



## CHAPTER ONE

# A LETTER AND A GAME

**“LOOK OUT!”**

A great orb of pulsing, black energy fell from the sky in Joseph’s direction. It was a Dark Spell he couldn’t defend against. He retrieved his sword from the nearby body of a shadowy soldier just in time to roll out of harm’s way. The many faceless figures around him screamed as the forceful impact of the energy knocked them to the ground.

The blast sent him tumbling into a ditch and the jabbing pain of something sharp pierced his side. He removed his chest armor as soon as he stopped, then cringed at the large gash across his midsection. The discordant song of clashing swords and shrieking voices surrounded him from every angle while he clawed across the broken landscape. A familiar sight caught his attention.

“Eric!”

The figure looked up and grunted. “Joe...we can’t hold them. I don’t think we’ll...” Eric grasped at a wound across his shoulder.

“Where are the others? Are they still alive?”

Eric’s head fell to the ground as the thundering of an advancing attack washed over them. “No idea, but...I’m not sure I’ll make it.”

Joseph slammed the blade of his weapon into the earth and gave Eric a mournful look.

“I just need you...to do one more thing for me...” Eric breathed heavily.

Joseph swallowed and gave a solemn nod to his dying friend’s last wish.

“I need...you to...deliver this chicken.” Eric pulled a white fowl with a green beak from his satchel. “It’s the last fetch quest before I finish the final side mission for the master weapon. Give it to the old lady...”—he panted with exertion—“...at the village farm.”

Eric’s final words echoed through his head like the chime of a bell, but they ultimately passed. His friend’s head slipped to the side as the final breath left his lips. The chicken called out upon his death, and the lifebar above Eric’s head hit zero.

Joseph shook him by the shoulders. His mouth was dry. “Eric?”

A soft voice gently pulled him from his grief.

“There is nothing you can do, so leave him be.”

He looked up as a figure draped in robes of dark blue and white stepped beside Eric’s body and knelt.

“What? You don’t know that!”

“I promise your friend is fine. This is nothing more than a dream. You have an”—the robed figure’s head tilted to one side—“odd imagination.” The figure’s voice was female and expressed concern.

Eric's white hen clucked, pulled a small sword from its sheath, then charged into the battlefield.

The girl passed her hand over Eric's body and it dissolved into the soil with a shimmer of white light.

Joseph staggered back and raised his sword. "What did you do to him?"

She gazed at him, her features hidden beneath the shadows of the hood. Only two details escaped the recesses of her hood—the soft sapphire glow of her eyes and the glint of her silver hair.

He stared directly into them, unable to move.

She approached. "I don't think Kilgan knows what he's talking about. There's no way someone like *you* can be part of this," she scoffed. "Magic has been asleep for too long. You're not awakened yet. You aren't ready, and you need to wake up! Wake up!"

"What?"

She gently shoved his chest and he stumbled backwards. As he hit the ground, the world shattered like a breaking mirror and the battlefield vanished.

Joseph Erift opened his eyes at the exact moment he tumbled from bed. He crashed to the floor with a thud. Rays of morning sunlight pierced the window and fell across his face.

He squinted and groaned. "I need to stop the late-night gaming. That dream was more vivid than usual."

He leaned back and blindly felt for the cell phone on the desk near his bed but it had fallen on the floor. The charging cable had also popped out, leaving him unable to turn it on.

"And that's why the alarm didn't go off." He sighed and rubbed his eyes, looking at the galaxy-themed clock on the wall.

It was close to seven in the morning.

He gasped and leapt up. *I'm going to be late!*

It was the last day of eleventh grade, and he didn't want to miss it. A mess of brown hair barely fell over his eyes in certain places, and aqua-hued eyes glanced at what could be described as a simple but sharp face as he passed a mirror in the hall. He always preferred to walk his own path in life, even if he wasn't the most social person around. It never bothered him as he was happy with the friends he already had.

After finishing in the bathroom, he ran back for a change of clothing. The jeans and t-shirt within reach would have to do. He glanced at the clock again and cringed. "Where's a fast spell when you need it?"

