

# KAYA MORGAN'S Crowning Achievement



JILL TEW



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WILL TAY



**KAYA MORGAN'S**  
**Crowning**  
**Achievement**

**JILL TEW**

**FREEDOM FIRE**

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## **Contents**

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Introduction

1. Hair Grease and High Hopes

2. You've Got Options

3. Gang's All Here

4. Getting Orientation-ed

5. The Queen

6. Something Stinks, and It's Not Just the Horses

7. Brothers and Their Big Mouths

8. Moping in the Mud

9. A Breakthrough in Brightcastle

10. Joy Is for Suckers

11. I've Made a Huge Mistake

12. The Jester Queen

13. The Mall

14. Now That's More Like It

15. Hobbits and Hugs

16. Melee Madness

17. The Week One Showcase

18. Worth the Stench

19. Quintessential Queenliness

20. Not Here to Make Friends

21. Whatever

22. The Next Level

23. Not on My Watch

24. The Week Two Showcase

25. Showtime

26. The Moment You've Been Waiting For

27. But...Why?

28. Wounded

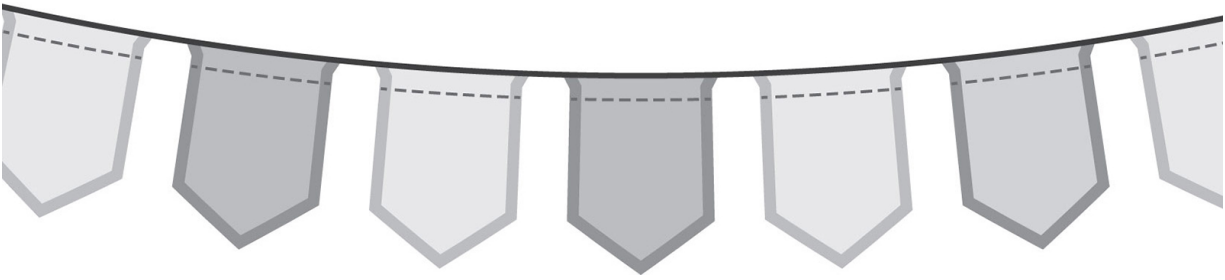
29. Apprentice Weekend

30. Healed  
31. Melee Madness, the Remix  
32. I Love It When a Plan Comes Together  
33. Faces of Change  
34. The Final Joust  
35. Time to Party  
Glossary, *or* Kaya's Guide to the Renaissance Faire  
Acknowledgments  
About the Author

*For my mother, who taught me that wherever I go, I belong.*

*And for my courageous, compassionate daughters.*





**All right, squires, gather round.** Stop polishing the armor and quit salivating over the buffet tables, I'm going to give a speech. Ready? Good.

For twelve brief seconds back in 2001, I was a knight.

Pretty cool, right? I agree.

So imagine the heady buzz of excitement I felt when I read the opening line of *Kaya Morgan's Crowning Achievement*. That same exhilaration had returned. Like Kaya attending the Renaissance Faire, I could clearly define my sense of purpose, the feeling of destiny, the knowledge that my role in life was clearly defined and my *raison d'être* (that means *reason for being* for my non-French-speaking friends) was right in front of me, ready to grasp.

Now, I have to clarify (for legal reasons) that I wasn't actually a noble mysteriously transported to King Arthur's court. I was just a college kid squatting in a grocery-store shopping cart as it rolled forward, charging at its opponent. Was my opponent a bush? Yes. Was it, at the same time, a dragon threatening the realm I'd sworn to defend? Also yes. Doesn't matter. The feeling was the same.

All this to say two things:

One, I really, *really* should warn you all against bush jousting. It's terrible and can lead to a standoff against possums.

Two, though my dream of being a knight came to a prickly end, Kaya's dream of being the first Black queen in the Faire's history is one she refuses to give up on. Her battle to reimagine what the Faire could be, especially for those pushed away from roles others think they're not fit for, is a battle millions of people—particularly young people—face every day. But every

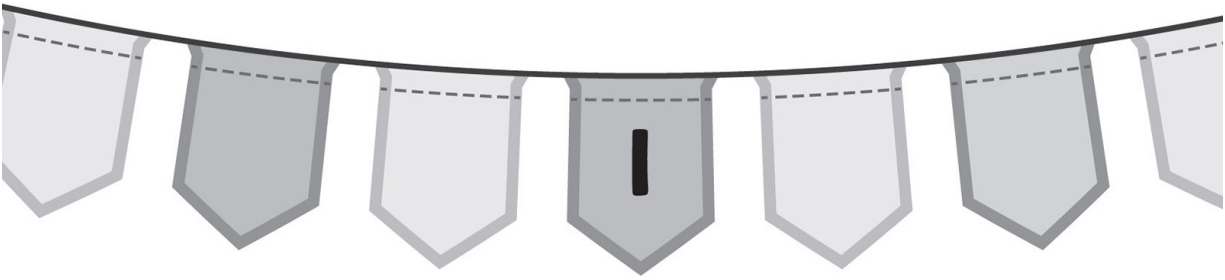
challenge can be a quest, and every obstacle, an adventure, and Kaya proves adversity is just another stepping stone to greatness.

I should pause here to explain something...the possums approached *me*; I didn't antagonize them at all.

Pay attention, squires, this is the point I'm trying to make: You are not defined by someone else's definition. You don't have to fit in someone else's categories. You can break molds and shatter expectations. You can create wonder for yourself and others. Create your own crowns and wear them without fear. Be courageous, be amazing, be inexplicable and defy assumptions. Inherit dreams and hand out achievements. Be the queens and kings you know you are, and more.

Be like Kaya.

Be yourself.



## Hair Grease and High Hopes

### **I bet King Arthur wasn't tenderheaded.**

Lady Guinevere, either. In one of my books on Camelot, the edges of Guinevere's hair by her temples are done in thin braids, then pulled back to look like a headband over the rest of her flowing locks. Just seeing those itty-bitty braids pulled so tight makes my scalp sting, but I can't imagine she did anything but sit, still and patient. The picture-perfect portrait of a lady. Couldn't be me.

Then again, Ginny and Arthur never had my mama's hands in their hair, twisting and pulling the braids so tightly to their scalp that *nothing*—not a rough night of sleep, or an afternoon sweating buckets on the archery range, or a hurricane-force wind—could loosen them from my head.

“Kaya, if you don't quit *squirming*!” Mama says, past the mini rubber band between her lips. Her voice breaks the quiet of our kitchen. It's a little past seven, the earliest I've been up all summer. The sun's already streaming in through the windows, and I can see little specks of dust floating in the beams. I try to focus on those, instead of the burning pain on my scalp that makes me want to dig my nails into this kitchen table and scream every cuss word I know. Because then I'd have way bigger problems.

“There...done,” Mama says, tucking one of her long micro braids behind her ear.

I grab her phone and switch it to selfie mode, checking out my hair as she slicks grease on my edges. “No, not like this.” I scowl at the halo braid Mama’s put in my hair, before minimizing the camera and finding the picture I texted her last night: a Black woman with ten itty-bitty braids starting at her crown, pulled together before they open into free-flowing curls. I hold the phone up over my head so Mama can see the picture.

“*This* is a Renaissance Faire hairstyle, Mama. Something fancy, something a crown would fit over. Not a bunch of zigzag parts and a protective style.”

Mama takes the phone back, unaffected by her *obvious* betrayal. “Says who?” she asks. “You look beautiful; those parts are *perfection*. And I didn’t have time for ‘fancy’; you just need something to keep all that dust out your hair down at the fairgrounds.”

*The fairgrounds.* She says the words like she’s talking about the bad part of town, instead of the Renaissance Faire: the place where I’ve had some of the happiest days of my life. On instinct, I turn to our kitchen whiteboard, cluttered with photos and keepsakes from the Faire. There’s a photo Mama took of me and Daddy when I was four. I’m on his shoulders, grabbing fistfuls of his hair. I can still hear his voice shouting up to me as we watched the queen wave graciously to the crowd. *Someday that’ll be you*, he told me. *My Kayabean, the loveliest queen*. A ribbon from my first queen costume that Daddy surprised me with when I was five. I ran that costume into the ground that summer, every weekend at the Faire and most days in between. The ribbon on the fridge tore loose when I rode the Faire’s Kiddie Kingdom Corkscrew slide for the millionth time one Saturday. I was worried Daddy would be sad that I’d already ruined the costume, but he just shrugged and tied the ribbon to one of his arrows for the archery show the rest of the summer. Another photo, of me and Daddy laughing at the jesters over a basket of funnel cake fries, our faces and arms covered in powdered sugar. And then a ransom note scribbled on worn parchment, from the time the pirates next to the archery booth kidnapped me when I was ten and Daddy rescued me back to safety. The crowd loved it, and Daddy beamed with pride as we bowed to their thunderous applause after our impromptu performance.



We didn't know it, but he was already sick then.

"Now, you packed your lunch?" The pants of Mama's scrubs swish as she moves to the countertop.

"Huh? Oh yeah. In my bag already." I give one last thought to my disappointing hair before joining her. Mama shuffles through the stack of important papers on the countertop—mostly a bunch of letters from my brother's new college that all amount to "Thanks for all that tuition. Now pay us even *more* money!" She sucks her teeth. "Where did I put those keys?"

"By the coffee maker," my brother, Kev Jr., says as he comes down the kitchen stairs. I'm shocked to see him up this early; these days he's basically nocturnal, playing video games with friends and soaking up the last weeks of summer before he heads to college at Stanford next month.

Mama spots the keys and crosses the kitchen. "Ah! Thank you, baby." She stuffs the keys into her purse, and the familiar jangle cuts through the silence of the house, the way it does on all her late-night and early morning shifts.

"Mmnaprallem," Kev Jr. says mid-yawn, which I think is supposed to be *no problem*. He pads over to the fridge and opens it. "Yo! Who took the last strawberry yogurt?"

"I did," I say. "Some of us have places to be before four p.m. today." I check the clock above the oven. My ride to the fairgrounds will be here in eight minutes.

My brother huffs. "Kaya! You know I don't like mixed berry."

"Why not? It's basically strawberry. Just think of it as 'strawberry and friends.'"

"Whatever." My brother sits at the counter, grabs a banana from the fruit bowl, and yawns again. I duck to avoid his radioactive morning breath. "Why are you so dressed up anyway?" he asks, pointing to my lace-trim tank top and jean skort. "Oh, that's right: first day of Corny Camp."

"It's *not* corny! It's..." Even I can't bring myself to say that the Renaissance Faire Apprentice Camp is cool, because it's not. After a few seconds, I find the word I'm looking for. "Special."

He scoffs. "Uh-huh. Well, let's see how 'special' you feel after they mispronounce your name all day and ask if your hair 'really just grows like that.'"

“Shut up, it won’t be like that....” I bite the inside of my lip.  
“Probably.”

“Mm-hmm. Whatever you say, *Kara*. Has there ever even *been* a Black queen of Brightcastle?” Kev Jr.’s eyebrows rise, even though he knows that *I* know that *he* already knows the answer. There hasn’t. But Daddy always dreamed I’d be queen someday, which would make me the first Black queen in the Faire’s forty-year history.

Kev Jr.’s got a smug look on his face now. He’s getting to me, and he knows it. But as the baby in the family, I’ve got an ace up my sleeve:

“Mama!” I whine.

“I don’t have time for this, you two,” Mama says, but she’s focused on checking something on her phone. I’m not sure she was even listening. She does that a lot lately, tuning out.

“Well, see ya,” Kev Jr. says as he takes his half-eaten banana back up to his room. I consider his retreat a victory, but our exchange did take a little bit of the pep out of my step. Like someone poured vinegar on my Cheerios. Before he disappears up the stairs, my brother looks over his shoulder and sarcastically says, “By the way, nice hair, *m’lady*. Why does the back of your head look like the lines on a basketball?”

I spin to Mama, pointing to my halo braid. “I *told* you!”

“Apologize to your sister!” she shouts, but Kev Jr.’s already gone. All I get is a half-hearted “Sorry, Kaya” from the top of the stairs. It’s whatever. The Renaissance Faire’s never been Kev Jr.’s thing, or Mama’s, to be honest. To Kev Jr., Black girls and medieval England go together about as well as pancakes and ketchup. And Mama may have done my hair for today, but when I try to tell her *anything* about the Faire, it’s like she just...tunes out. I wouldn’t even be going to the Faire today if my uncle Paul—not really my uncle, just my daddy’s best friend—hadn’t decided to surprise me by enrolling me. And good thing, too, because I was maybe half a *Naruto* marathon away from melting into a puddle of pure boredom. Daddy was always the one who planned our summers.

Kev Jr. makes it upstairs, and I hear his gaming chair roll across the floor. Better he retreat than jab me with one of his lethally pointy elbows, I guess. I roll my eyes. “Ugh. Teenagers.”

Mama laughs as she leans forward to plant a kiss on my forehead. I make a note to wait until I’m out of sight to wipe the berry lipstick off.

Don't wanna be rude.

"That'll be you in a few months," she says.

"Technically." Maybe when I turn thirteen, something will magically transform me into a nocturnal sack of mood swings like my brother, but I seriously doubt it.

"Anyway," I say. "I saw that the camp has its own TikTok account, so if you want, you can check in on me throughout the day and see all the cool stuff we're doing."

Mama's eyes are back to her phone again. "Sure thing, baby. I'll try. Lots of surgeries today, and— Shoot! Where'd that traffic come from?" She hurries to grab her travel mug off the counter and gives me another quick peck on the forehead.

"The Nomuras will be here in—"

"Two minutes," I say, checking the microwave clock. "I know."

She's going to be late if she doesn't leave for the hospital now, but her hand lingers on my shoulder. Mama's mouth kind of twitches to the side, like she wants to say something. I look up at her, waiting for a "Good luck, baby" or a "Can't wait to hear all about it" or an "I know it'll be hard, but I'm so proud of you." Instead, she gives my shoulder one last squeeze, grabs her bag, and leaves.

See? Tuned out. Fantasy and costumes were never Mama's thing, but she used to at least pretend to show interest, for my sake. Ever since Daddy died, though, it's like even pretending is too much. Like humoring me has dropped way down to the bottom of her to-do list, behind groceries and keeping up with the house, and everything else she has to do on her own now. I get it, but that doesn't make it hurt any less.

Alone in the kitchen, I shake off Mama's quick exit and Kev Jr.'s teasing. I can't afford any distractions, and not just because it'll be the first time I've been back to the Faire since Daddy died two Aprils ago. I've got to stay focused, because this time, I'm not just going to the Faire as a patron.

I'm going to be the queen.

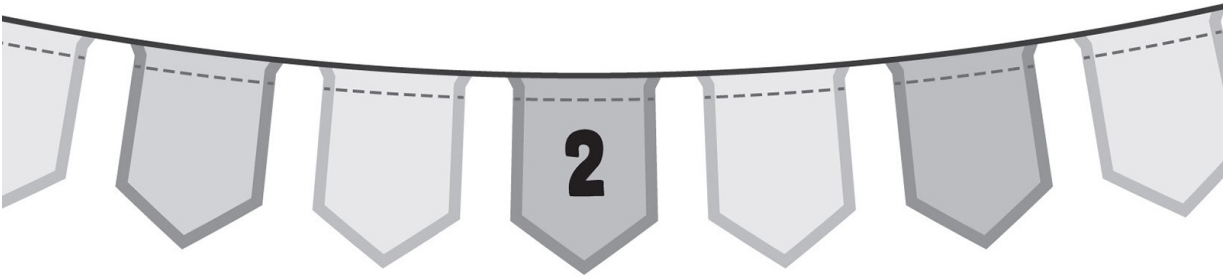
For the next two weeks, I'm enrolled in the North Georgia Renaissance Faire's Apprentice Camp, where I'll train alongside the *real* queen, learning what to say, how to be. Then, on the last weekend of the Faire—Apprentice Weekend—me and the other kids will take on our roles for real. Which

means I'll get to *be* Queen of the Faire for two whole days, in front of everyone, and end the best weekend of my life at the Final Joust—the most popular event of the whole summer—where I'll be applauded as the best queen of all time. Just like Daddy hoped.

*Queen Kaya.* Sounds right, doesn't it?

The clock on the microwave reads 7:44 now. Only one minute left until Mrs. Nomura gets here, and the greatest two weeks of my life begin.





## You've Got Options

**It's a nice morning**—not too hot yet—so I decide to wait out on the driveway. As the garage door rumbles open, the humid air wraps around me like a blanket. Mama's gardenias make our whole yard smell like sweet perfume. In the distance, some neighbor's lawn mower roars to life. I swallow a yawn. Crazy to think grown-ups are doing chores and stuff before I've usually even brushed my teeth. We live in a “mature” neighborhood, meaning most of our neighbors' kids are grown, and *also* meaning most of our neighbors have nothing better to do than fuss over their “curb appeal.” Our house is on a bend in the road, and every lawn as far as I can see looks almost exactly the same—grass clipped exactly two inches high, bushes in symmetrical shapes found nowhere in nature, maybe a pop of meticulously pruned colorful flowers for variety. Mama's gardenia shrub is the only plant I can see with even a hint of brown on it—gardenias' fragile white petals don't last long. I remember how she hemmed and hawed at the plant store, wondering if buying the plant was worth the neighbors' judgment as the flowers began to age. Daddy just put a hand on her back, told her to close her eyes, and inhale. There's nothing in the world like the smell of gardenias in the summer; Mama's decision was final after that.

A pair of blue butterflies dances past, but they're no match for the ones fluttering around in my stomach. Mrs. Nomura's gotta be here any minute now. I check the time. Still 7:44 a.m. *Seriously?* Before I can put my phone away, it buzzes with a text from my best friend, Rayana.

Good luck today! Love, me and Galileo 📱

*Huh?* But the confusion only lasts a second before the next text comes through, a picture this time. Ray's goofy grin appears beside a statue of some angry-looking white man with a thick beard and a receding hairline. She's got her arm around the statue like they're best buds, and she's giving the camera a thumbs-up. In the background I can see a domed ceiling of stars, and one of those red movie-theater ropes with a sign that says PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH THE STATUES.

Thanks! Are you supposed to be in there?

I'll be fine!

No one comes into the planetarium this early.

Aight, well, don't get thrown in Space Camp jail or whatever

I won't. You got this, Queen Kaya. Keep your head up. 🤖

Those words again: *Queen Kaya*. Suddenly I'm not Kaya Morgan, the rising eighth grader at Willow Springs Middle whose grandma says hasn't grown into her feet yet. I'm Queen Kaya, a gracious ruler who is beloved

by all. I'm riding high above the crowd in a golden-filigreed litter, waving to my adoring public as they shower praises and roses upon me. *Long live Queen Kaya! Forever may she re—*

*Beep! Beep!*

I blink myself out of my daydream, and Mrs. Nomura's maroon minivan appears in my driveway. She watches me, concerned, behind the driver's seat. *Oops.* How long have they been waiting?

The door slides open, and I step in.

"Hey," says Tyler in the seat beside mine.

"Hey," I say back as I buckle myself in. "Morning, Mrs. Nomura."

"Morning, Kaya." Her glass-bead earrings clack together as she turns her head, and a pink crystal—rose quartz, I think—dangles from her rearview mirror. Tyler's mom sells essential oils for a living—Mama wouldn't be able to make it through the month without Mrs. Nomura's Stress-NoMore blend for her tension headaches. But unfortunately for me, that means the Nomuras' minivan smells like someone took every fragrance in the world and mixed it together in a blender.

As Mrs. Nomura backs down the driveway, we pass my neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Webber, out for a walk. Even through the car window's glass, I can tell the exact moment they realize I'm watching them mutter about Mama's gardenias. They fix their faces into pleasant smiles and wave. I wave back, but inside I'm silently wishing they'd give Mama a break.

Tyler pulls a book out from his backpack, then pushes his forest-green glasses up on his nose.

"Summer reading?" I ask. Tyler and I are in a lot of the same classes at school. We're not quite hang-out-outside-of-school friends, unless our moms get together, but we get along well.

Tyler puts a finger between the pages to hold his place and flips the cover around to show me. *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

"Yeah. Ms. Valentino's class," he says. "Did you do it yet?"

"Oh, um. Yeah." I try to sound casual, but the truth is, I blasted through all our summer assignments the first week of break. Like I said, I was bored, okay? Ray's mom had her schedule packed with tennis lessons and extracurricular volunteer opportunities pretty much all July. Plus there's something nice about knowing exactly what people expect from you. A clear assignment, an easy way to meet expectations.

“You’re already done? Dang,” Tyler says.

“Tyler...” Mrs. Nomura warns from the driver’s seat.

“I mean *darn*.” He nudges his book bag with his toe, and I can see the other two summer-reading books tucked inside. “I’ve got some catching up to do, I guess. What about the Personal Heroes’ thing? Don’t tell me you made, like, a diorama or something. I’ll barely have time to answer the worksheet questions.”

I pretend something fascinating is happening outside the window as Mrs. Nomura pulls out onto the dogwood-lined street. Maybe I *did* put together a trifold board. That’s a crime now? I change the subject.

“Who do you think you’ll choose?”

Tyler shrugs. “Can’t decide. I was thinking maybe Steve Jobs. Or Kid Cudi. Or my mom’s great-aunt Aki.” He lists the three on his fingers like they’re not as different as baked beans and banana pudding. “Who’d you pick?” he asks. The question pricks at me, but only for a second. When I first saw the assignment—pick a personal hero to share with the class—honestly, Daddy was the only person that came to mind. But I don’t think I’m ready to talk about him like that yet. And anyway, it’s probably not what Mrs. Valentino had in mind.

“Michelle Obama,” I say.

“Oooh, nice one.”

“Right? You should go with Steve Jobs.”

“You think?” Tyler fiddles with the highlighter cap in his hand. “I dunno, Great-Aunt Aki went through a lot. I thought it would be kind of cool.”

“It does sound really cool, but trust me. Someone famous is the safer choice.”

“I hate to eavesdrop...” Mrs. Nomura says.

“Do you, though?” Tyler whispers. I giggle.

“But, Ty, I’m sure you can choose something personally meaningful if you want. You *both* could.” She catches my eye in the mirror, and suddenly I feel like I’m in one of those police interrogation rooms on TV. We’ve known Mrs. Nomura and her family for years—Mama was one of her first customers—so she can read me better than most people. I could close myself off now, scowl at the window and practice my imminent teenage angst. But I don’t want to be rude. Especially not when Mrs. Nomura letting



me catch a ride to the fairgrounds with Tyler is the only reason I can even go to Apprentice Camp. I'm lucky that Mama mentioned the camp to Mrs. Nomura while she was picking up a sample of hand cream, and Mrs. Nomura thought it would be right up Tyler's alley. Mrs. Nomura's also one of the only grown-ups outside of my family who hasn't treated me different since Daddy died, like I'm a bubble that's going to pop or blow away if they look at me wrong. I'm grateful for it.

"You don't have to just do what you think the teachers expect," Mrs. Nomura repeats her point. "You can have fun with it!"

"I guess," I say, just so she'll pull her spotlight off me. I crack the window an inch and breathe the fresh, unscented air.

Mrs. Nomura looks at her son. "And, Ty, don't put so much pressure on yourself. You've got time! Trust me: You only get so many carefree summers. Cherish them!"

"I'm cherishing, Mom. Promise." Tyler runs a hand through his spiky black hair, then looks outside. "There isn't much to cherish about an hour on the highway every day," he says. I smile out the window. We live on the north side, but the fairgrounds are twenty minutes south of Atlanta, which Mama referred to as "all the way out in East Jesus" before she firmly declined my request for a ride every morning. I guess I could've been smart like Tyler and brought a book or something, but I get queasy when I try to read in the car. And based on the way he's looking at his book like it personally insulted his mama, Tyler seems like he doesn't really want to read, anyway. I decide to make conversation.

"I'm so excited for camp!"

"Me too! I hope the other kids are cool."

*Not likely*, I think to myself. Apprentice Camp is only open to rising eighth and ninth graders because—let's be real—most older teens aren't as into this stuff. If I had to guess, the other campers will be rising eighth graders like us, huge nerds who also love fantasy and dressing in costume. Decidedly uncool. But that's perfectly fine with me; being cool is overrated. That's what Daddy used to say.

"What roles did you sign up for?" I ask Tyler.

"Knight and scribe," he says proudly.

"Knight! You know how to ride a horse?" Anyone who signs up to be a knight has to have equestrian experience. And also an extra waiver from

their parents.

He smiles shyly. “Yeah, my mom put me in lessons a few years ago. But I love poetry, too. And I’ve been practicing with the calligraphy set my dad got me for Christmas. Quill pens and stuff.”

“Whoa! Those roles are so different. Which do you want more?”

Tyler scrunches his face up. “Knight. No, scribe. No...I dunno! Hopefully by the end of camp I’ll be able to pick.”

“Well, I think it’s silly that you have to choose at all,” Mrs. Nomura says as she merges onto the highway. “Why can’t a scribe know how to wield a sword? And who says a knight can’t appreciate poetry?”

Tyler groans. “Mom, that’s just...not how it works.”

“I know, I know. I’m just saying,” she says. Tyler gives his mom a pointed look in the mirror, and Mrs. Nomura nods. “Okay, butting out now. Promise.” She turns the radio up and hums along as she drives.

“What about you?” Tyler asks. “I remember you saying you wanted to be queen. What else?”

“Nothing else.” I shrug. “Just queen.”

He narrows his eyes. “You didn’t put anything else on the form?”

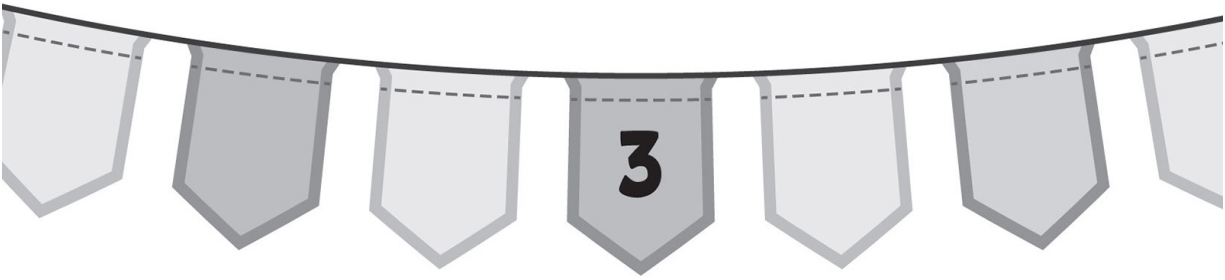
“Nope.”

“But—what about Week Two? Don’t you *have* to pick another one?”

“I don’t *want* another one. Maybe after they see how awesome I am in Week One, they’ll just let me do it again.”

“Maybe...” Tyler says it really slow, like he’s talking to a crazy person. Who knows, maybe he is. Maybe it’s a little extreme to only have one choice. But the way I feel about being queen—it’s like I *know* with something smarter than my brain that it’s what I’m meant to be. Why waste anyone’s time pretending otherwise?

The conversation fades, and after a while, Tyler pulls out his book again. I keep myself busy watching the highway exits, each one ticking down to the fairgrounds and the start of my reign.



## Gang's All Here

**Daddy was an insurance actuary** in real life, but for eight weekends every summer he worked at the Faire's archery stall, teaching ladies and other gentlefolk alike how to shoot a bow and arrow. Faire employees are supposed to work each of the eight summer weekends it's open, but somehow Daddy always managed to arrange his schedule so that he had every other weekend off, to actually enjoy the Faire with me. You would think after one weekend I'd see all there was to see, but that's the thing about the Renaissance Faire: Every day is different, because so much depends on the interactions between the cast members and the patrons. All it takes is for one patron to show up in an Iron Man costume, and bam—the whole kingdom is abuzz with tales of the “wizard in red” for the day, like it's an inside joke that we're all a part of.

The Faire is my favorite place on Earth. But after Daddy died two years ago, I could barely bring myself to get out of bed last summer, forget actually coming down here. I hope I'm ready now.

With ten minutes to spare, we pull into the fairgrounds parking lot. I've been looking forward to this moment all summer, but the sound of Mrs. Nomura's tires on the gravel makes it official somehow. Through the car window, I see the burgundy banners of the Faire flapping gently in the breeze. This is it. It's really happening. My heart's pounding in my chest, or

maybe it's the bodhrán playing along with the tin whistles somewhere over the Faire's wooden walls. I close my eyes and imagine I can feel Daddy squeezing my hand. *You got this, Kayabeen.*

Tyler looks up from his book.

"Ready, Sir Nomura?" I ask.

He blushes and dog-ears his page. "Ready, Your Highness." The Faire itself is only open on weekends, which gives us weekday mornings to be coached by our Mentors without distractions. Today, though, I bet we'll just be doing boring orientation stuff for a lot of our time. Getting-to-know-you games and that kind of thing. Walking the grounds with the kids who have never been here before, who don't know every shortcut like I do.

Tyler's mom walks with us to the front gate, where a white college-age boy stands waiting. With his dark hair and blue eyes, he looks kind of like Prince Eric from *The Little Mermaid*—but with more acne and smaller muscles. His powder-blue shirt has the Faire's logo on it, with the words APPRENTICE CAMP underneath. My hands are tingly. I breathe out slowly to calm myself, and it helps, a little.

The boy in the blue shirt smiles. "Hey there! You must be here for camp. I'm Zach, the program director." He extends a hand to Mrs. Nomura.

"Liz Nomura," she says, shaking his hand. "And this is—"

"I'm Tyler." Tyler reaches out his own hand. Zach shakes it. Seems so formal, but I guess this is what we're doing, so...

"Kaya," I say, introducing myself.

Zach's eyebrows raise, so I can't see them behind the dark brown curls that have flopped onto his forehead. "Kaya Morgan! We've heard tell of your legend, m'lady. You're a household name around here! To say nothing of your daring rescue from the clutches of Poopdeck Pete." He sweeps into a pretend bow. Tyler looks at me, unsure how we should respond. But I was born ready. I dip into the fanciest curtsy that ever curtsied.

"And none of it the least bit exaggerated, I assure you, my lord. Kicked his pirate booty, I did!" I fire back without missing a beat. Everyone laughs. I could get used to this.

Zach stands again, suddenly serious. "Hey, I was only hired this past fall, but from what I've heard, your dad was well loved around here. I'm sorry for your loss."

“Thank you,” I say. And when I look up at Zach, there it is: the you’re-a-delicate-bubble look. *Not you, too*, I think. It sucks the thrill right out of our joking, but that’s all right. It was just a taste of the glory to come. Mrs. Nomura gives Tyler a hug and a peck on the cheek, then leaves. We follow Zach into the fairgrounds, and suddenly I’m home.

Walking through the gates instantly transports us to the medieval kingdom of Brightcastle—well, if medieval villages had recycling bins on every corner and sold chicken tenders. It’s more like if Camelot and a carnival had a baby. There are booths for face painting, a test-your-strength game, and rides for kids of all ages. Merchant stalls surround us on either side, with so many different things for sale, it makes my head spin. Stained-glass landscapes, wrought-iron roses, flasks and flagons, fairy wings in a rainbow of colors. And a tent called the Saucy Wench with shelves of delicious-looking spices and condiments. I make a mental note; if I find a good spice rub for Mama, maybe she’ll come around to all this.

“Kaya, look!” Tyler points past a shirt that says I’M ONLY HERE FOR THE TURKEY LEGS to a replica of an armored knight that probably comes up to my waist.

“Awesome!” My eyes drift to a figurine of a glass egg with a luminescent blueish-purple dragon inside. Maybe if Mama comes to the Final Joust in a couple of weeks I can talk her into an early birthday present.

Beyond all the stuff, though, it just feels *so good* to be back. We walk by the jousting arena, the ax-throwing booth, and the stage where the loud milkmaid ladies told jokes that Daddy wouldn’t let me listen to. I can’t take five steps without smiling at something familiar. So many old memories. After today, maybe some new ones, too.

The path forks. Zach leads us down a slope to the right, toward a pub called Dragon Ales. The gravel dust is already sticking to my bare legs by the time we get there; I hate to admit it, but Mama was right to braid up my hair.

It’s only early morning, but already it feels good to get out of the sun and under the shade of the pub’s rafters. The pub is a large rectangular space, big enough for maybe fifty people to enjoy a meal, with a raised platform for performances in the front. Since the Faire’s not open right now,

all the wooden tables and benches have been pushed off to the side. At one end, three folding tables make a U shape, each table covered with important-looking binders and paperwork. Zach's office, I figure. At the other end of the pub, five or six folding chairs are arranged in a circle. Looks like I was right about the getting-to-know-you part of the schedule. Great. The chairs are all empty for now, though, and three other kids our age are standing off to the side, laughing at each other's phones.

"These are for you," Zach says before handing Tyler and me our own light blue shirts. Not nearly as queen-like as the lace tank top I chose for today, but my curtsy earlier probably earned me a few points, so I can be a team player with the shirt. Zach cups his hands around his mouth. "Gang's all here!" The three kids—two girls and one boy—turn to me and Tyler. The boy's a little short, with messy blond hair, big ears, and a perfectly straight smile. I fiddle with the rubber bands on my braces, a little jealous—I won't get mine off until sometime next year.

As for the two girls, well...I know we're all going to be wearing the same shirt, but they really make it look like a uniform. Both of them have the sleeves of their Apprentice Camp shirts rolled up, with white elastic hair ties securing each sleeve in place. They've got matching white-sequined fanny packs and matching purple heart charms on their shoelaces. The shoelace charms are why I notice they're both wearing crew socks with pale blue stripes that match the camp T-shirts. Meanwhile, I'm wearing a pair of ankle socks from the thirty-six-pack Mama bought me at Costco last month, right before I told her that only old people wear these now. The other kids can't be that much older than me and Tyler—maybe eighth graders?—but they look so...so *put together*. Very much cool, despite what I assumed back in the car. While the girls' heads are turned, I use the sides of my sneakers to push my socks as far into my shoes as they'll go and realize too late that I've left ashy streaks on my shins. Perfect.

The last thing I notice about the girls is their hair. The blond girl has hers done in a pair of neat French braids. But the brunette...it's like someone ripped the page right out of my Camelot book and gave it to a hair stylist. Those itty-bitty Guinevere braids I was talking about earlier? She's got three on each side, pulled tight into a ponytail that flows into the rest of her long, silky brown hair. Maybe I'm imagining it, but when she looks at me and my cornrows, I see her eyes widen, the tiniest bit. It reminds me of

the way our neighbors' eyes widen at Mama's gardenias—something out of place that needs to be plucked. She thinks I don't belong here, but she's wrong. Right?

The Guinevere lookalike walks over with her friends.

"Hi!" she says. "I'm Jessie, Jessie McDaniels. Carter, Wren, and I go to Woodbridge Academy. How about y'all—"

"Jess!" A frazzled-looking white woman with brown hair, tall wedge sandals, and Jessie's same thin nose runs toward the tent, waving something cylindrical in her hand. "Jessie Marie!"

Jessie rolls her eyes. "What?"

I don't have to look at Tyler beside me to know his eyes are wide, mouth a little open in shock, like mine. Mama's thirty-five miles away, probably scrubbing in for her first surgery of the day, and I can still feel her death glare if I *ever* fixed my mouth to answer her like that. It's a "Yes, Mama?" or *maybe* a "Yeah?" if you're feeling extra bold.

I'm still clenching my whole body when Jessie's mom finishes jogging up to us. "Here, baby. You forgot your water bottle." She smooths her tennis skirt.

Jessie takes the water bottle and mutters a "Thanks." Her mom walks away, panting slightly. I feel a twinge of envy as she goes. Jessie's mom, Mrs. Nomura...both of them actually drove across town to the fairgrounds for their kids. I know Mama had work, but why can't she at least pretend to be happy that I'm here?

Can't believe I'm jealous of a private-school princess. Jessie's school, Woodbridge Academy, is on the northwest side of town, where the houses are enormous and the trucks aren't much smaller. They've got money, and a lot of the moms don't work full-time, which explains why three Woodbridge kids are here at a camp all the way across town that lets out at two p.m. every day. One time on an elementary-school field trip to the aquarium, I saw some Woodbridge kids who were also on a field trip. They looked like they were having the best time—walking in small groups like normal kids, instead of single file like our class. And then, at the end, one of the class parents bought every kid in the class—every *single kid*—a stuffed orca from the gift shop, and you *know* those aren't cheap. When I got home, I asked my parents if I could transfer there.



“Not unless you learned to talk to dolphins today and can help out with that tuition,” Mama said. I understood, but I was disappointed. Daddy did our whole bedtime routine in fake whale sounds to cheer me up.

Jessie reaches into her fanny pack and pulls out a dainty bottle of bug spray. “Want some? It’s organic.”

“Sure!” Tyler says. I give him the side-eye. I’m pretty sure I smelled some on him earlier, when I got in the car.

I shake my head. “Thanks, I’m good.” I’m not saying it to be mean or anything; it’s true. Mama grew up in Atlanta, wading in backyard creeks every summer, and she raised us right. From May to October, I don’t step outside unless I’m doused to high heaven in lemon-eucalyptus spray. While the rest of the kids spray themselves with Jessie’s repellent (which I’m sure is about as effective as rosewater), I find a corner to put on my camp shirt. I guess I could duck inside the fairgrounds’ privies, which are just a short walk away. But they’re basically glorified porta-potties, and I’m not trying to smell like the stables on my first day here.

One arm through, then another. My elbows are stuck inside both shirts. I just need to shimmy up my tank top and keep the camp shirt down. Almost got it...

“Kaya Morgan?” Zach calls from his desk at the other end of the space. I spin around, my arms still pinned to my body. The whole group of campers turns to look at me.

“Y-yes?” I say while wriggling awkwardly like a third-rate Harry Houdini. *Play it cool, Kaya.*

Zach hasn’t even looked up from his paperwork yet. “Come here when you have a sec, please.”

I get my tank top off with a quickness and head over to his desk. Did I do something wrong? Is this about my form, and how I only chose one role? They wouldn’t kick me out for that, would they?

“Am I in trouble?” I ask when I reach Zach.

He looks up. “What? No.” He pulls out a manila folder with my name on it and opens to the first document inside, which is labeled *Media Release Form*.

“This was signed by a...Paul Harper?”

“Yeah. My uncle Paul’s the one who signed me up for camp. He’s not really my uncle, more like my godfather.” My leg itches. I reach down to

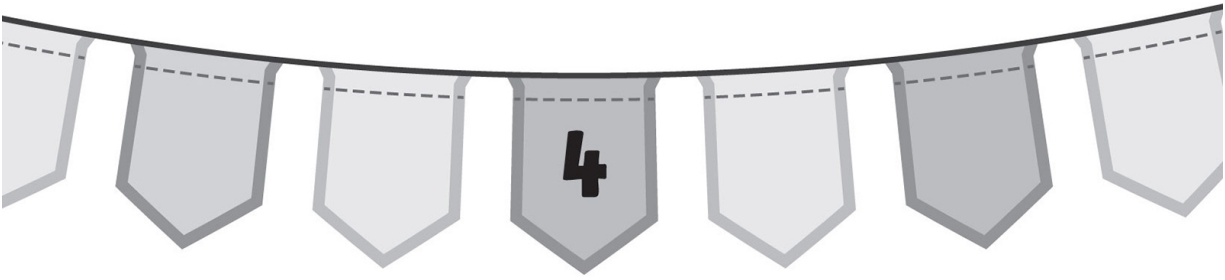
scratch it, and my fingers find a small, unmistakable bump. Dang. Maybe I should have borrowed some of Jessie's rosewater after all.

"It's no problem, m'lady! But this form has to be signed by a legal guardian." Zach hands me a blank copy of the same document. "Can you get your mom to sign this tonight and bring it back tomorrow? Our social media manager, Becca, will be taking lots of photos the next few weeks, and I want to make sure that's cool."

