

The Royal
One

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ONE

It was the morning Andre anticipated ever since he learned about the competition in school. He didn't want to have any part of it, afraid it would mean dire consequences if he didn't win. But that wasn't the point at all. The point was to find the next king and queen of the country of Rengal.

For centuries, the country had been run the same, electing new rulers through a competition. But as a result of the overpopulation decades earlier, parliament had decided to change the rules of the game.

During the months of January, May, June, and December of every year, mothers would be allowed to give birth. Any child born before or after wouldn't be kept. It was a rule, which Andre thought to be ridiculous. He had lost a brother from his mother's early delivery and made a vow that day to do whatever possible to change the rules. That law worked for a couple of years, until there was another problem, allowing every child to enter the competition would take a fairly long time. So, another law came into effect regarding the competition. Only males born in the month of May and females born in the month of June would be allowed to compete. This helped limit the amount of kids eligible once they turned eighteen so the competition would be ready to start in the month of July.

Unsure whether to be happy that this day had finally arrived or nervous about what's yet to happen, Andre got up from bed and dressed with the clothes sent over from the palace. It was a custom tradition for all the young males to wear the same black pants, white dress shirt, and red tie; and the young females to wear the same knee length red, black, and white colored dress. Both attires representing the country's official colors.

In the break of dawn, Andre's parents, Diane and Lenny Pearson, prepared a special morning meal so they could celebrate this event as a family first before making it national. His younger sister, Cindy, didn't seem to fully understand what the whole event was about, but he knew she would learn soon.

"Morning sweetie," his mother exclaimed as soon as she saw him. "My, don't you look so handsome. I bet all the girls won't be able to take their eyes off of you. Oh, I wish they allowed parents to accompany their children." She looked him up and down and smiled. Then with one tear streaming down her left cheek, she embraced Andre tightly.

"Oh, mom," he said, returning the hug. "Mom, it's okay. Don't cry," but she wouldn't let go. His father stepped into the living room and saw Andre stuck in the embrace.

"Oh, honey. You'll wrinkle the shirt," Andre's father said and pulled his wife's arms

off Andre.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, mom,” Andre replied, giving his mom a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Oh.” she said and wiped her eyes with her apron. She breathed deeply and then expressed a big smile. “Okay, enough of the emotional train wreck that is your mother, we prepared a special something for you,” she said, leading him over to the dining table. Andre saw the table set for the four members of his family, decorated with plates, napkins, silverware, tall glass cups, and a fruit basket centered in the middle.

Cindy jumped on her chair and with her arms spread out wide, she yelled, “Surprise!”

Andre laughed and walked over to pick her up. Then after a quick spin with her on his back, he hugged her and then went back to his parents. “Thanks, mom.”

“You’re welcome honey. Now, come on. Let’s eat before they come for you.”

The family sat down at the table and ate like they haven’t eaten in weeks. Andre’s plate was filled with fruit from the basket, eggs from their chicken house, and toasted bread from their wheat farm in the back. Andre’s parents owned 34 acres of land in the town of Slember, the farthest from the kingdom. But, he liked living nowhere near the busy streets of Mellani, the closest town to the palace. Even though the five towns were all under the same kingdom, each one ran itself independently, and only came together when necessary.

The car showed up two hours after the family had their morning meal together. It was a black van with tinted back and side windows, which made it hard for him to see if there were any other kids inside. There was no marking on the van, no image, either. It was just a plain dark van. Andre turned to his parents before getting inside, and smiled. He wasn’t going to come back home for a while, so he wanted to make the moment last as long as possible. The king had already chosen the ten males and ten females that would compete, so Andre wouldn’t see his family until December when they announced the new king and queen. It almost didn’t seem fair, but those have been the rules for almost 200 years. One objection wasn’t going to change anything.

Andre waved at his family one last time, then got in the van. A tall man closed the door behind him, then stepped inside the passenger seat, and the car took off. There was another kid in the van, wearing the same thing as Andre, and dark shoes. His hair was short and black, his expression was fierce. They exchanged looks and Andre knew this was the kid he had to look out for. There was no way of telling how bad this competition would get. The training would decide how dedicated each competitor was, and the tests would give the final answer.

