

CHAPTER ONE

THE MORNING CHASE

I wake at sunrise, ready for the morning chase. The honeyed light oozing through my bedroom window makes the pine walls glow warm and smell sweet. I sit up in bed and peer out into the light, until I spot the silhouette of Babusya. She's wobbling through the long yellow grass in the meadow, leaning on her two walking sticks. A large birch-bark rucksack is on her back, and she's halfway to the fruit grove by the lake already. I narrow my eyes and start to count.

One. I slide the huge woolen socks Babusya knitted me over my bare feet.

Two. I leap over the rag rug I made with Mama, swing open my bedroom door, and swerve into the long third-floor corridor.

Three, four, five. I take three running strides, then skid along the corridor, my woolen socks sliding over the smooth spruce floorboards quicker than skates over ice.

Six. I reach the first staircase, jump onto the sweeping oak banister, and zoom down it so fast that my heart

paces to catch up with me. Several of the portraits of my royal ancestors frown at me, but I ignore them with a whoop.

Seven, eight, nine, ten. I skid along two more corridors, past the ghostly outline of the secret door that leads to the dome I call Musician's Dome, because in it I found a viola and some ancient handwritten sheet music that crumbled apart when I touched it.

Eleven, twelve. There are two more banisters to slide down, past more frowning ancestors and a faded and torn tapestry of the royal crest that puffs dust into the air in annoyance.

Thirteen. I land on the wobbly block flooring of the ground floor and start running, because my socks don't skid so well over the mosaicked patterns.

Fourteen. I race through my favorite part of the castle, our kitchen, waving to my dark-haired papa, who is frying what smells like *grenki*—eggy bread—on the enormous tiled stove, and my red-haired mama, who is pouring coffee from a long-handled copper pot. The only sign of my sister is a few silk-soft dark curls peeping out from the bright green baby wrap that Mama is wearing to hold Rosa close to her heart.

Fifteen. Sixteen. I stumble to a halt by the kitchen door that leads outside, pull on my boots and the oversized cardigan Babusya knitted me, and smile because I'm making good time.

Seventeen. I burst through the door and fly into the

gold-and-rust-colored autumn world outside. I take a deep breath and squeal with happiness because everything is so beautiful.

Eighteen, nineteen. I sprint down the hill toward the lake shore. The air is cool and brimming with the earthy, maple scents of fallen leaves and ripening nuts.

“Twenty!” I shout as I reach Babusya. “Two seconds faster than yesterday.”

“But you’re still wearing your pajamas,” Babusya replies without looking up. “And you haven’t eaten breakfast.” She’s focusing on where to place her walking sticks and feet on the rough, hummocky ground.

“My pajamas are comfy and I’m not hungry yet.” I hold an arm out.

A small growl of annoyance rumbles in the back of Babusya’s throat, but she passes me one of her walking sticks and grips my elbow instead. “You don’t need to keep chasing me out here every morning, Olia. I can walk fine with my sticks.” Babusya lifts her head, and her big, dark eyes shine as they reflect the rising sun.

“I know you can. I just like the morning chase. And . . .” I hesitate, wondering whether to tell Babusya the other reason I follow her out here every morning. “I think I’m more likely to see magic when I’m with you.”

Babusya chuckles. “Magic is everywhere you believe it to be.”

My brow furrows. Babusya has a way of explaining things that seems both simple and complicated at the same time,

and the true meaning of her words often feels just beyond my grasp.

We reach the shade of the overgrown fruit grove, and Babusya leads me through it to the sprawling yellow-leaved trees on the far side. “So, what are we collecting today?” I ask.

“Ranet apples.” Babusya stops, and I help remove her rucksack and pass her walking stick back. We both peer into the trees. The fruits from the lower branches have already been picked, but the branches higher up are loaded with small red apples.

I kick off my boots and socks and clamber up the nearest tree, my bare feet gripping the thick, rough trunk and my hands grasping each branch, until I’m surrounded by fruits. Then I swing a leg over a sturdy branch to sit and pick three perfect apples. I try to pass them down to Babusya, but she’s wandered to the next tree along. She lifts a walking stick, rattles it against a branch, and five apples drop to the ground at her feet. She leans down to pick them up.

“What are you going to cook?” I ask, letting the apples I picked fall into the grass below.

“A *sharlotka* apple cake, for the harvest moon feast tomorrow night,” Babusya replies, hitting another branch with her walking stick until a few more apples fall.

I lick my lips, thinking not just of apple cake but of all the foods that will be at the feast. Once a year, when the harvest moon rises, fat and red, Castle Mila glistens like a ripening blackberry and its Great Hall fills with people

carrying the last fruits of autumn, baked into pies and boiled into jams of every color and flavor imaginable.