He points behind me, and I see a woman I didn't notice before—probably because half her face is hidden behind her phone. She practically blends into the furniture as she takes pictures of the other campers joking around. My spirits fall for a second. I should be in those pictures, instead of over here talking about missing paperwork. But that's all right, because I'll have photos of what really counts. I envision myself as queen at the Final Joust, a camera snapping away as I hold court with the audience. I just need to get Mama to sign this, ASAP.

"Got it, sorry. Will do!" I fold the paper and stuff it in my back pocket. That's when I notice the other papers on Zach's desk, the ones labeled *Week One Assignments*. My stomach flips. I lean over to see what's written beside my name, just as Zach closes the folder and stands. *Curses, foiled again!*

"Great! All that boring paperwork stuff is done," Zach says to the group, smiling. "Let's get started, shall we?"



## Getting Orientation-ed

**Orientation starts with a tour.** Zach hands out maps of the kingdom, but I stuff mine in my pocket; I know this place by heart. The kingdom of Brightcastle is divided into two halves—New Towne, closest to the entrance, and Olde Towne, up the hill. According to Brightcastle lore, the two towns were bitter rivals for centuries, until the queen’s judicious and generous rule brought them together in harmony. New Towne staff and buildings are detailed in blue, while the Olde Towne reps yellow. But I overheard Daddy talking to my uncle Paul once, and the real story is that New Towne is just a more recent expansion of the fairgrounds after Renaissance Faires got more popular in the ’90s, and the contractors had a mix-up with the paint order and had to finish the new construction in blue instead of yellow. I like the pretend version of the story, though.

On the far edge of New Towne is the main attraction of the Faire: the jousting arena, a big oval the size of a football field, where patrons watch knights battle for honor. Sprinkled throughout both halves of the kingdom are the shops, stages, and games that bring this place to life on the weekends. I’ve never been here when the Faire is closed; it’s like walking through a ghost town. My brain fills in every empty stage with the minstrels and harpsichord players that will be there in just a few days. Every locked shop door is propped wide open in my mind, the luxurious velvet gowns

and ribbons streaming from elaborate headdresses all glimmering in the sun. The few times Mama came to the Faire when I was a kid—before she and Kev Jr. decided they’d rather spend their Saturdays at Topgolf and the movies—Mama joked that I’d spend her whole paycheck on Renaissance Faire costumes if I could. No lie detected.

Straddling the line between the two halves of the kingdom is Ye Olde Food Court. The food vendors won’t be here during the week while camp’s going on, but even so I still catch a whiff of fried batter under the scent of the surrounding pines. “You’re free to use these tables to eat the lunches you brought, or just to have a rest in the shade,” Zach explains as he hands out a second piece of paper, our schedules for the week:

Arrival/Kickoff: 9:00–9:30 a.m.

Rehearsal I: 9:30–11:00 a.m.

Group Activity: 11:00–12:00 p.m.

Lunch: 12:00–1:00 p.m.

Rehearsal II: 1:00–2:00 p.m.

Dismissal/Pickup: 2:00–2:30 p.m.

“What’s *group activity*?” Tyler asks.

“Ah yes!” says Zach. “We’ve arranged to have a few activities scheduled for before lunch each day so you can experience the wonder of the Faire while you’re here. Artisan demonstrations, musical performances, attractions and games, that sort of thing.”

“Awesome!” I say. I wonder if the archers that took over for Daddy will make an appearance.

“Back up,” the Woodbridge boy—Carter, I think?—says. “Attractions and games? Like that one?” He points to a contraption I wouldn’t ride for all the strawberry Twizzlers in the world: a hollowed-out log about the size of a Volkswagen Beetle, suspended in the air by four long ropes. The way the ropes are attached, I can tell the thing’s supposed to twist like a tire swing, with its passengers inside. Literally *ad nauseam*. I squint at the banner that announces the ride’s name: THE CRAZED COLUMBUS. Not for me, thanks; queens don’t puke.

Zach shakes his head. “Nope. Not that one. Keep up, y’all!” He walks a little faster.

“Aww, why not?” Carter pouts as we speed-walk behind Zach like baby ducks. Zach starts to go off about waivers and the camp’s insurance policy but stops when it becomes clear that none of us are listening.

“Besides,” adds Wren, the blond girl, “you don’t want to spend the whole camp with your head in *ye olde porta-potties*, puking your royal guts out, do you?”

We all laugh, but something about the way Wren tells the joke makes me suddenly defensive. They’re called the *privies*, thank you very much. She’s been doing stuff like this all morning—pointing out that the shiny armor on a statue of a knight is actually plastic, rolling her eyes at all the punny shop names (personally I think Game of Combs is a great name for a medieval-themed hair accessory store, but whatever). It reminds me of Kev Jr.’s stank attitude every time he talks about the Faire, which means Wren and me? We’re gonna have a problem.

As we head up the hill to Olde Town, the slow trickle of memories turns into a flood. This is where Daddy and I spent most of our time, close to the archery stalls where he worked. I know this part of the fairgrounds like the back of my hand. I may still be figuring out geometric proofs at school, but I can tell you exactly what goes into a Sir Lance-latte at the Cloisters Café.

Every step brings us closer to the archery stalls. Zach’s still running through his tour. From our earlier conversation, I know he knows about Daddy’s history here. But he’s just talking about the first-aid tents stationed through the fairgrounds, like he doesn’t even realize where we are. I squeeze my eyes shut tight as the archery stalls come into view. I haven’t been here in three years—not since Daddy died, and not the summer before, when he was in and out of the hospital too much to work the stalls. Uncle Paul says he heard the entire archery show was on hiatus last summer, out of respect for Daddy’s memory. But now the show’s open again....What if the stalls are different from what I remember? Or worse, what if they changed the stalls, changed the show, without him?

My eyes are shut so tight my lids tremble. But when I peek through the black fringe of my lashes, I see the same stalls I remember: the worn-down wood and a hanging sign covered in old yellow paint: SHERWOOD FOREST ARCHERY: TEST YOUR SKILLS! It’s the exact same sign that’s been here since I was little. I sigh, relieved. The Faire never changes.

Jessie jumps up on a short stone wall that lines our path. “What’s the Faire like, anyway? When it’s open, I mean?” I’m so envious of her graceful balancing as she walks that it takes me a second to process her question.

She’s *never* been to the Faire?

“Well, it’s a lot of fun,” Zach says. “From the live performances to the delectable cuisine, it’s a journey through time that you won’t soon forget.” I know what he’s saying is supposed to sound interesting, but his voice is almost robotic, like he’s just parroting some brochure. Jessie looks thoroughly unimpressed, and I don’t blame her. Zach’s speech doesn’t even come close to doing the Faire justice. I may not know Jessie that well yet, but I can’t let her first introduction to the Faire—or *anyone’s*—be...*this*.

“The storied kingdom of Brightcastle!” I jump in, literally, as I join Jessie on the stone wall. “A land rich in lore and adventure, ruled by a queen as just as she is beautiful. Legends have been told of the magical creatures that walk these lands, unique in all the realm.” While Carter, Tyler, and Jessie seem into what I’m saying, Wren looks unimpressed. Like all she sees is a random collection of aging wooden buildings, twenty minutes south of the airport. Why is she even here, if she can’t suspend her disbelief?

A memory surfaces—the very first time I was old enough to remember coming to the Faire. Other kids had gone to Disney World over the summer, but Daddy insisted he was taking me somewhere even better. We pulled up, and I was hoping to see characters with ice-magic powers, or magic carpet rides. But no. It was the Faire, with its stray ketchup packets and dungeon masters with thick Southern accents—not exactly the same enchanting allure as Agrabah or Arendelle.

“I don’t want to be here!” I pouted. I’m sure my four-year-old whine echoed through the land.

Daddy squatted beside me. “I know, Kayabean, but— Wait a second, did you see that?”

I gasped, eyes wide. “What?”

“Over there.” He pointed to a blond woman with a gauzy purple dress on, so elegant she practically floated along the path. “Did you see her pointed ears?”

“It’s just dress-up,” I said. As a four-year-old girl, I was an expert on the subject of dress-up.

Daddy’s eyes flashed bright. “Is it?” He picked me up and wove through the crowd toward the woman-elf. “Excuse me, miss! Could we take a peek at your ears, please?” I don’t remember the woman’s face, but I remember what I saw when she pulled back her hair: pointed ears that seemed to blend seamlessly with her skin. Of course, now I know about cosplaying, and the effect a high-quality prosthetic can have on a costume. But four-year-old Kaya was mesmerized.

“Wow...” I said as the elf floated away and we crossed over a small wooden bridge.

“Kayabeen,” Daddy whispered as we passed a man wearing all black, a dark hood pulled over his face. “Was that rogue mage there a second ago?”

I glanced back at the man, swearing I could see a sly grin spread, below the line of the hood. “I...I don’t think so. I think he just appeared!” And Daddy took off running, with me bouncing along on his shoulders, my giggles spreading like wildflowers. From then I was hooked. The Faire’s not Disney World; it’s something better: a magical place grounded in the real world. The enchantment is only there because everyone believes, together. The next weekend was just as magical. And so was the next summer, and the one after that. The Faire never changes.

Wren’s still staring like a dragon egg is hatching on my head. I refuse to believe that I’m making things weird—*she’s* making things weird. But fine, guess I’m going to have to show the group myself what makes this place so special. “Look!” I point to a worn circle in the grass, almost certainly created by a since-removed trash can. The group draws near. “A fairy circle!” I say. “Don’t step inside, lest ye be transported to their enchanted world and subjected to their deceitful ways!” I playfully shove Tyler toward the circle. He laughs, but for a second, he actually looks scared that the fairies might take him away.

“And what’s that I hear?” I cup one hand to my ear. On the other side of the woods that surround the fairgrounds, thudding bass blasts out of a passing car’s windows. “The telltale pounding of a centaur’s hoofbeats.” Carter nods; he’s into it! Even Jessie gives a reluctant half smile. Yeah, sure, it’s all cringe. But it’s fun, too.



There's a rustling behind me. I turn just as Becca, the camp's social media manager, lowers her phone. Has she been there this whole time, taking videos?

Zach claps his hands together, and the magic spell I've woven evaporates like a puff of powdered sugar. "That was amazing, Kaya. You're quite the performer!" He chuckles. "Make sure to get that media release form turned in, okay? Our followers will love you!"

I smile brighter than the August sun beaming down on us. Passionate about her kingdom? Check. Excellent public speaker? Check. The role of queen is as good as mine. I may or may not shoot Wren a smug look after Zach turns away.

"Right," Zach continues, checking his watch. "Let's split up and get to know each other a little. Tyler and Carter, why don't you grab a seat in the fairy ring over there?" He points to a circle of knee-high steel mushrooms. "And, girls, you can hang out by the maypole. Ten minutes sound good?"

We all nod. Wren and Jessie link arms and skip—*literally skip*—to the maypole. I start to trudge behind them, when Tyler grabs my elbow.

"Hey," he says. "Uhh, how we feeling?"

"Feeling great! Did you see me back there? I've got queen in the *bag*."

"Yeah, but what was that thing with Wren?"

"What thing?" I start to say, but Tyler's giving me a be-for-real face. "Look, I can't help it if she lacks imagination. But I *can* use her lack of imagination to show Zach my— What's the opposite of lack?"

"Hm..." He takes off his glasses and cleans them on his T-shirt. "Abundance?"

"Right! My abundance of imagination. I am a *cornucopia* of imagination. I've got imagination coming out of my ears!" I open my arms wide for emphasis. From the maypole, Jessie and Wren look up from their conversation and give me a weird look. *Oops*. But oh well. I can't let a little thing like embarrassment get in the way of my goals. I'm here to claim my crown.

Tyler sighs. "I know you have big hopes for all this. Just don't forget to have fun, too, 'kay? It's going to be fun!"

"I *am* having fun," I say. "Didn't you hear? I'm quite the performer."

He shakes his head. "Okay, Kaya." Tyler heads to the fairy ring, while I walk to the maypole to join Jessie and Wren, who have started to make

flower crowns. Envy simmers in my chest. Such a naturally queen-like thing to do, and they're not even trying. How am I supposed to compete with that?

The wind rustles through the pine trees, fluttering the colorful pennants over our heads. "Hey!" Jessie shouts as I approach. "Here, we made you one." She smiles as she hands me an intricately braided crown made with some of the dainty white flowers that grow around the fairgrounds. I place the wreath on my head. It fits perfectly.

"Thanks," I say. And I actually mean it. Jessie smiles and hums quietly to herself.

"Ugh, you have the best voice, Jessie. I hate you—just kidding!" Wren says, laughing a little too loudly.

Jessie giggles as she focuses on the next flower crown. "Hopefully it's good enough to be a madrigal singer," she says to herself.

"Is that your top choice? Madrigal?" The Rose Lady madrigal singers are a small group of highly trained musicians; some patrons come from states away just to see them perform each summer. Suddenly I'm *very* interested in this conversation. It never occurred to me that I could use this time to scope out the competition.

"Yeah. I love singing, musicals, all that stuff." Jessie fiddles awkwardly with one of the maypole ribbons. Meanwhile, I feel like flying. Jessie was my biggest competition for sure. If she doesn't want to be queen, we might as well start etching my name in the Apprentice Queen crown right now.

"Such a nerd. JK, love you!" Wren chimes in.

"How about you?" Jessie asks me.

"Me? Oh, uh, I don't know." I try to play it cool. Casual. "Queen, I guess."

Wren's fingers stop braiding her crown. She looks up, quickly glancing between me and Jessie.

"Jessie's going to be queen," Wren says.

I frown. "But I thought— Didn't you say madrigal was your top choice?"

Jessie gives Wren an uneasy look. "It is. But my mom made me put queen down, too. Something about leadership potential and my 'extracurricular résumé.' I dunno."

Wren's smug now. I want to shove her smirking face right into the Sink the Siren dunk tank.

"Oh" is all I manage to say.

"All right, girls!" Becca appears out of thin air, holding her phone up like a prize fish. "Let's squeeze in close for a photo, huh? First day of camp!"

Jessie and Wren perk up immediately, snapping their shoulders together and holding their fingers and thumbs together to make those cute mini hearts. Their perfect straight teeth are brighter than Becca's flash, I'm sure.

"It's Kaya, right? Get in there, sweetheart," Becca says. I'm too stunned by the news about Jessie's second choice to respond, but I silently shuffle over and force a smile.

"One, two, three. Say *folly*!" Becca snaps a photo, then checks it on her screen. Her nose crinkles. "Let's try that again. Kaya, is the sun in your eyes?"

"No. Why?"

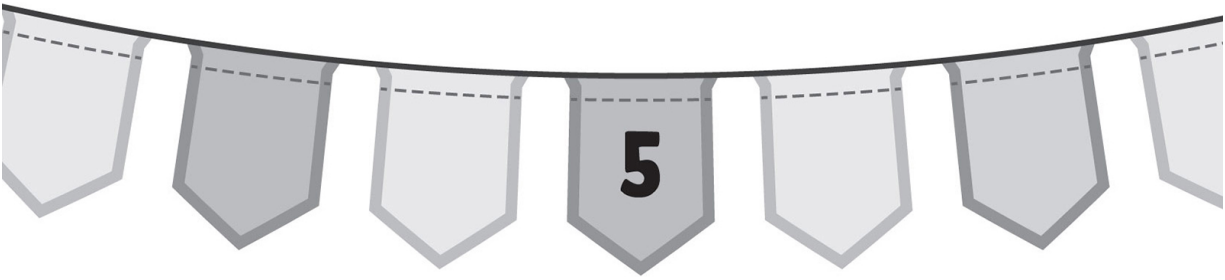
"You were just...doing something with your face."

Wren shoots me a look like I'm the janky toy in the prize bin. Dang. Guess I'm not as good at hiding behind my smile as I thought. Becca raises her phone to try again, and I've just managed to fix my face when I hear it: a rhythmic drumming that I can feel in my chest. Movement down the gravel path draws my eye: drummers in medieval costumes, followed by tumbling gymnasts and other Faire cast members carrying emerald-green flags atop high poles. Each flag has the same silver phoenix emblazoned on it.

I gasp. I know that symbol.

A trumpeter appears, his clothes and cap the same emerald as the flags. He plays a fanfare, then says five simple words that make me squeal with glee:

"Make way for the queen!"



## The Queen

**As soon as I catch a glimpse** of the queen's emerald-green dress, it's like time slows down. The long train of courtiers and jugglers arrives first, fanning out around the nearby stage nestled against the woods. Zach checks his watch again and smiles, and I realize this was part of his schedule all along, the reason he hurried us down the path. *Well played.*

Zach guides us to sit on the wooden benches in front of the stage. I'm on the end, followed by Tyler, then the other campers and Zach. Everyone faces the stage as the queen's musicians begin a ballad, but I swing myself around so I can watch her arrive. The queen's men carry her on a beautiful golden litter that glitters in the sunlight. It's every bit as magical as I remember. Suddenly I'm not watching at ground level anymore. I'm several feet off the ground, and I'm five again, watching the procession to the Final Joust from Daddy's strong, warm shoulders.

*That'll be you someday,* says his voice in my head.

The queen catches my eye and gives a small smile. I wave back, giddy as a toddler, then remember I'm supposed to be stately. Regal. I cross my legs and stop slouching as the queen's men reach the stage and lower her to the ground. We're all frozen as she glides to the center of the stage while the music comes to a natural end. She's pale—I just know she must have a bottle of SPF 5,000 tucked somewhere under that hoop skirt—and her dark

hair is pinned up in an elaborate bun. She's also younger than the queen I remember from the last time I was here, maybe late twenties. Her makeup is *immaculate*. I'd love to see her daily routine—GRWM to ensure justice and stability across the realm, anyone?

"Queen Daphne of Brightcastle!" the royal herald announces. The queen raises her delicate hands and opens her arms wide. "Well met, my bold apprentices! I am Queen Daphne, daughter of the magnanimous King Angus, God rest his soul. Welcome to the recently unified kingdom of Brightcastle! I rule these lands, until such day as I find a king of my own." I smile at the joke; the New Towne buildings have been here for longer than I've been alive, but every summer Brightcastle is *always* "recently unified." As the queen speaks, I steal a peek at the other kids down the line. Their smiles range from shy (in Carter's case), to full on cheesing (Tyler—and Wren, to my surprise). I'm smiling, too. The corniness is the point, right?

The queen goes on. "Today marks the first day of your training. You've spent the morning receiving helpful guidance from my trusted advisor, Zachary." The golden embroidery twinkles on her emerald-green dress as she turns to Zach, who gives a small bow of appreciation. "And now, without further ado, it is my sincere pleasure to share with you all...your first assignments."

My stomach does a somersault that would put Queen Daphne's tumblers to shame. She beckons her royal herald forward, who waddles stiffly to the center of the space. He unfurls a scroll for what feels like an hour, then begins reading.

"Tyler Nomura..."

Tyler steps forward.

"...Queen's Scribe."

"Yes!" He does a fist pump. His Mentor Scribe steps out from the queen's court. I watch, jealous, as Tyler joins him onstage. But if Tyler's the Queen's Scribe Apprentice, then we'll get to hang out a ton this week. I wonder if we can figure out a way to sneak some SZA lyrics into his poems.

As the other kids get their assignments—Wren: Pirate, Carter: Blacksmith—I imagine the queen and I bonding over our love for the Faire, cheering on the knights as they train, praising the merchants for their fine wares. I get so caught up, I almost miss the Royal Herald's announcement.

"...Queen of the Faire!"

Finally! I stand up to take my place onstage. But there's one tiny problem: Jessie is already standing there, in front of the queen. *Jessie* is the Queen's Apprentice!

Queen Daphne steps forward with a dazzlingly white smile and offers Jessie her arm. *That should be my arm*, I think, as Jessie stands beside the queen. I'd rather take a lance to the gut than admit it out loud, but they look perfect together, so poised and elegant. A queen and her protégé.

A few feet away, Tyler's making a weird face at me. I give him a confused look right back, until it hits me:

I didn't put anything else on my form.

So what in the *Royal Herald's* about to happen now?

"Kaya Morgan..." the herald bellows. I step forward, even though I'm the only one in the audience now, so it doesn't really matter. I can hear my heart beating in my ears. What's my assignment? Maybe there can be two Queen's Apprentices? Or maybe they'll kick me out of camp for filling out the form wrong? A queen would never do that. What was I think—

"Court Jester!"

*What?!* I blink at the herald. Everyone applauds: the queen, her court, Zach and Becca, and all the campers onstage. That last part hurts the most—Tyler, Wren, and Jessie *know* how badly I wanted to be queen. I glare at Wren as she cheers, and the sound dies in her throat.

"Sorry." She giggles.

*No, you're not sorry, but you will be.*

"This concludes our first Naming Ceremony!" Queen Daphne announces in a resonant tone. "Mentors, please escort your apprentices to your domains. Huzzah!"

"Huzzah!" the queen's courtiers echo.

Zach cups his hands over his mouth to shout, "Meet back here in an hour for lunch!"

The queen's court disperses as Mentors and apprentices hurry away excitedly. Out of the crowd, a man emerges wearing a yellow-and-green motley coat and a cap 'n' bells. He stretches out his hand. "Kaya, hi! I'm Barry, the queen's jester. Looking forward to working with you. This is gonna be fun."

I take in his patchy stubble and the cargo shorts sagging around his soft middle. "Uh-huh," I say. I feel like I'm in a daze, like someone just woke

me up out of a deep sleep. Barry leads me to our practice area near the jousting arena. As we walk, I look over my shoulder, where Jessie and the queen are chattering excitedly with wide, ladylike smiles on their faces. Ugh.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Barry says. “I was a big fan of your dad’s.” In the split second I look at him, I notice he’s not giving me the pathetic you’re-a-bubble look that Zach did, even though he knew Daddy. That’s a nice change, but I’ve got bigger fish to fry right now. I can’t be a jester. I won’t.

I spin around until I catch sight of Zach’s powder-blue shirt. He’s already halfway down the hill toward the Dragon Ales pub, chatting with one of the Rose Ladies. *No!* He can’t leave. Not before he makes this right.

“I, uh, gotta go to the privies,” I mutter to Barry. I spin too quickly as I take off, almost tumbling into a recycling bin. Barry sets it upright as I hurry toward Zach. Why didn’t he assign me as queen? Is it because of the form? Or because Jessie is so clearly made for the role? I think of Jessie’s classy socks and perfect braids. Maybe I need to make myself look the part, too. As I walk-run to catch up to Zach, I undo my crown braid, hoping it will create a wavy black halo around my head. The dust is flying, and Mama’s going to kill me. But if it means that Zach changes his mind, at least I’ll die royalty.

Zach hears my footsteps on the gravel before I get to him. He and the Rose Lady turn around.

“Kaya?” Zach asks. “What’s up?”

I stop in front of them. “Um.” Now that I’m here, the words won’t come. What was I thinking, running all the way over here, whining like a little kid? I roll a rock under my shoe.

Zach must gesture something to the Rose Lady, because she leaves and then it’s only us two on the path.

“Everything okay?” Zach asks.

“It’s just...I wanted to be queen.” My throat feels tight. I don’t know why my eyes are stinging like they want to cry—probably the dust—but it sure is annoying.

“Oh...” Zach says. I’m still looking down, but I can hear that you’re-a-bubble tone in his voice. “I’m sorry, Jessie’s application came in first. You’ll have a chance next week.”



“Uh-huh.” I hate how my voice sounds, so small. Like I *am* a bubble. Jessie’s basically already a princess. If she’s queen first, her performance will stick in everyone’s minds and I’ll never have a shot at Apprentice Weekend. This isn’t how I wanted my return to the Faire to go. *Get it together*, I tell myself. “Okay,” I say, trying to convince myself that it really *is* okay.

“Besides, you’re super funny!” Zach says. He’s not wrong; Kev Jr. says the only reason I don’t get in trouble more is because I can make Mama laugh before she has a chance to punish me. But the jester’s not the one everyone watches, up on that golden litter. The jester’s not the one all the little girls dream of being. The one *I* dream of being.

“I guess,” I mutter, kicking a rock down the gravel path.

“You are! That speech was hilarious.”

“Speech?” The morning sun’s right behind Zach, and I have to squint to look at him.

“About Brightcastle earlier,” he says. “The trash-can fairy circle? Cracked me up!”

Zach’s words come back to me: *You’re quite the performer*. Just one problem: I wasn’t *trying* to be funny. I was trying to act like a queen. I poured my heart out to him, to everyone. And they thought it was a joke.

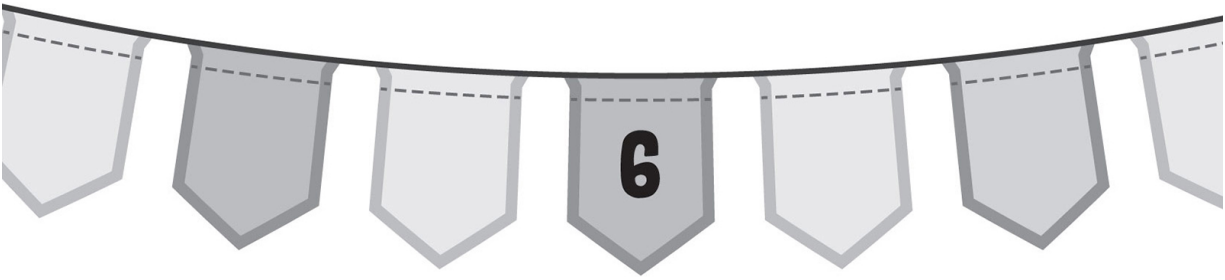
Sweat pricks my skin, and it’s not from the heat. Zach watches me carefully as I fan out my T-shirt collar, which just makes me more aware of my weird reaction. I feel awkward and self-conscious, and trapped. Why is anything bold I do in this body automatically seen as comic relief instead of elegant or brave? Again, I imagine I’m on Daddy’s shoulders, watching the Faire. But instead of seeing myself as queen, I’m watching myself as a jester, the whole crowd laughing as I fumble onstage. It’s the stuff of nightmares, and for the next week, it’s about to be my life.

“Just try jester.” Zach’s voice snaps me from my thoughts. “You might like it more than you think. Okay?”

“Okay.” It’s definitely still not okay, but I can tell this conversation is over.

“That’s the spirit,” Zach says. “I can’t wait to see what you and Barry come up with.” He leaves to take care of some Faire business, and I turn back toward the top of the hill, where my Mentor Barry’s waiting. I sigh as I watch him, whistling merrily and juggling three cloth balls high in the air.

“Catch!” Barry tosses me a ball, and it hits my forehead. *Bonk*.  
“Oops, sorry.” He laughs. I groan. This is not what I signed up for.  
Literally.



## Something Stinks, and It's Not Just the Horses

**If my life were a movie**, the rest of the day would be the most sorry montage you've ever seen. Picture me and Barry, tucked away by the stables, on a patch of dirt that has the nerve to call itself a stage. Normally we'd practice on the jester's square over in Olde Towne, but Zach wants all campers to stay close by for the first day or two so he can check in on us easily. The jousting arena is just over a tall wooden fence behind me. I can hear the knights' weapons clanging, Jessie and Queen Daphne praising their valiant efforts. Every so often I catch a glimpse of soft emerald fabric between the fence's wooden slats. Jessie's living my dream; meanwhile I'm stuck with Barry, both of us pretending each gust of summer breeze doesn't come with the strong scent of manure.

I *did* mention our stage is by the stables, right? Tonight is absolutely a wash night.

I don't remember much of lunch; I actively block out anything Jessie says about rehearsal. At some point Tyler asks me how things with Barry are going, and I just mumble something unintelligible and submerge my carrot in ranch dip. Along with my dreams.

When the nightmare of a first day is over, I slump into Tyler's mom's car. Tyler makes a face—I can't tell if it's pity for me, or if he's noticed the manure smell.

"Hey, y'all! How was the first day?" Mrs. Nomura asks as she pulls out of the driveway. In the rearview mirror, her eyebrows furrow. She thinks she's slick with the way she quickly adjusts the essential-oil air freshener to full blast, but I don't miss it. At least I smell like I feel, I guess.

"It was great, Mom!" Tyler's leg has been bouncing this whole time, like he can't wait to share all the amazing things he did today. While he launches into a five-minute speech about iambic pentameter and nib sizes, I pull out my phone. I've been texting Ray all day to fill her in on the disaster of our Week One roles, but there's been zero response. I'd be upset, or maybe concerned. But let's be real: There's no way there aren't surveillance cameras all over space camp. After her little stunt with the Galileo statue this morning, I'm 1,000 percent sure the counselors have her on some kind of punishment. I just hope she gets her phone back before my life ends up any deeper in the privies.

"...the other kids are all from Woodbridge," Tyler continues, his summer-reading book unopened on his lap. "They seem all right, though."

"That's great, Ty! How about you, Kaya? Is being queen everything you hoped for?" Mrs. Nomura's perfect smile flashes in the mirror, like flaky golden batter around a fried Oreo of pain. I thought I'd maybe started accepting my fate a little bit, but her words hit me in the gut and I'm back to the Naming Ceremony all over again. I can't answer her without a million jumbled feelings spilling out, and maybe some tears, too, which I *cannot* handle right now. So I ball myself up and look out the window.

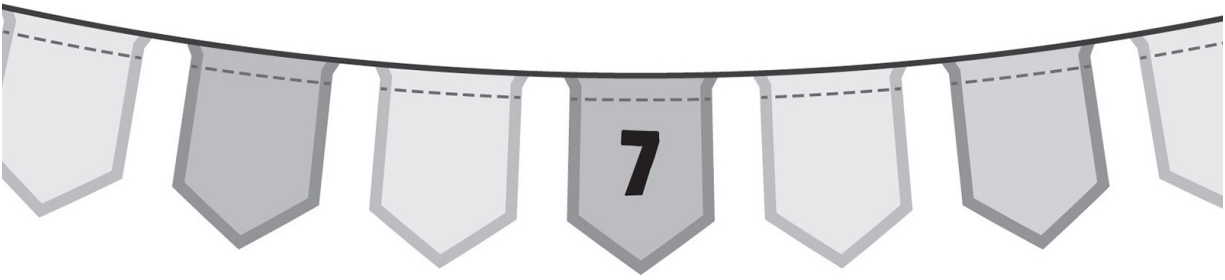
I try to keep it together, but I can tell by the way Tyler jumps into valiant hero mode that I'm not. "Oh, um, let's talk about something else, Mom," he says. "How was *your* day?"

He'll make a great knight someday.

As they talk about plans for dinner, the highway exits roll by, the reverse of my excited countdown this morning. I'm glad Mama's working late tonight; if she was home, she'd be able to read me like a book the second I step into the house. And then she'd pry, even though she doesn't even care about camp. She doesn't care about the Faire at all. So why does it feel like I let her down today?

The bright green leaves on the trees that line the highway remind me of Queen Daphne's emerald dress. *That'll be you someday*, Daddy's voice echoes in my head. *No it won't*, I want to answer, but I stop myself. It's no use.

There's no one there to hear me.



## Brothers and Their Big Mouths

**When I get home**, Kev Jr.'s in the kitchen, draining the grease out of a pan of ground beef.

"Tacos sound good?" he asks over his shoulder. All the fixings are laid out on the counter: warm tortillas, shredded cheese, rice and black beans, a jar of fire-roasted salsa. And, of course, the best condiment known to man: sour cream. Kev Jr. actually hates sour cream; the fact that he even thought to set it out for me makes my heart squeeze a little. He leaves for school in California in twenty-five days, a whole week ahead of when classes actually begin, because of some leadership honors program he got into. That means I'll be alone a lot more. Mom's working on changing her schedule around and getting a sitter for the unavoidable late nights, which I told her I don't need, right before I burned my grilled cheese to a crisp and set the fire alarm off. Allegedly. So it's not like I'll be on my own for meals once my brother goes off to school. But it won't be the same.

Dinner looks amazing, but as we sit down at the table, my stomach tightens. I know Kev's going to ask me how my day was, which means either telling him the awful truth about what happened, or brushing past it and hoping he doesn't pry. Like Mom, Kev's not really a fan of the Faire—he thinks we should be glorifying and celebrating our *own* heritage and history. I get it, and I'm proud of where I come from. But also, it's not that

deep. People at the Faire walk around in elf ears and tails—it's about the vibe, not actual history.

“What'd you do today?” I ask, hoping to put off the topic of camp for as long as possible.

“Not much,” Kev says as he takes a big bite of taco. “Hung out at Greg's, did some questionnaires for school. You?”

Dang, I was hoping there'd be more. But knowing Kev, he probably napped half the day away.

My brother's eyes go wide. “Oh wait! *Puh-lease* tell me all about corny camp.” He's already laughing, just thinking about it. “Were there men in tights, playing wooden flutes? Did you dance a jig?”

I press my lips together so tight I bet my mouth disappears. I don't have the energy for this; I've been trying (and occasionally failing) to fight back tears since the Naming Ceremony this morning. Yelling at Kev Jr. about camp is only going to make it easier for all the other feelings I'm holding back to slip past the gates.

“Camp was fine.” I push my rice and beans around with my fork. “*Not* corny— You know what? I'm not going to have this argument with you again. That's called growth.”

“O...kay?” I don't even have to see Kev Jr.'s face to know he's doing that look Daddy used to do, where he stares me down like I'm a puzzle he's going to solve. *Keep your eyes on your beans, Kaya.*

“What's up with you?” Kev finally asks.

“Nothing,” I mumble. “Just tired.”

His face goes back to normal. I should've known that excuse would work; teenagers basically sleep twenty hours a day. “Hmm,” he says. “Too tired to play *Raging Siegelands 3*? We could go co-op.”

“Wait, really?” I sit up straight, now giving him my full attention. Kev only ever lets me watch him play his games, and that's only if I promise not to ask too many questions. The chance to actually *play* with him in co-op mode is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Which I will take him up on, as soon as I get the horse poop smell out of my hair.



Never in my life have I washed my hair so fast. I'm pretty sure there's still some suds I forgot to rinse out of the back, and my detangling is questionable at best. Even so, I manage a decent middle part and quickly wrangle my curls into two cornrow pigtails, and rush out to join Kev Jr. in his bedroom. Playing with him is everything. I pretend not to notice that he's set the game to easy mode, but that's more fun anyway. We're finding loot, we're crushing side quests, we're kicking raiders' butts. It's exactly what I need, just my brother and some mindless fun. It's perfect.

"Yo, nice one! See? You *can* be cool sometimes." He holds his hand up for a high five after I take an orc down. I slap his hand quickly so we can focus on the enemy goblin attempting a sneak attack. Green dude thinks he's slick.

"Being cool is overrated," I say. Daddy used to tell us that all the time.

My brother sighs, shaking his head. "Man, whatever."

"Quick, loot the body! I'll see what's in these crates." I glance at Kev Jr., but it doesn't look like he's having fun anymore. He looks low-key annoyed. Was it something I said? "Hey, I didn't mean to disagree with you or anything. I was trying to say what Daddy used to—"

"I know who said it!" He pauses the game. "Look, Kaya, I know you miss him and everything—"

"What, and you don't?"

He clenches his jaw. "I didn't say that. But...just because he's gone doesn't mean he was right about everything."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Anger roars in my chest.

"All this stuff with the Faire...I just want you to be careful. I know you're having fun or whatever, but don't get too comfortable."

Again with these vague warnings. I am so *sick* of having to argue with my own family just because I *like* something. "You're just jealous!" I shout. "You're trying to make me give up the Faire because if you don't have a way to remember Daddy, then no one should!"

"I'm trying to protect you! Why are you fighting this so hard?" He frowns. "It's because I'm right, isn't it? Don't act like they don't treat you differently."

"You haven't been to the Faire in years. How would you know?" I sneer. But seriously, how *does* he know? I haven't told him about Wren, or about how Zach just thinks I'm comic relief. I don't wait for Kev Jr. to



answer; as a little sister, it's my constitutional right to never admit that he's right about anything. I drop my controller and walk out of his room.

"Kaya! Come on, man. I didn't mean—"

I don't hear the rest. I slam the door to his room and pull out my phone as I go downstairs. I need to talk to Ray. I need to talk to someone who understands that being Black and being into nerdy things aren't mutually exclusive. But it's almost seven o'clock, nine hours since this fiasco began; if she hasn't responded to my avalanche of texts by now, her phone must be in a counselor's desk drawer somewhere. So instead of calling her, I text my uncle Paul, Daddy's best friend from their days in the North Atlanta archery circuit. You'd think he would be a big Renaissance Faire nerd, too, since he shoots a bow and arrow in his free time and everything. But Uncle Paul's not into the whole Robin Hood thing so much as he's into cutthroat competition. Which is perfect for me right now.

Hi. I'm mad.

Need to shoot something.

Pick you up in 5?



The sun's going down when we pull up to the North Atlanta Archery Range, but it won't fully set for another hour at least—gotta love summer in the south. Ginormous outdoor lights mounted to the trees illuminate the courses. The range is a large wooded area, with different sections roped off according to type of activity. There are bull's-eyes and bales of hay in our

section, but farther off it gets more interesting. There's only one other group here, a pair of women at the other end of the range, doing a timed run. I watch them with longing as the first one darts around the course, landing her arrows in the target deer and turkeys as they shift back and forth on a narrow track. The moving targets were always my favorite to watch at Daddy's competitions. Something about the extra challenge seemed to light him up from inside. I loved watching that fire in his eyes as he studied the course, the way his whole body seemed to ignite with victory. I get that way, too, about winning sometimes, even something as silly as racing Kev Jr. to see who can wash their stack of dishes the fastest.

"Look, they're almost done!" I say. "Can we go over there today, just for, like, five minutes?"

Uncle Paul shakes his head, his blue eyes twinkling. I know what he's going to say before he even opens his mouth. "If you can't hit it when you're standing still, you can't hit it when you're moving. I know these drills are boring, but they're foundations that lay the groundwork for every —"

"Everything that comes after," I finish, kneeling down to open my case. I pull out my bow, which is slender, purple, and a little over four feet tall. It's a recurve bow, which means it's shaped kind of like a top lip that has a little dip in the middle. When I was a kid, I used to call it Lavender Lightning. It's the same bow I've had since I first starting shooting three years ago; it basically feels like an extension of my arm at this point.

We set up about fifteen yards from the target.

"So, you want to tell me who we're aiming at today?" Uncle Paul glances over before he lets his arrow fly. Bull's-eye, of course. At his skill level, this distance is capital-*E*, capital-*M* Easy Mode.

I sigh as I nock my arrow. "It's not a person so much as a situation." The ache in my throat grows, but I don't let it stop me from getting the words out. I tell him about the Renaissance camp, the Woodbridge girls, and the whole queen fiasco. When I get to the part about being assigned the role of Jester, Paul's eyebrows shoot up.

"You really are following in your dad's footsteps," he says. He nods to my drooping arrow. "You gonna shoot that thing or what?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah." I nock my arrow again, position my feet, exhale and release. *Thwip-thud*. A little left. It's not bad, but I know I can do better,

when there's not a blacksmith's furnace blazing in my chest. We check that the range is clear, then walk to move our targets farther out. "What do you mean, my dad's footsteps?"

"He was a jester his first summer at the Faire, too. Before you were born. Not his first choice, either, but they said he had to pay his dues."

"Pay his dues? Wasn't he, like, a really good archer by then?" I narrow my eyes as we return to the shooting line. I don't know the exact details, but Mama's raised me right. This smells like straight-up manure. Not the kind from the stables, either. The prove-you-belong-cuz-you-look-like-you-don't kind.

"Yep, better than them by a mile. Your mom was furious. But he put in the time. The next summer they made him Master Bowman, and the rest is history."

I shoot again. *Thwip-thud!* Closer to center this time. "Huh, I never knew." And I'm sure there's a reason for that.

"It was a different time, but that doesn't make it okay. You can do better, if you stay the course." Uncle Paul gives me a knowing smile, and I scrunch my lips to the side. "Why do I feel like you're about to give me some uncle-y advice?"

