of the crowd, and led him over to the left side of the entrance steps. There were a few older people standing there, dressed in colourful robes, helping guide everyone along. Cali made her way over to two gentlemen. One of them looked like he was a professor at the school; the other was young enough to be a student, and was preoccupied with his sage mirror.

As they approached, the student looked up at them, and then quickly put his sage mirror in his pocket. He stretched his arms out wide. “Hey girl,” he said as Cali embraced him. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is my brother, Kase. I told you he was starting today.” Cali disengaged and gestured over to him. “Kase, I want you to meet my boyfriend, Niveous, and his father, Professor Winters.”

The professor extended his hand. “Nice to meet you,” he said as he shook Kase’s hand vigorously. He turned to Cali and put his arm around her. “Cali, I was riveted by your report on the midnight owl. It was very well-written.” He pulled her aside, leaving Kase and Niveous a few steps away on the stairwell.

“Nice to meet you, Niveous,” Kase said as he extended his hand. Niveous had the body of a skeleton in comparison, and Kase was a little worried he’d hurt him if he touched him.

Niveous raised his eyebrows and nodded his head in awkward silence. He did not extend his arm in return; he simply turned his back and pulled his sage mirror out from his pocket.

Kase looked over Niveous’s shoulder curiously, and saw that he was swiping through various images captured in the mirror. Kase thought he should try to be friendly with his sister’s boyfriend, and start a conversation. He saw an image of Niveous holding the hand of a girl he didn’t recognize.

“Who’s that?” Kase asked. “Is that your sister?”

Niveous startled in surprise, and quickly turned his head to sneer at Kase. “Mind your own business.” He tried to push Kase away.

Kase took a quick step back and turned slightly, causing Niveous to miss him completely. Niveous stumbled forward. He lost his balance, and tumbled down a few steps to the bottom. He landed with an awkward thud, but his sage mirror crashed and shattered to pieces.

Everyone around them stopped moving and stared, including Cali and Professor Winters. Niveous was looking at the shards of glass around him, as if someone he cared about had just died.

“My sage mirror!” cried Niveous in desperate shock.

“Son, what happened?” Professor Winters exclaimed as he rushed down the stairs.

“He pushed me,” Niveous said, fighting tears from his eyes. “Now my mirror is broken!”

“Kase, what did you do?” said Cali furiously.

“I ... I didn’t do anything. He just ...” Kase stumbled for an explanation for the bizarre accident that just occurred.

“He tried taking my sage mirror, but I wouldn’t just let him *have* it,” Niveous interrupted Kase. “I slipped when he tried yanking it away, and fell down the stairs. I think my arm was hurt in the fall too,” he added as he clutched his elbow.

Professor Winters glared first at Cali, then at Kase. “Mister Garrick, I think you will find that that sort of behaviour is considered unacceptable here at The Academy. And over what, a sage mirror? You will report to the Administration Disciplinary Room at once, and we will deal with you after the opening assembly!”

Kase was shocked and dumbfounded. He didn’t even know what had just happened, but he didn’t think that he should be the one to blame; certainly not in the manner that Niveous claimed. “But, I ...” He looked around at the crowd, and at the professor still glaring at him, and felt the humility sink in. Had he made a misstep? He dropped his head in shame. “I don’t even know where that is,” he said, trying not to make the situation any worse.

“I’ll take you,” Cali said angrily. She grabbed his arm and quickly led him over to a separate entrance of the main castle. He was happy to get away from the judging eyes of the crowd, but he couldn’t help but look back as they walked. Niveous was being helped up by his father, and shot a quick glare in his and Cali’s direction.

He turned back to his sister, and tried to shake his arm away from her death grip. He wanted to explain what happened. He thought he

would at least have her on his side. “Cali, I didn’t even touch him. And I didn’t want his mirror. I was just asking him what it was about. He was looking at a captured image of himself holding—”

“Don’t Kase,” Cali said angrily. “Just don’t even talk to me right now. I’m so embarrassed. How could you? Never mind. Just don’t talk.”

“Cali ...” Kase started.

“Just don’t,” she retorted. They walked in silence. She led him into the main castle, and down a dark, empty hallway. The walls loomed closely in on him. He thought the thick scent of stone and stagnant air was worse than any animal smells at home on the farm.

When they finally arrived, Cali stopped, crossed her arms, and nudged her chin towards the door. He looked at her with sad eyes, grabbed the knob, and walked in without saying goodbye.

The disciplinary room was square and plain. There was a large wooden desk at the front, with four rows of tables and chairs lined down the room. In the middle of the first row sat a small girl with perfectly combed blonde hair. She was sitting with a stiff and straight posture, reading a small, red book. She looked up with curious, blue eyes, but quickly looked back to her book without acknowledging him at all.

At the end of the third row was another girl, but she was hunched over the table. Her hooded head was resting on her arms, and her eyes were closed. The fingers on her right hand were wrapped around a black object, while her thumb was repeatedly flicking its top edge. It made a small flame for only half a second, and then disappeared until she ignited it again. This girl didn’t seem to care that he had entered the room, either.

He closed the door behind him, walked to the end of the fourth row, tossed his sac onto the floor, and slumped down into his chair. He put his elbows onto the table and held his face with his hands, hoping he could somehow escape the dark thoughts and feelings that were creeping in.

“What are you in for?” said the hooded girl, still flicking her fire starter.

Kase didn’t move. He didn’t want to talk to anyone. He just wanted to crawl into a hole and be alone. The hooded girl stopped flicking her fire starter, sat up, and turned around in her chair to face him.

“Hey, what are you here for?” she repeated in a soft tone. She put her elbows on the table like Kase had.

He lifted his head up to look at her, but didn’t realize how close she was, and jerked his body back to get some space. The momentum sent the back of his chair into a tipping motion. The chair and Kase fell straight back, and he landed on the floor with a thud.

He didn’t move, just looked back at the top of the table and saw the girl’s fingertips curl around the edge of it. Slowly, the top of her black hood and the long, brown hair escaping it came into view, followed by her eyebrows. The girl stopped moving when her eyes were barely peeking over the edge and met Kase’s gaze for the first time.

“You’re fun,” she said, giggling slightly.

Kase stared at her eyes. They were green and glowing with life. They sparkled with delight after watching him fall, but were still softly empathetic. They were steady and calm, but burned with an adventurous passion. They were pure chaos, and were drawing him in.

At that moment, he forgot where he was, what he was doing, and how he got there. The rest of the world didn’t seem to matter in the wake of those magical eyes. For the first time since his arrival, he felt alive.