There will be music and dancing all through the night, until the harvest moon sets and the sun rises again over Lake Mila. This year, the celebrations will be bigger and merrier than ever before, because this year is Castle Mila's five hundredth birthday.

I'm most excited about the patch that I've made. It's a small square of fabric, about the size of my palm, with a picture stitched onto it. Someone from our family makes one every year, and tomorrow I'll add mine to the four hundred and ninety-nine other squares that make up our patchwork family blanket.

I've always dreamed about having a brother or a sister, and since Rosa was born, all I've wanted is to be the best big sister for her. The patch I've made feels like a start. It shows how much I love her, and once I've sewn it onto the blanket, it will prove forever how glad I am that she is part of our family.

I turn to look at the castle, thinking of all the adventures I want to have there with Rosa as she grows up. The huge, round roof domes reflect so much light that I have to shield my eyes to look at them.

"Every year they glow brighter." Babusya straightens her back and follows my gaze.

"Papa says the aspen shingles that cover the domes get more silvery as they age, reflecting more light." I reach up

into a branch so full of apples that it's bowed under their weight.

Babusya snorts. "Your papa is a fine carpenter who knows all about the wood of Castle Mila, I'm sure. But he's never paid any attention to the castle's magic, even when he was a young boy. The castle domes are filled with magic that has been locked away from the world, and they glow brighter every year because that magic is trying to escape."

I look up at the domes again. They are radiant, shimmering like quicksilver. "Why is Sun Dome the brightest?" I ask, hoping Babusya will tell me again, but that this time I'll understand her explanation.

"Because the key to unlock the magic is hidden inside that dome." Babusya's eyes twinkle. "No one has ever found a way up there. I've spent years of my life looking, but the spirits tell me even they can't get into that dome. And if they could, the key isn't a key anyway, and the lock is hidden somewhere else."

"That doesn't make any sense." I shake my head, pick a few more apples, then lean over to drop them near Babusya. "Do you think it's even possible to unlock the magic trapped inside the domes?"

"If you believe you can do it, then you will. Belief is *everything*, Olia. You can never have enough of it."

"I want to believe." I gently sway, like the leaves rustling above me, and sigh dramatically. "But I don't see magic the way you do, Babusya."

“Nobody sees things the same way.” Babusya laughs. “That’s why it’s important to look from different angles.”

I lean even farther over, until I’m dangling upside down from the branch. “You mean like this?” I smile. Babusya rolls her eyes but smiles back. “What would happen if I did unlock the magic?” I ask.

Babusya stares long and hard at the domes, as if she’s trying to figure something out.

“Then the magic would be free,” she says finally.

“Would that be a good thing or a bad thing?” I ask, unable to read Babusya’s expression.

“Like everything else, it depends on how you look at it and where you’re standing.” Babusya frowns as a wind blows from the direction of the castle, rakes through the meadow, and agitates all the trees in the grove. It smells faintly of the castle’s hidden spaces—of warm pine, dust, and old books—but also of something far more ancient, like sunbaked stones and dry, cracked earth.

Cold air needles through my cardigan and pajamas. I shiver and grip the branch I’m holding tighter. My hair whips around my face, and flashes of golden light dance in front of my eyes. I stop breathing and stare at the sparks in wonder. I’ve never seen anything like them.

Then, as quickly as it arrived, the wind falls away and the lights are gone. I’m left feeling ruffled and breathless. It’s as if—just for a moment—a veil over the world blew back, and I saw something glittering and tangled beneath.

I swing down from the tree and land next to Babusya, my pulse racing.

"You saw magic, didn't you?" Babusya leans toward me and looks right into my eyes.

"I don't know. It might have been . . ." I bite my lip. "How can I be sure?"

"Your heart knows the truth." Babusya leans even closer and whispers into my ear, "Time is running out, Olia. If the magic isn't unlocked soon, it will break out on its own. And that would be a bad thing, from whatever angle you look at it."

Babusya's words land heavily, sending waves through my mind. I've always looked for magic because the idea of it makes me feel curious and excited, but I've never considered that something bad might happen if I didn't find it. What if I'm meant to be looking harder or doing something more to reach it?

Another breeze whirls around me, and I nestle deeper into my cardigan. "I think it's just a cold autumn wind," I say to Babusya, trying to reassure myself rather than her. Because I feel in my heart that this is no ordinary wind, and I feel like *something* is about to happen. Excitement is fizzing up from deep inside me, but my stomach is flipping with nerves too, because I'm not sure that I'm ready for whatever this thing is.