"Because you're smart, and I am," he says, pulling a worn baseball cap down low over his salt-and-pepper hair. "Don't let this jester thing distract you from your goal. You can still be queen, but not if you take yourself out of the running by quitting before you've even begun. That's not the Morgan way."

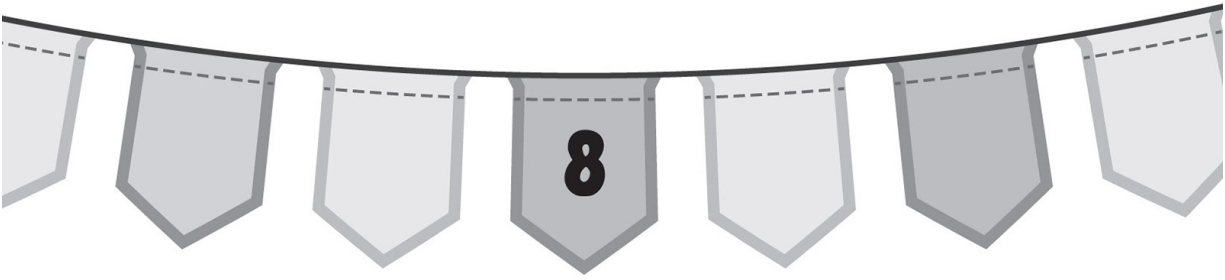
"You're right," I say. "Except the *Morgans* wouldn't even have my back if they knew. Kev Jr. would just shrug and say 'Told you so.' And Mama probably wouldn't even hear me." My bow digs into my fingers, I'm clutching it so tightly. Uncle Paul notices and takes a deep breath in and out. He does this sometimes, models calm for me when I can't seem to find it myself. After I've taken a few grounding breaths with him, he speaks.

"Your mom's under a lot of stress right now. Even so, she and your brother are right to want to protect you. I had no idea how hard it could be for a Black person in a mostly white space, until I saw what your dad went through at the Faire. Sure, he achieved his dream, but it took a lot out of him in the process. I don't blame your family for wanting to spare you that

fight...but I also know you. And there's no way you're giving up. You can do this."

He punctuates his speech by loosing another arrow, right in the heart of the target. The women from across the range are leaving now, and they stop by to chat with him. While the adults talk, I practice my shots and think about what he said. It might be exhausting to prove I belong at the Faire, but I don't have a choice. I love it too much; it's literally in my blood. Just like Daddy, I've been forced into a role that isn't the one I want. Uncle Paul says I should be a good sport and give jester my all. But if I'm too good, I'm scared Zach won't see me as anything else. I don't want to be pigeonholed as the comic relief just because I can tell a few jokes. But I also don't want to bomb on purpose and make Zach think I'm not a team player.

Clutching Lavender Lightning tight, I think about five-year-old Kaya and how disappointed she'd be if she knew I gave up because I faced a little setback. I have to stay in this, for her, and for Daddy. Forget Kev Jr.'s comments. Forget Zach thinking I'm funny. These next two weeks are about what *I* want. And that hasn't changed a single bit.



## Moping in the Mud

**Before I even open my eyes** the next morning, I hear the rain. I crack an eye open and peek out the window. Sure enough, currents of water rush down the backyard gutters, and the sky is the color of a knight's blade. Between the weather and what's waiting for me down at the fairgrounds, there's nothing I'd love to do more than go back to bed. But Uncle Paul believes in me...and he'd be disappointed if I spent 10 percent of the camp he paid for with my comforter pulled up over my head. With a groan, I get out of bed, grateful that I don't hear anyone stirring downstairs. Mama and Kev Jr. must still be sleeping, and after what my brother said to me yesterday, I don't plan on talking to him again until *Raging Siegelands 4* comes out...and the game hasn't even been announced yet. I trudge into the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. My face is pinched as tight as my stomach feels, my shoulders in a permanent state of slumpiness. Tyler and his mom will be here in thirty minutes—maybe I'll manage to fix my attitude by then.

Breaking news: I don't. In fact, I only get more down the closer we get to camp. By the time we pull into the fairgrounds parking lot, I'm beginning to worry my face might get stuck in permanent mean-mug mode, even though the rain has stopped. It doesn't help that overnight, the patch of dirt Barry and I were using to practice has turned into a glorified mud pit.

Barry's standing on the edge of the gravel path, a stack of flattened cardboard boxes with labels like 6 COUNT 1-GALLON HONEY MUSTARD and HALF-PLY TOILET PAPER at his feet. He's laying each box on the muddy square in front of him, creating a dry-ish checkerboard for us to stand on.

"Morning, Kaya," he says, distracted. I pick up a couple of boxes and help him finish the job. But the boxes shift as we walk on to begin our juggling lesson, beanbags in hand. Every squelching step leaves a half-inch seam of mud squeezing through the gaps. One box slips under my feet, and I almost eat it trying to catch myself.

Barry makes a *hmm* sound and looks worryingly at the boxes. My shoes are now covered in specks of brown. I'm not a sneakerhead like my brother or anything, but I just got these shoes, like, two weeks ago. I've already coordinated my first-day-of-eighth-grade outfit around them, and mud was not a planned accessory.

Something fluttery catches my eye. To my left, Jessie and Queen Daphne are practicing some kind of dance in a nearby field. They hold their arms at right angles and touch their palms together as they spin and skip in a circle. Their laughter carries on the wind, and—I wish I was making this next part up—actual *mist* swirls around them, making them look like something ethereal, straight out of a cosplayer's TikTok videos. I mentally add the weather to my list of sworn enemies.

Down the path on a bench, Tyler's looking up from his writing to watch them. His mouth's hanging open a little bit, and I wish I could shove a muddy beanbag in it.

"What do you say we find another place to practice today?" Barry asks, eyeing the muddy cardboard like it may give at any moment and swallow us whole.

"Sure." I shrug. At the very least, our traveling time will eat into the hours I have to spend coming up with my jester routine.



"Here we are," Barry says. We've walked clear across the fairgrounds from the jousting arena, to Olde Towne. No more giggling Jessie, no more Tyler muttering his failed attempts at iambic pentameter. The only sounds now

are our steps up to the Olde Towne stage, and the birds happily emerging from the shelter of the trees. The hanging sign to the Cloisters Café swings in the thick breeze. The sun peeks out through the clouds, and my insides loosen a little bit. In this older, more familiar part of the fairgrounds, I feel more relaxed. I feel at home.

“So. Juggling,” Barry begins. “It’s simple, really. Just comes down to two things: One—whatever you’re juggling, throw it nice and high. And two—get your timing right. Let’s use one beanbag to start.”

“One?” I try to rein in my side-eye; I’d rate my success a solid B plus. “Is that even juggling?”

Barry chuckles. “I said the same thing my first time. Just toss it back and forth, try to focus on throwing it the same height each time.”

One beanbag. Uno. Is he for real? But okay, fine. I do as he says, tossing the beanbag from one hand to the other, in a high arc. I’m not the most coordinated person—when I was three, I used to wear my bicycle helmet inside around the house, just for fun, and apparently it saved us from a few trips to the ER—but even *I* can handle this.

“Good! Real good,” Barry says fifteen minutes into the world’s most boring circus act. “Now add another one, and do the same thing. Toss-toss, catch-catch.”

Over Barry’s shoulder, Zach and Becca appear. *Be a team player, Kaya!* I grab a second beanbag and enthusiastically follow Barry’s instructions. Maybe a little *too* enthusiastically.

*Toss-toss, catch-plop.* The second beanbag lands right in my eye.

“Ow!” I wince as Barry approaches, arms outstretched.

“Shoot, you okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine, I’ll be fine. Ow.” I try to blink away the pain just as Becca’s flash goes off. I’m sure my face was all kinds of screwed up. Glad we have *that* moment immortalized for all time.

Zach and Becca move on before I can recover. I check my phone—still some time until we break for our group activity, a demonstration from the Faire’s resident glassblower. Barry stands cautiously off to the side, waiting for me to be ready to try again. Uncle Paul’s story from last night sticks in my brain. Daddy started out as a jester, and yesterday Barry said he knew him. Maybe I can get some info out of Barry, to understand how Daddy went from being a jester to the role he was destined to play.

“So, you knew my dad?” I pick up the beanbags and start tossing them again.

Barry relaxes. “I did! I started at the Faire a year before him, serving at the Olde Towne tavern. Kevin was a good man.” He glances at me sideways. “I, uh, don’t know if you knew this, but he was a jester before we worked the archery stalls.”

I make a surprised face, because grown-ups love to think they’re telling you stuff for the first time. Makes them feel important. It’s good news, though! If Barry was here for Daddy’s first year, then he saw Daddy’s whole journey. “Was he any good at it?” I ask.

“I’ll be honest...not at first.” Barry chuckles. “His pins went flying into the audience a few times. But he was a quick study. By the time weekend three hit, you’d think he’d been juggling for years.”

I pause before tossing a beanbag. “Huh. He put in the work.” Daddy didn’t even want to be a jester, but he still practiced like nobody’s business to get it right. With a little more confidence this time, I toss up the bags. *Toss-toss. Catch-catch.*

“Nice!” Barry says. “And yeah, your dad worked his tail off to be a jester worthy of the Faire. After I saw how much he improved that summer, I knew I could do it, too.”

I frown at him. “You mean...?”

“Yep. Your dad’s the reason I became a jester. In the real world, I’m an executive assistant; it’s my job to blend into the background. So, I always thought I was better suited to help out behind the scenes here as well. But after seeing what your dad accomplished as jester, I had to throw my hat in the ring, so to speak.” Barry takes off his cap ‘n’ bells hat and seamlessly juggles it along with his two beanbags. “I love making people’s day a little brighter. Being a jester lets me do that in a whole new way, and I have your dad to thank.”

“I— That’s...” The words get stuck in my throat, like corn-dog batter without a soda to wash it down. Daddy’s still here, in every trick Barry does, in every patron’s laugh at his jokes. If I take center stage as Apprentice Queen, I can make sure he lives on in me, too.

“So, your dad. The whole time he was improving his jester skills, he was making his case to be an archer,” Barry says. “When he got the gig the next year, he really made it his own. Even incorporated some of the things



he learned as jester into the archery demonstration. Who knew you could crack jokes while decapitating a scarecrow?"

I laugh. The details of Daddy's show make so much sense now. One of my favorite tricks was when he "stole" three apples from a lady's satchel, tossed them in the air, and shot an arrow through each of them before they landed. That kind of precision and coordination takes practice. But it also helps that he had another kind of training.

*Toss-toss, catch-catch.*

"And..." Barry lets out a deep breath. "I know jester wasn't *your* top choice, either."

I stop tossing. "You do?" Guess Mama's right: I *do* need to learn to control my face. "I'm sorry. It's not like being jester is a bad thing or anything. I just want to be queen. It's what my daddy and I dreamed of."

"You don't have to worry about hurting my feelings, Kaya. I know being jester isn't everyone's first pick. But if you've got half the dedication your dad did, I think you've got a real shot at queen. First, though, we've got to do more than just toss two beanbags. Right?" His eyes twinkle.

"Right!" I smile at Barry. Daddy kept the faith, put in the work, and he was rewarded for it. Maybe that will be my story, too. Full of hope, I throw a beanbag into the air...and wince as it lodges itself in the tree branches above. Oops. Barry rubs the back of his neck as he looks up at the bright blue bag, then checks his watch.

"Ten forty-three...I'd say that's close enough to eleven, wouldn't you? We'll get back to it in a couple of hours, after lunch." His voice is cheerful enough, but on the slow walk to the glassblower's shop for the scheduled demonstration, I'm filled with dread. Daddy had weeks to improve his jester act; I've got days. How am I going to get good enough at juggling by the Week One Showcase to impress Zach?

## A Breakthrough in Brightcastle

**I spend the glassblowing** demonstration lost in my own thoughts, going through the motions of Barry's juggling advice over and over as Brightcastle's glassblower, Susanna, twists molten balls of glass into delicate flowers and birds. She calls Jessie up to assist her. Zach stands nervously off to the side, in a wide stance like he's ready to douse the flames himself at the first sign of danger to a camper. But Susanna's very careful, and Jessie walks away with a gorgeous glass butterfly trinket.

"Toss-toss, catch-catch," I whisper to myself as the demonstration continues with some cautionary words about maintaining your furnace temperature. "Toss-toss, catch-catch."

"You okay?" Carter whispers beside me.

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your hands are, like...twitching." He flicks his hands up in small jerky movements, the way a fool might if she were picturing herself doing entry-level juggling tricks while in the middle of a glassblowing demonstration. Or so I imagine.

"Well, I'm good. Just...really passionate about glassblowing," I say. "Wanna get my hands on those..." I reach for the proper term. "Tweezer-things?"

"Jacks," Carter says. "Weren't you listening?"

“Kaya!” Zach’s voice calls from across the shop. “Why don’t you get up there as our next volunteer?”

“Oh! Um. Okay.” As I join Susanna at the furnace, Zach nods to Becca, who angles herself for the best shot, phone ready to record.

“All right, Kaya, I’m going to pull this pipe out of the furnace, and before the glass cools, I need you to blow as hard as you can on the end.” She points to the gold tip of the pipe, which is like a four-foot-long metal straw. I nod, ready. I’ve been known to blow bubbles in a milkshake or two in my day. I suck in a big breath as she pulls out the pipe, and blow as hard as I can. The pressure builds in my neck, and my ears pop like I’m on an airplane, but I can see the ball of glass expanding at the end of the pipe. This is so *cool*! Maybe I can make a glass crown for myself to wear at the final weekend. I blow again, and the ball gets even bigger.

“Good, *good*!” Susanna says out loud. Then, quieter to me, “I was a big fan of your dad’s, by the way. So sorry for your loss, kiddo.” I make the mistake of glancing up at her, and the look in her eyes tells me she thinks I’m as fragile as the assortment of ornaments hanging from the rafters.

My lungs deflate like an unplugged wacky, waving, flailing inflatable-arms tube man, and try as I might, I can’t get the glass to expand any farther. Susanna cools the piece down and tries to work with it, but the best she can do with my misshapen clump is a potato-shaped paperweight. I sit back down to the other campers’ charitable applause, feeling Becca’s phone camera trailing me to my seat. I barely notice when Zach dismisses us for lunch.

I trudge up to Ye Olde Food Court, lunchbox in hand. Everyone else is already digging into their homemade lunches (the food vendors aren’t open during camp—criminal, if you ask me). There’s an empty spot across from Tyler, but he’s already chatting away with the other campers. I hesitate before anyone notices me. When did Tyler get so buddy-buddy with the Woodbridge kids? Not like we were super close before this, but something about seeing my only friend here with *his* new friends makes me feel lonelier than the abandoned straw at the bottom of the Capri-Sun box.

For a second I wonder if I should just find a shady spot somewhere and try—*again*—to reach Ray, who still isn’t answering her phone. I wish she was here with me. Everything would be so easy then; she’d win the other

kids over with some combination of dirty jokes and unbelievably interesting facts about...comets or something. And we'd all be cool.

Whatever, it doesn't matter; everyone's basically done eating anyway. But then Tyler spots me. "Kaya, over here!" Everyone else looks up. *Shoot*. No turning back now. I snap a smile onto my face, but even I can tell it's as thin as Barry's jester tights. I take a seat on the bench beside Wren and Jessie, who are admiring Jessie's glass butterfly from Susanna's demo. Close up, I can see tiny specks of turquoise inside the wings.

"Can I see yours?" Jessie asks, eyeing the lumpen glass potato clutched in my fist. Before I can object, she holds out her palm and I'm handing it over.

"I like it!" Jessie says. "It's got a more natural thing going on, like sea glass." The other campers make sounds of agreement. I just shrink into myself.

"How's jester practice going?" Tyler asks. I can feel everyone's eyes on me, and the skin under my collar gets hot.

"It's going great," I say, taking a bite of my sandwich. People can't detect lies through a mouthful of PB&J; it's been scientifically proven. "I've already mastered juggling with balls, so we're moving on to pins next."

"Pens?" Carter asks.

"*Pins*," Jessie says, crunching on a baby carrot. "You know, like those bowling pin thingies?" She's right, but who eats carrots without ranch or hummus or anything? Another reason not to trust her.

"So cool!" Tyler holds up his hand for a high five. I give him one and hear the camera sound effect of Becca's phone somewhere behind me.

"Sounds like you found your calling," Tyler continues.

I almost choke on my string cheese. "I mean, I wouldn't say it like that. I'm still really looking forward to being queen." I should add the words *next week* to the end of that sentence, but I'm not just talking about next week. I'm talking about Apprentice Weekend, and the Final Joust. I give Jessie a pointed look, which stops her mid-chew. Does she think of me as her competition? She should.

Jessie snaps out of it and continues eating. "Well, you're going to love Daphne," she says casually. Not *Queen Daphne*. Just *Daphne*, like they're

besties who do face masks and movie nights together. It feels like an intentional jab. “Speaking of which, I should get back to rehearsal.”

There’s a chorus of “Me too” from the Woodbridge kids, and then it’s just me and Tyler at the table. Jessie’s parting words are still ringing in my ear, and I take my frustration out on the clementine I’m holding. Who made these things so freaking hard to peel?

Tyler reaches over. “Uh...may I?” he asks. I hand over the fruit. Five seconds later, he gives it back, sparing it from the mangled fate it would have met in my hands.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

“I’ve gotta go, too,” Tyler says. “But, Kaya, yesterday when we were driving here...you were so excited for all this. Now we’re here and every time Jessie speaks it’s like someone peed in your mead.”

I laugh at the rhyme. “Nice. Did you learn that one in scribe training?”

“Nope, that’s off the dome. But what I’m saying is, don’t let that stuff get to you. Look around! This place is amazing, and we get to experience it like no one else can. Maybe, I dunno...enjoy it? Embrace the joy you used to feel here.”

He walks away, and I sigh into my lunchbox. He doesn’t get it. The only way I’ll truly enjoy Apprentice Camp is if I’m named queen. Anything else is...

The wind rustles, carrying the smell of magnolias across the food court, and with it, a familiar song in my mind.

*Kayabeen, the loveliest queen.* What was every summer weekend, every well-loved polyester gown for, if not this exact moment?

I finish the thought: *Anything else is unacceptable.*

With a new determination, I snap my lunchbox closed. I need Zach to be impressed so I can ask for what I really want. It’s time to get my head in the jester game.



“You came back!” Barry says as I step back onto the Olde Towne stage. He sounds genuinely surprised.

I take a swig of my water bottle, then rub my hands together. “Okay, I’m ready! Toss-toss, catch-catch, right?”

“Yes! But first...” He hands me a sheet of paper with something printed on it. “See if any of these strike your fancy, for your bit.”

“My ‘bit’?” I ask.

“Your performance, for the showcase.”

I scan the paper, and the string cheese in my stomach turns when I realize what I’m looking at. They’re jokes. Technically. Each one more groan-inducing than the last.

But that’s okay. I can do this. *Anything else is unacceptable.* I pick out one of the least ugh-y ones.

“What do you call a medieval spymaster?” I ask.

“I don’t know!” says Barry, who absolutely does know. “What?”

“Sir Veilance.” I wince and let out a slow puff of air. “Sorry. That was— Sorry.” I may be developing an allergic reaction to cringe.

Barry cracks up, like genuinely hollers. “That was fantastic! Most people just deliver the joke straight, which’ll get you a chuckle or two at most. I like your spin on it; letting the audience *know* you know it’s cheesy.”

“Totally,” I say, even though it was fully unintentional. I like this approach, though; it makes me feel less like it’s all up to me to make the audience laugh. More like we’re in on the joke together.

After a few more jokes, we switch back to juggling, and for the next hour, I really do give it my all. I drop more beanbags than I care to admit (“That’s all right! Gravity’s gotta win sometime,” Barry says), but I’m patient with myself, and around the forty-five-minute mark I find my rhythm. We decide to add a third beanbag, and it takes a second, but then I figure that out, too. Huzzah, I’m doing it! I’m a literal juggling fool!

We switch from beanbags to balls, and I feel even more legit.

“Amazing, Kaya!” Barry says as I juggle them perfectly. “I’ve never seen someone pick it up so fast.” I look at the balls cycling through flawless arcs in the air, and I can’t help but smile. *I’m* doing that! *I’m* keeping them up, despite the fact that I’m so uncoordinated that I somehow managed to elbow *myself* in the gut when I was getting dressed this morning.

“Alllll riiiiight, Kayaaaaa! You’re doing great!” Zach’s voice says from down the road, getting closer. “Becca, get that, it’s a perfect shot.”

Becca sweeps in and takes some photos and what I assume is a video, from the way she slowly walks around me with her phone.

“Nice,” Zach says, peeking over her shoulder. “That video of you talking about the Faire yesterday got our highest engagement yet! And a bunch of interested parents filled out the form in our bio, to sign their kids up next year. Keep this up and you’ll be the face of the Faire!”

*The face of the Faire.* If that doesn’t sound like Apprentice Queen, I don’t know what does. Only a queen would represent her kingdom to the masses, and get them excited about experiencing the wonder of Apprentice Camp for themselves. I’m so excited, I have to stop juggling. *This* is it. This is how I help Zach and get to be queen next week, and forever after.

Becca’s still recording. I seize the moment.

“Welcome to Brightcastle!” I flash the phone a grin. “We’re known for our *knightlife*!”

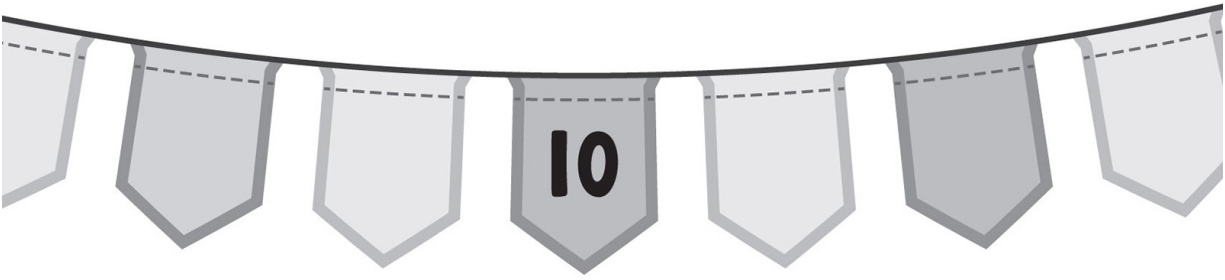
“Ha! Love it.” Becca puts her phone in her pocket. “I’ll post it later at peak viewing time.”

“Speaking of posting,” Zach continues. “We *do* still need to dot our *i*’s and cross our *t*’s, legally speaking. Did you bring that media release form for me?”

“Shoot. Not yet. My mom’s been working nights this week. I’ll bring it tomorrow!”

“Please do,” Zach says. He holds his hands up, fingers in two L shapes, like he’s framing a shot. “There! With the shops just behind her.” He steps out of the way so that Becca can capture it—capture *me*—in my element. I take the hint and begin juggling again, a genuine smile on my face. Daddy put in the work, and so did I. And like him, I’ve been rewarded for it. Being a jester isn’t my dream, but it doesn’t have to be a punishment, either. Only three days until the Week One Showcase, and after that Zach will name me queen, and I’ll hang up my cap’ n’ bells forever.

Until then, I’ll do what Tyler suggested. I’ll embrace the joy.



## Joy Is for Suckers

**I'm shocked when Barry says** it's time to go home for the day. The late-afternoon sun is high in the sky, burning off the last of the morning rain so quickly that the jousting arena is literally steaming when I swing by to grab Tyler. In true scribe fashion, he's got his pen to his lips, his eyebrows scrunched like he's thinking hard about something.

"Whatcha working on?" I peer over his shoulder at his notepad and catch a glimpse of a name that looks suspiciously like *Jessie* on the page. Tyler scrambles to shove the notepad into his backpack.

"Me? Nothing! Sum-summer reading stuff. With books. Hmm?"

"Got it..." I blink at him. Tyler's been a good friend these past few days, so I'm going to be one back and pretend like he didn't just have a total system malfunction right in front of my eyes. "You ready?"

"Yes," he says, relieved that I'm going to let him slide. We start down the path toward the fairground exit. Wren greets us with an "Ahoy!" and joins us from up the hill in Pirates Cove, where she's been practicing her swashbuckling and buccaneering. Her cheeks are flushed and she's got a bright excitement in her eyes.

"This place is the coolest!" she says, snapping open her water bottle.

Tyler nods in agreement. "It really is," I say, doing my best to be extra friendly. Wren's finally catching on to the magic of the Faire. A queen



would be gracious, so I will be, too.

“I can’t imagine Week Two being any better. It feels like everyone’s already found their fit. We should just do these same roles again.”

I frown. If Wren’s words are a cheese grater, then I’m a block of cheddar. But I’m trying to be joyful. Good-natured. I laugh it off. “Nah, I’m trying to be queen next week!”

Wren scrunches her face up. “Really? Sounds like you’re a natural at the whole...jester thing.”

Grate, grate, grate. An hour ago, I liked it when Zach told me I was a good jester. But in Wren’s mouth, the words feel different. She’s saying the same thing, but what she’s *not saying* has my hackles up higher than Uncle Paul’s cat Fletcher when Kev Jr. lets out one of his monster sneezes.

But again: I’m. *Trying*. To. Embrace. The. *Freaking*. Joy.

“It’s a lot of fun, sure! But queen’s what I really want, so I’m excited to have a shot at it.”

“And she is not throwing away her—shot!” Tyler says, quoting his fellow wordsmith. Of course he would love *Hamilton*. I give him a look of gratitude, and he gives me a let’s-get-away-from-Wren-as-quickly-as-possible look.

Wren flips her hair and sighs breezily. “Fine, whatever. This place is about make-believe, after all.”

That stops me in my tracks. “Hold up. So when Jessie’s queen, she’s found her fit, and when I’m queen, it’s make-believe?” I’m two steps behind Wren and Tyler, and they have to turn around to see me when I speak. Tyler’s eyes are wide, and he’s shaking his head with really tiny moves that only I’m supposed to see. *Don’t do this*, he’s saying silently. I should listen to him, should focus on the highs of the day. *Embrace the joy, Kaya*, I tell myself.

Wren rolls her eyes. “Don’t be like that. It’s not like *I*, personally, made things the way they are; it makes sense. Jessie just *looks* like a queen, and you...”

My brother’s warnings on the first morning of camp flutter around me, latching on to my brain like mind mosquitos: *Has there ever even been a Black queen of Brightcastle?*

There hasn’t, and it doesn’t sound like Wren thinks there should *ever* be.

To Wren's credit, at this moment she realizes she's goofed, majorly. The look on her face says she wishes she could take it all back, from the moment she opened her mouth to the start of that last sentence. Because the logical *end* of that sentence is *Jessie just looks like a queen, and you—* meaning me—*look like a clown*. She doesn't say it out loud, but my brain connects the dots anyway. And all my joy flies straight into the cheese grater.

"Excuse me?" I say.

"I—I didn't mean...I'm—"

The fairgrounds disappear around us, vaporized by my rage. I'm shaking, I'm so mad, and I feel my hands ball into fists. I'm not sure what my plan is when I take a step toward her, but it doesn't matter. Wren bolts off the path, too quickly, and slips in a thick layer of mud. With a *thump* that's more like a *thuuuurk*, it coats her hands, her shorts, and the bottom of her designer backpack. She looks up at me and Tyler, positively disgusted. I try hard to hide my laughter and I do pretty well, I think. Wren tries to wipe the mud off her butt, but it just makes things worse. For once, Mother Nature was on my side. She owes me after that mess with the mist this morning.

"I'm sorry," I say, barely biting back my laughter. "Maybe you could... find a towel or something?"

Wren huffs off toward her mom's truck, a huge smear of mud across her backside. I can't hear all of their conversation, but Wren's mom physically blocks her from getting in the truck until she finds a way to clean herself up.

Tyler and I walk in silence past their bickering, to his mom's car. It's not until all the doors are closed and we're pulling out of the parking lot that either one of us speaks.

Tyler looks at me, deadpan. "Well, that happened."

I erupt with laughter, and Tyler joins in. Looks like a tiny sliver of joy *may* have survived the Great August Cheese Grater Massacre. Even so, I can't deny it's been tainted. I'm still going to have a great time here, but I can't let Wren, or Zach, or even Barry get it twisted:

I'm *not* their clown.



Mama's not home when I get there, but the presence of a crockpot full of lasagna suggests she's been here at some point today, between shifts. Kev Jr.'s setting the table for dinner; I give him a reluctant "Hey" as I spoon out our meals. To be honest, I wasn't planning on ever speaking to him again, unless it was regarding our standard bathroom territory disputes. But it's hard enough having Wren as a nemesis and Jessie as my competition at camp; I don't want to fight with my brother anymore.

"Hey," he offers back, and we sit down, our relationship not quite fully repaired but getting there. I've only taken three bites of lasagna and I'm debating telling Kev Jr. about Wren—I'm sure he'd be proud of me for standing up to her—when my phone buzzes from across the room. Mama doesn't let us have screens at the table, and even when she's not here, I try to respect her rules, so I can't see who's calling. But I can hear it. The only person I've set to that specific pattern: *bzzzzzzzz-buzz-buzz-bzzzzzzzz*.

"It's Raygottagobye!" I blurt as I stand from the table.

"But—"

"I'll eat later!" My phone's on the last ring, and I answer just in time. Ray's face takes over the screen. She's smiling wide, until she scowls at me.

"Why your hair look like that?"

Self-consciously, I touch my fingers to the uneven cornrow pigtails I rushed through last night before Kev Jr. and I played video games. "Shut up. Where have you *been*?" I shout as soon as I close the door to my room.

"I know, I know. They took my phone away after the statue thing. I'm still not allowed to go on social media."

"Social media?" I set the phone against my jewelry box and start to take out my lopsided cornrows. "What's that have to do with trespassing?"

Ray's mouth bunches to one side. "I *may* have tagged the space center in a post, along with another hashtag."

"So, who cares?" My hands freeze in my hair. "Wait. What was the other hashtag...?"

"Hashtag Gali-bae-o..."

"RAY!"

“It was a *joke!*” She rolls over on her bunk bed, and I catch a glimpse of rows of other beds under glaring fluorescent lighting. “Anyway, my phone is free from space camp prison, and now I can talk to you. What’s been going on?”

I fill her in lightning fast about everything that’s happened this week. Talking to Ray is like aloe for my sunburned soul. I can’t believe how much better I feel after getting everything off my chest, with someone who truly understands. I wrap up with telling her about Wren’s muddy demise. Ray lets out a low whistle.

“Dang. Newton’s first law, it’ll get you every time.” From somewhere off-screen, she lifts a fistful of sour gummy worms into her mouth. “So what now?”

“Now I’m embracing the joy, or trying to anyway. I feel like queen’s as good as mine, no matter what Wren thinks.”

“Hm. Maybe you can take it a little further, though,” Ray says in her I’ve-already-got-a-plan voice.

“Further?”

“Well, it sounds like today planted the seed in Zach’s head about you being queen. But you’ve got to water that seed. Give it sunlight. Fertilizer. Show them what a great queen you’ll be, even though you’re not one yet.”

Whatever Ray’s plotting, I’m not quite getting it. “What, like...just *be* queen, even though I’m not?”

“I mean, yeah.” With the gummy worms in her cheeks, Ray looks like a sugar-addicted chipmunk. “Dress for the job you want. Give that seed some Miracle Whip.”

“You mean Miracle-Gro?” I giggle at the idea of covering a patch of soil in mayonnaise.

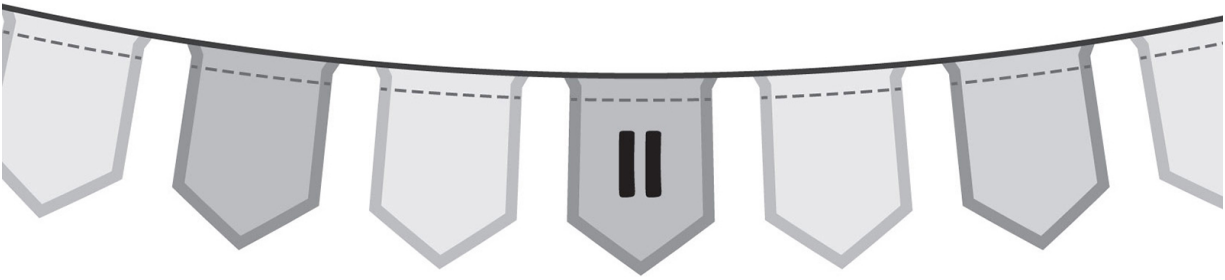
Ray laughs, too. “Right.” She makes eye contact with someone I can’t see and holds her index finger up to them. “I gotta go, K, we’re screening *Hidden Figures* tonight, and I need to make sure I’m sitting in the right spot.”

I nod, understanding. Ray and I both know what it’s like to be the only brown face in a space, and the awkwardness that happens when conversations turn to race. Last year in Mr. Reynolds’s honors social studies class, we covered world history and stayed on the transatlantic slave trade for two weeks. *Two weeks* of everyone in the class expecting me or Ray to

raise our hands every time Mr. Reynolds asked a question. Meanwhile, Mansa Musa was a fifteen-second side note, but I digress. My point is, I can't blame Ray for wanting to sit where no one notices her tonight. Sometimes it's easier to just blend in. "Good luck," I say.

"You too," Ray says, and then the call's over. As I consider Ray's advice, my gaze floats to the church dresses in my closet. Ray probably hadn't meant I should literally dress like a queen, but that couldn't hurt, right? One dress in particular stands out, a velvet deep purple hand-me-down from my cousin Nicolette that I'm supposed to hold on to until it hopefully fits me this Christmas. Not trying to brag or anything, but I look *good* in purple. Regal, even.

I pull the dress down from the hanger and drape it over the foot of my bed for the morning. Wren may think the roles have been decided after this week. But tomorrow, this dress and I are going to show her that she's sorely mistaken.



## I've Made a Huge Mistake

### **I may actually be dying.**

I should've known I miscalculated this morning, when Kev Jr. gave me a weird look before he crawled back to his hormone cave. At least he didn't say anything, but that one look still hurt. Whatever. Who needs family approval when the kingdom of Brightcastle is calling? And anyway, Kev Jr. *always* looks at me weird, so I didn't think anything of it. That is, until I slipped out of the house and into Mrs. Nomura's minivan. The morning air was pleasant, but the car was a little toasty, and I asked Mrs. Nomura to turn the AC up a bit.

"Shoot, were we supposed to dress up today?" Tyler asked, mildly panicked.

"No, no! This is just something I'm doing...for me," I said as my armpits began to prickle with sweat. That should have been another clue.

Now it's eleven a.m., and it feels like someone's holding an enormous magnifying glass up to the Georgia sun, and I'm the unlucky little ant in the spotlight. Every time I lift my arms, the velvet fabric rubs against my clammy skin, creating a new wave of unbearable heat. And I'm, you know, juggling, so I'm lifting my arms *a lot*.

"Water break?" Barry asks, sympathetic. We've taken three times as many today, and he keeps looking at me like I'm on the verge of passing

out. Possibly because I am.

“Thank you,” I gasp, and take a long, refreshing sip. The sun rages mercilessly. Sweat drips down my sides. I mentally will it to stop. Queens do not sweat.

“I was thinking about your dad’s act last night, how he blended the two roles,” Barry says as he puts his water bottle down. “Maybe when you become queen, you can bring something you’ve learned this week, too. You know, release your inner jester.”

“Uh-huh.” I try to blink away the haze in my brain. Where is the dang breeze?

Barry studies me, concerned. “Let me just go ask Zach if he has any extra camp shirts,” he starts, but I shake my head.

“Mm-mm.” I take another swig of water. “I’m fine, really.” That’s all I need, to be draped in some XXL T-shirt that comes down to my knees, like I’m being punished for wearing spaghetti straps to school. No. I’ve only got a few more hours, and then I can take refuge in Mrs. Nomura’s sweet, sweet air-conditioning. I try to push my long sleeves up to my elbows with renewed conviction, but they’re so tight and sticky with sweat that they barely budge.

It’s a small mercy when Zach calls us for our group activity—a performance from the Rose Lady madrigal singers—five minutes early. If my dress weren’t such a dark color, I’m positive the sweat marks would be visible from my armpits down to my waist. I wipe my forehead with my sleeve, and the sweat leaves a long, decidedly un-queenly streak. The other campers appear on the trail and I whip my hands behind my back to hide my sleeve.

“Well met!” I say.

“Whoa, Kaya!” Carter says, untying his blacksmith apron. “You look awesome!”

“I love your dress!” Jessie says, and it actually sounds sincere.

Told you I look good in purple.

“Thanks!” I say. Wren says nothing, but her eyebrows look like they’re reaching for the clouds. I’m not smug about it. Queens aren’t smug.

The performance is a struggle, though. Sitting in one spot by the Tudor Rose stage just means I’m baking under the heat. I can barely focus on the

performance as the three beautiful Rose Lady madrigal singers begin their ballad:

*The water is wide, I cannot get o'er,  
And neither have I wings to fly.  
Build me a boat that can carry two,  
And both shall row, my love and I.*

I can't handle a song about water right now. For the next hour, I concentrate on not passing out, but things still go a bit fuzzy. I'm so out of it, I don't even notice when the singing's over. Everyone else must have gone to lunch, because now it's just me and Jessie.

"Kaya? Did you hear what I said?" she asks.

"Huh?" The world's going a little hazy at the edges, and Jessie's voice sounds like I'm at the bottom of a swimming pool.

"I said I have a change of clothes if you want them."

"Oh...I'm fine, thanks." I reach for my water bottle beside me, but between the two identical bottles that have mysteriously appeared on the bench, I pick the wrong one. My fingers wrap around thin air.

"You're not fine. Come with me." She grabs my arm, and we float to a shady spot. Every time I blink, tiny baby fireworks explode in my vision. I'm definitely not fine.

"Here we go," Jessie says, rummaging through her backpack. "Lucky for you I have tennis practice on Wednesdays, and I brought extra clothes." Even in my disoriented state, I can tell that's what I *should* be wearing in this heat. Not a purple stage curtain with sleeves.

I pull the shorts on underneath the dress. Sweat has melded the rest of the dress to my upper body, never to be parted. But Jessie helps me yank it over my head—*very* ladylike, thank you very much—and it's not long before I can breathe again.

"Oh my gosh, that's so much better," I pant as I look down at the tank top I'm wearing now. NORTH ATLANTA DIVISION FINALISTS. No one would ever believe in a million years that I play tennis, let alone that I could beat anyone else. But if it means being able to think straight and not melting into a puddle of tears and sweat by the end of the day, then just call me Serena.



“It’s no problem,” Jessie says. “Mom always wants me to wear this top to tennis practice so that I’ll play harder. But that’s not really how it works, you know? Any old shirt’s fine.”

“Still, thank you.” I’m already starting to feel like myself again. “Now I won’t pass out when Barry teaches me how to juggle fire torches this afternoon.”

“Wait, seriously?” She hands my old dress back to me, perfectly folded.

“No, not seriously. But can you imagine?”

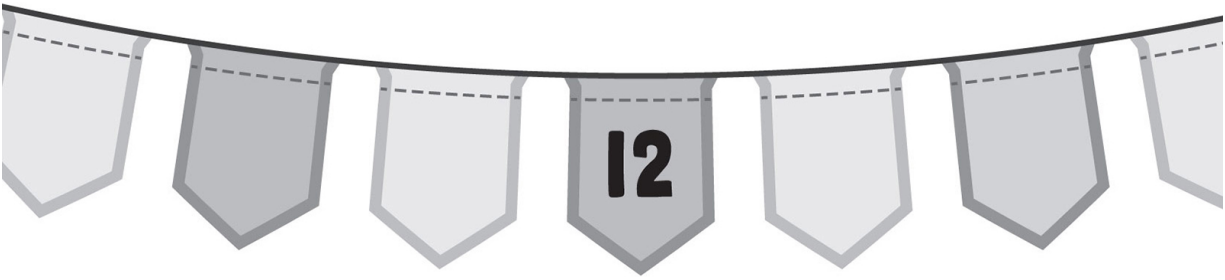
She smirks. “Pretty sure Zach would disintegrate on the spot. But not before shouting something about insurance liabilities.”