Andre wasn’t sure how to approach this kid, but he knew if they kept this anger between them before even knowing each other’s names, there would be no hope at all. Andre extended his hand towards the guy next to him and said, “Andre.”

“Jones.” The two shook hands. Andre turned back to face the front of the car, staring out the window into the open road up ahead. Neither of them spoke again until they picked up another kid. He wore the same thing as them, and boarded the van without a word. Andre didn’t bother to introduce himself, too eager to pick up everyone already and arrive at the

palace. He was anxious to get this thing started, because the sooner it began the sooner it would end. It wasn't until they got to the next town over that they picked up the first girl.

TWO

Her hair was long and straightened to reveal the shiny black color. Her pale skin made her all the more attractive. She jumped on the step of the van and holding on to the handle on the door; she pulled herself onto the carpeted floor. She sat down on the second row, directly behind the driver and leaned over to close the door before she settled down. With a loud bang sealing the van once more, the vehicle took off for the next home.

Andre had only caught a small glimpse of the girls face, but her bright red lips could stand out anywhere. She scooted over to the window and crossed her legs, resting her hands so gracefully on her lap. She stared out the window, studying the land closely, almost as if examining it to give it a grade. Then she turned her head forward and didn't move again.

Andre was positive he wanted to get to know her better, and the way to do that was to sit next to her before the next kid did. So, ever so quickly and quietly, he bent down and got up, jumping to the row in front of him, and sat down next to her, making sure to leave some space between them. She didn't flinch as he did that, but kept her head facing the seat in front of her. Andre cleared his throat and turned to face the girl.

"I'm Andre," extending his hand to her, offering a friendly shake. She didn't respond at first, but then looked down at his open palm. She glanced at him and lifted her hand. It was soft against Andre's skin, but her grip was strong, stronger than Andre would've thought.

"I'm Faith," she said, and retreated after a long pause.

"Cool name," Andre commented, but Faith didn't reply or even move. Andre thought about what he should say next, but his thoughts were all scattered throughout his brain, making it impossible to speak again.

They picked up another six kids, all guys, and then they were on route to the palace. One guy wanted to sit in Andre's row, making Andre have an excuse to move closer to Faith to make room for the guy. But as desperately as he wanted it, they didn't talk anymore. He tried gathering his thoughts; make an attempt at conversation with her, but nothing good enough that might impress her came to mind. One thing he knew for sure, he wanted to know her. Andre was able to push that aside in time for the arrival at the palace.

It was a huge castle, made of dark gray stone on the outside, but beautifully painted walls all throughout the interior of the building. The fountain that lay in the center of the grassy field right before the entrance was surrounded by flowers of all different colors,

brightening the mood. The day had begun cloudy, but eventually, some sunlight was able to get through. When the van pulled up to the gate, Andre and the others had to stay put in the van until the check-in booth was available. After twenty endless minutes waiting, the automobile started up again, and drove through the first booth.

“Vehicle number three. Nine males and one female. Henry Calvert and Michael Howard,” said the driver in a deep, masculine voice, removing the dark shades he wore all throughout the ride, hiding his face from the rest. The man in the booth wrote something down, and then turned to type on the computer behind him. Since the windows were tinted, it was hard for Andre to see the screen of the monitor. With a sudden nod from the man in the booth, the van engine roared and the van proceeded to the open tent that was set up nearly two hundred feet from the palace.

As soon as the van came to a stop, both men in the driver’s seat and the passenger seat got out. The driver went to sign some papers for a guy coming toward the van. The guy in the passenger seat opened the side of the van and everyone took turns descending the vehicle. When Andre got out, he turned around and held his hand out to Faith, offering help to step down. Without thinking about it, she took it and squeezed it, using it for support climbing down.

“Thanks,” she said and let go to fix her dress.

“You look fine,” he said, trying to make conversation like he’d been practicing the entire ride there. But she only smiled and walked off to check herself in.