He stumbled into the bathroom down the hall and picked up a comb. The reflection looking back from the mirror appeared as if it was older than his seventeen years. It resembled him, but more mature. In a blink it was gone, and he shrugged it off. A few swipes of the comb did little to calm the jungle on his head.

"Eh, good enough!"

After plugging his phone back in to charge, he dashed downstairs to the kitchen.

He took a quick chug of orange juice from the carton and a bite of sandwich he didn't finish yesterday. The clock was ticking. He grabbed his backpack, stuffed some cash into his pocket, and was out the door.

He ran around the house and unlocked his bike from one of the pipes. The sun had just finished rising over Sethen County when he rode into the street. He turned into another driveway further down the road where he got off and waited. A pair of voices rose from inside before the front door was opened. His friend, Eric Castis, strolled out as he crammed the remains of a breakfast bar into his mouth and finished putting the last stroke of gel into his light brown hair. He always wore it highlighted in the front, where it was spiked up.

Even though Eric was a year younger, his best friend was in the same grade at the same high school as Joseph.

His buddy approached the garage and vanished inside. “Oh, come on! I know you’re in here!” Eric shouted.

His friend had an attitude that often got him into trouble, but at his core, Eric was fun to be around—full of energy and ready to face most any challenge.

Curiosity got the better of him, so Joseph approached and waited as Eric rummaged through the piles of junk. Stray objects bounced into view, including a tire that rolled out onto the lawn.

He shook his head. “You know it would be easier if you cleaned it out, right?”

“Sounds like work.” Eric struggled to remove his bike. “Besides, *someone* said they’d get a car once they got their license.”

Joseph laughed. “I need a job to get a car. They don’t let you walk up and take one off the lot.”

Eric finally freed his bike and joined him. “So what’s up? I thought you’d have left already.”

“I overslept.” He stopped at the end of the driveway. “You wouldn’t believe the dream I had.”

“Was it cool?”

“You’d have liked it. It reminded me of that game we played yesterday. Swords, magic...violence.”

Eric grinned and tossed a quick thumbs-up.

“You were there. It looked like we were in some sort of battle. We’d been fighting these crazy shadows but they killed you. I also had to deliver a chicken for you because...” Joseph shook his head. “I don’t even know.”

“Oh, come on,” Eric complained. “Why’d you kill me?”

“I didn’t kill you.”

“You could have at least shoved a potion down my throat or something. It was *your* dream.”

He chuckled and nodded. The dream had been so real, its imagery still weaved in and out his thoughts. He hadn’t even mentioned the strange female entity. That one still had him confused.

Joseph shifted on his bike as they rode off and the brisk morning air filled his lungs. The wind was at their backs as they left the suburban developments toward the school building. Buses were dropping off students as the groups walked in.

Joseph and Eric rode to the side of the building, bypassing the crowds to lock up their bikes. Class started at 7:30, so they hung out in their usual spot to wait for the bell. Joseph was still trying to shake the dream. The bike ride had helped.

Eric kicked at the ground as he folded his arms and leaned against the wall. “Our lives are boring, man. We do the same thing every day.”

“One more year, Eric. College should be better.”

Eric cringed. “Ugh, don’t remind me.”

Joseph set his backpack on the ground, slouched next to Eric and sighed as a familiar sight greeted them. A large black limo slowly weaved around cars and buses on its way to the school’s front sidewalk. It stopped and the driver’s side door opened. A man wearing a fine black suit got out and walked to the rear where he opened the last door. A young man clad in name-brand clothing stepped out. He ran his fingers through the slicked-back, perfectly combed style atop his head. The dirty blonde threads always looked like there was more hair product than actual hair, yet there were always stray strands that curved over his face.

“Why does Clyde still need to show off like that? It’s the end of junior year. We get it—he’s rich. This isn’t

an anime...” Eric’s expression perked up at the thought, as though it was the first time he considered it. “I kinda wish it was, though.”

“Like you wouldn’t do the same thing,” Joseph teased.