I sit up straight and do my best Zach voice. “We’re not covered for thiiiiis!”

We giggle under the oak tree, and I wonder if maybe I’ve gotten Jessie all wrong. She didn’t *have* to let me borrow her clothes, but she did because she’s naturally generous. She’s also funnier than I thought, without even trying.

An effortless queen. Meanwhile, I’ve been practically grinding my teeth together at every obstacle, forcing myself to fit into a mold that she just glides into.

How can I beat someone who’s not even trying to compete?



## The Jester Queen

**With lunch in my belly**, a seasonally appropriate change of clothes, and the ability to see straight again, it's time to come up with a new strategy. I still need to make sure I'm seen as more than a jester, but Jessie's words under the oak tree got me thinking. Maybe it's about more than just the dress. Maybe I need to be *acting* like a queen, to be seen as a queen. But how do I do that while telling jokes and juggling brightly colored balls?

Barry sheds approximately five hundred tons of worry when he sees that I've found a change of clothes. We get back to practicing.

"All right, let's get into some patterns now you've got the basics down," Barry says. "This one's called columns." He demonstrates as I watch, tossing the balls in a single row. The two balls on the outside of the row move up and down opposite to the one in the middle, making it look like each ball is in its own column.

"So, to start, you're going to toss one up, then two up. And stop." Barry keeps coaching as I throw. My mind spins. The balls go up, the balls come down. There's nothing even remotely elegant about this. The sound of Zach's laughter somewhere to my left makes me feel like someone poured an Icee down my insides. I've got to do something, quickly.

In a panic, I throw the balls higher than before. When I catch them, I do the only thing that comes to my mind.

“Was that a...curtsy?” Barry asks.

“Yes?” I say, still frozen on bent knees. The fact that he had to ask does not bode well for my plan. But to my relief, Barry’s face breaks out into a grin. “I love it! Let’s try it again. This time when you catch the balls, bring your arms out into a bigger flourish.” He demonstrates with surprising grace. I copy the move just as Zach walks by.

“Whoa, that’s new!” he says.

“Thank you, m’lord. It’s a new act we just started working on.” I glance at Barry, who’s smiling at me with pride. This is what he was telling me to do earlier: Take a part of my act this week and throw it into my queen character. “We’re calling it the, uh...the Jester Queen.” I point the words at Zach with all the subtlety of a battle-ax.

Zach’s smile doesn’t falter. “Love it. I’ll send Becca by to snap some shots. And I can’t wait to see the rest on Friday!” He walks away, and I let out a squeal of excitement. Not very ladylike, but I can’t help it. Just like Ray said, I’ve started nurturing the seed of an idea that I can be queen. And with Zach excited to see the Jester Queen on Friday, I’d say my reign is starting to take root.

“Ready for a new trick, Queen Kaya?” Barry asks with a slight bow.

*You bet I am.*



The rest of practice is amazing. Barry and I work out a routine where I’m the queen and want my royal jester to teach me how to juggle. Our act involves curtsies, twirling (slowly), and me pretending to give him silly orders. I even get to give a little monologue at the beginning with my best royal British accent. It’s everything I need to show myself in a different light, and the perfect preview of the next week, when I’m queen for real. Becca stops by to get some content, and I check her post on the way home—eighty likes and climbing for the Jester Queen!

I text Ray on the drive home:

Slight miscalculation on the look-like-a-queen thing, but the day was a success!

Thanks boo 🙄

Cool! Knew you could do it

What do you mean miscalculation, though?

Church dress + GA summer = 🤔 🙄

Kaya you did not?? I raised you better than that

It's cuz you always on that phone.

Shut up 💖

As soon as I get home, I'm in preparation mode. Today's little snafu with the velvet inferno dress was...unfortunate. But now that I've got the perfect opening to act like a queen, I really do need to look like one, too. For the Week One Showcase, I need a royal gown I can wear without passing out. Maybe even some of those crew socks that Jessie and her friends have. I think of Queen Daphne's regal beauty, and it hits me, the most essential part of queenly vibes:

I need makeup.

I check the time on my phone. Mama's not home yet, but she should be pulling up in the next thirty minutes. That should be plenty of time to get what I need. I check to make sure Kev Jr.'s not home, then head for Mama's bathroom. She almost never wears makeup, so when I find everything on her vanity, the containers are nearly full. I quickly make a game plan: I'm

not gonna mess with the eyeliner or mascara for now; tonight when I have more time, I'll check out a tutorial online. I just want to try the foundation and blush, to get a feel for what it's like.

Carefully, I twist open the loose-powder foundation container. A small pile of deep brown powder sits inside, glistening like the richest earth. I set it down and hunt for a brush in the silver zippered pouch beside all the makeup. I'm not exactly sure which brush goes with which type of makeup, but eventually I find the largest one, with fibers dusted the same shade of brown as the powder. Nancy Drew in the house, y'all!

Maybe I'm a little too excited when I dip the brush into the powder, because when I pull it back up, it's got a thick layer of powder on it that even *I* know is way too much. The vibe is Fenty elegance, not Pennywise with melanin. I tap the brush against the makeup container like I've seen Mama do. It mostly works, except small flecks of powder end up on the perfectly white bathroom counter, too. I wipe it off with my hand, but the powder just smears, leaving streaks that look like cocoa comets against a porcelain sky. That's a pretty way of describing what is, in reality, a big mess, and as soon as I see the streaks, I've already got a plan to grab a spare washcloth, wipe off the counter, then rinse out the washcloth and put it deep in my laundry so Mama doesn't suspect anything.

Like I said, Nancy Drew.

At last, I brush the—well, the brush over my cheek. Mama and I have the same medium-brown skin, but still I frown. It doesn't look quite *right*. Like someone took my face and turned off the lights from the inside. I squint at my reflection, thinking. Is there something I'm missing to make it look brighter? What's that stuff that adds shine again?

Bronzer!

I sift through the makeup on the counter a second time, carefully placing each item exactly back where it was, like I'm Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. At last, I find a thick stick of golden-brown bronzer. I examine my face, trying to remember the handful of makeup TikToks that have ended up on my FYP. Where does bronzer go? My phone's downstairs in my backpack. I could go get it, but that would waste precious time before Mama gets home. I've got this. If I can make it through Mrs. Bentway-Green's honors pre-algebra, I can figure out makeup. I think.

I start with my forehead, since it's the biggest part of my face (thanks, Daddy) and looks the dullerest right now. The bronzer helps, I guess? I don't know. Maybe it just looks weird because it's only on part of my face. I keep going. And going. By the time I'm done, my face is definitely glowing, but not in a beautiful, ethereal way.

More like an oops-I-swallowed-Tinker Bell way.

The clang of familiar keys downstairs.

"Hello? Kaya, you home, baby?"

Mama.

There's no way I can make it back to my bathroom to wash this off without her seeing me. Even in my panic, when I rush to one of the large vanity's sinks, I pick Mama's side; something about using Daddy's sink just doesn't feel right...like without him here to use it every day, it's out of service. The water comes out freezing cold, but I'm in no position to be choosy. I scrub, and the water going down the drain turns brown. But my face still feels greasy, and when I look up at the mirror, I can still see the bronzer covering my skin.

I can also see Mama.

"*What* are y—" Mama's eyes go wide, then find the makeup, the brush, my gilded reflection. Maybe if I stay still enough she'll think I'm an actual bronze statue. I'm frozen, waiting for words of frustration, or at least disappointment. But they don't come. Without a word, Mama steps up to the counter and pulls a pouch of wipes from a drawer.

"Come here, baby."

The wipes glide over my skin with their faint floral scent. Mama is focused, and so gentle that it makes my throat ache a little.

"Thank you," I say. I think of how to explain my thought process for why it seemed like a good idea to turn myself into Glinda the Good Witch of the South. But as usual, Mama's a couple steps ahead.

"You have your daddy's undertones," she explains. "Mine are cool, but his were warm. Golden. *When* it's time for you to start wearing makeup, you're going to need your own shades."

I lower my eyes to the floor, defeated. "Yes, Mama."

We stay that way, her washing my mistake off in silence for a few minutes. Shame makes little knots in my stomach. Mama's already exhausted, and I just added to her trouble.

Confirming my guilty thoughts, she sighs as she rinses off the washcloth and starts on the second half of my face. “I don’t get it, baby. You don’t usually do this sort of thing.”

“I really am sorry. I was just trying to look my best for camp— Wait!” I pull away from her scrubbing and fish the wrinkled media release form out of my pocket. “I need you to sign this so that camp can post photos and videos of me online.”

Mama’s brows crumple together worse than the paper in my hand. “Videos?” Her eyes narrow as she scans the form.

*Uh-oh, she’s suspicious.* “Just, like, little promotional clips,” I say.

Mama’s phone buzzes. She glances at it and her face falls.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Your sitter for tomorrow night just canceled. Stomach bug. I’m still on nights through Wednesday.”

“Sitter?” This is news to me. “Why do I need a sitter? Where’s Kev Jr. gonna be?”

Mama frowns. “He’s camping with his friends. Left this morning. He didn’t tell you?”

My stomach drops like a penny in a wishing well. I shake my head. “We haven’t been speaking much lately.” And soon we won’t at all, when he goes off to school next month.

One eye on her phone as she scrolls through her contacts, Mama pulls a pen out of her bag and scribbles her signature on the release form. “Here, baby. I need to go figure out something for tomorrow night.”

I take the paper as she walks out, her face hard with stress. It’s strange. I got the form signed, which is great—now there’s nothing to stop me from helping Zach and Becca bring in as many enrollments for next year as possible. But as I stand alone in the bathroom, I can’t help but feel like that’s not what I really *wanted*. I take the washcloth from the counter and begin scrubbing the rest of the makeup off my face, watching the water turn beige in Mama’s sink. In the mirror, Daddy’s side of the vanity is empty of the aftershave and mouthwash I remember being fascinated by as a kid. So many mornings I sat and watched him start his day, before he got me ready for school. Something—don’t ask me what—possesses me to leave the vanity and go sit on the floor in the same spot I used to back then.

*I'm trying, Daddy, I think as I stare at the empty space where he used to stand. I remember you wanted me to be queen, and I'm almost there, I think. I just need a little help.*

Of course, nothing happens; Daddy doesn't float down on a glittering cloud, and his voice doesn't magically fill the room. This isn't a movie. Something warm and wet slides down my cheek and drips onto my hands. Mama really should get that leak checked out. I resign myself to sitting in the silence for a bit longer, but then Mama rushes back into the room. I scramble to rub my face with the washcloth again so that it looks like my red nose and puffy eyes are from scrubbing my face raw, and not from, you know, feelings.

"All right!" Mama says, with a sense of accomplishment. "Uncle Paul's going to come hang out with you tomorrow night."

I scowl. "You mean 'babysit.'?" We're not covering euphemisms in language arts until spring semester, but I'm advanced for my age.

She laughs. "Okay, fair. You hungry, baby? There's nothing in the fridge. I thought maybe we could go to the mall. Eat in the food court, and then find you some lip gloss or something."

There's a little thrill in my chest. "Like, now?"

"Like, now. Sound good?"

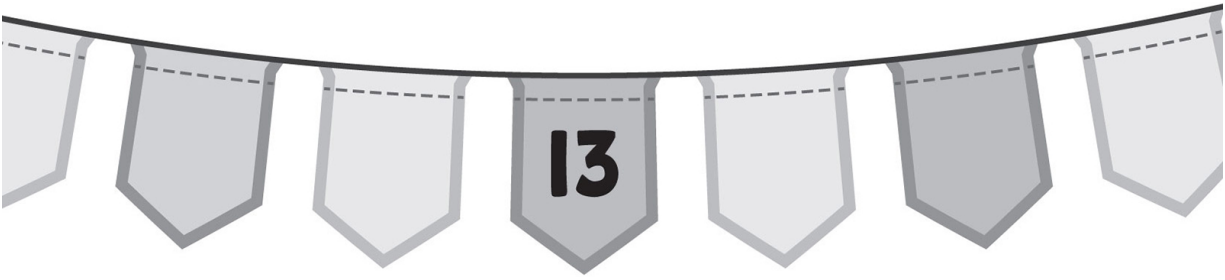
"But...you're not going to punish me?" I gesture to the mess I've made of her side of the vanity.

Mama smirks, eyebrows raised. "Baby, I think you punished *yourself*, don't you? Though now that I think about it, I really should've gotten a picture. For future blackmail purposes." She smiles and winks at me. "I'm just gonna change. Meet you downstairs." She turns me toward the mirror. "You missed a spot, right...here." She kisses my temple before I can protest, leaving a big red smudge of lipstick, then leaves.

"Mama!" I yell, but I can't keep the laugh out of my voice. After one last wipe of the washcloth, I turn to the other half of the marble vanity, still pristine.

"Thank you, Daddy," I whisper.





## The Mall

**Mtcheww.** The sound of Mama kissing her teeth cuts over the mall's buzz. She's dragging her finger over the map display by the elevators, shaking her head and frowning.

"This is ridiculous. Where are the stores for girls your age? What, they expect you to go straight from barrettes to booty shorts?" she asks, too loudly in my mortified opinion. The mall's pretty quiet on a Wednesday night, even for summer, but someone I know is bound to show up. It's Kaya's Law: Anything that can embarrass me will embarrass me.

"Mama!" I plead through clenched teeth.

"I'm just saying, when I was your age, twelve-year-olds had *options*," she mutters.

We try a few makeup counters, where Mama asks for lip gloss and something called "roll-on body glitter," which I've definitely never seen on TikTok. I'm pretty sure they stopped making it at the turn of the millennium. But still, I'm so happy to be here—to be *anywhere*—with Mama. As we leave the department store for another shop, I sneak a glance at her. She's off her phone for once. Maybe now's my chance to tell her what's been going on.

"So like I was saying back home, I think if I can look a little fancy on Friday, I'll really impress the camp counselors."

She gives me an adoring look. “Aww, you don’t need to try to impress anyone, baby. You’re already impressive.”

“You have to say that; you’re my mother. But for real, this showcase is pretty important. The other kids will be doing all sorts of cool demonstrations: singing, composing sonnets with suggestions from the crowd....”

“Mm-hmm,” Mama says, peering into a display case. She’s not even listening anymore. Why does she do this the second I go into any sort of detail about the Faire? Tuned out, once again.

“And I’ll probably eat a frog or two, for comedic effect.”

“Sounds good,” Mama replies evenly as she moves to another counter. Tuned. Out.

I sigh, and my breath fogs up the case’s glass. “Can I take a break?”

“Hmm? Oh, sure, baby.”

We agree to meet in twenty minutes in front of Sbarro’s for dinner. I wander the lower level of the mall, until I find myself at the automated massage chairs. Unconsciously, I roll my shoulders back. They feel tight, which is embarrassing because the only exercise I’ve gotten recently is... juggling. But before that, my most demanding physical activity was holding books over my face in bed, so let’s call it progress.

After some fishing, I find a couple of dollars in my bag and slide them into the machine. It rumbles to life immediately, and I’m suddenly very aware of my entire body jiggling on display in front of the entire mall. No one’s really checking for me like that, *at all*, but I’m still glad when the machine stops making me look like a bowl of cranberry sauce when someone knocks the dining room table. The chair starts to massage my shoulders, then my upper spine. It applies gentle pressure to my hands inside the mechanized arms, which feels great on my forearms after tossing balls and beanbags for hours every day. Thinking of those muscles reminds me of camp. Not like things are all sunshine and roses there, but at least I’m around people who *get it*, unlike Mama. And after my performance on Friday goes viral, my talent will be even more undeniable.

I close my eyes and visualize my Week One Showcase routine. I start onstage, frustrated at my poor juggling attempts. Barry passes by and I stop him, then demand he teach me all he knows. He refuses, as scripted, and

then I say, “Hand over your balls or I will have my guards remove them”—cue knowing glance at the audience here. Then—

“Kaya?” Jessie’s voice makes my eyes shoot open. Jessie’s standing over me, her long brown hair in a sleek ponytail. Beside her, a scowling Wren fiddles with the scrunchie on her wrist. This isn’t their mall. What are they even doing on this side of town? Are they lost? Are the mall’s parking spaces even big enough for their parents’ trucks, which look like they eat other cars for breakfast?

Makes no sense, right? Shouldn’t be possible? But remember: *Anything that can embarrass me will embarrass me*. Kaya’s Law strikes again.

“Hey, y’all! What’re you doing here?” I try to stand, but the chair still has my hands in its clutches. The gray digital timer on the chair’s control panel informs me I still have seven minutes left in my massage.

“Oh! We come here sometimes. You guys have different stores than Greenlake,” Jessie says, referring to her neighborhood mall. Sure, if by *different*, you mean “a T-shirt costs less than eighty dollars.”

Jessie must have gone to acting camp last summer or something, because she’s managing to keep her face straight, like all this is perfectly normal. Like the massage chair isn’t going *brrrzzz brrrzzz* every fifteen seconds as it rolls down my back, pushing on one shoulder, then the other, making it look like I’m shimmying, but really slowly.

Meanwhile, I’m dying inside. I don’t think shimmying—no matter how slow—is in a queen’s repertoire.

“We should be going,” Jessie says right as—wish I was making this up—the chair starts jiggling again. “Um, have fun!”

“Saaaa youuuuuu,” I say. Queens *definitely* do not jiggle.

Wren’s too glad to be ending this conversation. As they walk away, she sneers at me so badly that I almost check my shoes for dog poop. I’m sure she loved every second of that, seeing me trapped in a fifteen-minute cycle of agonizing humiliation. Let’s hope a slice of pizza as big as my face is enough to dull this memory.



“Look who I found!” Mama says when I get to the food court. The woman she’s talking to turns around. It’s Mrs. Nomura.

“Hi, Kaya,” she says warmly as Mama places our order. “Tyler should be around here somewhere.”

I give a polite wave. “Oh funny, I ran into two girls from camp just now.”

“How nice!” Mrs. Nomura smiles. “Must be fun to see friends off the fairgrounds, right?” I open my mouth, but it’s been a long, sweaty day, and even if I did have the energy to explain to Mrs. Nomura why Wren and Jessie aren’t my friends, I doubt she’d get it. To Mrs. Nomura, a stranger’s just a customer she hasn’t met yet.

She takes my silence for shyness. “I can text Ty, if you want to hang out?”

“That’s okay,” I say. So far, I’m batting zero on having a non-mortifying mall experience tonight. If I run into Tyler, I’ll probably trip over my laces or something. And I’m wearing slides.

“Your mom told me you’re here for some makeup. For the showcase?”

For a second I’m confused at how she put it all together. But then I remember Mrs. Nomura drives us home every day and probably listens to our conversations. Beyond that, I bet she and Tyler actually talk about how camp is going when they’re at home. Because Mrs. Nomura actually *cares* about Tyler’s camp experience. She doesn’t tune him out, like Mama does me.

I nod. “We didn’t find anything, though.” At that moment, I realize we also forgot to get the socks. For some reason, that tips me over the edge. In two days, Jessie’s going to get onstage and do something lovely and elegant. My act is funny, but it’s literally just a weak imitation of hers. I won’t have the socks, or the makeup, or anything to make me stand out. I’m not a queen. I’m just a juggling jester, who occasionally jiggles. Jessie’s mom will probably be in the audience, cheering and filming her daughter for their friends and family to see. Meanwhile, Mama will be busy at work. And Kev Jr. will be camping with his friends, busy hating me from afar.

Why did I think any of this was a good idea?

Mama comes over with our food. We say goodbye to Mrs. Nomura and find a booth. I know there’s lots of pizza snobs out there, but there’s something about a slice of Sbarro after a few hours of shopping. I tear into

mine, and so does Mama—after she dabs off some of the oil on her slice with a napkin. If you ask me, that’s where all the flavor is, but to each their own.

“Can’t believe the summer’s almost over,” Mama says between bites. “I’ve been working too much. You feel ready for school?”

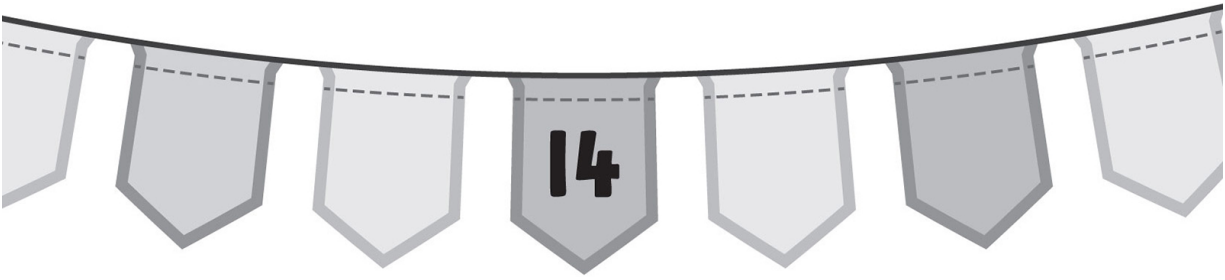
I shrug. “Sure.” But I don’t want to talk about school. I want to tell her what I really care about, why it’s so important that we find socks or glitter or whatever it is that will make me stand out. So I do. And the second I get to the first selection ceremony, Mama’s eyes start to glance down at her phone on the table.

I reach out to cover it with my hand. “Please, just listen! I need your advice. Becoming a jester is the worst thing that’s happened to me all year, and I—”

“*Jester?*” Mama’s eyebrows rise sky high, and a few shoppers nearby look our way. I shrink back in my seat. Oops. I forgot about that part of Uncle Paul’s story. The part where Mama was furious when Daddy got assigned jester his first year at the Faire. *Think, Kaya!* If I don’t come up with something, Mama’s going to pull me out of camp faster than you can say “Huzzah!” She watches me expectantly.

“I mean, um. Just for, like, an hour,” I lie. “All the kids got to try juggling and other jester things. Then I was crowned queen. That’s why I wanted the makeup and stuff.”

Slowly, Mama’s shoulders come down from around her ears. “Oh, Kaya. You don’t need makeup, baby. You’re already a queen to me.” She reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. My stomach gets that sad, twisty feeling. I wish it was that simple; I wish being a queen in Mama’s eyes was enough. But Daddy and I always dreamed of seeing me up on that dais. So, makeup or no makeup, tomorrow it’s back to camp. To fight another day.



## Now That's More Like It

**As soon as Mrs. Nomura** drops me and Tyler off, I hurry to Dragon Ales to give Zach my signed media release form. Jessie and Wren are already there, recording some new TikTok dance in the corner while they wait for everyone else to arrive.

“Excellent!” Zach says as he tucks it into a manila folder. “Your timing is perfect; I’ve got something exciting planned for the group activity today. Can you keep a secret?”

No. “Yes!”

Zach looks both ways and leans in conspiratorially. “We’re getting a demonstration...from the archers.”

I squeal so loud, Jessie and Wren have to start their recording all over again. Sorry, not sorry.



I’ll be honest, I don’t remember a lick of practice with Barry, there are so many emotions swirling inside me. I’m nervous about seeing the new archery show that took over after Daddy passed. But I’m also thrilled to have an opportunity to show Zach I can be more than just a jester. And if I can somehow manage to be *part* of the demonstration and get Becca some

content for the Faire's social media pages, I'll cement my status as face of the Faire and soon-to-be queen.

The words "See you after lunch" are barely out of Barry's mouth when I take off down the gravel path toward the archery stalls. Since I'm already in Olde Town, I have the shortest distance to cover, and I get there with eight minutes to spare before the demonstration is scheduled to begin. Every step toward the stalls makes my heart beat faster, harder, until it's hammering in my chest. I reach the stalls and take a deep breath of the familiar wood smell. My fingers trace the almost-invisible lines on an inside post where Daddy marked my height each summer. The Faire is like a second home to me. If anyone can prove they belong here, it's me.

A soft thwacking sound at the farthest stall shakes me from my thoughts, followed by voices cheering or laughing through disappointment. I get closer, until I can see three people gathered on the other side of the waist-high wooden wall that separates the stalls from the targets. All three of them wear the pale yellow colors of Olde Towne as they challenge each other to make increasingly difficult shots.

The new archers.

One of them notices me. She looks maybe thirty, with light brown skin, a gold nose ring, and straight black hair pulled into a long braid down her back. She hits her companions on the shoulder and turns completely, and I notice the bright turquoise streak of hair tucked behind her right ear.

"Well met!" she greets me as she walks over.

"Well met," I respond. "I'm Kaya. Kaya Morgan." Okay, fine, it's a little cringe that I give my full name, hoping to spark some sort of recognition in her. But in my defense, it works. Her winged eyes go wide. "Kevin Morgan's daughter?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

She makes a face. "Oh no, please tell me I'm not in *ma'am* territory yet? I need to step up my moisturizing game!" She clutches her cheeks in mock terror, and we laugh. "I'm Ayesha."

"Nice to meet you!" We shake hands as the other two archers come over. "And this is Wes and Nori." They wave. *Ayesha, Wes, and Nori*. The distinctive names flash in my mind, even though we've never met before. Then it clicks: They sent flowers when Daddy passed.

“Kevin Morgan’s kid,” Ayesha explains to her friends. *Sure am*, I think. My inner self does the mental equivalent of brushing her shoulders off.

“Wow, that’s beautiful,” I say, admiring the bow slung over her back, polished cherry wood with a mother-of-pearl inlay on the arrow pass.

“Thank you! I’ve had this one for almost ten years now. Do you shoot?”

“I do!”

“Compound? Recurve?” she asks, listing various types of bows.

“Oh, definitely recurve. Daddy says—said—it’s the best way to start, to help you build the right muscles. Plus I just think it looks cooler.”

If any of them noticed I misspoke, they don’t make a big deal out of it. “Well, we’ve got a few minutes before everyone else gets here,” Wesley says. “Come shoot with us, Kaya.”

“Wait, seriously?” I ask. I mean, I’d *hoped* this would happen, but no way did I expect it actually would.

“Sure!” Nori says. When we get to the stall, they set me up with one of the bows patrons can rent. I nock an arrow and lift the bow. Knowing my luck, Kaya’s Law will set in any second now: I’ll miss the target completely and the archers will awkwardly ask me to have a seat before I hurt myself.

But miraculously, that’s not what happens. I mean, it’s not a bull’s-eye or anything. But it’s a perfectly respectable shot. Phew!

“Nice!” Ayesha holds up her hand to me for a high five. “Where do you practice?”

“NAAR,” I say, giving her the abbreviation for my local range.

“I’ve been up there for a few competitions! They’ve got a great moving-targets course.” She flicks an invisible speck off the tip of her bow.

“Oh, I can’t wait to do moving targets! Shooting at stationary targets feels like swimming in the kiddie pool. When I think of people using a bow and arrow, they’re, like, riding on a speeding horse, you know? Not—” I make a show of planting my feet, methodically lifting my bow like I’ve got all the time in the world.

Nori laughs. “I know what you mean. When I was a kid, I tried to set up a moving target field in my backyard, using some cardboard cutouts and my mom’s blow dryer. It did...not go as planned. But I got there eventually, and so will you. You’re too good not to.” I file that one away into my Evidence That I Am Awesome folder and lift my bow to shoot again.



“It’s too bad archery isn’t one of the camp focus areas. Would’ve been so cool to hang with you next week!” Wesley says.

“Huh, you’re right,” I say. I really hadn’t considered it... To me, Apprentice Camp is about things you *want* to be good at, not things you can already do. But now that I think about it, it would’ve been pretty dope. If I hadn’t had my sights set on another role, of course. “To tell you the truth, I’m really here to be queen. It’s all I’ve wanted, ever since—”

“Well met, Your Majesty!” Wesley gives a tiny bow.

“Well met,” Queen Daphne’s voice says behind me.

I drop my arrow, and it clatters against the wooden platform. *Way to play it cool, Kaya.* I turn toward Queen Daphne and give a small curtsy. I know she’s not really a queen and no one’s fully in character right now, but it still feels like the right thing to do, to honor the spirit of the Faire.

Jessie stands beside the queen, a deep blue ribbon woven into a thick braid down her back. “Wow, Kaya, that was awesome!”

“Agreed, you shoot well!” the queen says. I’ve never been so grateful that my melanated skin is blush-proof. How much of our conversation did she overhear?

“Can you do some more?” Jessie asks. Part of me is suspicious, like there’s no way she genuinely wants to see me do well at something. But if there’s one thing I’m going to do, it’s play to my strengths, so I don’t overthink it. Ayesha hands me the arrow I dropped, and I fire off a few more shots, at various other targets in the field. Before I know it, the rest of the campers have arrived, as well as Zach and Becca, but I’m almost having too good of a time to notice. The archers challenge each other, and me, to increasingly difficult shots, basically like a game of horse but with a bow and arrow. I hold my own and almost stay in to the very end, until Ayesha lands a perfect bull’s-eye on the highest row of targets. But by then, the other campers are cheering my name, Becca’s gotten a bunch of footage, and Zach is grinning from ear to ear. Face of the Faire? Check.

Zach brings the group to order, and we sit down so that the archers can begin their official show for us. My stomach’s in knots. The archers seem really nice; I’m sure they wouldn’t mean anything by changing Daddy’s show. But still—it’ll just be one more reminder that he’s gone.

“Fair gentlefolk!” Wes’s booming voice begins from somewhere offstage. “Welcome to Sherwood Forest, where we aim to please!”

With that, the three of them jump into view, tumbling on the ground before landing perfect shots on the targets across the range. My insides flutter in excitement as the familiarity wedges into my heart. These lines, these moves—it's Daddy's show. Sure, there's three of them instead of one, and they might be a bit more nimble than Daddy was. But they've stayed true to his performance. *The Faire never changes.*

After ten minutes of impressive trick shots and slightly less impressive jokes—"What's the secret to being a good archer?" "You've got to get your point across."—we get to the moving-targets portion of the demonstration. The Faire's archery course has two tracks that go from left to right over the tops of the targets, with little conveyor belts inside that move apples, balloons, or other funny items across the course. Daddy used to paint my name on the balloons as they went by on days I visited the Faire. The archers fire off coordinated shots at the balloons, and glitter and confetti rain down on the course. Our small crowd cheers and hollers as the archers take their final bows. Then, to my astonishment, Ayesha extends a hand in my direction. Is she inviting me to get up there with them? I stay put, confused, until she makes a come-here motion. Nothing confusing about that! I jump up and join them, doing my most elaborate Jester Queen curtsy for Becca's video. Not only did Ayesha and her crew keep Daddy's show, but they like me! My heart swells with pride and confidence. *I belong here.*

After that, we say goodbye to the archers, and it's time for lunch. Tyler, Carter, and Jessie have a million questions about archery, and I'm loving being the center of attention for once. I glance over my shoulder and see Wren lagging behind us, stepping carefully to avoid getting the red dirt on her pristine white sneakers. Normally I wouldn't care that she's alone—like *at all*—but I'm riding high today and feeling magnanimous. Maybe this is the time to squash our beef. Queens are merciful, after all.

"Y'all go ahead," I say before I fall back to Wren. "Hey."

"Hey," she mumbles.

"I wanted to talk to you," I say. "I feel like maybe we need a reset."

"A reset," she repeats slowly.

"Yeah. Can we...?" I point at some benches in front of a small stage, tucked under a copse of trees. Fragrant honeysuckle vines wind around the trellis behind the stage, painting it a buttery yellow. Wren takes one more

nervous glance around. I fight the urge to roll my eyes, but eventually, we sit.

“Okay.” I exhale. I’ve gotta get this out. “I know we’ve had some... disagreements...about our camp roles and everything. I just wanted to say I’m sorry that I thought it was funny when you fell in the mud.”

“You thought it was funny?” The plastic daggers in her waistband are no match for the ones in her eyes.

Oops. “What I mean is, I should’ve helped you up. And maybe, instead of just arguing with you about Jessie not being queen, I should have explained why it means so much to me. She’s your friend. Of course you’re going to want to defend her.”

“Oh...thank you.” Wren’s expression softens, and she even smiles. “I’m sorry, too. I can see why you love this place so much. And the other day Tyler mentioned something about, um, your dad and everything. And you’re really good at archery.”

“Thanks.” My body tightens as I immediately feel protective about hearing Daddy’s name in Wren’s mouth. But she’s careful and genuinely sympathetic. I un-hunch my shoulders.

“We should get back,” she says. I check the time and nod, and we both stand. Wren tucks a lock of blond hair behind her ear.

“Um, friends?” She holds out a cautious hand for me to shake.

I take it. “Friends.”

“Thanks, Kaya. I’m so excited for your Jester Queen routine, too. I think it’s super creative. And this way, everybody wins!”

I frown and drop her hand like it’s a hot coal from Carter’s blacksmith forge. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Huh? Oh, just, like, you get to be Jester Queen, and Jessie gets to be *Queen* Queen. Everyone gets what they want.”

“But that’s *not* what I want.” I’m burning so hot I can practically feel the honeysuckle behind me wither.

Wren’s face hardens into stank-faced stone. “You can’t be serious? Jeez—what is your problem? Jessie’s working so hard. Why do you have to take this from her?”

“I’m not *taking* anything! I deserve just as much of a shot as she does.”

“Yeah, but you’re barging in here like it’s your right. What, you think just because your dad died that you, like, inherited the Faire?”

Three things happen very quickly after that. The first thing is that I square up to personally wipe the smirk off Wren's face. The second is that Wren's eyes bulge wide; I assume because she realizes she is way, *way* out of pocket and fully deserving of whatever comes next.

The third thing is that, behind Wren's head, I lock eyes with Queen Daphne. I step back immediately, even though it's clear from the concerned look on her face that she's seen too much already. Zach rounds the corner to join her seconds later.

"Well met!" Zach says. "Everything okay? Just fifteen minutes left for lunch."

"Everything's fine," I mutter, keeping my eyes on a sandy rock in the dirt.

"Yeah, we're fine," Wren repeats. Without another word, we head off—separately—to Ye Olde Food Court. I swear I can feel Queen Daphne's gaze on my back until I turn the corner.

Once I'm out of view, I kick the closest thing I can find (sorry, trash can—wrong place, wrong time). No question, this is the worst instance of Kaya's Law so far. I can't believe my bad luck, can't believe how dumb I was to let my emotions get the best of me. There's no way Queen Daphne doesn't tell Zach about what just happened. And even if by some miracle she doesn't, why would she want me as an apprentice now?

Wren might be right, after all: Maybe Jester Queen is as close as I'll ever get.



I'm almost to Ye Olde Food Court again when I realize I don't hear Wren's steps behind me anymore. Guess she does have some sense; probably a good idea for us to stay out of each other's way for a while.

Even with the mess Wren just started, I'm still riding high after my performance with the archers. I walk proudly over to the picnic table where the other campers are sitting. I bet they'll have more questions about archery and what it's like to be so awesome, and I'm ready to answer. But the other kids don't look up when I arrive. They're hunched over Carter's phone, scrolling through TikTok. I peer over their shoulders and realize

they're not just on his FYP, they're scrolling one profile in particular—the Faire's. And every single video features yours truly.

How *cool* is that?

“Wait, go back to the first one!” I say, and the three of them jump. Carter moves to put his phone away, before he does as I ask and scrolls to the top. Becca's already posted a montage of the archery demonstration, with sweeping shots and tight close-ups of me as I shoot with Ayesha and her team. The whole thing's set to really dramatic orchestral music and makes me look like I'm ready to join Legolas and the rest of the Fellowship on the way to Mordor. I want to play it on a loop for the rest of my life.

“Oh my gosh, can y'all believe it?” I grab Carter's phone and watch the clip a few more times, then notice the engagement it's already gotten. It hasn't even been up for an hour, and there are already dozens of likes, as well as a few comments.

I would've loved something like this when I was a kid.

Signing my son up for next year immediately!  
and

Loving this diversity! Do you have half-day options?

My daughter will have extramural lacrosse camp in the afternoons.  
and

THAT'S MY BEST FRIEND! QUEEN OF MYYYY HEART 🏰 🤩  
(from Ray of course)  
and

get strong 2day wit new protein suppl3ment. free to try with credit card info

Okay, that last one isn't as cool, but the first two send me to cloud nine. I'm really doing it! I'm helping Zach get new signups and introducing more kids to the wonder of this place.

“Um, Kaya, can I...?” Carter holds out his hand, and I realize I've still got his phone.

“Oops, sorry.” I give it back, then sit down and open my lunch. “Those TikToks are wild, huh?”

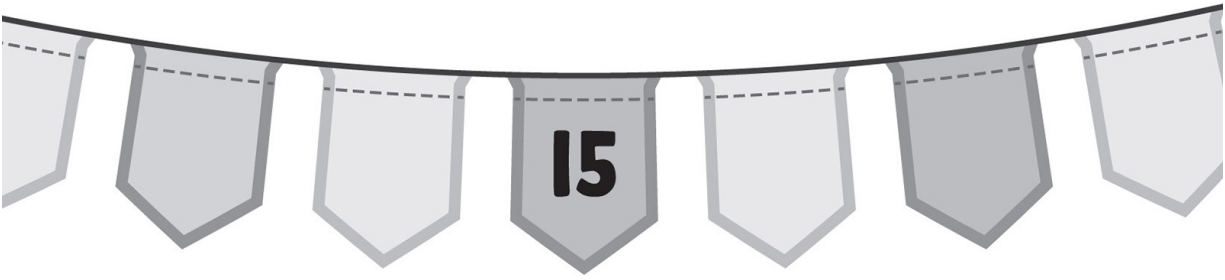
I suddenly notice Tyler won't look at me. "Yeah, they're, um, something," he says.

"It's kind of weird, I guess." Jessie hugs herself. "The rest of us are, like, only in the very first video. And only for a few seconds."

I look from Jessie, to Carter, and finally to Tyler. All of them seem uncomfortable, and none of them will look at me. Are they seriously going to be jealous right now? I don't really know Jessie or Carter that well, but I expected better from Tyler.

I shrug. "Yeah, I don't know. Marketing..." I mumble. I don't tell them about Zach and my conversation, and being the face of the Faire. It was Zach's idea, so it's not really my thing to tell. Also, even though she's been nicer to me, Jessie's still my competition for queen. I need all the advantage I can get.

So, aside from the occasional crunch of a baby carrot, we finish our meal in silence.



## Hobbits and Hugs

**Tyler decides to dive into** his summer reading on the drive home, even though I know it makes him carsick. No one's home, so I let myself into the house, pour myself a bowl of Doritos, and scroll through my new favorite TikTok account. The views and likes are even higher on the archery video since this afternoon; it's shaping up to be the account's most popular post yet! Just in time for the showcase and the second Naming Ceremony tomorrow, where I'll be officially crowned as Week Two queen. If Wren thought I was a problem before, she's going to be sick of me once Zach makes it official.

Uncle Paul comes over around six, wearing a polo and jeans that fit him too well to be cheap. He's got a box of pizza in his hands, and without even opening it, I already know it's our usual—half pepperoni-mushroom for me, half sausage-banana pepper for him. Technically we're not supposed to eat in the family room, but what Mama doesn't know won't hurt her. Plus, we're careful: We take all the fancy throw pillows off the couch in case of stray marinara sauce, and settle into our usual spots—him on the couch, me on the floor—for a movie.

"What are you in the mood for, kiddo?"

"Hmm." I think about the day and my daring feats with the archers.

*"Lord of the Rings?"*

Uncle Paul lets out a groan. Not because he doesn't love the movie trilogy—he's the one who first introduced me to them a couple years ago—but because he knows we only have time for one of the three films, and I'm going to want to watch my favorite one.

"I can't believe you like *The Two Towers* the most," he mutters as he pulls it up on the TV. "It's so depressing!"

"That's what makes it so good! Plus it's got Helm's Deep, one of the best battle scenes of all time."