Andre looked down and tried to fix himself as well, fidgeting with the end of his tie. Then he ran his fingers through his hair and walked across the lawn to where Faith was bent over signing what must have been her name. She heard him approach and looked up as he stepped right behind her.

“What?” she asked. For the first time, he was able to look into her eyes, beautiful hazel eyes which were more noticeable by the paleness of her skin, the redness of her lips, and the blackness of her hair. Andre realized how gorgeous she really was.

“Umm...Could you help me loosen my tie a bit?” he asked, putting his hands in his pants pockets, tilting his head to the side. Faith looked at him, as if thinking whether to do it or not. But she reached her hands out and with one gripping the tie; she used the other to pull down on the knot, creating a small gap, between his neck and the top of the tie.

“Better?” she asked, not dropping her hands.

He nodded in reply and Faith released her hands, dropping them slowly, gently feeling her way down his chest, then his abdomen, and then dropping them completely. They looked each other in the eyes for a couple more seconds, neither one of them moving, but as if talking with their minds. Then Faith smiled and walked off.

Andre followed her with his eyes and held his breath, fighting the urge to go after her. There was something about her that made him nervous whenever she came in close contact. It was the need to impress her that made him dizzy, afraid that if he didn’t, she might disappear. That he couldn’t take her going away. The feeling was somewhat still confusing, but Andre wasn’t giving in so easily. The strong connection he felt between them just now faded as quickly as it came. So, Andre wanted more than ever, to get it back and make it stay.

THREE

“Name, sir?” asked the lady sitting behind the table on the lawn under the tent. She was wearing a black collared shirt with a white overcoat and a name tag that said Beth Joans: Phase Two Receptionist. She looked at him with curious eyes, as if actually wondering what his name was. Andre didn’t know why, but he looked shocked and hesitated before answering.

“Andre Pearson,” he replied. The lady wrote it down on the piece of paper in front of her, then circled something, wrote down something else under it, and finally stamped it at the very bottom. She placed it in a pile of other papers and took out a new one from the other pile. She signaled a guy behind her with two fingers, and before Andre could tell who it was or what they were going to do, a snapping sound and a bright flash came at once. Andre blinked several times and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, trying to erase the light from his eyes.

“What was that?” he asked, but the lady was already focused on the guy behind Andre. She didn’t even acknowledge that he was still there.

“Name, sir?” the lady asked, as if trying to get rid of Andre and keep her pace. Andre could tell that he was slowing her down and decided to move out of her way before another flash happened and left him blind for good.

“This way,” someone said from behind, grabbing hold of Andre’s shoulder and pulling him towards the next tent.

“Who are you?” Andre asked. He restrained from moving, but the boy’s grip was too strong to fight off for very long.

“Kyle Armstrong,” he offered his hand out to Andre.

“Andre Pearson.” They shook hands and Andre knew he was going to like this kid. He stopped resisting and began walking on his own, giving Kyle the cue to let go of his shoulder, which he was now squeezing way too hard.

“So, you ready for this thing?” asked Kyle.

“What you mean?” questioned Andre.

“The competition.”

“Oh, yeah. I mean, I guess.”

“What you mean ‘I guess’?”

“I don’t know, man. It’s not like we have a choice here.”

“Guess you’re right.”

“If I could change this thing, I would. This bloody law took my brother, and my

sister won't get to run for queen. I swore to my parents I'd change it if I won."

"Man, you don't know nothin', do you?"

"Huh?"

"It's parliament that votes to change the rules, not you. Even if you do get king, they all gotta vote for it to happen. If they don't wanna change anything, they won't. End of story," Kyle explained.

"Yeah, we'll see," Andre said.

"Keep talking like that, and you'll be the first one to go," Kyle warned and jogged ahead of him, annoyed at Andre's poor common sense.

"Pfft. Whatever," he muttered to himself and walked along the grass until he reached an available desk in the second tent.