Eric shrugged. “I bet every neighborhood has someone like Clyde. Maybe in an alternate universe it’s you or me stepping out of that limo and Clyde’s leaning against this wall complaining about annoying rich kids. Weird to think about, isn’t it?”

Joseph shook his head and smiled. “Whatever you say, Eric.”

Clyde had moved to their city four years ago. Though he boasted, and a sort of smug self-satisfaction oozed from his every word, they knew little about him. The Foristen name had acquired a powerful reputation in the neighborhood, even if the exact nature of their business had remained under wraps. They were just another part of the odd social elite. Joseph never had a problem with Clyde, so he never let the snide remarks and snickering laugh get to him. However, he had to admit the tension between him and Eric always made for an amusing performance.

As if Joseph’s thoughts had summoned him, Clyde made a sudden turn and headed in their direction.

He stopped and gave them each a nod. “Look what the bikes dragged in. Still on two wheels I see. Must be hard passing that driving test.” He flashed an insincere smile. “I’ve never had to use them, but I hear the buses give a plenty comfy ride.”

“You’re a funny guy. I’ll pass it when I’m ready,” Eric casually replied. He pointed at Clyde but looked at Joseph. “Ever notice how his mouth moves a lot without him saying much of anything?”

Joseph enjoyed the show. Moments like this made him wish he could make popcorn appear from thin air.

“Envy looks petty on you, Eric. I know it eats you alive that my channel has more followers.” Clyde tossed his hair before folding his arms. “You’re more than welcome to join them. You might never catch me, but I don’t mind if you want to watch.” He shrugged. “You might learn a few tricks of the trade. I might even toss you some mentions if you ask nicely enough.”

“The only reason your channel has more viewers is because you get access to all the new games first! In a fair fight, I’d come out on top. My page will always have more style.”

Clyde’s frown was fake. “It looks like you’ll remain one step behind me, then. Hate to see you as a middle-aged man flipping meat patties at Mach Burger, but not everyone has natural talent.”

Clyde gave Joseph a quick look before turning to enter the school.

“The only natural thing about him is his ego,” Eric muttered.

“Don’t let it get to you. He thrives on the attention.”

“Why isn’t he in private school with the other rich jerk-offs so we don’t have to deal with that?”

Joseph laughed. “Maybe they don’t want to deal with it either.” The bell for class chimed as he said it. “Come on. Don’t wanna miss homeroom.”

The hallways were overflowing with bodies trying to get to their rooms on time. “See you at lunch, man!” Eric gave a quick wave and was out of sight.

Joseph started for the upper floor but as he turned the corner, he met with an immovable object and his backpack fell, tumbling the contents to the floor. An elderly gentleman in a dark green suit gave a soft, hearty laugh as he shook his head.

“Terribly sorry about that.” He smiled, stroking his fingers through the long ivory beard on his kind-looking



face. The old man adjusted the round frames of his glasses. “I sometimes lose focus when I’m lost in a thought. There’s always so much that requires my attention. I’m sure you know the feeling.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Joseph knelt to pick up his things and stuff them back into place.

The stranger bent at the waist and came up with one of Joseph’s books. “Ah yes! The Wand of Time and Space. This is an epic tale of fantasy and adventure. Have you read much?” The man offered him the book and Joseph put it away.

“I just started reading it.”

“The beginning of a new voyage is always thrilling, is it not?” The man nodded as he folded his arms behind his back. “They often come into our lives when we least expect it. Of course, those are just fictional stories meant for our enjoyment.”

Joseph cocked his head and squinted at the man after he adjusted his backpack. “Are you a teacher here? I’ve never seen you before.”

“You could say that, but I’m better described as a guide who helps enlighten others.” The man stepped back to allow Joseph room to pass. “I should let you be on your way. You don’t want to be late on your last day, do you?” The man winked. “Besides, you have something very important waiting for you at home.” He gave Joseph a reassuring tap on the shoulder. “Every adventure starts with a dream.” He then disappeared around the corner, and it was as if he’d never been there.

Joseph paused before he chased after the old gentleman. “Hey, have you—”

Be he was already gone.