He lifts an eyebrow in my direction. "Right. And exactly how many battle scenes have you seen?"

"I mean, a couple? Like five-ish?"

Uncle Paul rolls his eyes, but I think secretly he's proud of my nerdery. Three slices of pizza later, Pippin and Merry are getting better acquainted with Treebeard, and we pause the movie for a bathroom/soda-refill break. I reach for the remote to press play again, but Uncle Paul holds up a hand.

"Hang on, hang on. I wanna hear how camp's going. How did the jester thing turn out?"

I can't believe it's only been three days since we went to the range and I was panicking about the first Naming Ceremony. It feels like I've overcome insurmountable odds, finding my way to impending victory in the shadow of enemies who would love to see me fall. I'm a lot like Frodo, when you think about it. Except taller. I tell Uncle Paul about my improving juggling skills, and how I've become the face of the Faire over the course of the week. I even pull up the latest TikTok video—now at over a hundred likes! I keep waiting for him to smile or be impressed or something, but his forehead just gets crinklier and crinklier.

"But are you having fun, though?" he asks before taking another bite of pizza.

*What?* "Well, yeah! I'm the face of the Faire!" I know Uncle Paul's solidly middle aged, but I thought he'd have longer before his hearing started to go. I'm well on my way to getting exactly what I want. What could be more fun than that?

Uncle Paul's still chewing. He looks like he wants to say something, but instead, he stands and walks toward the front door.

"Where are you going?" I ask as I follow after him.



“Be right back.” The front door opens, then closes shut. I run to the window and watch him pull something big and rectangular out of the trunk of the navy sedan he keeps impeccably clean. When he makes it back to the door, I let him in.

“Okay,” Uncle Paul says. He’s holding a wrapped present as long as my lower body, as wide as the grapefruits Mama eats each morning. “I was saving this for your birthday in a couple of weeks, but I think you could use it now. As a reminder of who you are. Where you come from.”

I make a face like I’m trying to guess. “Who I am and where I come from...A case of personalized luggage tags?”

“Very funny. You know what I mean.” He gives me the box and nods toward the family room. Mama taught me to be gracious when receiving gifts, but I’m going to explode if I don’t find out what’s in here. I do my most polite speedwalk to the carpet and not so graciously tear off the silver wrapping paper. When I open one side of the box, the rich, warm smell of old leather pours out. My breath hitches on instinct. I know this smell. Gently, I reach into the box and pull out Daddy’s quiver, handmade from leather and etched brass. I breathe in the musky scent as my fingers trace the brass’s ornate tree pattern. I used to beg him to let me carry this for him at the range, when my arms got too tired of shooting. I slip it onto my shoulder and make a motion like I’m reaching over my back to draw an arrow from it. The quiver was heavy then, but now it feels exactly right.

I miss him so much.

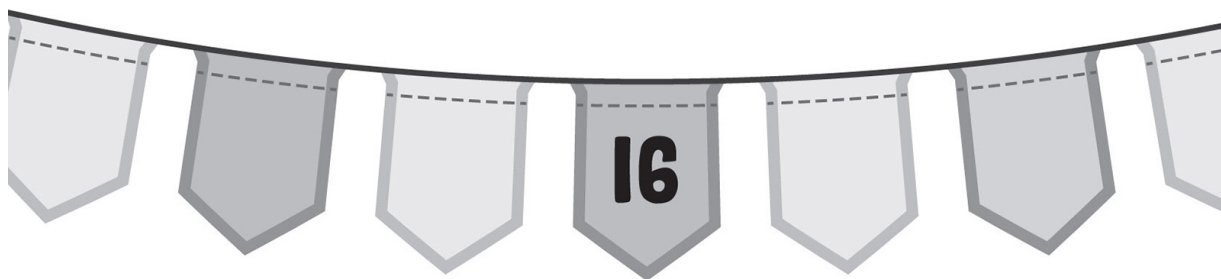
“He’d be so proud of you, Kaya.” Uncle Paul’s voice breaks.

I rush to hug him. “Thank you.”

“Like I said, I thought you could use a little encouragement,” he says into my shoulder. We separate, and he continues. “To win the crown *your* way and have fun doing it. Your dad’s still cheering for you, loudest of all.”

I lovingly touch the strap on my shoulder. Daddy’s quiver has filled a place in my heart that I didn’t even know was empty. Now there’s no doubt in my mind that I’m exactly the queen Zach needs, camp needs, the *Faire* needs. I’m ladylike, entertaining, *and* I can shoot an arrow like nobody’s business. I’m the total package, and when I’m crowned Week Two Queen at the showcase tomorrow, everyone will know it.

Uncle Paul said he thought I could use this gift. And use it I will.



## Melee Madness

**It's Friday, the day of the** Week One Showcase, and the day we get our Week Two assignments. By the end of the day, I'll be bidding "fare thee well" to Barry, and "good morrow" to Queen Daphne and a week of regal instruction. Either that, or my dream will be crushed like peanut shells in the jousting arena stands.

I stuff a piece of toast in my mouth and look at my reflection in the entryway mirror. My outfit doesn't look quite like I hoped—no dress, no socks, no makeup—but I've got Daddy's quiver. *My* quiver. I don't have time to work any archery into my showcase performance today, but the quiver still feels like a good-luck charm, so I decide to bring it along. I make sure Tyler sees the quiver when I get into his mom's car. By the way his eyes widen, I know he does—who could miss such a thing of beauty? But he doesn't say anything about it, or much of anything to me at all, actually. Guess he's in his head about his performance later today.

The showcase is the last thing on the day's schedule, and all the campers are done practicing about an hour into the morning. I guess at this point you've either got it or you don't. At ten, Zach calls us together at Dragon Ales for an announcement.

"I'd kind of figured this would be a light morning for everyone. So...He claps his hands together and rubs them. "We've got a little surprise. Several

of the Faire's cast members are here to work their stations and give you all a private taste of the Faire."

Carter's hand shoots up like a rocket.

"This does not include the Crazy Columbus," Zach says. Carter lowers his hand, pouting as Zach moves on. "But other stations, like face painting, the castle maze, carnival games, and more are waiting for you. Enjoy!" With every attraction Zach listed, the excited looks and murmurs grow within our group. When he steps away from the pub stage, the Woodbridge kids all start scrambling for their maps of the fairgrounds.

"The carnival games are this way," I tell them, pointing west with a smile. I'm proud of myself: Four days ago it bugged me that they weren't as familiar with the Faire as I am. But I'm about to be queen, and queens aren't petty. The weight of Daddy's quiver against my back is quiet reassurance. I belong here, and I can help the others belong, too.

We take off for the carnival booths, barely able to keep ourselves from running. Everyone except Tyler is curious about my quiver on the way over. I let them take turns holding it. Even Wren, whose stank face softens long enough for her to begrudgingly admit that it's "really cool, I guess." A win is a win.

Jessie and I go straight for the face painting, while the rest of the group tries their luck at the Test Your Strength booth, where you slam a giant mallet down as hard as you can and try to make the bell at the top ring. Jessie gets her face painted first: a slender tendril of green across her forehead, dotted with delicate flowers of white and yellow. She's literally given herself a crown. Envy gnaws inside me, so strong I have to look away. Across the path at the Test of Strength, Tyler and Carter are complaining to the attendant that the game must be broken, while Wren grins holding the biggest stuffed animal Totoro I've ever seen.

"All set," the face painter says as Jessie stands. She turns to me. "And what would you like, my dear?"

I frown. A crown would've been the obvious choice, but now it will just look like I'm copying Jessie. I scan the options, and one jumps out immediately: a large butterfly that will cover the top half of my face, like a mask. I tell the woman my choice, and she smiles. "That one's my favorite. Let's add some dazzle to it, shall we?" She searches on her table for another palette, of shimmery pale blues and purples.

Ten minutes later, she holds up a mirror and I gasp. I look like some sort of fairy-slash-alien-slash-princess, with blue-and-lavender wings that shift from one color to the other depending on how I turn my head.

I look like magic.

“This is...so cool!” I blurt. “Thank you, thank you!”

The face painter laughs. “Enjoy yourself, dearie.”

I grab my quiver and catch up with the rest of the group at the ring-toss booth.

“Whoa!” Tyler says. “Kaya, you look like an elf! A really cool elf, I mean. It’s giving Rivendell, not North Pole.” For the first time since yesterday morning, he smiles at me. I smile back, then catch Wren rolling her eyes before she takes her turn. Whatever.

“Yeah, you look like an elf warrior princess or something!” Jessie adds.

“Ha, thanks, guys.” I laugh and shrug, totally casual. Even though I was *totally* pretending to be *exactly that* on my walk over here. They don’t need to know that.

“Here, you can take my turn,” says Carter, handing me his rings. “I think all these games are broken, anyway.” I look over at the other campers, all smirking and shaking their heads. Guess it’s just not Carter’s day.

In his defense, the ring toss *is* really hard; I only land one around the neck of a metal bottle, which doesn’t win me anything. But I’m still having a great time. We all are, even Tyler when Jessie manages to nail the throw that lands him in the dunk tank. Tyler’s a good sport, smiling while he walks back to us, wet as a dog. Then he *shakes* like a dog, and we all shriek. Rude.

“Oooh, what’s Melee Madness?” Jessie reads off a sign. She has one arm draped over Tyler’s shoulders like they’re old friends. Tyler’s face is pinker than a Rose Lady’s, well, rose. They look to me.

“I’ve actually never gone in there,” I say, careful to leave out the fact that Daddy never let me see this attraction. Instead, I point to the wooden sign of a scary-looking medieval headsman that says THOU MUST BE YEA TALL TO ENTER. We’re all barely tall enough to go inside.

“Well, it sounds awesome. Let’s check it out!” Carter says, bounding toward the activity. Whatever Melee Madness is, it takes place inside a fenced-in dirt enclosure that reminds me of a petting zoo. Weapons of all

sorts sit on a wheeled rack in the center of the space. Battle-axes, broadswords, maces, and clubs, just sitting out in the open. Mama's warning tone plays in my mind, the advice she gave Kev Jr. before his first official high school party: *Have a good time, but don't party yourself off the planet.* Shouldn't there at least be an adult here, someone to make sure we don't do something incredibly dumb?

Carter reaches for an ax, and my heart jumps to my throat. Pretty sure Zach's beloved insurance premiums are about to go through the stratosphere.

"Um. I don't think we should—" I begin. But when Carter lifts up the weapon, he holds it easily with one hand. He tosses it to the other, then back and forth.

"They're foam!" he says, with the goofy grin of someone who can't believe his luck. I can't believe his luck either; he should have at least one appendage missing by now, if not several.

"Welcome to Melee Madness!" a man's voice booms. We all jump and turn to see...Barry? He's not wearing his jester cap 'n' bells anymore. Instead, he's dressed head to toe in black, with a mask that makes him look like an old-school executioner. It would be creepy, if I hadn't seen him balancing a juggling pin on his forehead less than an hour ago.

"How do we play?" Carter asks.

"The rules are simple," says Executioner Barry. "Each player may choose a single weapon. When the round begins, you fight. If a player's weapon hits you on any part of your body, you lose that part of your body. No head shots!" He eyes Carter pointedly. Carter gulps. Executioner Barry turns back to the rest of us. "If you lose a limb, you can no longer use it."

"You mean, like, hop on one foot?" Wren asks.

"Precisely." Barry takes a longsword off the rack and hits his own leg with it, then starts hopping. "Lose two legs, and you're on your knees. Once all four limbs have been hit, you're out of the game, and you move to the side. Victory goes to the last player standing, as it were. Any questions?"

We look around at one another, clear on the rules and eager to play. I've got my eye on a giant club, but then I see exactly what I want: a bundle of foam arrows beside a toy bow. Jackpot.

"Then you may choose your weapons," Barry says. We rush the rack like it's the cornucopia from *The Hunger Games*. I grab the bow and slide

the arrows into my quiver. They're snug; the quiver is made for real arrows, not blocky ones made of foam. But if things get real out there, I'll be jumping and ducking for cover. Snug might be best. Everyone else comes away with their choices. I wrap my hands around my bow, feeling good about my pick. Katniss Everdeen's got nothing on me.

Executioner Barry guides us to stand in a circle about ten feet across.

"Players at the ready!" he says. Everyone's a mix of nervous and excited. Carter points two fingers at his eyes, then points them at Wren, pretending to be menacing. I'm also trying to be intimidating, but Tyler sticks his tongue out at me when our eyes meet, and I end up giggling instead.

"Let the melee...commence!" Barry announces, and from there it's chaos. Tyler and Wren rush to the middle of the circle, while Jessie goes after Carter in a full-on assault. I stand back and nock an arrow, then take aim, but I'm laughing too hard to fire. The sound of our shrieks and laughter is interrupted only by the chorus of *thwaps* from our foam weapons. Wren makes quick work of Tyler (who goes down with a "It's just a flesh wound!"), but then I nail a shot at her leg before running out of the way of her revenge attack. Jessie's too distracted with Carter to notice me sneak up to close range and fire at her arm, her last limb. She's out. Carter gives me a nod for the assist, then finishes off the rest of Wren's last appendages. And just like that, Carter and I shift from being partners to adversaries, the last two in the fight. I've still got all my limbs, but Carter's only working with one hand now, which is tricky with an ax. Plus he has to keep shaking his hair out of his eyes—should've used more gel this morning. If I can just manage to stay out of close range and attack him from the side, I should be able to—

My feet tangle in something long and flimsy, and I fall to the dirt, landing hard on my left side. What the heck just happened? I look at my feet, and the foam-longsword coiled between them like a silver snake. My eyes trail up the gray foam, to the hand still holding the hilt.

Wren looks back at me, just as satisfied as if she'd stabbed me in the heart.

While I'm staring at her, dazed, Carter daintily taps my legs and arms. "I win!" he shouts.

Tyler steps forward from the sidelines. “Hey, wait, that’s not fair! She tripped!”

“I *was* tripped,” I say, glaring at Wren. Her eyes go wide as saucers as she releases the sword and puts her hands up in helpless defense. “It was an accident, I swear! I tried to get out of her way, but I couldn’t walk.” Her voice does that little wobbly thing, and I’m disappointed—but maybe not surprised—when it works on Barry.

“Kaya, would you like a rematch?” he asks, avoiding the issue of Wren altogether. She slithers away to the sidelines.

“No, I’m okay.” I stand to face the group, and they gasp.

“Kaya,” Jessie says sorrowfully. “Your butterfly...”

I scramble to pull out my phone and switch it to selfie mode. My face paint is ruined. The left side of my face is covered in red-brown dirt, the wings of the butterfly smudged beyond recognition. There’s dirt in my hair, on the collar of my shirt. The showcase is only two hours away, and I’m a walking disaster.

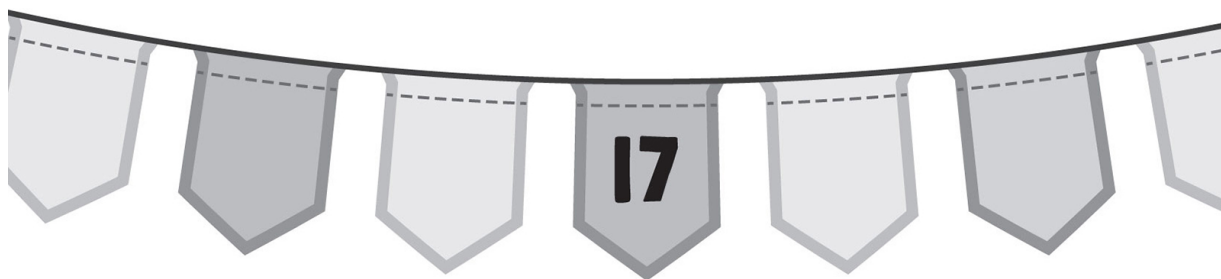
Barry appears on my phone screen, behind me. “I’m sure we can get you fixed up before this afternoon,” he says, dropping the executioner act.

“It’s fine,” I say, grabbing my quiver. “I’ll go clean myself up.”

Jessie steps forward. “I’ll help you.”

“No!” That’s all I need, Jessie’s perfect face paint next to my smeared mess. “I’m good on my own. I just need to get to the privies.”

“Good idea,” Wren says with a twisted smirk. “Maybe you can find a towel or something.” The same words I used a few days ago, except *I* actually meant them. I shove my phone back in my pocket, anger stinging behind my eyes. I thought for just a few hours I could ignore the competition and have a good time. I was such a fool for deciding to enjoy the fun of the Faire, and taking my eyes off what really mattered today. Wren may have dealt the final blow, but I have no one to blame but myself.



## The Week One Showcase

**I spend so long in the privies** scrubbing off the dirt and my ruined face paint that I miss most of lunch. But I don't care. I have no appetite, and I definitely don't want to be anywhere near Stank Face McGee anytime in the near or distant future. I hoist my quiver strap higher on my shoulder and head toward New Towne and the jousting arena. In a way, Wren gave me a gift just now; she helped me get my head on straight for the showcase. I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to win. I won't be making the same mistake again.

I hear the commotion of the jousting arena before the field even comes into view, downhill from where I stand. I thought the showcase would just be campers, Mentors, and camp staff. But this is so much more. All the Faire staff that are onsite today are here, in costume, filling up about a third of the stands. They talk excitedly as the queen's musicians play a canticle from the royal dais. The Rose Ladies glide and twirl through the stands, flirting with the occasional audience member. Brightcastle's green banners flutter on a zigzagging string across the poles that surround the field. There's even a small food cart, the Royal Confectioner, selling caramel corn and cotton candy.

*Whoa. This is, like, a real thing.*



It feels like there's a bouncy ball going wild inside my belly. The fairgrounds are always magical, but *this*—the people, the energy—this is what makes the Faire like nowhere else on the planet. The buzz of the crowd hums in my bones, filling me with a pulsing, electric confidence. I adjust my quiver so it fits securely on my back, and walk down the hill toward the stables, our especially smelly backstage area. On my way down, I spot Ayesha and the archers in the back row of the stands, and we wave to each other. Nori motions to my quiver and gives me a thumbs-up, mouthing the word *Nice!* I can't wait to show them—and everyone else here—what I've been working on. Jester Queen today, Apprentice Queen tomorrow.

Tyler and Jessie are already here. They sit beside each other on a wooden fence, chatting while we wait the last five minutes for the show to begin. I don't know if I'm imagining it, but from the way Jessie giggles at everything Tyler says, and the pink shade on the tips of Tyler's ears, it seems like there's something in the air between them...I mean besides the potent aromatic blend of cotton candy and horse manure. I decide not to disturb them, which ends up being a great call, because good ol' Wren bursts into the stables ten seconds later and heads straight for her bestie.

"Look at my scabbard!" she shouts, then points to the plastic weapon at her hip with a fake ruby in the hilt. Wren may have an eye patch on as part of her pirate costume, but even without it, I bet she'd be blind to the moment she just ruined between Jessie and Tyler. Some friend. I turn away. I can't deal with Wren right now; she's not even worth my time, she's merely a distraction from the only thing I care about today.

In another corner of the stables the Mentors gather, presumably talking about tax returns or vitamin B supplements or something. Barry catches my eye and mouths, *Are you okay?* My stomach squeezes a little. I guess it's nice that he was worried about me after that stunt Wren pulled at Melee Madness, but again, it's the last thing I should be thinking about right now. Yet another distraction. I give Barry a short, sure nod and busy myself practicing a few juggling patterns.

After another seven minutes, Carter shows up carrying a cloth sack full of something heavy in both his arms. By then we're two minutes past when the show is supposed to start, and Zach's face is so red, it looks like he's been trying to hit the high notes on a royal buisine. "There you are, young blacksmith!" Zach smiles at Carter through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, sorry! These are heavy!” He leans to show Zach the inside of the bag, and a couple of black coals spill out. “My mom dropped them off; I had to carry them all the way from the parking lot.”

A tall, wiry man joins their conversation—Carter’s Mentor, the Faire’s blacksmith. “Carter, did you...bring your own coals from home?” He places a concerned hand on Carter’s back.

Carter looks confused. “Well, yeah. You said we were gonna ‘bring the fire’ today.”

“That’s not what I...” The blacksmith looks to Zach for what to say, but Zach’s no help. He presses his lips together so tightly I wonder if they’re gone for good, then walks away to notify the stagehands that we’re ready to begin. Carter’s Mentor shakes his head and joins the other adults, while Carter looks around the stables.

“So...can I put these down now?”



Wren and her Mentor Pirate are first up. They launch into some skit about being pirates from opposing ships, complete with puns that I’m pretty sure are older than I am (“What lovely earrings, Captain Wren! How much did your piercings cost?” “A buck-an-ear!” Cue laughs and a few valid groans.) Wren messes up her lines a couple times. Maybe she should’ve spent more time rehearsing and less time trying to sabotage me. To my annoyance, the crowd cheers as Wren finishes up. Doesn’t mean she’s good, just means they’re nice.

Carter and his Mentor go out next, showing off a selection of the items he’s forged this week before they bring out an *actual* forge on wheels for a live demonstration. I didn’t even know you could *do* that. Even though Carter’s a couple of coals short of a fire himself some days, he knows his way around an anvil. In just a few minutes he’s got a spoon that would hold half a dozen Cheerios, at least.

As Carter hammers away on a coat hook, Tyler scoots next to me in line. “That was so shady, what Wren did to you earlier,” he whispers. “Are you okay?”

Why does everyone keep asking me that? “I’m fine,” I hiss sharply. Tyler takes a half step back when I snap at him. My stomach twists again. Maybe I’m not fine? Ugh. Tyler’s just trying to be a good friend, but his timing is awful; I’m up next. I need to focus.

Carter wraps up, and Barry claps a large hand on my shoulder. “That’s us! You ready, Your Majesty?”

Tyler gives me one last concerned look. I snap the lid down tight on the Tupperware of my heart. I can’t afford to feel whatever emotion keeps threatening to spill out. I’ll feel my feelings after I’ve won.

“Ready.” I exhale. Gently, I place my quiver against a stable wall. It may be my good-luck charm, but it doesn’t belong in my act.

“Break a leg,” Tyler whispers.

I don my most convincing frustrated scowl and walk out into the arena. Everything’s quiet as I take center stage. I take the three beanbags in my hand and toss them up in the air haphazardly, then flail as I try to catch them. This is clearly not *toss-toss, catch-catch*, but the Jester Queen persona I’ve crafted doesn’t know that. “Ughhh!” My groan is over-exaggerated and whiny, and there are more than a few chuckles in the audience. It’s working.

“Go, Kaya!” Ayesha shouts as I focus on trying again. Wesley puts two fingers into his mouth and gives a large whistle. Inside, I’m smiling. But outside, I incorporate it into my act, shooting a haughty glare in their direction. Wesley’s whistle dies like he’s a toy that’s run out of batteries, and it’s so perfect that even I almost crack up when the audience laughs.

Well, most of the audience. Closest to me, there’s an older woman in the audience that I recognize from the balloon-pop carnival game. She looks more like she’s sitting at the DMV than front row for the best performance of the showcase—eyes half closed, stifling a yawn. I make it my personal mission to make her laugh. According to Barry and my script, I have one more attempt at juggling before he joins me onstage. I’m supposed to just let the beanbags fall again, but I think of something even better. Let’s hope it works on balloon-pop lady.

A second time, I toss the beanbags in the air, and I actually get a bit of a rhythm going. I make it a little wobbly on purpose—I’m not supposed to be good at this, remember? But I let genuine surprise and pride show on my face. I give the audience a look that says, *Not bad, right?* and they clap, right on queue. I do a little happy dance, as well as I can while still keeping

the beanbags up. Balloon-pop lady's mouth twitches with the faintest hint of a smile. Then, just as the audience's applause reaches the peak, I lose my rhythm and let the highest beanbag come crashing down on my face with a *plop*. I freeze, letting the joke have its moment. The screech that follows is muffled by the beanbags fabric, which makes it even funnier.

"Jester Barryyyyyyyy!" I yell, stomping my feet to make it extra tantrum-y. Between the beanbag on my face, my whiny voice, and Barry's windmilling arms before he trips into the dirt (as planned), the audience sounds like an old *Fresh Prince* laugh track. *Including* balloon-pop lady. We've got 'em.

From there, the rest of our act is smooth as slow-churned butter. Barry begins to teach me how to juggle, and I give him the perfect amount of regal disdain. I don't drop a single ball, even when Barry and I start passing them back and forth. We strike our final pose, where Barry bows to me as his queen, and I raise my hands in victory. The audience is small, but when they burst into applause, it sounds like every seat is full. The archers are on their feet, clapping and cheering. But I can barely hear any of it over the pounding of my heart in my ears. Is this real life?

Barry and I run offstage, where the other campers, Mentors, and Zach are waiting with similar praise. I have no idea what happens the rest of the showcase—couldn't tell you if Tyler sprouts wings or Jessie delivers her lines in flawless Klingon. But soon enough it's all done, and the five of us file out for the second part of the gathering: the Week Two Naming Ceremony. I'm supposed to be third in line, same as our order for the showcase, but I duck out at the last minute to scoop up my quiver. I squeeze the strap tight as we all emerge to the audience's standing ovation. *Be with me here, Daddy*, I think. *I need you*.

Zach has us all stand shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the arena. Just like Monday, he calls Tyler's name first. *Dang*. I had hoped maybe he'd reverse the order so that I could go first and spare myself the suspense of last time. No such luck. But the good news is that Wren didn't get her wish—it looks like everyone *is* getting new roles this week after all. Tyler is a knight, which is so unbelievably cool I can't *wait* to see. Wren is a milkmaid, which I think just means she gets to make ice cream all day. Carter's an apothecary, and Jessie's face lights up when Zach announces her as a madrigal singer.

So that just leaves me.

“And Kaya...” Zach begins. The bouncy ball in my stomach earlier must have had babies, and now they’re all bouncing around inside me. I hold my breath. In the stands, I spot the archers leaning forward with their elbows on their knees. Waiting. Hoping.

“I don’t think there’s any doubt, you made a fantastic jester this week,” Zach says.

I close my eyes tight. *Please please please.*

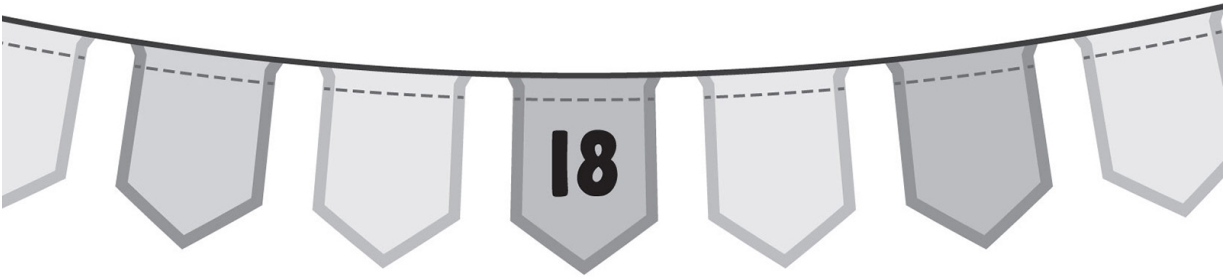
“And I can only imagine what you’ll bring to your next role. As queen.”

You heard it, too, right? I didn’t imagine it?

Afraid it might all be a dream, I crack one eye open. Zach’s smiling at me and nodding, like, *yes, really*. The audience cheers again. I feel a hand on my shoulder, gentle and reassuring. When I turn, Queen Daphne is standing beside me. Becca swoops in to get a panoramic shot of the arena and all five of us with our new Mentors.

“This will be fun!” Queen Daphne smiles down at me. I smile back, even though she’s wrong. This won’t just be *fun*.

This will be *everything*.



## Worth the Stench

**I call Ray as soon as I get home**, gushing about the showcase and ceremony at speeds that only a best friend could keep up with.

“Ahhh, I’m so hype for you!” Ray says as she folds her laundry on her space camp bunk bed. “You’re going to be the best queen. Jessie better look out, because my girl isn’t playing around.”

“No, I’m not. I’ve been thinking about it, and I want to make the role of queen my own, like I did with jester. Maybe do some archery tricks. Just be my whole self, you know?”

“Love! It!” Ray punctuates each word with a clap. But then her face transforms to one of horror.

“Ray? What’s...?” My question dies as, slowly, a pair of green flannel boxers enters the frame. Ray’s pinching the very tippy-top corners of the waistband, like they’re radioactive. But in her defense, some stranger boy’s underpants? They might as well be.

“Ugh, I hate communal laundry,” Ray says. “Now I have to wash this batch all over again. That’s another twelve dollars and fifty cents gone.”

“I mean, really? Yeah, it’s nasty, but they’re clean, right?”

Ray shoots me a side eye as she shoves her folded clothes back into her laundry bag. “Easy for you to say. You’re not the one with some stranger’s booty juice all over your rompers.”

“Ew, you did not just say *booty juice*.”

“Booty juice! Booty juice! Booty jui—” I end the call before she can finish. She’s so weird. I love her.

I fall asleep with the Naming Ceremony on a loop in my head, so it’s no surprise that I dream about the Faire that night. In my dream, I’m Queen Kaya, dressed in a sparkling golden gown, my quiver full of gold-fletched arrows. I oversee the jousting tournament and select a winner judiciously, then shoot a target above the arena that makes funnel-cake fries rain down on everyone. Is there anything more auspicious than funnel-cake fries? I don’t think so.



Mama’s week of swing shifts is officially over as of Saturday morning, so after she sleeps in a bit, we start our usual routine of cleaning the house. I straighten up my room and put fresh sheets on my bed, then start folding my own laundry (mercifully free of mysterious green boxers, thank you very much). While I fold, I watch one of my favorite old movies, *Ever After*, to celebrate my win. The main character is just getting to the ball, when my door bursts open and Kev Jr. jumps in the room.

“I’m baaaaaaack!” he shouts in a singsong. He’s been camping for three days, and even though we were fighting when he left, I missed him. His duffel bag drops to the ground with a thud. My brother came to bug me before he even went to his room. Maybe he missed me, too?

Kev Jr. crosses the room to where I’m sitting on my bed and leans over to give me a hug. The fact that I allow myself to be absorbed into his cloud of camping and teenage boy mustiness should be studied in diplomatic textbooks alongside the likes of Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela. But I’m no hero. I just want peace.

He lifts a leg to sit beside me on the bed.

“Unh-unh!” I shout. “Get your knobbly knees *off*. These are clean sheets, and even if they weren’t, you need at *least* one shower before you can sit on my bed.” I sniff the air, making my point. “At *least*.” Sorry, Mr. Mandela. I don’t want peace *that* bad.

He laughs. “Fine, fine. What are you watching, anyway?” His eyes slide to my tablet. “Really, Kaya?” he asks.

“What?” I already know he thinks this movie’s corny. But I will defend it with my whole heart forever, so he can go ahead and kick rocks.

“What about, I dunno...*Black Panther*? Any of ’em. Or *The Woman King*, if you like that royalty stuff.”

Ugh. I’m not in the mood today. Kev Jr. hasn’t even been home ten minutes, and I can already feel the shine of yesterday’s win fading. I pause the movie. “Why do you always *do this*?”

“Do what.” He doesn’t really say it like a question.

“Act like I should feel some type of way about watching what *I* like? I’m not asking you to watch it. I like these shows. They’re fun, and beautiful, and—”

“Melanin-deficient.” He’s laughing now, but I’m not.

“That’s not my fault! What, I’m only supposed to like stuff with us in it? How is that fair, or empowering? Why should we limit ourselves?”

This wipes the smile off his face for a second. I know he hears the echo of Daddy’s favorite piece of advice for us: *This world will try to limit you. Don’t you dare do it for them.*

He sucks his teeth. “Whatever.” It’s the sound of defeat. He’s trying to walk it back now, but I won’t let him get away that easy.

“I don’t get why you can’t just appreciate that I’ve found something I like. I don’t get on you for being into art stuff.”

“Graphic design,” he corrects me gently, then sighs. “It’s different for us, Kaya. It just is. And I’m not trying to limit you—the opposite, actually. Did I ever tell you about my senior design project?”

“No.” I close the cover on my tablet and turn to face him. I remember lots of late nights for Kev Jr. last November, accompanied by an attitude the size of Stone Mountain. I just thought it was normal teenager stuff, but was there something more going on?

“We were supposed to design a website for a fake company. I came up with the idea of a crowdfunding website for sneakerheads. Like, support your favorite designs and then when there’s enough people, they’ll make the shoe, you know?”

“Okay, I see the vision!”



“Yeah, well, my teacher didn’t. First he started making suggestions on the font. Then, before I knew it, he was telling me to change the actual words on the page. He said my ‘slang’ wasn’t professional, said that the average person wouldn’t understand what I was trying to say.” He grips the corner of my comforter tight. “But I wasn’t making it for the average person. I was making it for *us*, you know?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“I almost made his changes before I put it in the portfolio for my Stanford application. Mom convinced me to send my original design at the last second, and the application committee loved it. I went back to Mr. Kristofferson like—boom!” His characteristic smile brightens my room. “But my point is, Kaya: You may think you know how to handle yourself, but the closer you get to college and the real world, the more the pressure builds.”

“Pressure?”

“To change who you are. Make yourself more like the ‘main’ culture—whatever that means.” He rolls his eyes. “It’s gonna get way harder. And when it does, I’ll be all the way across the country. I guess I just wanted to try to make you understand now, while I’m still here.”

I look up at my big brother. I never considered that all this teasing might have come from someplace real, his own experiences. It must have been hard, pushing for such an ambitious future, when the people who are supposed to encourage you have such limited imaginations.

Kev Jr. continues. “And...you were right the other day. I am a little jealous. Maybe. The Renaissance stuff was always something you and Dad had in common. And now, even though he’s gone, you still have it. Something to remind you of him, and stay connected. Sometimes I worry... I don’t know. I worry I’m forgetting. And I don’t want to forget.” Kev Jr.’s nose scrunches a little, and his eyes shine with unshed tears. He suddenly finds an imaginary smudge on my headboard very interesting. “When I leave for school, things will be even *more* different. Things keep moving forward, without him. It’s not fair.” A tear finally escapes his eye, and it tips me over the edge. I rise up on my knees to throw my arms around his neck in a big hug. He squeezes me tight, and it feels like something’s filling in the cracks between us.

“It’s not fair,” I agree. “It’s weird for me, too. The Faire is exactly the same, except he’s not there. And I wish he could see...” My own voice chokes with emotion as I hear Daddy singing in my mind. *Kayabeen, the loveliest queen.*

“See what?” Kev Jr. asks, releasing me from the hug. And that’s when I tell him about camp, about how I spent the whole week as a jester and met the archers and clawed my way back up to queen. My brother follows every word, and he’s even more impressed when I open my tablet and show him Becca’s videos.

“Kaya...what?! This is so dope.”

I smile brighter than my tablet’s glowing screen. I want to record his praise and stick it in a Build-A-Bear so I can hear it on repeat.

“Will you come to the Week Two Showcase on Friday? It might help you remember Daddy, to see the fairgrounds. And...I’d really like you to be there.” I look up at him, hopeful. Daddy won’t see my second showcase performance, not the way I want him to. But if Kev Jr. comes, maybe it will feel like a piece of Daddy is there. For both of us.

Kev Jr. smiles. “I will *absolutely* be there, Your Majesty.” The sweet smile morphs into something sinister, and I don’t have time to react before he tackles me in a bony bear hug. My clean, crisp bed is engulfed in a cloud of teenage-boy funk, outside, and Cool Ocean body spray. Several loud screeches and shoves later, and Kev Jr. is finally on his way out of my room, chuckling all the way upstairs. I’m laughing, too, even as I pull the sheets off my bed and carry them back to the laundry room.

The things we do for love.

## Quintessential Queenliness

**I barely sleep Sunday night,** I'm so excited. When Tyler and I get to the fairgrounds Monday morning, I'm still floating on air, ready to give this week my all. My court etiquette will be the most gracious, my needlepoint the most refined. I'm ready to braid the mess out of some flower crowns. I'm also ready to dazzle Queen Daphne with more of my archery skills. I am Queen Kaya, and just like my daddy, I can be more than one thing.

After kickoff, I meet Queen Daphne on the north side of New Towne, in an area known as the Queen's Garden. Instead of a throne, she sits on a wooden platform, among a pile of plush cushions of emerald green. The platform itself is covered by a canopy of gauzy fabric that leaves hazy green shadows on the ground.

"Well met, Queen Kaya!" Queen Daphne says. I swear, that'll never get old.

"Well met, Your Majesty," I say as I sit. The most comfortable position would be to sit crisscross applesauce, but as a queen, that would be more like *crass*-cross applesauce. I try to mimic Queen Daphne's posture—leaning back against one cushion, on her side—but in my case I think it's giving more arthritic porpoise than graceful mermaid.

"What's first?" I ask. "Embroidery? Courtly etiquette?"

“I thought we might chat about the state of the kingdom.” She smooths the velvet of one cushion. “Pray tell: Are your companions enjoying themselves?”

“My...companions?” Is she asking me if the other kids are having fun at camp? How would I know? I’ve barely spoken to them the last week, unless it was to clap back against Wren, or rescue myself from impending heatstroke.

“They are well,” I say calmly, hoping she won’t ask for more details. Why does it matter how anyone else is doing? *I’m* the one she’s mentoring.

Queen Daphne bows her head gracefully. “Excellent. A good queen knows her strongest asset is her relationships. Those you can count on to support your kingdom in times of strife, as well as bounty. That’s why we’ll be focusing this week on how best to support your fellow campers. In Brightcastle, when one of us shines, we all shine.”

It takes every ounce of queenly poise inside me not to clutch the velvet cushion in my hands to within an inch of its life. I’ve worked my royal butt off to rise from jester to queen, becoming the face of the Faire so that Zach will finally notice me. And now my reward for all that is to spend the next five days thinking about everyone *else*?

“What about everything else it takes to be a queen?” I ask. “Defending the land from enemies, speaking up on behalf of your subjects?”

“Oh, absolutely! Being sovereign requires equal parts courage *and* compassion. But you’ve got courage in spades.” She smiles. Her flattery will get her nowhere. Well, not super far, anyway. Probably.

“So, where would you like to begin?” Queen Daphne asks brightly.

“Tyler.” The choice is obvious. Carter’s fine, but I don’t know him that well. And I’m still in competition with Jessie for the final queen slot. As for Wren...let’s just not.

“Excellent choice! He’ll make a fine knight this week. What do you suppose would be most supportive for him?”

I chew my lip as I think. Tyler doesn’t really need my help. He already knows how to ride a horse (which, again, is so cool!). But maybe riding with armor on will be new. It could get hot under all those layers.

“Maybe...something to help him stay cool when he’s in costume?”

The queen gives me a dazzling white smile. I’ve got to ask her what that shade of lipstick is called so I can wear it in six years when I move out of

Mama's house. "Excellent!" she says. "We could make a little waterproof pouch and fill it with ice. I'll grab some fabric from the weaver during your lunch break."

"Sounds good." I do my best to summon genuine enthusiasm, but it doesn't come. I had more in mind than just a sewing project for my time as queen. My quiver sits in a corner of the platform, propped up against a wooden beam. Will I even get to use it this week?

*Closed mouths don't get fed*, Daddy used to say. *If you want something, you've got to ask for it*. He was right. The Faire may be magic, but there are no mind readers here.

"I was thinking, Your Majesty—"

"Oh, just call me Daphne."

"Daphne. Well, I had so much fun shooting last week. I thought I could add a bit of archery to my Week Two Showcase."

"Archery..." Her mouth turns down at the corners as she thinks it over. Uh-oh. Did I overstep? It would be great to shoot, but more than anything I need her to like me.

"I mean, I don't have to, if you don't think—"

"No, I love it! And you do shoot so well. It's just, you'll have to ask Zach. He has a very clear vision for each role of the Faire during camp. I haven't even been able to persuade him to change my backstory."