"Wrist, please, sir," a guy said, holding his hand out from behind the desk. Andre didn't object and extended his arm to the man. The man grabbed Andre's wrist roughly and pulled it closer to him, making Andre lean over against the edge of the table. The man wore the same collared black shirt and white overcoat as the women, but had no visible name tag. The man wrapped a black watch around Andre's wrist and pushed some buttons to set it up. Before returning his arm, the man took a small scanner and scanned the watch. A slight beep sound and the man let go of Andre's arm.

"Next!" the man yelled, and Andre took that as his cue to leave for the final tent.

Andre looked down at the watch tied around his left arm and it seemed very confusing altogether. There was a total of seven miniature buttons, a scroll on the side, and a dark screen divided in two---the top side told the time of day and the bottom half seemed to be a countdown timer that wasn't yet set. Andre didn't want to get in trouble fo experimenting with it, so he left it alone.

He reached the third and final tent, which stood no further than fifty feet from the fountain. The tent was open, like the others, but had various closets around the middle. He had gotten close enough that a young, preppy-looking woman approached him with a measuring tape around her neck. Surprisingly, she came with a smile spread about her face, brightening every inch of skin on her body.

"Hello. What size, hun?" she asked. Andre was so stunned by her kindness, he remained speechless. "Alright, then. I'll just measure you." She removed the tape from her neck and lifted his arms out wide. She measured from wrist to elbow, from wrist to shoulder, from shoulder to shoulder across his chest and back. She measured from his shoulder to his waist, from right hip to left hip, from waist to ankle, and lastly across his butt. Without having to write down any of the measurements she just took, she smiled and walked to one of the closets centered in the middle of the tent.

A couple of minutes passed and Andre was still standing there, waiting. The tent was beginning to empty out and he wondered what was taking the lady so long. To pass the time, he played with his tie, tightening it and loosening it. It reminded him of Faith. How she had fixed his tie for him knowing there was nothing irritating about it. What mattered most to him was that she played along, which meant she must have cared.

The sight of the young woman coming back from the closet forced Andre to push that thought aside once more.

"Here you go, sweetie. Sorry it took so long. Now hurry up and change," she said. The lady walked away again before Andre could respond and began working on someone else.

Andre walked off, with the jumpsuit in his hands. He studied it for a bit as he was making his way through the lawn. It was entirely made of black cloth, with decorative red stripes around the ankles, wrists, neck, and waist. There was also a white printed name on the right. He squinted his eyes to be able to read it better, and saw the letters spelled his name in unique fancy writing. However, it was only his first name and a picture of a hammer underneath. It seemed odd to him, but he couldn't question clothing that came from Mellani or from the palace. It simply wasn't allowed.

Andre jumped at the sound of trumpets roaring an alarm that came from the stairway leading to the palace's front door. Without noticing it, he was now only a couple of feet from the fountain. Most people knew what the noise meant, to get ready to enter the castle. With a sigh, Andre marched along the grass following the rest of the group until he reached the stone walkway in front of the stairs. One by one, he climbed them, each step taking less energy to do so. It seemed to have been fading, the reality of it all. A picture, a wristwatch, and a uniform weren't part of the competition requirements in the past. This was all new to him, and by the looks on the faces of those he passed, they thought the same. *If this is an addition to the rules...Andre thought...I wonder what else they've changed in there.*

The trumpets sounded one more time, and once every recruiter was gathered around the door, two service men pulled open the heavy, brown, stone gateway.

FOUR

The room Andre walked into was large in size, but nothing compared to what he remembered about it. It had extravagant paintings everywhere, and the floor was polished to the point where he could see his reflection. The columns that stood in the middle of the room and around corners were made of light colored granite stone, and felt smooth in comparison to his roughly made walls back home. It was different in a way that didn't make sense to him. Everything about the competition was different somehow, from the documentation of the competitors, giving them a wristwatch, changing the uniform, and assigning suites to them. It was organized in a way he never heard of before. In each suite, there would be a male and a female staying together. They each had their own portion of the bedroom, with a bed, a dresser that remained empty throughout the months, a night table with a lamp, and a small window facing either the front of the palace or the back. Usually, the suites would be one floor for the males and one for the females, but this change made him wonder how different the competition would really be.

There was no introduction of the rules like there usually was on the first day. Instead, they made them change into the uniforms they received outside, and head straight to their rooms. Andre looked on the door of his assigned room, C-3, and lightly tapped on the door. He was afraid of entering without knocking for the girls' sake.

"Come in," said a faded voice from the inside. It was familiar in a way that he loved. With a smile across his face, he opened the door and walked in. There she was.

"Hey," he said in a welcoming tone. He closed the door behind him, not taking his eyes off of her. She was so beautiful in her uniform; he had forgotten all about his concern for competition and its surprising change of rules.

"Hi," she said back. She turned her head to the window again, returning to her original position. He looked down and tried very hard to figure out what to say, not wanting to let the conversation die out this time. It was his second chance at getting to know her, and he wasn't going to let that pass. "So, I guess we're roommates."

"Guess so," she didn't look at him, which made him think he should just leave her alone. But he was giving up just yet.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She shifted in her seat and pulled her knees up to her chest. "Not really," she said.

"Why? What's wrong?" he looked concerned and sat on the windowsill beside her. He wasn't sure if it seemed like he was coming on too strong, but he placed his hand on her knee, trying to soothe her.

“I overheard some men talking inside a room on my way here.”

“And...what did they say?”

“They were talking about the rules.”

“What did they say?” Andre urged her. She hesitated, unsure whether to tell him or not.

“They were...” she paused.

“Yeah?”

“Talking about the competition.”

“And?”

“About the rules and stuff.”

“What about the rules?” he was getting more eager to hear her out, and every time she paused, he felt like shaking her, spilling all the secrets she was keeping back.

“You know how things this year are different?”

“Different as in, what?”

“Like, the photograph at the first tent, the wristwatch at the second,” she held her hand out to him to show him she had gotten one as well, “the uniforms, and getting roomed with someone from the opposite gender.” Andre nodded in reply. “Well, they were talking about the outcome of the game.”

“The outcome? So they already know who’s gonna win?”

“No,” she shook her head and leaned back against the frame of the windowsill.

“Then, what?” he couldn’t wait any longer.

“What’s going to happen to those who don’t win?”

Andre stared at her, in complete disbelief. They had changed everything about this thing.

It was a completely new competition; a better word for it was a game. “What will happen to them?” he asked.

She stared out the window, the same way she had done when she studied the land on ride to the palace. She was biting her lip, refusing to tell him the rest. But he urged her to keep going. It was crucial that he knew everything. Then, very quietly, she said, “They get killed.”

FIVE

That night, Andre didn't sleep. He was too preoccupied with what Faith had told him hours earlier. *'They get killed'*...he thought over and over. It was tiresome to hear a phrase continuously repeating while you tried to rest. Various possibilities on how the losers would die popped in and out of his head. They all eventually led to a nightmare.

One kid had dark brown eyes and soft, bouncy, black hair. Despite his confident look, his eyes were filling up with tears, fear rendering its way to his heart making him appear vulnerable. It was one look Andre would never forget. He was standing before a panel of black figures. Andre couldn't see any faces or a sign of them being alive. There was no movement, until one stood and held out their hand. Within an instant, his thumb popped out and was pointed towards the ground. A second black figure stood and did the same, followed by three more. Pretty soon, the entire panel of black figures was standing holding out their right arms and pointing their thumbs to the floor. Then the leader of the group crossed his arms and did what Andre didn't expect, he smiled. The only thing visible was his pure white teeth encircled by a black body-like shadow. Andre heard a scream come from the boy and then a repulsive smell left his body. It was hard to tell what the smell was, but it wasn't pleasant. More likely, it was the smell of something rotting. Perhaps, something that was alive not too long ago. It could have been an animal, but Andre knew the smell of a dead animal; this smell was definitely human. A dead, rotting human body fell from the stand and lay on the floor of the dark room in which the smell now filled completely. A minute passed, everyone motionless, then another came and went. Andre lost track of time, when someone else screamed; another boy. The smell was back, stronger than before. It was more powerful, spreading about the room faster than the first one. Then nothing, no more screams, no more smell. Minutes passed again. Andre became impatient with this whole thing when suddenly; he felt a hand press against his shoulder. He spun around and took hold of the wrist, and noticed it felt soft. The hand felt familiar, and he looked up to the person who it belonged to. It was Faith. For some reason, her face didn't show any glowing features like it had before. It