I think back to her opening speech the first day of the Faire. "That your father gave you the kingdom?"

"Until I find a husband worthy of the throne." She winces. "I know we're in the sixteenth century, but we're also in the twenty-first, right?"

"Right!"

"Anyway, all that to say, you'll have to take it up with him." Her eyes leave mine as she looks over my head. "Speak of the devil!"

I turn. Zach walks over to us in long, confident strides. "Well met, ladies!" He dips his head. "Kaya, I know it's almost time for your group activity, but could I steal you for a few minutes? There are some people here I'd like you to meet."

"Um, sure!" Relief floods through me. Becca may not have come by to get any content this morning—maybe she can't find me tucked away back here?—but I'm still the face of the Faire.

“Great!” Zach says. I hop off the platform and wave goodbye to Queen Daphne.

“I’ll have that fabric ready after lunch,” she calls after me.

“Okay!” I say. But in my mind, I’m already focused on the task ahead. Whatever Zach needs me to do, I’m just happy to be back in the spotlight again.



Fifteen minutes later, we’re on the northwest edge of the fairgrounds, in a region known as the Highlands. A low murmur of people chatting grows louder as we climb the hill, and I’m surprised to see a large white canopy tent at the top, like the kind people use for street fairs and outdoor weddings. It wasn’t here on our orientation tour on day one, and I don’t remember it being on the map. Strange.

Inside the tent, maybe two dozen people are standing among rows of metal folding chairs. Mama says it’s rude to call old people old, so I’ll just say they’re all, um, *of a certain age*. Maybe in their sixties? There’s a large bowl of mixed fruit and a tray of golden croissants on a table off to one side. At the front of the tent, slideshow images play on a projector screen.

“See anyone you know?” Zach jostles me with his elbow. We come around to the back of the tent so I can see the screen clearly, and I let out a small gasp when I realize I’m in at least half of the pictures. Zach smiles proudly at me, then jerks his head. “Come on.”

He leads me to the front of the tent and picks up a microphone. “Thanks for your patience, everyone!” The audience all turn to see me. Most of them are dressed like they’re going to work. A skirt suit in this heat? Hard pass.

“I apologize for the short delay,” Zach continues. “But I promise this will be worth the wait. This is Kaya, one of our campers this session,” Zach says. I give a tiny wave, and the crowd claps politely.

“They’ve seen the videos,” Zach whispers to me with a wink before speaking loudly into the mic again. “Kaya, why don’t you tell us a bit about how it’s going so far?” He holds the microphone in front of my face.

I fuss with a loose string on my shorts. “How it’s, um, going?” I’m confused, is how it’s going. I thought maybe I’d be speaking to a handful of

people, a parent considering camp for their kids next year. Not...whatever this is. Sweat pricks under my shirt. I feel like I'm single-handedly ruining this event, but Zach's not pressed at all.

"Your experience so far, and your connection to the Faire?" he says, casual as ever. *My experience so far.* Something tells me Zach wouldn't want me to engage this crowd in a ten-minute whine-fest about wanting to be queen and becoming jester instead. So I go for the second part of the question.

"Well, my dad used to work here, actually," I begin. "Every summer that I can remember. He was an archer here. I spent so many weekends here while he worked, and even on his days off we'd return to explore."

"I love that," Zach says. In the back of the tent, Becca holds up her phone, recording our conversation as Zach goes on. "How does it feel to be carrying on your dad's legacy here?" Zach holds the microphone up to my mouth.

Daddy's legacy? Daddy's legacy is Saturday pancakes, and funny voices, and long walks by the creek, and afternoons at the archery range. Zach watches me expectantly. *Think, Kaya. What's the right answer?* I clear my throat. "Well, just like my dad, I also love archery. I'd actually really like to—"

"Wonderful!" Zach cuts me off before I have a chance to mention putting archery in my act. "That's wonderful. So many legacies to honor. But I was thinking more about how you're here, as a person of color." He rushes the words *person of color*, like he can't wait to get them out of his mouth. "What's it like being here, representing your community like your dad did?"

The audience is silent, a dozen blank faces waiting for my response. I'm not sure how to answer. I mean, of course I'm *always* representing my community, just like anyone. But my love for the Faire has nothing to do with that. Daddy just *liked* this stuff, and so do I. Isn't that enough reason for us to be here?

"Eyes on me, Kaya," Zach says softly, and I realize I've been staring straight at Becca's phone. If I bomb this, I can forget being useful to Zach, which means I can forget being crowned Apprentice Queen at the end of the week. "It's okay to be nervous. Let's try a different question. Why is diversity at the Faire so important to you?"

“Diversity? Oh, well...” When I think about the Faire, I don’t think about *diversity* so much as I think about *harmony*—all the different kinds of people who come together and find community here. No matter how strange the “real world” may think we are. “I guess I’ve always felt like I was weird for liking this kind of thing. Medieval jousts, princesses, and stuff. My family—my mom and my brother, I mean—they don’t think people like us really have a place at the Faire.” My voice cracks on the last sentence. Until now, I’ve never really let myself feel the pain that comes with Kev Jr. and Mama not embracing the Faire. It hurts. It really hurts.

“But they’re wrong,” I continue. “The Faire is a place for pretending, for make-believe. At the Faire, I can be anyone I want to be. I can belong here, even if sometimes I feel...like I don’t belong with them.” My eyes burn with unshed tears as the truth hits me. When Kev Jr. and Mama dismiss the Faire, it’s just one more reminder that I’m the odd one out in our family now. Daddy was the one who really got me. Without him, I’m just lost.

Polite applause shakes me from my thoughts. In front of me, the audience is clapping, some of their eyes sparkling with tears of their own. I wipe my tears away and smile, then realize Zach’s beaming at me like I guessed the exact number of jellybeans in the jar. Gold star for Kaya!

“Well, I can’t think of a better note to end on than that,” Zach tells the group. “Thank you all for coming. Please enjoy the refreshments before you leave.” As everyone stands creakily, Zach holds out his hand for a high five.

“That was awesome, Kaya! Thanks for doing that. Here, let me introduce you to some people.”

“Okay,” I say, then notice Becca fiddling with her phone near the back of the tent. A strange feeling flares in my stomach. “Hey, could you ask Becca not to post my answer to that last question? I think I got a little too real there.” I laugh nervously.

“Huh?” Zach says. “Oh, sure, that’s no problem. You really were terrific, Kaya!” He leads us on a winding path through the crowd. He’s pleased with me. Now is the perfect time to talk about adding archery to my act. I push my shoulders back, summoning confidence. “Actually, I was hoping to talk to you about the Week Two Showcase. I was thinking—”

A random hand clutches my shoulder. “Young lady, you were fantastic,” says an old white woman wearing a pair of perfectly smooth cream pants.



“Thank you!” I smile, though my shoulder still feels funny even after she pulls her hand away.

Zach gestures to the woman. “Kaya, this is Cecilia Polk, chairwoman of the Round Table.”

“Like, King Arthur?” I shift my eyes to the woman’s face. Holy croissants, is she a *descendant* of King Arthur? Should I bow? Salute?

Zach catches my hesitation. “The Round Table is a non-profit that serves to fund the Faire and all its auxiliary programming,” he says, like he’s reading it straight off a brochure.

I just blink at him. “Like camp?”

“Right!” the woman, Mrs. Polk, chimes in. “We were just meeting to discuss possible fundraising opportunities, to support the camp’s budget. But I daresay you’re helping more than we ever could. Those internet videos of yours—so charming. And you’re so articulate!” She gives us both a prim smile, and her eyes light up when she catches someone across the tent. “Richard! If you’ll both excuse me. Lovely to meet you, Maya.”

“Kaya,” I say to the empty space where Mrs. Polk used to stand. Oh well, it’s not the first time, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. Anyway, she doesn’t need to know my name. Zach does, and that’s all that matters. That, and getting to shoot in the showcase.

“Um, Zach? I wanted to ask you if I could add my own thing to the show on Friday....”

Zach watches me, patient, but I can tell half his attention is focused on the conversations around us. He frowns. “Your own thing?”

“Yeah, I was hoping I could add—”

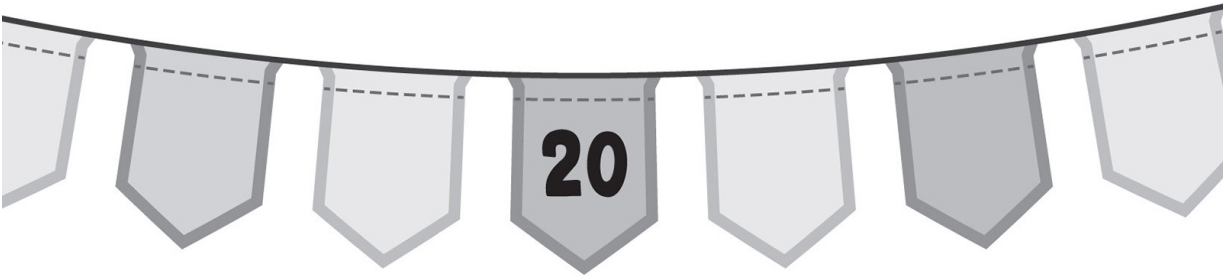
“There he is!” A large mustachioed man with a voice like thunder claps Zach on the back. Zach looks relieved to be talking to another adult.

“Archery,” I say to myself.

“Walter!” Zach says as he fights for his life against Walter’s vigorous handshake. They start to head off, and then Zach remembers I exist. “I’m sorry, Kaya, I’ve got to run,” he says over his shoulder. “Whatever you’ve got in mind, I’m sure it’s great.”

He vanishes into the crowd, and I’m left on my own. But I don’t care, because I got what I came for. It’s time to take this to the next level:

Kaya Morgan, queen of the archers.



## Not Here to Make Friends

**Lunch has been going for** about twenty minutes when I get to Ye Olde Food Court. The other campers are focused on Carter, and as I get closer I realize he's telling a joke.

"So the apothecary shouts after the duck, 'Wait, you have to pay for that elixir!' And then the duck turns to the apothecary and says, 'Put it on my bill!'"

A chorus of groans erupts from the table. Wren throws a veggie straw at Carter and just barely misses.

"So corny!" she says. It may be the first time we've agreed on anything all camp.

I squeeze in on the end, as far away from Carter as possible so I don't have to smell his salami roll-ups. Jessie doesn't look at me, but she does scoot a little to make room.

"Well, being queen is super cool!" I say out of the blue. I'm sure we were just about to get to how my morning's going, all that stuff I learned about courage and compassion. But nobody asks any follow-up questions. They barely even acknowledge that I've spoken at all.

"That's great," Jessie says with a small smile. She turns back to Tyler. "Okay, wait, I want to hear about being a knight!"

Tyler sits up straight, as if he's been waiting for this moment. "Oh man. It. Is. Awesome!" He opens a bag of Cheetos. "My horse's name is Traveler \_\_\_\_"

"Coolest name ever," Carter says. He's not wrong, even if he leaves the scent of deli meat in the air whenever he talks.

"Yeah! And she's so smart and fast. Sir Nicholas says he's never seen her take a liking to anyone so quickly."

"I rode horses once, on vacation on the beach," Jessie says. "I think they know good people. Like, Traveler can tell you have good energy." I don't think Jessie has any idea that she's single-handedly created a core memory for Tyler with a handful of words, but he basically dissolves into a cheese-dusted puddle after that. Jessie, totally clueless, opens her bento lunchbox to reveal a humongous slice of frosted yellow cake, and nothing else.

"Mmm, leftovers," Wren says. "Lemme have a bite." Without waiting for Jessie's approval, she takes a spoonful.

"Is it, like, your birthday or something?" I ask.

Jessie's eyes flash nervously to Wren, who's munching happily on her stolen bite of cake. "Yeah. Well, no. On Saturday it was."

"Happy birthday!" I say. "Leo gang rise up; mine's end of next week."

"Oh, nice," Jessie says, and takes a rushed bite. It's a little weird that no one else is wishing her a happy birthday, but I don't think anything of it. I've got to make sure Jessie likes me so I can show Queen Daphne I have strong relationships, to nurture my kingdom or whatever it was she said. No one's talking anymore, but I decide to keep the conversation going. Because relationships!

"So what did everyone get into this weekend?" I pull apart my string cheese and look around the table. I expect Tyler to share a story that is equal parts unbelievably nerdy and cool, or for Wren to exaggerate to make herself look more popular than she actually is. But I don't get either of those things. Instead, I get silence.

"Hello? Anyone?" I ask. Carter and Tyler exchange an uncomfortable glance before they both begin talking at once.

"Nothing really. I mean—"

"Yeah, pretty much just—"

"Nothing," Jessie says.

"Nothing?" I repeat. "You didn't even do anything for your birthday?"

She presses her lips together into a single line, then shakes her head with a jolt. “No, just ate cake. At home. Alone.”

I narrow my eyes at her. If Jessie “Born to Be an Influencer” McDaniels expects me to believe that she didn’t throw a birthday party for half of Woodbridge at *least*, she’s not as smart as I thought. But why would she lie?

Unless...

“You all went, didn’t you?” A weird mix of emotions comes over me: the satisfaction of solving the mystery, blended with the disappointment of what it means. “Jessie had a party, and everyone was invited but me?”

“I didn’t realize until I got there that you weren’t invited, I swear,” says Tyler, reaching across the table. I pull my hand away and put it in my lap.

“It’s fine,” I say.

“My mom said I could only invite thirty people, and one spot opened up, and I...” Jessie’s voice is quiet, and it fades to silence as she looks to Tyler. “And this was a week ago; I wasn’t even sure if you liked me then.”

To be fair, I *didn’t*. But I thought my charming, funny Jester Queen thing was impressing people. Maybe I was conflicted about Jessie, but it still hurts to be rejected. And when she let me borrow her clothes...was she just pretending to be nice?

Queen Daphne’s voice rings in my head. *We’ll be focusing this week on how best to support your fellow campers.* Was that Jessie’s assignment last week, too? If so, that means...

“You were just trying to get ahead,” I say, my voice rushed. “When you let me borrow your clothes.”

“What?” Jessie asks.

“You didn’t actually want to be friends. You were only trying to win.”

“Kaya, what are you talking about?” Jessie looks genuinely confused, which has to mean she’s still playing the game.

Wren touches her friend’s arm. “Just forget her, Jess.” She looks at Tyler. “I knew we made the right call not asking her to hang on Thursday.”

My head snaps to Tyler. “Thursday?”

His eyes go wide. “I—”

“At the mall,” Wren jumps in. “The three of us met up to hang out. Without you.”

“Wren!” Tyler’s face is bright red.

The realization slams into my chest like a dull lance. “That’s why I saw your mom there.” I shake my head and stand. “I’m so stupid.”

Wren scoffs. “What do you want, Kaya? Her mom said she could only invi—”

“Wren. Please,” Jessie says. She opens her mouth to say something else to me, but I brush her off and scowl all the way back to the Queen’s Garden. Queen Daphne sits in her pavilion, a bolt of beautiful damask fabric at her side.

“Isn’t it gorgeous? Before I became queen, I used to cosplay at the Faire. I made the most beautiful gown with this cloth. Tyler will love his custom ice pack!”

“Change of plan,” I say coldly, hefting my quiver higher on my shoulder. “Zach gave the okay to put some archery in my act.”

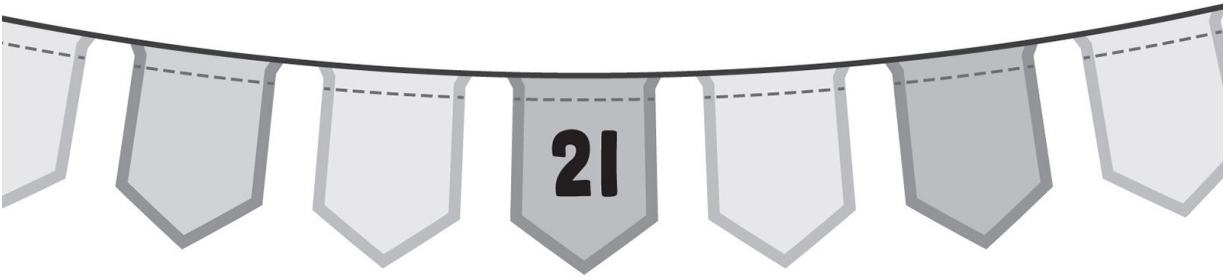
“He...did?” Her perfectly shaped brows jump skyward.

I nod. “So, I’m going over to Olde Towne to practice.”

“I see.” Queen Daphne eyes the fabric beside her. “Let me put this away and I’ll join you.”

“Sounds good.” The words are barely out of my mouth before I’m off the pavilion and onto the lane toward the archery stalls. I pass Wren at the creamery, and Carter at the apothecary, but I keep my eyes ahead and my shoulders back. Does it hurt that the four other campers are essentially besties who don’t want anything to do with me? Of course it does. But I don’t need them. I may not have any relationships here at camp like Queen Daphne wishes, but what I *do* have—what I’ve *always* had—is sheer will.

Let the Cheetos fall where they may.



## Whatever

**In addition to being beautiful** and elegant, Queen Daphne has also been gifted with excellent powers of perception, because she lets me shoot things in silence the rest of the day. The archers aren't here today, but that doesn't stop me from using their equipment. I let arrow after arrow fly with a *thwack*, hoping it will help to clear my head.

*Thwack!*

I didn't want to be Jessie's friend, anyway.

*Thwack!*

Wren's the one with the attitude, not me.

*Thwack!*

They'll all change their tune when I'm crowned Apprentice Queen on Friday. Everyone wants to be friends with a queen.

Right?

When the day ends and it's time for pickup, I leave through the western exit of the fairgrounds so I won't have to run into Jessie, or worse, Wren. But there's no escaping Tyler. I may not want to see him right now, but I don't really want to be stranded here overnight, either. Sleeping in stables ain't it. I trudge over to Mrs. Nomura's car and slump into my seat.

"I swear I thought you'd be there," Tyler says quietly once we're on the road and his mom turns up the volume on her Top 40 playlist. "I almost

texted you to see if you wanted a ride.”

“It’s fine. Really.” I stare out the window at the other cars on the highway so he won’t notice my nose getting a little red, or my eyes shining with tears. “It’s just a few more days, anyway, and then I don’t have to pretend to be friends with them ever again.”

I don’t look at Tyler, but I can hear him shift in his seat. “Jessie *does* think of you as a friend, though. She feels awful about what happened. I guess Wren convinced her it would be okay or something—”

“Oh, because Wren doesn’t have it out for me *at all*, right? She’s not biased or anything.”

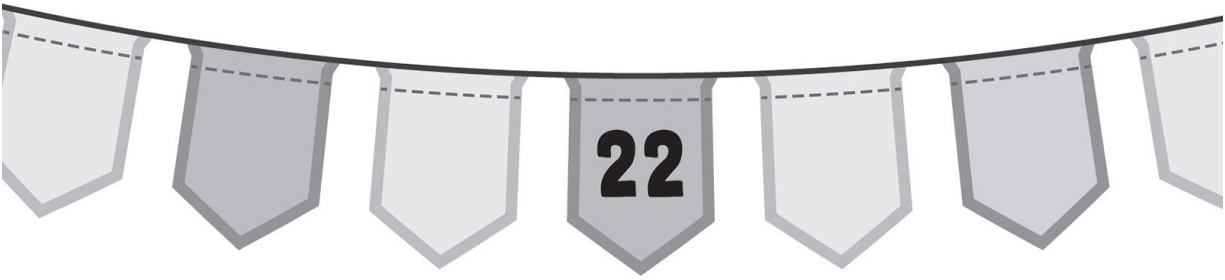
He rubs his neck. “Yeah, that’s fair. Just...Jessie’s not the bad guy, okay? She doesn’t even *want* to be queen. She’s got a great voice for the madrigal group anyway.”

I roll my eyes. Even now, in his mom’s minivan, when he’s supposed to be making me feel better, Tyler can’t keep the adoration for Jessie out of his voice. He’s got it bad.

“And you’re not biased either, right?” I smirk at him, and he turns a lovely shade of carnation pink. Oh yeah, he’s *gone* gone.

Tyler’s mom stops humming along to the music but still tries to act totally natural. Seriously, it’s like all parents have some sort of my-kid’s-got-a-crush radar. Tyler and I exchange a knowing look. No further discussion on the topic for now. I kind of maybe believe Tyler when he says he thought I’d be at Jessie’s party. But that doesn’t change the fact that Wren’s had it out for me since day one, and Jessie was only ever pretending to be nice to me so that she could beat me. For whatever reason, Tyler gets along with the Woodbridge kids, and I don’t. Maybe someday I’ll be able to make Queen Daphne proud and nurture my relationships, use my courage *and* my compassion to lead. But as much as I’d love to lead with compassion, it’s my courage that has helped me get this far. Without courage, I wouldn’t have been able to stand up to Wren, or push past my nerves to be the face of the Faire. I wouldn’t have been able to challenge Kev Jr. and form our truce.

Courage has served me well. Compassion can wait until after I win.



## The Next Level

**Instead of having everyone go** to our respective areas to practice with our Mentors the next day, Zach calls an all-hands meeting first thing in the morning. While we wait, I sit off to the side as Tyler and the Woodbridge kids joke about some TikTok Carter’s showing them. I pretend to be busy on my own phone, but instead I’m just scrolling through old messages from Ray. When we talked last night, I filled her in on the birthday party disaster. Last night, her response was a bunch of words that made me have to turn the volume on my iPad down so Mama wouldn’t hear. But now there’s a new voice note that came through after I went to bed. I pop in my earbuds and hit play.

“Sorry, still thinking about this. Forget them, Kaya. You’re on a mission. A quest. These guys may not be your enemies—well, except for dusty Wren—but they’re just side characters, you know? At the end of the day, you’re the one who chooses who’s a part of your story. And if they’re not lucky enough to be involved, that’s too bad for them.”

Her voice fills my head, grounding me. She’s so right. I can’t let myself get distracted by what anyone else thinks of me. It’s nice to have friends, but I *already* have friends. When school starts again in a couple of weeks, Wren will be a distant memory. But the feeling of being queen—if I can make it happen—will last a lifetime.



Finally, Zach enters. I know it's early—I still haven't gotten used to waking up for camp before the sun's all the way up—but Zach looks exhausted. His powder-blue camp T-shirt is wrinkled, his socks are two different heights. And he's got bags under his eyes, which I didn't even know could happen to you before you turned, like, thirty.

"Well met, team," Zach says, bringing his hands together. Even his clap sounds tired. "I've got some exciting news: We're going to have a bit of an audience for our Week Two Showcase on Friday."

I frown, remembering the dozens of people in the jousting arena last week. Didn't we already have an audience?

Zach continues. "Our board, the Round Table, has been getting updates from me on your progress this session. And they're so impressed that they've decided to turn Friday's showcase into a promotional event for camp! We'll let prospective families from local communities come see everything you've been working on these two weeks. Hopefully some of them will enroll for next summer!"

"Cool!" says Wren, wringing her milkmaid apron. "Maybe I can make some free samples!"

Zach points at her. "Great thinking!"

Jessie raises her hand but doesn't wait for Zach to call on her before she speaks. "Um, so, if we don't do a good job, parents won't want to sign their kids up?" I've never heard her talk so quietly; she must be really nervous about her madrigal performance.

"Oh, no, no." Zach holds both hands up. "I don't want anyone to feel any extra pressure from this—"

"Too late," Carter whispers.

"You all just do exactly what you were going to do, and leave the rest to me and the board. You're already terrific. I just didn't want you to be surprised if you saw a few extra faces in the crowd."

We all murmur our acceptance; what other option is there? Zach dismisses us and heads down the path, muttering to himself. I catch Queen Daphne shoot him a worried look, before she sees me watching and gives her trademark perfect smile. "Ready for day two?"

"Ready," I say.

"Good! Because I texted Ayesha last night. She, Wesley, and Nori are going to meet us at the archery stalls." Queen Daphne holds her hand up,

ready for the high five I launch at full force. This is perfect. A bigger audience means more people to see my performance, and how much I deserve the role of Apprentice Queen. A strong routine—with the help of the archers—means the crown will be undeniably mine. I remember Ray’s voice note: My quest has just leveled up. Time for me to do the same.



The next couple of days are an everything sundae, drizzled with perfection sauce and a dream-come-true cherry on top. I trade witty repartee with the archers as I best them at accuracy games, get fitted for an actual *crown*, and smile so hard my cheeks hurt at the end of the day. I remember Jessie’s performance from the Week One Showcase; it was nice, but there’s simply *no way* what we’re putting together won’t blow her song and dance out of the water.

The only thing that *isn’t* perfect about my camp experience right now is the lack of, well, other campers. I can tell that Queen Daphne’s confused when I say I’d rather eat lunch with her and the archers instead of going over to Ye Olde Food Court. But I don’t really have anything to say to anyone besides Tyler, and we catch up on our drives to and from camp. Besides, trekking all the way over to the food court and back would mean precious time lost from rehearsal. I’m good where I’m at.

On Thursday afternoon, we’re working on the last bits of dialogue under a shaded grove by a stream. Somewhere in the distance, a bard tunes a lyre. I can’t believe this is my life.

“I think your retort should mention his weapons somehow, so that it ties in the competition,” Ayesha says, weaving a trio of pine needles into a braid.

I consider her suggestion. “Thy words miss their mark, as do thy arrows?”

“Maybe. Hmmm.”

Wesley fiddles with an arrow in his hand, absentmindedly tapping the tip of one. Suddenly inspiration strikes, and I turn back to Ayesha. “Oooh: If thy arrow be as sharp as thy wit, thine enemies have cause to rejoice?!”

“Love it. Done,” she agrees. I write down the change.

A few yards away, Becca rounds the bend in the path. I rush to my feet and dart after her. Except for the Round Table breakfast the other day, she hasn't gotten any footage of me this week. "Becca! Hey!" I yell. She jumps a little, then smiles when she sees me.

"Hey, Kaya! What's up?"

"The archers and I were just practicing for my queen routine tomorrow." I'm a little winded from running after her. "Did you want to get some footage?"

Becca looks over my head at the archers, then to my flower crown, and back to me. A series of expressions flutters over her face that I can't quite interpret. "Oh! You know what, I'm actually all set for right now."

"Are you sure? Because I could—"

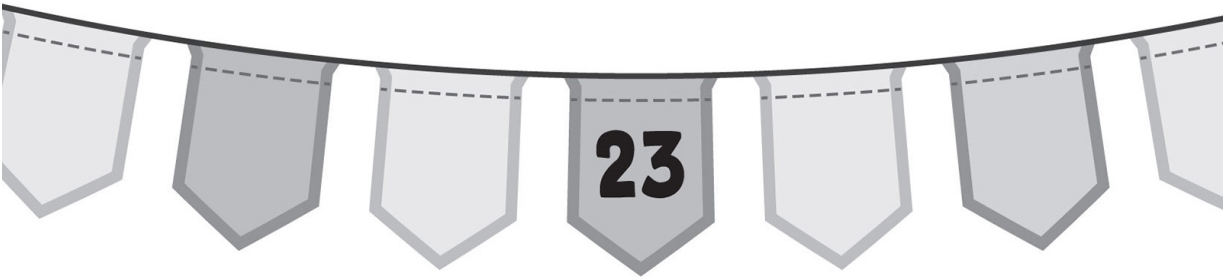
"Yep, we're good. You gave us so much great material at that Round Table breakfast. We'll bring in a bunch of enrollments for sure."

That puts me at ease. I'm sure Becca has a lot on her plate; I just wanted to make sure I'm still doing my part.

"Okay, cool. See you later!" I wave goodbye as Becca continues down the path. The archers are standing up from under the tree when I return.

"Script's all set. How does one last run-through for the day sound?"

I adjust my flower crown so it's evenly balanced. "Sounds perfect."



## Not on My Watch

**The butterflies in my stomach** are nonstop from the moment I wake up the next day, and I don't think it's just because of my mild lactose intolerance to the pile of ice cream Kev Jr. and I ate after dinner. It's Friday, the day of the Week Two Showcase. Since the first day of camp last week, I've worked so hard to get here. I can't wait to show everyone what I—what *we*: Queen Daphne, the archers, and I—have put together.

Tyler's muttering his lines in the back seat when I hop into Mrs. Nomura's car.

"At last, I will fight for the prosperity of my queen and the honor of our mighty lands—no, wait...honor of my queen, and the might of our... prosperous lands?" He unfolds a small piece of paper and scans it. "'For the honor of my queen and the prosperity of our mighty lands.' Okay."

"Big day!" I say as I buckle my seat belt. "You nervous?"

"I'm terrified," he says. "But it'll be okay once I'm with Traveler. I always think about how weird it must be for her, trotting around in front of all of those loud people. I feel like if she can do it, then so can I, you know?"

"I love that." It's seriously so cool that Tyler gets to perform with a real live animal. "I feel like having the archers up there with me will help, too. Not sure they like apple slices as much as Traveler, though."

Tyler cocks his head to one side, pretending to think. “Well, how do you know if you haven’t tried feeding them some?”

I laugh. “Fair point! First time for everything, I guess.”

The rest of the ride to the fairgrounds is smooth and easy. A big part of me wishes that it could have been this way the whole time, instead of arguing about Jessie or suffering awkward silence with my brother. But I can’t change any of that. I decide to just enjoy this last early morning ride south, and savor the sight of the skyscrapers gleaming in early morning light as we pass through downtown Atlanta.

Just like last Friday, some of the attractions are open to us before the showcase. The other campers make a beeline for Melee Madness as soon as everyone arrives. Tyler shoots me a look over his shoulder. It’s a silent question—will I join them?

Will I?

Technically, this is our last day of camp, since Apprentice Weekend begins tomorrow. It *would* make a lot of sense to let bygones be bygones and join them for one last game. Wren and I could sweep everything under the rug.

But—as Mama would be the first to tell you—sweeping’s hard work, and I’ve never been a fan of chores. It’s something I’ve got to work on, but forgiving Wren isn’t going to be my calling today. I give Tyler a slight shake of my head. He looks disappointed for a second, before running to catch up with the others.

It’s just as well that I skip Melee Madness anyway; I’d rather save up my energy for the performance this afternoon. I walk lazily around the fairgrounds, noticing the way the cicadas in the nearby woods grow louder as the morning heats up. I toss a coin into the well in the main square and wish for good luck this afternoon. A few of the vendors have their stalls open for us, and I finally seize the opportunity to buy Mama that spice rub I saw on our first day here.

“Here y’are!” The shopkeeper hands me my bag as I finish paying. She speaks in a thick Southern accent that no amount of medieval slang could ever hope to hide. “This is always my favorite day of camp. Gonna miss y’all next year.”

“Aw, thank you!” I say. “But I’m sure I’ll be around on the weekends. And you’ll have a whole new group of campers to sell to!”

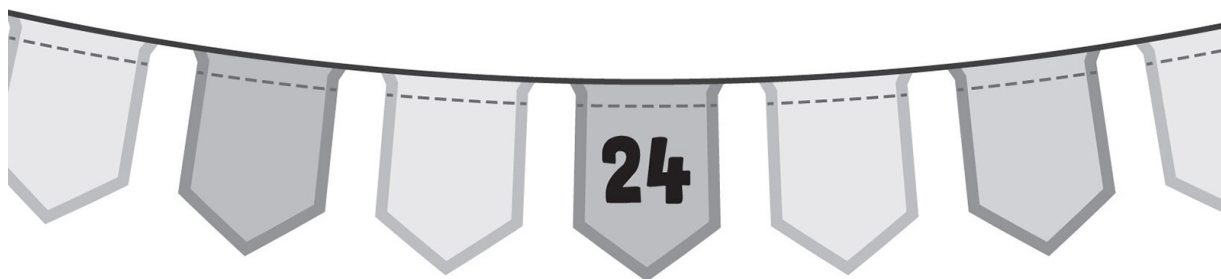
The corners of her mouth turn downward. “Zach didn’t tell y’all? There might not be a camp next year.”

I do a double take. “What?”

“No fundin’.” She nods sadly. “That’s what I heard, at least.”

I make no effort to hide my shock as I leave the stall. *No Apprentice Camp?* So *that’s* why Zach’s been so stressed and weird this week: The camp’s running out of money, and he feels like it’s on him to fix it. That’s why the Round Table was meeting, why they opened up the second showcase to prospective families, and why they’re pushing social media so hard.

My heart pounds desperately in my chest at the thought of camp going away. Zach may think he’s the only one who can save the camp, but he’s wrong. Because now there’s more than just a chance at queen at stake for me. I’m going to give the performance of my life tonight and make sure the audience at the Faire—and online—sees how magical this place can be. Time for me to do what any good queen would do, and save my kingdom.



## The Week Two Showcase

**Zach asks us to arrive** at the jousting arena thirty minutes earlier than last week—maybe he’s afraid Carter will be late again. Whatever the reason, I’m not going to be the one that screws this up. I get to the tournament field at 1:18 p.m.—an extra *twelve* minutes ahead of Zach’s requested time, thank you very much. The front entrances are already *packed* with people. I see a few familiar faces from the Round Table luncheon earlier this week—the older woman who squeezed my shoulder and told me I was wonderful right before she got my name wrong, the man who pulled Zach away when I asked him about archery. And there are a *ton* of families! Soccer mom types with kids about my age. What’s a little odd, though, is that all of them seem to be the Woodbridge Academy crowd, if you get my meaning. Barely a melanated face in sight. I remember how Zach told me he was promoting the showcase to “local communities.” Clearly he didn’t mean *all* local communities. Why not? Maybe when I’m crowned, we can make sure more Black and brown families see me on the camp’s social media page.

Everyone’s milling around outside of the entrance gates to the jousting arena, chitchatting with small plates of snacks in their hands. A bard plucks a mandolin as he strolls through the crowd, serenading small clusters of people. The Faire’s milkmaid hands out small cones of ice cream that I

assume Wren helped to make. And off to one side, a young woman in a server uniform stands behind a table covered in bottles of expensive-looking wine. Dang, they really pulled out all the stops for this.

I don't want to be late for Zach's curtain call, and I don't really feel like having my metaphorical cheeks pinched by anyone in the Round Table right now, so I rush around to the tournament area's back entrance. Tyler and Jessie are already there, looking jittery.

"This is wild," Tyler says. "Just listen!" We pause at the growing buzz of the crowd outside. They must be starting to file into their seats.

Jessie's wearing a costume for her madrigal performance, a cobalt-blue dress with a golden woven belt around the waist. The sleeves are wide and draping, and she keeps wringing one of them nervously.

"It'll be okay," I tell her. "My uncle Paul does huge archery tournaments around the Southeast. He told me once that nervousness and excitement feel the same physiologically. Just tell yourself, 'I'm not nervous, I'm excited.'" Part of me's trying to be nice, but I'm also thinking back to the conversation I overheard this afternoon. If Jessie's nervous, she'll blow her performance. We can't afford that if we want the camp to survive.

Jessie gives a small nod. "I'm not nervous, I'm excited. I'm not nervous, I'm excited..." Her voice stops shaking after the third or fourth refrain. She smiles. "Thanks, Kaya."

"No problem," I say, having to talk a little louder over the crowd outside.

Wren and Carter arrive, right on time.

"This is wild!" Carter says.

"That's what I said!" says Tyler as he adjusts a pauldron on his shoulder.

"Have y'all seen it out there?" Carter asks. "They did up the whole field with banners and signs. And—" He stops to look at me.

I frown. "What?" I rub my face self-consciously. I'm not the cleanest eater, and I did pack leftover pizza for lunch today.

"You really should take a look," Carter says. "It's awesome!"

"It's whatever," Wren says, crossing her arms. Well, if it gets her Aeries in a bunch, then I *definitely* have to see what Carter's talking about. I scoot toward the velvet curtain that separates us from the field, and peek out with one eye to see...



Myself.

A giant picture of my face is plastered on a banner above the field, between the words APPRENTICE CAMP and BE ANYONE YOU WANT TO BE! I remember this photo; Becca took it just as I was figuring out how to juggle three balls at once. My face is framed by the midair blurs of three foam balls. I'm looking up, smiling wide. I look *so* happy.

"Whoa" is all I manage.

Carter steps next to me and pulls the curtain a little wider. "And that's not all." He points to a projector screen hanging in front of the royal dais. A video of me standing in front of the crowd at the Round Table luncheon a few days ago is paused on the screen.

Tyler frowns. "When was this?" The other campers look at me.

"Oh, just a thing earlier this week Zach wanted me for." I'm trying not to humble-brag, but I also feel a little squirmy under their gaze. Maybe if they want me to tell them stuff, they should invite me to hang out more often.

Zach steps out onto the arena, and the crowd's murmurs quiet. "Good afternoon! We are so excited to have such a fantastic turnout for the Week Two Showcase of the North Georgia Renaissance Faire's Apprentice Camp. Our campers have worked hard to master their skills, and I know they can't wait to show you all what they've learned. But before that, I wanted to highlight a very special camper"—he looks to his side and winks at me—"with a very special connection to the camp. I could go on and on about Kaya Morgan, but I'll let her tell you herself." With that, he gestures to the enormous screen behind him, and someone somewhere presses play.

"Um, hi. My name's Kaya Morgan," I hear myself begin, over the hammering of my heartbeat in my ears. This is *wild*. Never in a million years could I have imagined myself *opening* the showcase. I'm floating on cloud nine, until I hear Zach's voice playing through the arena speakers.

"Why is diversity at the Faire so important to you?"

"Diversity? Oh, well...I guess I've always felt like I was weird for liking this kind of thing. Medieval jousts, princesses, and stuff. My family—my mom and my brother, I mean—they don't think people like us really have a place at the Faire. But they're wrong. The Faire is a place for pretending, for make-believe. At the Faire, I can be anyone I want to be. I

can belong here, even if sometimes I feel”—I watch myself take a shuddered breath in the recording, holding back tears—“like I don’t belong with them.”

The frame tightens on my face, and the words APPRENTICE CAMP: BE ANYONE YOU WANT TO BE! swirl around in sparkly letters. Emotional instrumental music swells in the arena, and the video fades out.

*What was that?*

Carter claps me on the back. “Dude, Kaya, you’re, like, the star of camp!”

“So cool!” Jessie says. Wren stays silent. I don’t say anything either. I’m not sure how I feel. I mean, I *do* look great—the melanin is popping in high resolution. And if Zach thinks *I’m* what can help make the showcase a success, then I don’t want to get in the way of that. But my stomach feels as twisty as Jessie’s wrinkled sleeve. I asked Zach not to use that recording, let alone show it to hundreds of people on a giant screen. So much was going on in my head during that speech, but the way it sounds without knowing any of that, it’s like I don’t want to be a part of my family. Like I don’t want to be Black. Shouldn’t Zach have asked first, if he really thought it was important to play it? I guess technically the media release form Mama signed *was* asking, but—

I don’t know.

“Well met, noble campers!” Queen Daphne sweeps into the room so gracefully that I almost forget it’s an empty stable and not a palace ballroom. She must see some expression flicker on my face, because she’s by my side seconds later, my costume draped over one arm. It’s the same dress Jessie wore last week, and while it fit her perfectly, it hangs on my stringbean body like a circus tent. Better than nothing, though.

“Everything all right?” Queen Daphne asks softly once she’s next to me. Her long, mascaraed lashes flutter in concern.

My eyes dart from her to the projector screen, to the crowds, and back again. *Excitement and nervousness feel the same*, I remind myself. But whatever this is, it doesn’t feel quite like nervousness *or* excitement.

The sharp squeal of microphone feedback, and then: “And with that, the Week Two Showcase begins!” Zach’s voice booms on the speakers. The other campers give him their attention, but Queen Daphne’s still watching

me, patiently waiting for a response. Everything is...not quite all right. But maybe I'll be able to put a better name to whatever I'm feeling after the showcase is done. For now, I remember the vow I made to myself, to give the performance my all so that the fundraiser goes well.

At last I nod, and Queen Daphne looks relieved.

Showtime.



## Showtime

**“Close by his fellow sits the dove** and gently whispers her his love.” Jessie’s warm vibrato fills the tournament field, echoing from the speakers as she takes her final curtsy. The audience has been enraptured since her very first note. Now, three songs later, they’re on their feet, cheering and throwing roses they must have picked up from a vendor outside of the stands. I clap loudly, too: Even if she is my competition, she’s got a great voice, and it’s clear that music is her passion. Beside me, Tyler looks like he got hit in the butt with an arrow from a cartoon cupid.

Jessie practically skips offstage, her eyes wet with happy tears. Tyler’s up next, and he’s sliding on his gloves in preparation for his performance. Jessie stops in front of him, helps him with the gloves, and tucks a rose from the audience into a buttonhole in his vest.

“Good luck, Sir Tyler,” she says with a giggle. Seriously, they’re unbearable. I look around for a spare feed bucket or something I can throw up into.

Tyler’s routine is about how he advances from being a lowly squire by showing the knight he works for that he’s got what it takes. He stumbles over a few lines, but I don’t think anyone even remembers once he climbs onto his horse, Traveler, and they take off across the field. Tyler leans forward so that his chest is almost touching Traveler’s back, and they go

even faster, the horse's hooves thundering as Tyler gracefully threads his lance through three colored rings. When Tyler's Mentor Knight kneels and gives him his helmet, the crowd erupts with cheers and whistles. Tyler takes his time bowing and getting off the stage. I don't blame him. He's earned it, and the audience is still eating it up.

Zach eventually has to come out with a microphone to quiet the crowd down, and Tyler gets the message to head back to the stables.

"And now, for our final act of the evening, Kaya Morgan. We heard a bit of Kaya's story earlier tonight, but there's so much more to tell." Zach glances toward the stables, and our eyes meet. What's he doing? He didn't give any of the other campers an introduction like this. I look up at Queen Daphne, and the crinkle between her eyebrows tells me she's just as confused as I am.

"Kaya's father, Kevin, was our Master Archer for seven seasons. It wasn't easy for him to be in a space that was so...unfamiliar..." Zach keeps talking, but I can't focus on his words anymore. He didn't even *know* Daddy; he barely even knows me. And even if all that stuff was true about Daddy facing challenges here, I don't like the way it sounds in Zach's mouth. Like Daddy was a charity case, instead of a passionate archer with as much right to be here as anyone else.

Queen Daphne squeezes my shoulder gently. "Hey," she says.

"Hey."

"Don't worry about...whatever's going on out there. Just across the arena, Ayesha, Wes, and Nori are waiting to help you give the performance of a lifetime. This is your moment, and you've worked hard for it. No speech can take that from you."

Her words are like honey, soothing the ache that's been building in my chest. Daphne was born to be queen.

And so was I.

"...Kaya Morgan!" Zach finishes talking. Ayesha and the other archers enter the field, whooping and japing as they pretend to be escaping with looted goods from a nearby kingdom.

My kingdom.

I don't let them get away easy. When I step onto the stage, I feel a surge of power course through me. Call it adrenaline, or confidence, or something bigger than both of those. Whatever it is, I'm ready.

“Yeah, Kaya!” comes a voice from the crowd. Kev Jr. *He came!*

“Halt, rogues!” my voice rings out, strong and clear. “You dare to steal the riches of Brightcastle?”

The archers freeze and slowly turn. “Your Majesty.” Wesley sneers the words. “This gold is ours, by the right of our might. There is none here who will wrest it from our hands.”

I size them up shrewdly, then look around. It’s just the four of us onstage. “You may be right; I cannot overpower you on my own. However, I can make use of one of your many weaknesses. Your pride.”

They look at one another, confused.

“I challenge you to a contest,” I say.

“A contest?” Nori rolls her eyes. “Of what sort, pray tell?”

“Of the sort in which I am well versed.” I whip my cloak off to reveal the bow and quiver under my arm. The crowd cheers, and someone in the audience whoops. With a smirk, I hold my bow up so the archers can see. “I trust you are familiar?”

The archers confer with one another, then nod in unison. “You will regret this,” Ayesha says, to which I retort, “On the contrary. When we are done, it is you who will give me my riches, of your own volition.”

“We’ll see about that!” Nori whips an arrow from her quiver, and the contest begins.

A spotlight shines on targets around the arena, each one progressively more complicated than the last. The archers and I take turns challenging one another, firing at scarecrows, bales of hay, and specially marked pennants high over the audience’s heads. As Queen Kaya holds her own against the rogue archers, we trade barbs and insults, all the way to the final target: a large pennant above the royal dais. I take aim, and my arrow flies to the center of the target. There’s a loud “Huzzah!” from the crowd, but then they go quiet. My victory depends on whether Wesley can make the same shot.

“If Your Majesty spent more time on diplomacy and less time on archery, Brightcastle would be better for it,” Wesley says, turning to the audience as though he expects applause. They meet him with jeers and boos. Wesley shrugs it off, takes aim at the pennant, and narrowly misses—on purpose, of course.

“If thy arrow be as sharp as thy wit, thine enemies have cause to rejoice!” I fire back the line we came up with yesterday afternoon. The

crowd cheers twice as loud as I lift a fist in the air. The archers kneel at my feet, arms outstretched to return the satchels of stolen goods.

“Fair Queen Kaya, you have defended your lands with courage and honor,” Nori says. “Please have mercy on our band of miscreants! ’Twas an act of folly.” The three of them bow hurriedly and rush toward the stables. Time for the grand finale. I inspect the goods they left and frown as I notice three items are missing. Wesley is the last thief to exit, still a few yards from the stable gate.

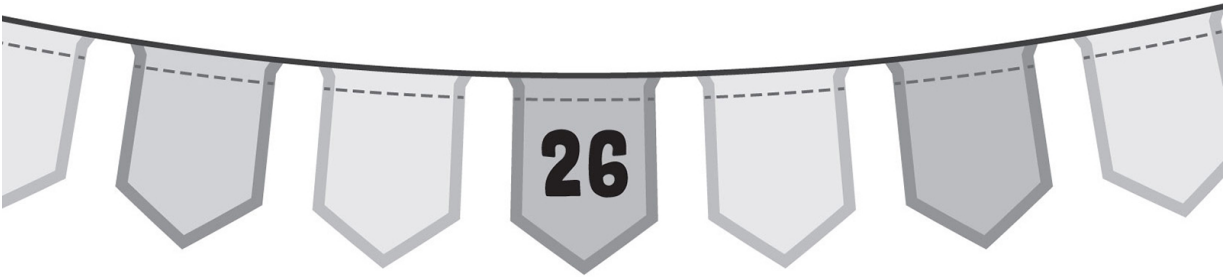
“Drop it!” I command as I fire one last arrow at a nearby post. He yelps and tosses me three large gold bracelets, which I juggle with ease. With a flourish, I catch the bracelets around my arm—*one-two-three*—and give my final dramatic curtsy.

Queen Kaya is victorious.

The audience thunders with applause. An avalanche of roses lands on my feet and thuds gently on my head, my shoulders. My heart is hammering so loudly in my ears that I can’t hear the cheers, but I can feel them shaking the ground below me.

The other campers come out to join me for a final bow as the audience rises to their feet one last time. And in this moment I don’t care about Zach’s weird speech, or the larger-than-life version of me smiling down from the banner overhead. There’s only room for a single thought in my mind:

*I did it.*



## The Moment You've Been Waiting For

**I'm riding such a high after** our curtain call that I almost forget about what comes next. The audience must, too, because a third of them are starting to shuffle out of the stands, when Zach appears.

"Lords and ladies, if you'll take your seats," he says. "There's just one final piece to this evening's program."

Of course: the Naming Ceremony. The *real* one, where we find out our roles for Apprentice Weekend, starting tomorrow. The one I've been imagining all summer, picturing myself in the royal dais for the Final Joust. The twisty feeling starts in my gut again. No hope in telling myself it's just excitement this time; this is all nerves.

Zach gestures for the five of us to turn around and walk to the royal dais. A couple of squires stand beside a small table with a few props on it, I suppose to signal the various roles we'll be taking on for the weekend. There are way more props than campers; both a crown and a set of juggling pins for me, but also a writing quill and a spot for Tyler's knight helmet. I guess they want to keep the element of surprise up to the very last minute.

Wren's up first. Unsurprisingly, Zach hands her a pirate's scabbard, and she looks delighted. She was always a wench to me; this just makes it official. Carter is named a blacksmith. Tyler's up next. He removes his knight's helmet, and Zach holds out his hand to take it. He has a feather



quill in his other hand, and I watch with bated breath. Will he give Tyler the helmet back? Slowly, Zach extends his other hand, holding out the quill. I feel a twinge of disappointment, but Tyler's eyes light up as he accepts the feather.

"Yes!" he says. I guess he wasn't lying when he said he'd really be happy with either option. I wonder what that's like.

Zach shuffles over to me, a warm glint in his eye.

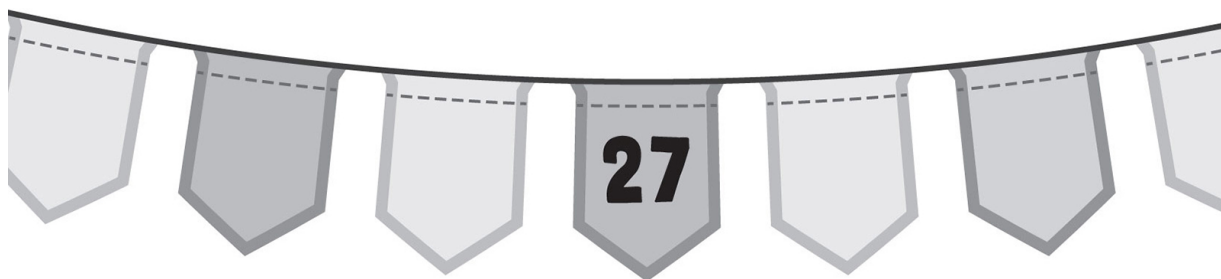
"You crushed it, Kaya," he says with a wink. "Nice work."

When I was little, my grandma had a cockatiel that would puff out its chest feathers when she called it a smart boy. I feel a little bit like Professor Crackers right now. I can't help the smile that spreads across my face from ear to ear. If only Mama were here to see this...

Zach holds out a juggling pin. It stretches across the space between us, pointing at my stomach like a dagger. It might as well be one.

I am not queen.

I am the jester.



## But...Why?

**What the Faire-famous** frozen custard just happened?

After Jessie was crowned, the five of us stood there on the dais while the Round Table and their friends cheered and threw more stupid flowers. I don't know if anyone said anything to me, or even looked at me. It was like I was outside of time, outside of my body watching a disaster happen in slow motion. Five minutes later, we're herded onto the floor of the jousting arena again, where the audience is gathering to socialize and (hopefully) sign up for next summer. It's like when everyone rushes the field after the Super Bowl, except going to Disney World is the furthest thing from my mind right now.

"Smile!" Becca says cheerily, holding up her phone. "Get closer! Pretend you like each other!" The other campers put their arms around one another in a huddle. I try to do the same, but the juggling pin slips from my hands. I stare at it on the ground, willing myself to pick it up. But I can't even bring myself to touch it. I don't *want* this, and picking the pin up again feels like accepting my fate.

Jessie, of course, grabs it for me. "Here you g— Oh," she says as she clocks my face for the first time since the Naming Ceremony. My eyes trail from her face up to the dainty circlet atop her head, sitting there so perfectly

I almost wonder if it's been custom fitted. How far in advance was this planned? Did she know?

"*Ren Faire* on three!" Becca calls our attention back. "One! Two! Three!"

Flash. Between my pout and Jessie's concerned panic, I'm not sure that one's going up on the fridge any time soon.

When Becca moves on to capture some more memories, Jessie and Tyler stay behind.

"I'm so sorry," Jessie says. "I had no idea...and I don't even want—"

"Right, she doesn't even *want*— Sorry," Tyler says, realizing he's interrupted. Jessie smiles sweetly at him. "No, it's fine. And you're right...."

"No, I shouldn't have talked over you—"

I wait not so patiently for both of them to remember they're supposed to be consoling *me*. At last, Tyler turns.

"What can we do?" he asks as he thumbs the quill in his hands.

Suddenly I'm embarrassed that they're fussing over me like this. Why can't I just be like Tyler, happy with either option?

"Yeah, how can we help? I'm so sorry, Kaya. Like Tyler said, I didn't even want to be queen. Seriously."

She expects me to believe that? After her sugary-sweet here-Kaya-have-my-shirt-so-you-don't-pass-out routine last week? I know we're close to the stables, but the horses aren't the only manure I smell right now. Still, if Jessie's going to keep pretending to be my friend, at the very least I can call her bluff.

"Tell him," I say. "Tell Zach you don't want the role, that you want me to be queen instead."

"What?" Jessie blinks at me.

Tyler laughs nervously. "Kaya—"

"You wanted to help, right? So help." I look them both dead in the eye.

Jessie folds one arm across her stomach, but then her expression changes from hesitant to resolute. "I mean, yeah," she says. "Of course. Let's do it."

My mouth falls open. "Wait, for real? You would...do that?"

"Sure." She shrugs and takes off toward Zach in the crowd. I look from her to Tyler, who gives me a told-you-so look. I should've known Tyler

wouldn't crush on just anyone. Jessie's all right.

"Jessie Marie!" A blond woman I recognize from the first day of camp as Jessie's mom comes swooping in, arms wide. She cuts Jessie off on her path and wraps her in a hug.

"You were amazing, sweetheart!" Jessie's mom says.

"Thanks, Mom." Now *Jessie's* the one who looks a little like Professor Crackers—pleased and proud. She turns to me. "I'll be right there, just let me do something real quick."

Jessie starts to introduce her mom to Tyler as I search for Zach in the crowd. The Faire's resident bard is perched on a fence, tuning his lyre, as I walk past. I try to rush by quickly, but as soon as he opens his mouth, I know I've been spotted. In a resonant baritone, he sings:

*"There once was a maiden so lovely and fair,  
No part bit of her homely or plain.  
Her most striking feature, her raven-black hair,  
As bold as a li—"*

I spin to face him. "Lemme stop you right there, before I hear you say *lion's mane* and we end up on the internet."

The Bard holds his hands up innocently. I give him one last look and keep going.

I catch sight of Zach posing for a picture with some older men, looking like he shed years of stress in an hour. He's got his back turned to me when I reach him, and I falter for a second. Am I really about to confront him like this, with all these strange people around? It reminds me of the first day of camp all over again, when I was the whiny little girl throwing a tantrum. Is it worth all this, just because of some childhood fantasy of being queen? I look up in uncertainty and see my very own face staring down from the banner overhead. And that settles it. I don't have to have the words to articulate what's wrong about this to know that it's not right.

I tap Zach on the shoulder. He spins around with a politician's grin, expecting to meet someone at his eye level. His smile dims a little when he realizes it's just me.

"Oh, hey, Kaya! Let me introduce you to a few—"

"Sorry, no—just a sec. I need to talk to you." I force the words out before I have a chance to second-guess them. "I want you to change the roles and make me queen. I think...you know you should." That last part is

a stretch, but I've gotten to know Zach a decent amount these past couple of weeks. The boy's not dumb.

Zach's shoulders slump, and he sighs like Mama after a long shift at the hospital. "Kaya. How to explain..." His brows knit together. "It's Marketing 101: Know your audience. You like performing, right?"

I nod.

"Well, if you had to give a performance to a group of kindergarteners, would you do Shakespeare or bust out some balloon animals?"

"Balloon animals," I say.

"Right! It's about expectations. You are *great* at being the face of the Faire for social media. I love your story. But our in-person audience wants something more traditional. When they think *jester*, they want your juggling and your amazing sense of humor—speaking of which, maybe no bow and arrow in the jester act this weekend, yeah?—and when our audience thinks *queen*, they think—" He waves his hands in small circles, looking for the words. He doesn't find them.

But I do. When they think *queen*, they think *Jessie*.

"Which audience do you mean, though?" I ask, my voice stronger than I feel. "Because I know firsthand that other people besides this crowd enjoy the Faire. People from *every neighborhood*. But where are they?"

Zach steeples his hands. "The camp has a limited budget. We have to target our funds where they're most effective, in communities most likely to attend."

"How is anyone else supposed to attend if they don't even know about it?" My voice is getting all screechy now. I can feel the tears burning behind my eyes.

Zach's face goes pale with panic as he notices a few Round Table members glance our way. I'm causing a scene. Good.

"Kaya." Zach puts his hands up like he's taming an animal at the circus. "Jessie's worked every bit as hard as you—"

"But Jessie doesn't even *want* it!" I say. Speaking of Jessie, where is she? I rise to my tiptoes, searching across the crowd. I spot Jessie's mom first, talking to Queen Daphne. Jessie's sandwiched between them, and her mom is adjusting her daughter's crown and looking like she may genuinely burst with pride. The torn, distant look on Jessie's face tells me everything I need to know. She's not coming. Of course.

“Still....” Zach’s calm voice pulls me back to our conversation. “This is bigger than just what Jessie wants. It’s about the future of camp. Campers come from our patrons, and patrons come to the Faire for the illusion—”

“Oh, it’s an illusion all right.” Kev Jr. emerges from the crowd. In this moment, with the afternoon sunlight blurry through my unshed tears, he looks more like Daddy than I’ve ever seen him.

“This whole place is an illusion,” my brother continues as he steps closer to us. “None of it’s real. Not the costumes, not the history, and certainly not the part where you expect Kaya to let you exploit her grief for enrollments.” The people closest to us have stopped their conversations, forming a small circle as they watch.

Zach’s eyes shift between Kev Jr. and me. “You must be Kaya’s brother!” he says, laying on the charm like he’s welcoming us to Thanksgiving dinner. A few onlookers return to their conversations. “She’s quite the star, isn’t she? What did you think of her performance?”

“Didn’t notice it, to be honest with you,” my brother says, and the words are like a battering ram to my heart. He goes on. “What I *did* notice is you manipulating a *child* into being the star of your little marketing campaign.”

When Zach speaks again, his voice is low. “I don’t know what you think is happening here, but I would never dream of making Kaya do anything she doesn’t want to do. Nobody’s using anybody.” He turns to me. “Right, Kaya?”

It feels like my mouth is glued shut. Obviously, what’s happened is unfair, but is Zach right? It’s not like he forced me to put myself in front of Becca’s camera, or forced me to get my mom to sign the release form. And if he *did* use me, then I used him, too, didn’t I? Because if I had gotten what I wanted and been crowned queen, would I even be upset right now?

Zach’s still waiting for me to agree with him. Kev Jr. looks disappointed in me, but he pulls out his phone and holds it up to Zach’s face. I can hear my own voice coming through the speakers, tinny and strained: “At the Faire, I can be anyone I want to be.”

*Anyone but a queen, that is.*

“Delete it,” Kev Jr. tells Zach. “This post, and all the other videos where you make my sister your minstrel.” Zach’s eyes go wide, and I know he understands what my brother means when he uses that word. When Kev Jr.

says *minstrel*, he's not talking about the singing men in tights who walk around the Faire. He means that Zach is taking advantage of my face—my *Black* face—to paint the Faire as more diverse and modern, even though his own views about how the Faire should look are as backward as ever.

Zach laughs nervously. “Hey, man, I—”

“Delete it!” Kev Jr. yells, and dozens of pairs of curious eyes turn to us. My brother doesn't even notice, but I can feel their eyes on me. Zach must, too, because he plasters a smile on his face. “Let's let Kaya decide,” he says. “Kaya, I'll delete those videos in an instant, just say the word. But you know that if I do that, we'll lose out on who knows how many enrollments for next summer. We may not get the numbers we need to stay afloat. I know how important Brightcastle is to you. And I'm sorry for the way the showcase turned out, I really am. But you still have a chance to be the queen Brightcastle deserves, and do what's right for your kingdom.”

I look between the two of them: Zach, begging me with desperate eyes, and my brother, face hardened but hopeful. Zach's betrayal still burns in my chest. He told me he loves my story, but loving my story and loving *me* are not the same thing. My shine is only useful to him as long as he can point it where he wants. Maybe this is what Kev Jr. was talking about when he told me to be careful—not just of people who call me names or exclude me outright. He was warning me to watch out for people who see me as a symbol instead of a person. People who want to use me, and what my presence here could represent.

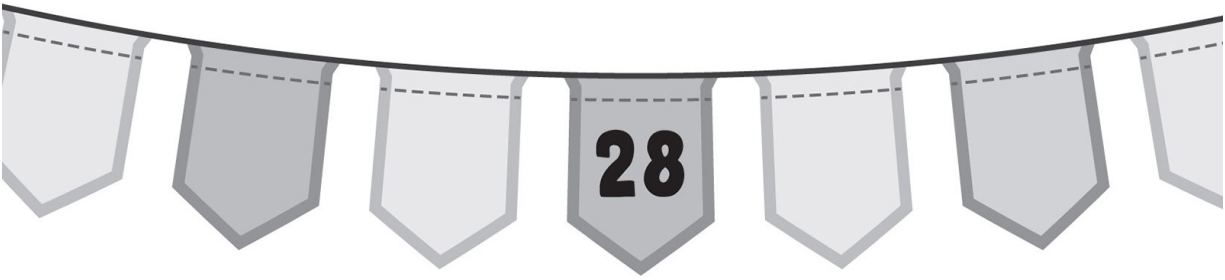
Zach's still watching me. *Just say the word*, he said. The future of Apprentice Camp is in my hands. Can I really bring myself to risk it closing simply because I want revenge?

“Let's go home,” I mumble to Kev Jr. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Zach's shoulders slump with relief.

“You serious?” my brother asks behind me.

“Yeah. I don't want to be here anymore.” Kev Jr. doesn't say anything, but I hear his footsteps behind me as we walk toward the parking lot. A storm's rolling in tonight. Brightcastle's green pennant flags flap wildly in the wind over the Faire's entrance. I should be happy, proud that my actions mean Apprentice Camp will go on next summer. I saved the kingdom, exactly like I wanted. But I don't feel victorious.

I just feel *done*.



## Wounded

How'd it go???

hello?

ur probably out celebrating

**Every message from Ray is like** feeling the loss of this afternoon all over again. I turn my phone to airplane mode and shove it in my pocket. Kev Jr. still hasn't said anything since we got in the car, but as we roll down the northbound highway in a torrential downpour, his thumb taps erratically on the steering wheel, like it's a funnel for all his pent-up anger. I know he's disappointed in me. For a second there, I almost believed I could make it through the summer without him being ashamed of me again.

I should've known better, I guess.

But this time is different, because I'm embarrassed, too. I was doing just fine handling things with Zach before Kev Jr. stepped in and caused a



scene. How many enrollments did the camp lose because people saw him and Zach arguing?

It's late afternoon by the time we fight our way through Friday rush-hour traffic and pull into the garage, finally safe from the pounding sheets of rain. The car's rumbling stops as Kev Jr. kills the ignition.

"Sorry about the way things turned out today," he says. "If you want, I'll cancel my plans and we can play *Siegelands* all day tomorrow?"

"What? No!" I say, too loud, too quickly. "No, I'm...going to be at the Faire tomorrow." I didn't know it until this moment, but it's the truth. I'm heartbroken, but the Faire's still my happy place; there's nowhere I'd rather be. And anyway, Barry's counting on me for the jester performance. None of this was his fault, and I don't want to let him down.

"*What?*" The word is sharp as a dagger's point. "Kaya, no. I don't ever want you to go to that Faire again."

"Good thing you're not in charge, then," I fire back. "You really didn't even watch me perform?"

"*That's* what you're upset about? Kaya: Who. Cares. They were *using* you. The second I saw that video, I couldn't focus on anything else. If you think for one minute that I was going to let them do that to my baby sister —"

"You came today to feel closer to Daddy. What do you think he would've thought of the way you behaved?"

"The way *I* behaved?! Zach's the one who was out of pocket. I was standing up for you."

"And you almost brought the whole camp down in the process. If anyone had thought to pull out a phone and record y'all, or if anyone posts about it later..."

He sniffs, trying to act all tough. "Yeah, well, maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing."

"You would love that, wouldn't you? The end of camp, the end of the Faire, even! Just because you're jealous of what me and Daddy had."

He laughs bitterly. "I know you like your make-believe movies and stuff, but eventually you're going to have to join us in the real world."

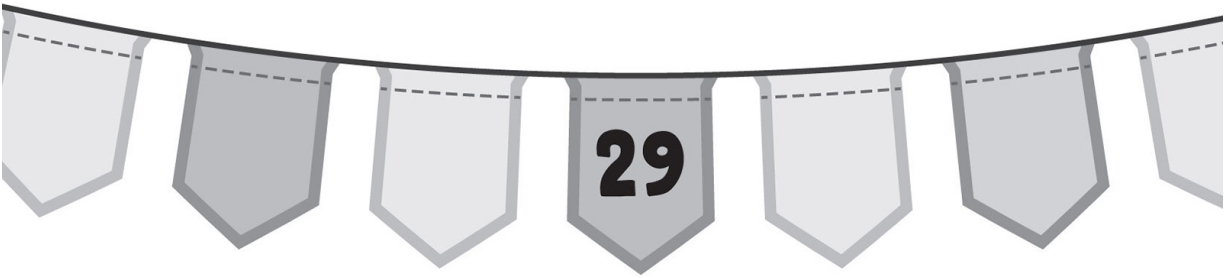
I pull my arms tighter across my chest. "I *know* the Faire's not the real —"

“So, why?!” He squeezes the steering wheel so tight the leather creaks. “Why do you care so much about being queen? You let those fools walk all over you, and you get mad at *me* when I’m just trying to help you see your worth. Why does this matter so much to you?”

Silence hangs in the air between us. I can’t believe he came all the way down to the fairgrounds and still doesn’t get it. I wanted him to see the magic of the Faire, but instead he just saw the same old battle he always searches out: white versus Black, them versus us. I’m sorry that he’s had his own struggles, I really am. But doesn’t he get tired seeing the whole world as one big fight?

Kev Jr.’s still watching me, waiting hopefully. Like if I can explain why I care so much, it will heal the wounds we’ve both caused. But instead, I grab my things and step out of the car, mumbling the only thing I’m sure of as I rush past him into the house:

“You wouldn’t understand.”



## Apprentice Weekend

**You don't have to be the Faire's** resident fortune teller, Nostra-Don-Us, to guess that my first morning as Apprentice Jester goes horribly. Barry and I have two shows before lunch and two shows after, and in between we're supposed to be joking with the patrons as they walk through the Faire. But I'm too worried about running into Jessie and Queen Daphne to focus on our act. Onstage, I'm so distracted that I drop the ball—literally—half a dozen times. I'm sure the lifeless expression on my face doesn't help matters. When Barry tries to get me to smile, whatever I do with my face makes the audience visibly uncomfortable, so I just go back to sulking. I feel awful; I wanted to come back to the Faire to help Barry out, but my presence here might make this his lowest weekend for tips on record. I should've stayed home.

After show number two, we leave the stage. A flash of green fabric in the crowd sends me darting the other way to avoid Jessie, so quickly that I almost run straight into the Faire's falconer, Connie.

"Sorry," I mumble as Connie's falcon, Gertrude, rearranges herself on her arm. "I thought..." But as I turn toward the source of my panic, it's not Jessie's green gown I see, but some guy cosplaying as a hobbit. False alarm.

"Kaya." Barry catches up with me as Connie gives me a side-eye rivaling Gertrude's wingspan. "What was that?"

“I don’t know. I’m sorry, I...I don’t know.” Of course, I *do* know. But the last place I want to erupt into tears is in the middle of the Faire. Nobody likes a sad jester.

“Look,” Barry says softly. “I know this isn’t exactly what you hoped for. I just wanted to say, your dad was an amazing archer. But he was a fantastic jester, too, because that’s the kind of man he was: He put all of himself into whatever was in front of him. Including being your dad.” He smiles. “And you can bring your whole self to *whatever* role life throws your way.”

I think Barry’s trying to make me feel better about being a jester, but all I hear is that I’m not giving it my all today, which I already knew. Daddy would be so disappointed. Even without Barry’s speech, all I see are memories of him, everywhere I look. *How are you carrying on your dad’s legacy?* Zach asked during that interview with the Round Table. The question was whack, but it still has an answer:

I’m not. In fact, I feel like I’m destroying it.

Against my will, my face begins to crumple. Barry’s face softens with concern. “Oh, Kaya...Do you want to talk about it?”

I can’t talk about it, not right now. It feels like the only thing stopping every bad feeling inside from tumbling out is the fact that they’re all trying to get out at once. “I’m okay. Thanks, Barry. See you in an hour?” Before he can respond, I head to Ye Olde Food Court to drown my sorrows in a basket of chicken tenders. I don’t want to see the look of pity on Barry’s face. He’s just one more person I’m disappointing lately.



The good news is that the chicken tenders—as always—are hitting. I can barely wait for the chicken-shape magma under the batter to cool before I eat it all. There are still forty minutes left in my lunch break, so I prop my elbow up on the wooden picnic table and settle in for some people watching. This is my first time at the Faire when it’s actually open all summer. The patrons are the true magic of the Faire. I spot elves, witches, even—somehow—a centaur. For a few hours, everyone here suspends their disbelief and envisions a different reality.

*Look, Daddy!* I think to myself. *That fairy's wings are too shimmery to be man-made. And that wooden flute must be charmed—see how its melody makes the man in the corner fall asleep?* I smile at the drowsy patron—who is definitely under some kind of enchantment and not just suffering the consequences of the half-empty tankard of ale in front of him. Indulging in the fantasy helps a little bit. After I throw away my trash, I decide to spend the rest of my lunch break wandering the Faire, spotting more magic in the wild. I walk around aimlessly until I find some shaded seating over by the children's area, probably put here so parents can watch their kids play without getting baked alive. In the center of the children's maze and other rides, a tall slide shaped like a tower rises from the ground. The Castle Corkscrew. When I was younger, I used to climb to the top and pretend I was Rapunzel. Other kids—normal kids—would climb the ladder and go down the slide, growing more and more annoyed with me as they cut in front of me for the fifth time. But I wasn't there to play. I was there to dream, and I would've spent hours up there if Daddy hadn't lured me down with promises of sugary treats. I take a seat and catch sight of a young girl with frizzy brown curls, perched atop the slide and looking down at the Faire like she's surveying her kingdom. A warm glow fills my chest. The Faire never changes.

"This is perfect." A familiar voice stirs me from my thoughts. I peer around the shade tree as Zach emerges from a fabric merchant's shop a few yards away, holding a hanger with a green silk robe. Embroidered on the robe are two slender cranes in an art style that is definitely not medieval Europe. It looks almost...Japanese?

"I'm so glad! Sorry again about the delay," says the shopkeeper before rolling a plastic bag down over the robe. Neither of them have noticed me yet. I creep closer to the tree and peer around to get a better look.

"Oh, one day won't make a huge difference," Zach says. "As long as Tyler wears this for the final day of Apprentice Weekend, we can call it good." He's got a bulging tote bag over his shoulder, and he struggles to hold the robe along with everything else he's carrying. Zach shifts his weight, and a book slides out of the bag. I squint at the cover as he picks it up. *Japanese Calligraphy for Dummies*.

"I'll give him the news tonight," Zach says. "If our new 'Toshi' Nomura needs his kimono taken in tomorrow, can you...?" He lifts the clothes bag

with a questioning gesture.

“I’ll be here,” says the shopkeeper. They say goodbye, and Zach stuffs *Japanese Calligraphy for Dummies* back in his bag.

Oh, someone here’s a dummy all right, but it’s not going to be Tyler. If I’m putting things together correctly, it looks like Zach wants to turn Tyler’s scribe character into some walking stereotype. I should’ve seen this coming: In Zach’s world, there’s no room for a medieval scribe who looks like Tyler—it doesn’t fit the “expectations” Zach’s trying to fulfill. My neck and chest burn under my jester’s costume, and I feel the same shameful outrage I did at the Naming Ceremony. I may not have been able to stand up for myself last night, but I’ve *got* to stand up for my friend. I have to tell Tyler what Zach’s planning. I pull out my phone:

Can you talk

But no matter how hard I stare at my phone, there’s no response. Maybe his phone’s off? Sometimes performers switch off their devices to help get into character. I’ve got to think of a way to reach Tyler. Quickly, I scribble the words *check your phone* onto a napkin and catch one of the Rose Ladies as she strolls, arm in arm with a smitten patron. She agrees to pass my note to Thomas the Tall, the Faire’s Stiltwalker. Thomas’s route takes him past the Bracelets and Baubles Gift Shoppe. The main clerk there, Bryn, can walk it across the High Road to the Witch’s Brew coffeehouse, where Connie the Falconer should be on break. Connie can get it to the Merry Milkmaids, who do their afternoon show on the stage right beside the scribes’ booth, where Tyler and his Mentor will be penning custom poems in beautiful calligraphy.

The Rose Lady assures me she’ll pass the message on, but three hours later, there’s no answer from Tyler. The instant we complete our final bows for the last show of the day, I say goodbye to Barry and sprint toward the fairgrounds exit. Tyler’s already in the car, telling his mom excitedly about his first day as a scribe.

“One patron asked me to write a poem to her neighbor, asking him to stop letting his dog do his business in her yard every morning. Not only did I come up with something brilliant; it’s even in iambic pentameter! Listen

to this: ‘If on your morning walk, each summer day, your pug must poo, then please: Throw it away!’”

“Hey,” I say hurriedly as I buckle my seat belt. “I texted you earlier.”

“Oh, sorry, my phone’s been dead since lunch.” He shows me his phone’s black screen. “I spent my first break looking up quill-trimming tutorials.”

My stomach twists at the mention of calligraphy. Telling Tyler about Zach’s plan is going to wreck him. But it’s got to be done. As soon as we’re on the road and Tyler’s mom turns up her music, I begin.

“Hey, so, this afternoon I overheard Zach planning something kind of messed up that I think you should know about.”

Tyler marks his spot in his summer-reading book and closes it. “Like what?”

“Well, like, he had a kimono and all these books about Japanese calligraphy. I think he wants to change your role tomorrow. To something more ‘authentic.’”

He frowns. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know! Like I said, it’s messed up. But last night after the Naming Ceremony, when I asked him why I couldn’t be queen, he said that Faire patrons have certain...expectations...when it comes to roles like that and...”

“And?”

I reach for the words as I look at Tyler’s face. I don’t even know for sure if Zach made him a scribe instead of a knight for the same reason I can’t be queen, or if that’s why he’s changing Tyler’s character. But it’s got the same stink on it.

I swallow. “Roles like that, and...people like us.”

Tyler frowns. “He said that?”

“Not exactly, but that’s what he meant.” A sick feeling spreads in my stomach at the same time confusion spreads across Tyler’s face. “I’m sorry,” I say quietly. “I think you would’ve made a great knight. And it’s not right that he wants to make your scribe character this...well, *character*.”

Mrs. Nomura’s pop music plays softly in the car as I wait for Tyler to respond.

“I mean, you don’t really *know*,” he finally says.

“What?”

“You *don’t* know that’s what he meant. That it’s a race thing.”

I stammer. “W-well—like I said, not for sure. But don’t you think it’s weird how every family at the showcase was white? It’s like Zach didn’t even *try* to reach out to other communities.”

“And this Japanese calligraphy thing sounds ridiculous,” Tyler continues, like he didn’t even hear me. “Why would Zach change my role at the last minute?”

“I have no idea, but—”

Tyler pinches the bridge of his nose. “Look, Kaya, I get that you didn’t end up with the role you wanted. That sucks, and I’m sorry. But I’m *happy*, you know? I’m just as happy being scribe as I would’ve been being knight. Seriously. I don’t need you making this into something it’s not and blowing all that up, just because you’re upset.”

“That’s not what I’m doing!” It’s a struggle to keep my voice quiet enough that Tyler’s mom doesn’t get suspicious.

“What else would you call it, then? Since day one, you’ve been trying to put the same chip on my shoulder that you’ve got. Getting me to not like Jessie, to think Zach’s...what, a secret racist? Well, it’s not us against them, Kaya; it’s not us against anybody. It just is what it is, and you’re the only one making it some big struggle!”

“Guys?” Mrs. Nomura’s voice has that mom-warning tone, but Tyler keeps going.

“You think that being queen will automatically make everything great. That’s not how it works! People don’t like Jessie because she looks like a queen. They like her because she’s kind. Genuinely kind. She wasn’t just being nice to get ahead. Do you want to know what her main goal was for her week as queen? Conquering her stage fright.”

“Stage fright?” I repeat. *Equal parts courage and compassion*, Queen Daphne told me earlier this week. Jessie already had the compassion part down. She was working on her courage.

Tyler keeps going. “It wasn’t even about you. So what now, Kaya? Are you magically going to become kind when you find yourself up on that throne? Alone?”

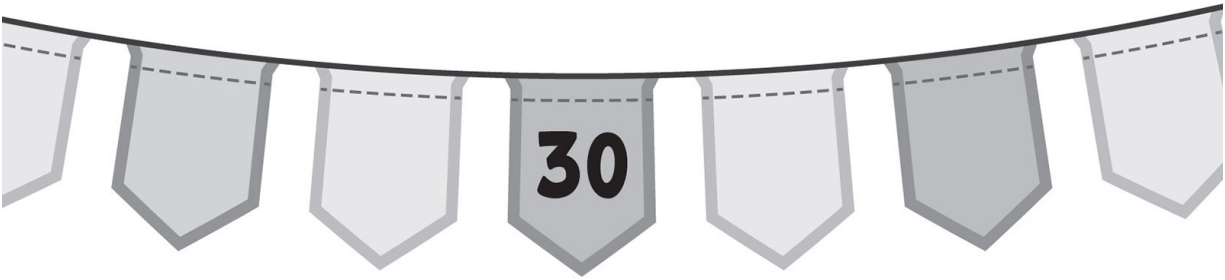
*Nice one, Dr. Seuss.* My head is spinning so fast at his sudden outburst that I can’t even put an answer together. I open and shut my mouth a few times, then just look out the window and will the hot tears not to overflow.



Tyler doesn't talk to me again, not even when his mom pulls into my driveway. I run out of the car before anyone can see me cry, but the second I get into the quiet kitchen, the dam breaks. My quiver is sitting there against the wall by the coatrack, reminding me of everything I wanted Apprentice Weekend to be. Now it's finally here, and not only do I not have my crown, I don't have any friends, or my family, or my pride. I'm not Queen Kaya, bidding my loyal subjects adieu at the Final Joust. I'm Kaya the Fool, a lonely failure who can't even set foot in Brightcastle without letting someone down.

The tears fall freely now, followed by quiet hiccups that turn into choking sobs. My loud cries fill the empty kitchen so completely that I can't hear anything else. That's why I barely notice when familiar footsteps race from the other side of the house, down the stairs, and a blurry someone sweeps me into a hug I would recognize anywhere, in any lifetime.

"I got you, baby," Mama whispers into my hair. "I got you."



## Healed

**Kev Jr. pops his head out** of the family room a few seconds later, head bowed sheepishly. “I...*may* have told Mama about our conversation yesterday.”

“What?” My voice is muffled by Mama’s arms, still wrapped around me. A small part of me is mad at my brother for sharing my business like that, but that small part is no match for how much relief Mama’s hug brings. And after holding everything in for so long, I’d be too exhausted to explain what happened at the showcase, if Kev Jr. hadn’t already filled her in.

“Things got even worse today,” I tell them both. We head into the family room. Kev Jr. takes the comfy recliner, which normally I’d be salty about. But I sit next to Mama, and she puts her arm around me, giving me strength to explain what happened today. I tell them about the conversation I overheard between Zach and the shopkeeper, and the fight with Tyler afterward. By the time I’m done, Mama’s mouth is quirked so far to one side that I fear for Zach’s safety.

“But I understand why Tyler reacted the way he did,” I say. “I haven’t been a good friend since camp began. He was right to be suspicious of me.”