was full of concern and worry, but mostly fear. She, too, was scared. He held her hand in his and pulled her closer, trying to protect her from whatever she was afraid of. She shook her head and lifted her finger to her mouth, motioning him to keep quiet. Then she leaned in to him and kissed him on the cheek. The kiss was soothing and gentle against his sweaty skin, but she didn't show any disgust. Then she fled his side and walked over to where the boy had fallen from. Andre hadn't noticed two more screams come at once, and then silence. He stared at Faith as she stepped up on a stool and lifted her arms, joining the position of a boy next to her. With a quick glance, Andre could see three other kids standing the same exact way she was. Then, the most uttering thing happened to the one on the end. A spear pushed its way through the boy chest, creating a large enough hole to fit a human arm. It bled uncontrollably, spilling red liquid and body parts all over the floor. A scream from the boy and Andre smelled the odor of a dying body once more. Then silence. The body was dragged away by two black figures, and a third cleaned up the mess. Then a pause, no sudden movements, and no more smell. One minute passed and Andre counted the seconds between each murder. Then, after four minutes and thirty seconds, a spear dug its way through the next chest in line; a scream and then the smell again. That was when Andre realized the routine. He quickly counted the time that passed before the next person was brutally murdered. Three minutes and 30 seconds this time and a third person was killed. The scream and the smell didn't bother him anymore. What did bother him was that Faith was in that line, that line of those to die. He looked at who was next and there she was. His eyes filled with tears, but he fought them back, convinced she wasn't going to die. She couldn't. He screamed and pulled on the metal bars that held him prisoner. He counted one minute, then another. Oddly enough, he reached four minutes and she was still there. Nothing had happened to her. She looked around, probably wondering the same thing as Andre. Then, he caught sight of the spear making its way through her chest. Her scream was all it took to make him look away. It was a high-pitched scream, full of sorrow and hate. The scream replayed over and over in his head. He shut his eyes, but the image of blood pouring out of her body never left. It was devastating for him to cope with those images. The scream didn't fade, but kept going, getting louder each time he tried to push it away. He pressed down on his ears and moved frantically around the cell. Then he opened his eyes and was back in his room.

SIX

The wake-up call came at five am, startling Andre as he got up to open the door. He wore his uniform, unaware that he had forgotten to change last night. The bed was warm, and he regretted having to leave it. The urge to walk over to Faith encircled his mind, but he quickly pushed it aside. The nightmare hadn't given him much chance of sleep, so his exhaustion blocked the way of speaking to her.

He had reached the door in time for the second knock. It was the same as the first, but louder. Whoever was knocking was in a hurry and Andre knew that they wouldn't leave until the door opened. With a quick turn of the knob, the person on the other side pushed the door open, forcing Andre to jump back.

"Hey!" he said, but with the light from the hallway, it was hard for him to see who was there. The person didn't speak at first, probably shocked at the remark that they were given.

"Five minutes," a sweet sounding female voice echoed in Andre's room and the figure left and knocked on the next door just a couple of feet away. Andre didn't catch much of the woman, but he would definitely remember her voice. He abruptly closed the door, upset he couldn't rejoin the comfort of his warm soft bed on the right side of the room. He turned to the left and there lay Faith, sound asleep.

He walked over slowly, and pulled open her curtains, shining heavy light into the room, forcing Andre to squint once again and rub his eyes. Faith didn't move an inch, however. *Man, she's tough...* he thought with a slight chuckle. He glided to her bed and sat down on the side. He shook her very carefully and she woke.

"What time is it?" she asked in the most genuine way.

"Man, you're human, alright," he replied.

"What? Do I look like some sort of creature to you?" she said, sitting up on her bed. He noticed she wasn't wearing her uniform but a simple white long sleeve shirt and black cotton sweatpants.

"That's not what I meant."

“Yeah, whatever,” Faith said, and pulled on the covers to free herself. Her bed felt warm as well, and Andre fought the urge to climb into her bed and keep the bed warm. He was so tired, and the nightmare hadn’t done him any good. “Sleep well?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Andre didn’t want to go into detail about his night, so he turned the question back to her, “You?”

“Fine,” she commented and looked through her drawers vigorously, desperately trying to find something. Andre couldn’t help himself and got up to stand beside her.

“Looking for something?” he asked.

“It should still be here,” she said, ignoring his question.

“What should still be there?” he peeked at her drawer as she violently messed up the neatly folded clothes.

“Where is it?” she asked, not paying any attention to him.

“WHAT!?!”

“My necklace! My mother gave it to me before I left. She said it would bring me good luck. I took it off last night and put it away in here. Now I can’t find it. So, make yourself useful and look over there by the bed.” Andre did as he was told.

There was another knock on the door. Andre kept himself occupied looking under the bed, so Faith went over to open it.

“It’s time. Get dressed and be down in one minute,” someone said. The loud slam of the door made Andre laugh.

“Man, are you in a cranky mood,” he laughed.

“I just can’t have lost it,” her worried tone alerted Andre and he got up from the floor.

“Hey, we’ll find it,” he said, his face serious. He looked at her and then down at her lips. She did the same. The moment was there. It was his time to make the move. She was letting him and together they got closer, and closer, and closer.....

Faith looked away and began searching through the drawers again, leaving Andre empty-handed. For a second, just a split second, he was happy that the embrace has lasted longer this time. It was a special moment, and Andre knew it would motivate him to get closer to her. But his actions could have well enough frightened her to break their contact. He did what he tried to avoid; he came too strong. But it was the least of his worries. They had embraced again, and he was certain it wasn’t their last one.

SEVEN

“Welcome everyone. I’m glad you enjoyed your wake-up calls this morning,” there were a few groans and a couple of laughs in the crowd of twenty eighteen-year-olds. “Anyway, it’s time for you to learn the rules of the competition.” The lady pulled out a long sheet of paper and read slowly, trying to waste some time. “Number One: Each test will not exceed the amount of time originally given. If there is any extra time that one receives, that test will be eliminated and he/she could either be sent home or be penalized for taking extra time. All the competitors will have the same amount of time for each test. The time will not exceed one week per exam, but could be anywhere from minutes, to hours, even days. It all depends on the individual. Note: there is one exam every month, but you only have one week to complete it. And I don’t think you will need so much time anyway.

“Number Two: There are no teams. If anyone of you tries to form any team or a group of you help each other out, you will be automatically eliminated. These exams will test your strength, both mentally and physically, and your scores will reveal the best male and female at the end to rule the country.

“Number Three: Be aware that the dorms have changed this year. And there is also a purpose for this change. It will be revealed at a later date. But for now, keep the contact to a minimal, and stay put on your own side of the room. They were designed to be divided for that purpose, males on the right and females on the left. Let us keep it that way.

“Number Four: There will be a four day break in between each exam where the panel of judges grades each and every one of you. Your scores will be added together to create your final score. In between the four day breaks, you are allowed to roam free throughout the castle, with a few exceptions: you cannot leave the castle grounds. If you are caught trying to escape, you will be sent home and punished. The punishments may vary.

“Lastly, Number Five: You must always wear your uniform when completing a test. Unless otherwise instructed, you are allowed to wear anything else you find in your closets and drawers. Remember, have fun, and try your best. The future of this kingdom rests in your hands. So don’t let the people of Rengal down.”

Andre wasn't surprised as much as he was worried. *The future of this kingdom rests in your hands...* he thought over and over. He desperately wanted to become king. It was a promise he had made his parents. So it was one he had to keep. The chatter among the group continued until the lady ordered for silence once again.

“Thank you for your patience. Now if you all follow me, your first challenge will begin.” Everyone followed the tall lady through a door that Andre hadn't noticed before. He gulped as he reached the frame of the entrance, and inhaled deeply as he walked through, feeling both relieved and anxious about what lay inside.

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