“I’m so sorry you’ve been going through all this without me, baby. I should’ve been there for you.” Mama squeezes my shoulder. “It’s still hard

for me to hear about things your father loved so much.”

“I love those things, too, Mama.” My voice trembles as I speak, but the words demand to be said. “And I need you to see me.”

“Oh, baby.” Tears leave a trail down my mother’s smooth brown cheeks. “I see you,” she whispers. “What can I do?”

I look from her, to my brother, both of them watching me with such tenderness. I just want us to spend time together. To be a unit instead of two halves of a whole.

“Movie marathon,” I say decidedly. “*A Knight’s Tale*, *Shang-Chi*, and”—I eye my brother pointedly—“*The Woman King*.”

He smiles at me.

“You got it, baby girl,” Mama says. “I’m off on Monday. And I promise, I’m going to do better.”

“Me too,” says Kev Jr. “And I’m sorry for yesterday. I could’ve handled myself differently—”

“No, I needed exactly what you did,” I say. “You were right about Zach. But he’s always so...*nice* to me, without your reaction I never would’ve realized how unkind he is.” I look at my brother and let out a deep breath. “And I realized something. You asked me yesterday why being queen is so important to me.” I take a shaky breath as I remember the girl atop the corkscrew slide earlier today. “I think it’s because of losing Daddy. The Faire never changes, and that’s why I feel so close to Daddy there. I think I thought maybe *I* wasn’t supposed to change, either. That way I could...keep things in place. Stop the world from moving. From moving on.”

“Oh, Kayabeen.” Mama’s voice cracks.

“I want to be queen because it’s what I’ve wanted forever, since before Daddy died. If I change what I want, it feels like I’m betraying him. Turning into someone he never got to see.”

“He would be *so* immensely proud of both of you. I talk to him about you two every day. And, Kaya, he wouldn’t want you to hold yourself back from becoming the person you’re meant to be. You owe it to yourself to grow. Daddy will always be with you. Nothing you like or dislike will ever change that.”

I bury my face in her side so her shirt can absorb my happy tears. When I pull away, Kev Jr.’s standing in front of me, waiting for his own hug. I

don't waste a second before I jump up and wrap my arms around him. After we hug, he clears his throat.

"Okay, good, movie marathon is set, and we got the feelings out of the way," he says. "Now we can switch focus to what really matters."

"What's that?" I wipe my eyes and look to Mama, who seems equally confused.

Kev Jr. smiles with a glint in his eye. "How you're going to get ol' boy back tomorrow."

"Zach? Get him back how?"

"You tell me, Queen Kaya. How are we going to show *Zach*"—he rolls his eyes—"and everyone else at the Faire what you've really got going on? Before the sun sets on Brightcastle, you need to be front and center. Shooting arrows, slaying foes. And not just for the Woodbridge crowd, either. For all of us."

Mama nods. "Your dad would want you to bring your whole amazing self to your role. Our funny, brave, kind, beautiful girl."

"I...don't know," I say. Kev Jr.'s idea sounds amazing, but I don't have any idea where to start planning something like that, especially not by myself. If I'm going to put on any sort of performance against Zach's wishes, I'm going to need help. I'm going to need my friends. So, I guess there's only one thing to do now.

And it involves a fight to the death.



## Melee Madness, the Remix

**“Relax, Kaya. He’ll be here,”** Kev Jr. assures me, eyes glued to his phone. The Faire’s just now opening, and the heat’s picking up. The cicadas in the nearby woods buzz to life. It feels like they’re swarming in my stomach as we head up the hill toward the Melee Madness arena. “I hope so,” I say. “How are things looking on social?”

“Just hit two hundred followers!” Kev Jr. says. His face scrunches up. “Who’s 404SunshineGrrl? Wait—I already know.”

I giggle at the mention of Ray’s username and peer over my brother’s shoulder. Last night, he went through all Becca’s videos on the camp’s social media accounts and used the footage to make some videos of his own on a new account called BrightcastleRemix. The new page features supercuts of me doing archery, juggling, and talking about the Faire. He even made the glassblowing disaster look good! And I’m not the only one shown; I made sure the videos featured each of the campers using clips from the beginning of Week One, before I became the face of the Faire. All Kev Jr.’s videos invite people to the Final Joust tonight. And all of them have hip-hop tracks in the background instead of the pop music Becca chose. Seeing myself loose an arrow at a target accompanied by Drake and Megan Thee Stallion makes me feel powerful. Like there’s no disconnect between being Black and liking these things. Ray’s all over the comments

section, of course, screaming her support in all caps: AND THAT'S ON HAND-EYE COORDINATION and GO HEAD WITH THOSE GLASS LOUBOUTINS, I SEE THE VISION! All of it makes me feel empowered, capable. Maybe Black culture isn't just one set thing. Maybe anything Black people do—anything we're interested in—becomes part of the culture. Maybe it grows and evolves. Like me.

It's still early, and none of the patrons have made it over to Olde Towne yet, which is perfect for what I've got planned. Last night, Mama texted Mrs. Nomura, explaining that I wanted to apologize to Tyler in person. She asked Mrs. Nomura to arrive to the Faire just ten minutes earlier than usual, and ask Tyler to go to Melee Madness, where I'm standing now. But time's almost up; our Apprentice Weekend shifts start in two minutes. Maybe Mrs. Nomura didn't make the drive in time, or maybe Tyler figured out what the whole thing was about and doesn't want to see me. I don't blame him.

The clock in Olde Towne Square chimes ten. I should pack it up and get to Barry before I'm even later for warm-ups. But I'm rooted to the spot. Just a few more minutes. Just one more chance.

At 10:05 a.m., Tyler trudges up the hill from New Towne, amid the first trickle of patrons. He walks steadily until he spots me standing alone in the Melee Madness pit.

"You got this, sis," Kev Jr. says softly. "I'm going to go work on the other part of our plan." He gives Tyler a nod and heads for New Towne. Tyler's face is twisted in a full-on scowl now, but at least he doesn't stop walking. Hey, I'll take it.

"Hi," I say when he reaches the threshold of the pit.

"Okay, I'm here. What do you want?" he says gruffly. And that's *all* he says.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

"I, uh—" I clear my throat. "I challenge you!" My voice booms so loudly that the patrons walking by turn to watch. Tyler shrinks under the attention.

"Kaya, what are you doing?" he asks, embarrassed.

"Trial by combat! One-on-one!" I don't lower my voice. A small crowd is gathering now.

"I'm not—"

“If you win, you may name your prize. But if I win,” I shout even louder, “you must hear my suit, without interruption!” The crowd cheers, even though they don’t understand the full meaning. I don’t want Tyler to do my bidding; I just want him to hear my apology without stalking away.

“Fine, whatever,” he mumbles. “Let’s get this over with.”



I stuff as many foam arrows as will fit into my quiver. Tyler goes with a morning star. The spikes on the ball look so real I have to remind myself it’s just foam. We square up as the weapons master reviews the rules. Since this is one-on-one, there won’t be multiple rounds. Only one shot to vanquish Tyler and hopefully get my friend back.

“Begin!” the weapons master bellows.

I fire my first arrow, but I’m too slow, and Tyler easily dodges my attack.

“What is this?” he asks as he whips the morning star like a lasso over his head. “Some last-ditch attempt to get Zach to crown you as queen?”

“What? No—” I’m caught off guard as Tyler looses his weapon, and it strikes me on the left ankle.

“Hit!” cries the weapons master. That’s three points left for me. Wobbling slightly, I lift my left foot.

“No,” I repeat to Tyler. “I’m done with that. I don’t care what he thinks.” I nock my arrow and feint to shoot for Tyler’s left arm. But at the last second, I switch my aim to his right foot when he moves to block. I fire.

“Hit!”

Tyler starts hopping as the crowd cheers. With just one foot left, it’s a lot harder for him to whirl the morning star. He tries a few times but almost topples over. I can’t help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?” He shoots me a death glare.

“You are,” I say. “It looks like you’re doing some avant-garde performance of ‘I’m a Little Teapot.’”

He smiles. “Oh yeah? Like this?” He exaggerates the movement and then—and I wish I was joking—starts singing. “*I’m a little teapot, short and stout. Here is my handle...*”

I burst into giggles. I don't know if it's the heat, or just the chance to goof around with Tyler again, but I'm delirious with laughter. That is, until I feel the tap of a foam ball on my other foot.

"Hit!"

I wipe the tears of laughter from my eyes. "Hey! That's a cheap shot!"

Tyler just shrugs, smirking. *Ooh, he's gonna get it now.* I activate my inner super Saiyan and become a foam-arrow shooting machine—well, as much as anyone can while wobbling on their knees. In seconds, Tyler's lost an arm and his other leg. He hobbles toward me on his knees, still swinging his weapon.

And still *singing*. But now he does this high-pitched thing with his voice that makes it sound like he's part weapon-wielding scribe, part dying Furby. I'm only human; I'm not made to withstand such conditions. I collapse on the ground in a fit of laughter, and Tyler makes quick work of tapping each of my remaining limbs. But not before I get him on his remaining arm.

"Hit! Hit! Hit! Hits! It's a draw!"

The crowd cheers and disperses as Tyler helps me up. He's victoriously smug, but I'm at a loss. What do we do with a draw?

"Welp, see ya," Tyler says.

I stare, open-mouthed, as he walks away. "Wai—" I begin, before he stops and turns, grinning.

"Just kidding," he says. Rude, honestly.

I check my phone. My next show starts in ten minutes; better make this quick. "I wanted to say sorry. Not just for this morning, but for this whole time. You were right; I put being queen over everything else, and in the end I lost it all."

"It's okay," he says. "I wanted to find you, actually. The reason I was late getting to Melee Madness is because Zach wanted to talk."

My stomach sours. "You saw the kimono," I say.

"I can't believe I was so naive!" Tyler whacks his morning star against a wooden beam before we hang up our foam weapons. "I said I didn't want to do it, and he started pressuring me a ton, saying Jessie would be really impressed, and that he'd write something nice for my college admissions. I'm *twelve!*"

"I'm so sorry, Tyler."



“So am I. But if you hadn’t warned me, there’s no way I would’ve been ready to stand up to him. The way he makes everything sound like it’s a good idea, like it’s what *you* wanted all along. It’s confusing.”

I nod. I know exactly what Tyler means. Zach’s so nice, his words have a way of making you unsure of what you even believe. But I’m starting to understand that being nice and being good are two very different things.

“All this has been so messed up,” Tyler goes on. “And meanwhile, Jessie hates being queen. I’ve never seen someone so miserable with a crown on their head.” He sighs. “None of it’s right.”

“Then let’s make it right,” I say. I wanted so badly to believe that nothing would stand in the way of my dreams of becoming queen. Now I’m going in with eyes open, but that doesn’t mean I’m jaded. It just means I’m ready. “We’ve got one more shot, at the Final Joust tonight. Let’s make it the stuff of dreams.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “How do we do that?” And though he’s skeptical, I see a hopeful trust in Tyler’s eyes that makes me confident we can pull this off. I’m not on my own anymore. I’ve got my brother, and I’ve got Tyler. My friend.

“The Final Joust,” I say. “We’re going to take it over.”

Tyler raises his eyebrows. “Umm, isn’t that a little...public?”

“That’s exactly why it’s the best idea,” I say. “The Final Joust is the most well-attended of all the Faire’s shows. It’s also the only performance that features each of our roles.”

“There’s no scribe at the joust.” He frowns.

A smile spreads on my face. “But there *is* a knight.”

## I Love It When a Plan Comes Together

**“Are you sure no one followed you?”** I ask Tyler as he slips under the willow tree branches.

“Positive,” Tyler says, almost tripping over one of the glazed stone-mushroom seats that form a fairy ring around the tree. It’s just past noon, a few hours since our melee make-up, and the Faire’s at peak capacity. But this willow tree is tucked back against the fairgrounds’ boundary with the forest, with branches so long that most people have no idea about the magical mushroom seating inside. In the distance, melodies from the lunchtime musical performances blend together, layered with wails from hot, overtired kids. I can hear a few parents consoling their children as they head to Ye Olde Food Court, bribing them with corn dog bites (or, in more desperate cases, fried Oreos) to hang on until the Final Joust at three.

“Is Jessie here yet?” Tyler asks as he looks around.

I frown. “I thought she’d be with you, coming from the Highlands.” Nerves prickle in my stomach like burrs from the sweetgum trees nearby. Maybe Jessie got cold feet? Or maybe she ratted us out?

“I’m here!” Jessie pants, ducking quickly under the willow. Her face is flushed. “Sorry, had to wait until Zach left the Queen’s Pavilion. I came as fast as I could.”

Tyler and Jessie both take their seats, each perched precariously on a mushroom. It's a little surreal, meeting here like this. I used to play on these toadstools when I was a toddler, weaving in and out and pretending I was a fairy myself. Whatever magic I believed in then is long gone.

"Tyler filled me in on the plan," Jessie says, grinning. "I think it's brilliant. A chance for us to rewrite the roles the way we want, in front of everyone."

I look between Jessie and Tyler, who watch me expectantly. I needed help, and they offered it, no questions asked. I haven't even had a chance to apologize to Jessie yet. Maybe their trust is a kind of magic, too.

"Okay, don't get me wrong, I'm all in," Tyler says. "But...won't we get in trouble?"

"Maybe without help from our Mentors," I say. Right on cue, Kev Jr. arrives under the willow, trailed by Barry, the archers, and Queen Daphne. Barry's sweating, and he wipes his forehead with the hem of his board-game shop T-shirt.

"Kaya? What's going on?" Queen Daphne asks. "Your brother said you needed our help." The adults' eyes scan over Jessie and Tyler, growing more confused. Tyler shrinks in his seat, and I realize he's right; we could all get in a *lot* of trouble for even trying to take over the joust. It wouldn't be fair to punish them just because of what *I* want.

"I have an idea," I begin. "Tyler and Jessie had nothing to do with it; they're here same as you. To hear me out. I hope."

Slowly, the Mentors sit, each with a suspicious glint in their eyes.

"Okay," Barry says slowly, his dark brows furrowing.

"Zach has called the shots on our roles for all of camp, regardless of what each of us actually wanted to be. He wants us to fit the way *he* sees the world, which is..."

"Limited," Queen Daphne says.

Nori scoffs. "That's putting it lightly. Did you know the Round Table wanted Ayesha and me to wear dresses at first? How am I supposed to crouch in a gown?"

"Right!" Jessie joins in. "And I want to be on Broadway someday. I never wanted to be queen!" Her eyes go wide as she turns to Queen Daphne. "I mean! Um—"

“It’s all right.” Queen Daphne laughs. “That was good! Courage, remember?”

“Courage.” Jessie nods.

“For some of us”—I sneak a glance at Tyler—“the boxes Zach has put us in are even more harmful. But we all have a chance to break free of what anybody else thinks about us. We can set our *own* expectations for ourselves.”

I nod to Tyler, who begins handing out the script I asked him to start drafting before our meeting. In this new version of the Final Joust, Sir Tyler the knight and I intrude on horseback, submitting me as a contender for the throne. There’s an archery challenge, and then I win and take my rightful place as queen.

“This rocks!” Ayesha says, hunched over as she reads. “You wrote this?” she asks Tyler.

“Mostly, yeah,” he says, bashful.

But I notice Jessie’s brows furrow deeper the more she gets into the script. Shoot. I should have known this would be a tough one; wish I’d run this by her before we all met together. The rest of the group seems to sense Jessie’s concern, because all eyes slowly gravitate to her.

“This isn’t right,” Jessie says at last. “I don’t want you to take the crown from me.”

“Yeah.” I wince. “We can change anything you want. Maybe rule together?”

“No.” She looks up at me. “You’re the rightful queen, point-blank. You shouldn’t have to *contend* for anything. I’m rewriting my lines. I don’t want you to take the crown from me,” she says again. “I want to *give* it to you.”

I beam at her. “There’s a madrigal feature for you, at the end, if you have a song in mind.”

“Absolutely!” Jessie squeals.

Queen Daphne smiles at us both. “I love this, Kaya. You’ve created a happy ending for you *and* your friends.”

“Yeah, this is great stuff,” Barry agrees, then stands. “All right, well... based on this script, we’ve got some work to do. I’ll talk to Russ, the Mentor Knight, about getting y’all a horse.”

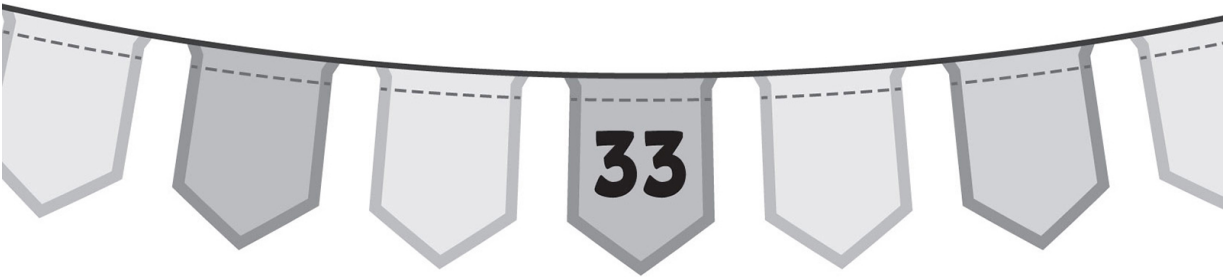
“You’ll need a costume,” Queen Daphne says. “One that actually fits. There’s not enough time to make something from scratch, but I’m sure I’ve

got some pieces in my car that could work together.”

“We’ll get to work on some, uh, extra flare.” Nori winks at Wes and Ayesha. Everyone’s on their feet, ready to turn the Faire’s last show into one to remember. A new excitement fills me. I’ve been working so hard the past two weeks to become queen, but this is the first time since camp began that I’ve truly been part of a team.

“Thanks, everybody” is all I manage before I have to wipe something from my eye. Pollen, probably. “See you at three.”

Tyler smiles. “And then it’s showtime.”



## Faces of Change

**My last performance as the** Jester Queen is flawless. I know a big part of it is my excitement about the Final Joust, but something else has happened, too. Instead of the same familiar faces in the audience, I notice more faces like mine watching the show. Black and brown patrons are everywhere I look after that, many of them experiencing the wonder of the Faire for the first time. A tall Black man and his family sit in the front row, laughing as they dig into baskets of mozzarella sticks and fried ice cream. My heart squeezes as I imagine Daddy in his place.

“It’s happening!” I tell Kev Jr., breathless, as I leave the stage after our final curtain call. “Your videos worked!”

“I can’t believe it,” he says.

“I can. You’re amazing.”

“Must be genetic or something.” He smiles, and we hug. I know he’s thinking the same thing I am. *We* are Daddy’s legacy, and this—a diverse crowd of patrons enjoying the Faire and suspending their disbelief for an afternoon—is exactly what he would have wanted.

Barry and I are taking down all our props so that the Rose Ladies can do their set onstage next, when Zach walks by in a tizzy.

“I’m on it,” he says into his walkie-talkie. “Who even knew that goats ate corn dogs?”

Barry, Kev Jr., and I exchange knowing glances. This is our cue: Queen Daphne would have called in the Camel-Lot Petting Zoo disaster on the walkie-talkie, knowing that Zach would respond. Answering the call will take him clear across the fairgrounds to the Kiddie Kingdom, far from the jousting arena, and the performance that's scheduled to begin in fifteen minutes.

"Break a leg, Kaya," Barry says. "But before you go...you sure I can't interest you in a reprise of the Jester Queen next summer? Just one show, for old time's sake?"

I smile. "Never say never."



Tyler and Jessie are already in the stables when I sneak in. Jessie's securing Tyler's armor, while his Mentor, Russ, checks on the horses. Queen Daphne's there, too, with a couple of accessories I can turn into a makeshift costume. "This is one of my favorite costumes I made, from way back when," she says. "The bodice is adjustable but will still be a little loose on you. Good thing I never clean out my car!" There's a flowy white chemise and a saffron bodice with delicate silver embroidery along the hem. The cloth feels silky and cool against my skin, even in the heat of a late-July Georgia afternoon. Queen Daphne must have woven literal fairy magic into the fabric.

"Let me help you tie it up," Jessie says, making quick work of the laces so that the bodice is snug but not too tight. "Your hair looks awesome, by the way." She nods to the braids I've undone up to the crown of my head so my hair falls in loose curls. "I love your braids, like the halo braid on the first day of camp? So cool."

My mouth falls open a little as I remember the way Jessie stared at me last Monday. I was ready for a fight after Kev Jr.'s warnings and seeing my neighbors frown at our yard. I thought Jessie was judging me and my hair. But it turns out she was...admiring me?

Queen Daphne goes to check on the crowd and make sure Zach's nowhere in sight. This might be my last chance to talk to Jessie before (a)

I'm crowned queen, and/or (b) we're banned from the Faire forever. Either way, it feels like I should say something. I got her so wrong.

"Thank you," I begin. "And...I'm sorry. You were just being kind to me, with the change of clothes and everything, and I made you my enemy. I accused you of using me to make yourself look better, probably because that's exactly what *I* was trying to do. I wish I'd spent less time competing with you and more time trying to be friends."

She smiles. "We *are* friends. And as your friend, I should've been speaking up for you this whole time. Wren would say these awful things, and I'd clam up like..." She frowns, then shakes her head to clear the thought. "Anyway, it's something I'm trying to be better about. And don't be too hard on yourself. It's not you, it's...this whole thing—" She flaps her arms at her sides. "Pitting us against each other. Wren got weird, too."

Shoot, I forgot about Wren. Do we need to worry about her doing something?

"Does...Wren know about the joust?" I ask, trying not to sound too concerned. Jessie shakes her head. "Unh-uh. I tried to tell her, but it didn't feel right. Which is kind of weird...We've been friends forever, but only because our moms are friends. I...don't know what will happen after this summer."

She looks down at the stable's dirt floor. My heart hurts for her. Wren's not exactly my cup of high tea, but it never feels good to lose someone you're close to.

Jessie takes a determined breath and rolls her shoulders back. "Anyway! Let's focus on now, yeah? You've got a throne to claim."

We leave the stall, and Jessie heads for the royal dais, where she begins the show. Meanwhile, Tyler's already seated on top of his horse, Traveler. The Mentor Knight helps me up behind him, and...whoa.

"This is, um, really high up," I say, looking down at Jessie. "Did you know horses were so high up?"

"How's it feeling?" Russ asks as he makes some adjustments to Tyler's stirrups.

"Like it's really high up."

Tyler laughs. "It'll be less than a minute. Do it for the fans."

I scoff. "The fans. Right."

"Or...for yourself!" he says.



*Or for Daddy.*

“All right, you’re good to go. Remember to keep your legs loose,” the Mentor Knight says, handing me my quiver. “Oh! Almost forgot: Ayesha and the crew asked me to wish you luck! They also said you’ll need this—” He reaches behind a stall wall and pulls out a bow. It’s gorgeous: custom cedar with new varnish. It feels natural in my hand, like it’s already a part of me.

“But...there’s no more archery in our script,” I say. “Since I’m not challenging Jessie to the throne.”

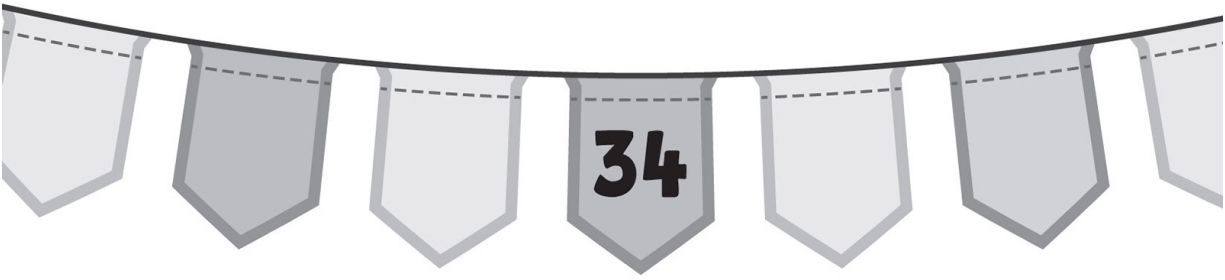
“Ayesha said to ‘look for the golden stags.’ No idea what it means, but maybe you’ll figure it out when you get there.”

“Ooookay.” I take the bow. Outside, the first few lines of the jousting play have begun. Jessie is welcoming the audience and bidding the tournament competitors luck. This is it.

“Ready?” Tyler asks. I hold on to him with everything I’ve got.

“Too late to say no?” I ask, looking down at the ground I’ve taken for granted my whole life, now so far away. “I could live with just being a jester. I could—”

“Hyah!” Tyler gives Traveler a short kick with his heel. And we’re flying.



## The Final Joust

**“What’s this?” one of the** knights in the arena asks. I can’t tell you which one, because everything is a bumpy jumble as we race out of the stables. The blurred brown of the stables gives way to the crowd—a mosaic of faces and clothing of every shade. It’s a good thing I don’t have Jessie’s mic yet, because the words I’m screaming right now—while creative—*definitely* aren’t in the script.

Tyler brings us to a perfectly executed halt right in the center of the arena. The knights circle us, and I can finally hear myself think again.

“What, ho! A new competitor?” the same knight asks, delivering his line perfectly.

“Or a challenger for our lady’s honor?” asks another. Beside his horse, the squire stares at us. And that’s when I realize we forgot to tell the squires about the plan.

The squire squints at me. “Is that—”

“My dear sister, back from the war!” Jessie stands excitedly in the royal box. She must be nervous, because her line delivery is giving more Southern belle than Lady Guinevere, but I was just yelling curse words that *definitely* aren’t time-period appropriate, so who am I to judge?

I raise my hand so the crowd knows I’m speaking. “Yes, sister, ’tis I: Lady Kaya. You have done an admirable job ruling in my stead. Now, let us

reign together in peace!”

Tyler pulls up to the royal box, and I hop over the banister with surprising grace. I say a silent prayer of gratitude that I’m back on solid ground; then Jessie and I clasp hands and lift them to the sky. Tyler unsheathes his sword and stabs the air in victory. The crowd cheers. I catch sight of Mama, Kev Jr., and Uncle Paul in the front row, and I feel invincible.

“The kingdom is yours, dear sister,” Jessie says. She lifts the golden circlet from her head. This close, I can see the delicate golden leaves and mother-of-pearl flowers that make up its design. “I shall travel the lands with my knight.” She flashes Tyler a smile. I’m sure they can see his blush all the way up in the cheap seats. Jessie turns back to me and gently places the crown on my head. It feels light on my curls but secure. Like it was always supposed to be there.

Jessie turns to the audience. “To Queen Kaya! Long may she reign!” she shouts.

“To Queen Kaya!” the audience echoes with the rest of the cast. This. This is the moment I’ve played in my head over and over since summer began. Since I was a little girl on Daddy’s shoulders. It’s everything I could have ever imagined, and more.

There’s a commotion on the dais to my right. Zach bursts onstage, draped in an oversize king costume, dripping with sweat. His brown hair flops into his face.

“My dearest...daughter,” he says as he adjusts a lopsided crown. “I welcome your return. But such garments. Such...behavior. It is not befitting a damsel such as yourself.”

“My *behavior* is exactly what this kingdom needs.” I take a step forward. My eyes drift behind him, to the coat-of-arms banners that line the top balcony of the arena. The black one on the end is new, and it’s sliding back and forth on its rigging, almost taunting me.

What I notice more than the banner’s strange behavior, though, is the symbol emblazoned on the bottom.

A golden stag.

A moving target.

I’m about twenty yards away. It would be a stretch to hit it, but maybe...

I lift my bow and draw an arrow from my quiver.

“We are, all of us, bound by the limits of our imagination,” I say to Zach. “With my reign, I hope to expand those boundaries. In Brightcastle, we can be anyone we want to be. Starting...now.”

My arrow flies and hits its mark. Confetti explodes from all corners of the arena, showering the audience in streamers and colored paper. I’ve read the phrase *the roar of the crowd* in books before, but I never knew a group of people could actually make that much noise until now. The sound of their surprised delight is deafening. And just like that, my conversation with Zach is over.

I’m smiling, amazed, at the confetti as the trumpeters begin their refrain. But Zach’s focus hasn’t wavered. He takes a step toward me and opens his mouth to say something only I can hear. Something that—based on the look in his eyes—probably isn’t very nice.

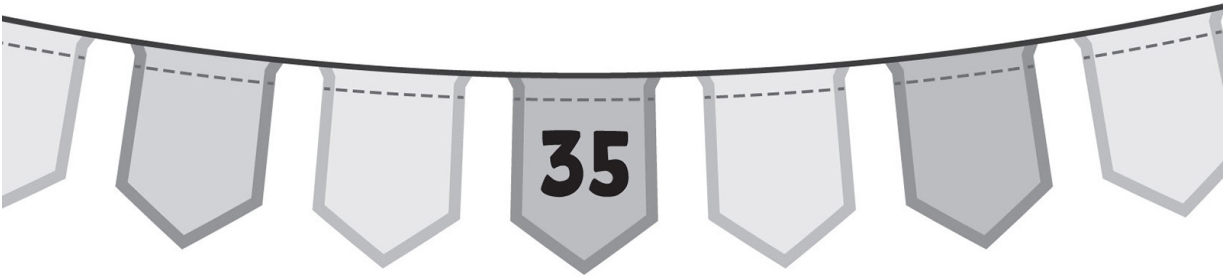
“Smile!” Becca’s phone flash goes off from just below the dais. Zach’s expression transforms in less than the blink of an eye—I doubt the camera even caught his blue eyes narrow into slits. He wraps one arm around my shoulders and lifts the other in joyous celebration.

Yeah. No.

I don’t worry about being polite when I push his arm away and step to the side, as far away from him as I can get. He has the good sense not to follow me. Before I strike a pose for Becca, I shout for the other campers to come join me. Tyler and Jessie gallop over on Traveler. Carter leaps from the stands, handmade silverware clattering in his blacksmith apron. Wren’s nowhere to be found. Oh well.

“That’s perfect, Kaya! Big smiles everyone!” Becca instructs. I throw my arms around the group, savoring how *right* it feels for all of us to celebrate this moment together, after we literally rewrote the script for ourselves. I know it won’t be the last time we have to fight to prove we belong somewhere. But still, this victory is sweet, and I couldn’t have done it without them—I wouldn’t have wanted to.

After all, a queen is nothing without her kingdom.



## Time to Party

**“That’s twenty points for the Crimson Knight!”** the announcer’s voice booms across the theater. We’re at Jousting Time, a live dinner-and-jousting tournament show that’s open year-round, unlike the Faire, which closed for the summer last week. I take another bite of my cream-puff dessert and boo as loudly as I can. Our group is seated under the banner of the Emerald Knight, so the Crimson guy can kick rocks as far as I’m concerned. I lean over to Ray, who’s sitting beside me.

“Now they move on to the second part of the competition: hand-to-hand combat.”

“Ooooh.” She slurps her soda. “I can’t believe you’ve never brought me here before! This is dope.”

Kev Jr. butts in annoyingly from the row behind us. “She’s never brought *any* of us. And I agree. Definite dopeness.”

My chest swells as I take a look down the row on either side. When Mama asked me what I wanted to do for my birthday this year, there was only one right answer: sharing my love for all things medieval with my friends and family.

But in the air-conditioning this time.

Uncle Paul, Mama, and Kev Jr. are here, of course. And Ray, finally home from space camp after what feels like an eternity. I invited all the

campers, but in the end only Jessie and Tyler could make it. Carter did send a really cool metal bookmark, though—a tiny arrow that he forged himself.

Our Mentors are also here: Barry, Daphne, and the archers. They're here to celebrate me but also to gather some ideas for the Faire next summer. After the success of the Final Joust and record-breaking ticket sales, the Round Table is interested in how places like Jousting Time attract more diverse crowds. The Faire never changes, but maybe in this case I'll make an exception.

There's a quick intermission as the squires sweep off the arena floor. A bard strolls through the crowd as he plucks his lute. He's followed closely by a vendor selling fake roses that flash red, green, and blue at a dizzying speed. Uncle Paul's sitting in the aisle seat of the row behind me. He buys a rose and, with a smoothness that would make Daddy proud, twirls it between his fingers before handing it to Ayesha beside him.

"M'lady," Uncle Paul says.

"Aww, thank you!" Ayesha takes the rose and, just as smoothly, tucks it behind Uncle Paul's ear. He's speechless.

"Red's your color." Ayesha giggles at him, but she's definitely still blushing.

The Jousting Time employees clear our plates as Mama cuts the birthday cake and begins passing pieces down. Onstage, the royal scribe unfurls a long parchment and begins reading out the names of everyone celebrating a special occasion tonight.

"Janet and George: Congratulations on the fiftieth anniversary of your nuptials," he says. "And to Kaya Morgan, a very happy thirteenth birthday!"

Our little corner of the arena hollers and stomps our feet. "That's my baby!" Mama shouts. On my other side, Tyler jostles my shoulder with one hand. The other one is resting comfortably in Jessie's beside him.

"Stooooop, y'all!" I say, embarrassed but, okay, also loving it. Tyler slides down my piece of cake: a brown stick figure in a yellow dress, with a yellow crown on her head.

"Hey, why didn't you get one of those cool birthday packages for tonight with the birthday crown and stuff?" Ray asks, lifting a forkful of cake. "Your mom didn't want to pay?"

I shake my head, whispering as the final fight begins, “She did. But I didn’t need it.” Nothing could top the Faire last weekend. Yes, I achieved what I set out to do. But more importantly, I did it by being myself, surrounded by friends and family who love me for me, exactly as I am. And we had a blast. Every moment since then has felt like a dream. A dream as nerdy and bold and joyful as I am.

The crown’s just the icing on the birthday cake.

# Glossary, or Kaya's Guide to the Renaissance Faire

**Okay let's get into it.** First, the big one:

**Renaissance Faire:** An outdoor carnival that's supposed to loosely resemble the English Renaissance. Key word *loosely*. There's food, music, games, shows, and anyone that wants to can dress in costume. No offense to Disney World, but it's my personal Happiest Place on Earth.

## **People (in rough order of importance)**

**Queen:** I mean, do I even need to explain? She's THE QUEEN. At a Renaissance Faire, the queen judges the jousts, wears gorgeous gowns, and enjoys the adoration of her subjects. Queen Daphne of Brightcastle rules the Faire with a just and gentle hand...at least, until she can find a husband to be king. Are we in the Renaissance or the Stone Age?

**Knights:** Soldiers of the realm. At the Faire, the knights ride horses, compete in the jousting tournament, and get all the turkey legs they want. They sweat buckets under all that armor, but I bet it's worth it.

**Royal Herald:** The queen's messenger/hype man.

**Scribe:** Renaissance Faire-talk for a writer. They weren't so hot on literacy back then, so knowing how to write was a big deal. Scribes write poetry and other messages for Faire patrons.

**Rose Lady Madrigal Singers:** The "It girls" of the Faire. Beautiful women with voices like a quartet of classically trained angels. Often found flirting with patrons.

**Archer:** Okay, not to rag on the other roles, but arguably the trickiest role at the faire. Don't believe me? When's the last time you shot an arrow



through an apple from fifty feet away? My daddy was an archer, and the Brightcastle archery stalls are my home away from home.

**Bard:** A musician and songwriter.

**Pirate:** Were pirates really wandering around Renaissance London, peg legs, eye patches, and all? Wikipedia says no. But maybe Wikipedia should mind its own business.

**Jester:** See also: man in tights. An entertainer in the queen's court. Known for juggling and jokes but also speaking truth disguised as humor.

**Patrons:** Customers at a Renaissance Faire.

### **Places (also in rough order of importance)**

**Privies:** The restroom, or—in the case of the Faire—the glorified stink holes. If you gotta go, make it quick and make it early (before the afternoon sun hits), or live to regret it.

**Sherwood Forest Archery Stalls:** Where Daddy used to work as an archer. At the stalls, patrons can learn how to shoot a bow and arrow, or just come watch the twice-daily archery demonstration. (William Tell? We don't know her.)

**Ye Olde Food Court:** The source of all that is fried, greasy, or filled with frosting. Sometimes all three at once!

**Jousting Arena:** A giant field at the fairgrounds where the jousting tournament is held.

**Kiddie Kingdom:** The Faire's miniature area for kids, complete with playground and petting zoo.

**Camel-lot:** The Faire's petting zoo. Don't get too close to the goats....Just trust me on this one.

### **Food**

**Funnel cake fries:** Heaven, coated in powdered sugar. Fry up some dough, cover it in sweetness and maybe some fruit, and enjoy.

**Fried Oreos:** Delicious. At least, I'm pretty sure; only three of my taste buds were functional after the molten cookie inside the batter melted my tongue off.

**Steak-on-a-stick:** Pretty much exactly what it sounds like. If you're going to order, get in line on the earlier side of the lunch rush. Unless you like heat-lamp-baked shoe leather.

**Turkey leg:** Again, self-explanatory. The turkey legs at the Faire are legit bigger than my face sometimes. My brother, Kev Jr., teased me once that the Faire actually serves people emu legs and pretends they're turkey, but that's ridiculous. They didn't even have emus in Renaissance-period England. (Then again, they probably didn't have funnel cakes, either.)

### **Other Stuff**

**Dais:** Pronounced DAY-iss. A raised platform that holds a throne. At the Renaissance Faire's Final Joust, the queen and her court all sit on or beside the royal dais. Aka where I wanna be.

**Lyre:** A musical instrument, like if a harp and a ukelele had a baby.

**Litter:** A seat carried by the queen's guard. How the queen gets around when she's feeling fancy.

# Acknowledgments

## Well met!

Although this is technically my second published book (glory to God), in many ways it still feels like a debut. I'm writing in a new genre, for a new audience, and I have many people to thank for guiding me along this unfamiliar path:

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And to you! If you're reading this, there's a big chance you're a nerd at heart. If so, I encourage you to stay strong in your commitment to like what you like. You never know—maybe someday you'll get to pursue your passion for a living.

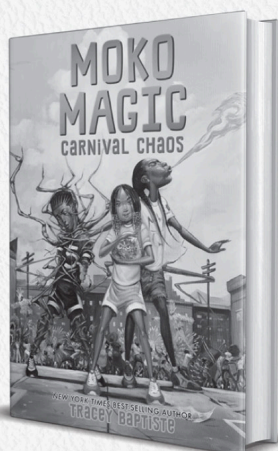
Huzzah!

**JILL TEW** (she/her) was destined for speculative-fiction nerddom from childhood. She grew up watching *Farscape* and *Xena*, and always had the latest copy of Animorphs tucked in her backpack. Now she writes the kinds of stories she loved as a kid, with characters she wanted to see more of—Black heroes asking big questions and saving the world (or at least, their little corner of it). A recovering business school graduate, Jill enjoys belting show tunes and baking in her spare time. She lives in Atlanta with her family.

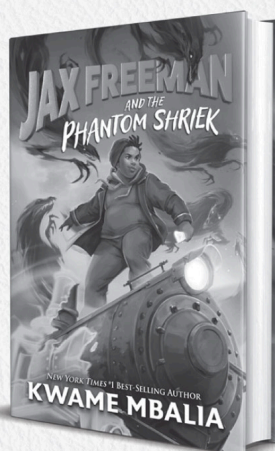
**KWAME MBALIA** (he/him) is a #1 *New York Times* best-selling author and the publisher of Freedom Fire, an imprint of Disney Hyperion devoted to stories about the Black diaspora by Black creators. His debut middle-grade novel, *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*, was awarded a Coretta Scott King Author Honor, and it was followed by *Tristan Strong Destroys the World* and *Tristan Strong Keeps Punching*. He is the coauthor of two Last Gate of the Emperor books with Prince Joel Makonnen, and the editor of the short story anthology *Black Boy Joy*. Kwame is a proud Howard University graduate and now lives with his wife and children outside Raleigh, North Carolina, where he is currently working on the next Jax Freeman adventure. For more information, go to [www.KwameMbalia.com](http://www.KwameMbalia.com).

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