

## 1. ALEX

*Snow clung to Taytora's eyelashes as she glanced down the mountain ledge. The fierce winds whistled around her, tugging at her thick garments like an incessant child.*

*'The Squealers are gaining, Brother,' Taytora said, fiddling with the silver brooch that fastened her cloak. 'Any of your bright ideas would be most appreciated.'*

*A chuckle escaped her numb lips, an outburst of emotion she found odd given their predicament. After visiting the city of Glayridge, Taytora's father had given both her and her brother Deonis a brooch. It hadn't dawned on Taytora until now, but the breastpin was fashioned into a gorlac, the very beasts in their pursuit. The irony was all too much.*

*Deonis peered down the mountainside, brow creased in concentration. 'How confident are you?'*

*Taytora followed her brother's gaze and let out a huff. The two gorlacs were clawing their way upwards, their snow-white fur indistinguishable against the mountainside. Squealers were truly hideous creatures: A singular amber eye. Teeth as jagged as icicles.*

*Paws as big as grizzly bears that glistened with hooked claws. The mere sight of them could make the bravest man's insides liquefy.*

*'Not very,' Taytora admitted, assuming Deonis was questioning her bow and arrow skills. She knew the odds of firing an accurate shot would be the same as besting her father in a sword fight: highly unlikely. The harsh winds that blew from the Galbraz Mountains could uproot trees, so what chance would an arrow at long distance have? But odds and winds aside, Taytora knew she needed to attempt something. If the gorlacs scaled the mountain any higher, she and her brother would soon be occupying their stomachs.*

*The wretched beasts hadn't earned the name Squealers for any old reason. Upon closing in on their prey, the gorlacs would let out a high-pitched shriek, disorienting their victims and rendering them defenceless. Thankfully, Taytora had only experienced this agony a few times, and much to the village folks' disbelief, she had lived to tell the tale. She often compared the feeling to submerging your head in boiling water, then taking it out, then immersing it again.*

*Taytora's chest heaved as she walked towards the mountain ledge above the beasts. She shut her eyes and focused on nothing but*

*her breathing. The corner of her lips curled into a smile.*

*My bow and arrow isn't my only weapon, she thought.*

*'Don't use too much,' Deonis advised, seemingly able to read her mind. His heavy boots crunched through the layers of snow and dirt as he backtracked.*

*After a year's worth of training, unlocking her Gate was second nature. Loosening her shoulders and relaxing her muscles, Taytora pried open the barrier to the mystical power. She knew it was unwise, but she drank from the Eternal Source as if she'd been stuck in the Saadarok Desert for days. Taytora breathed in the fresh snow and sweet mountain air as newfound energy surged through her limbs, heightening her senses and washing her mind with clarity.*

*She performed the Chain for the Spell, then pointed an arm downward. There was a deafening crack as a bolt of lime-green energy emitted from Taytora's palm. The blast of lightning hit its mark. The mixture of snow and boulders gave way, smashing into the Squealers and sending them wailing down the mountain.*

*Taytora dusted her gloved hands, then rounded on Deonis, her golden hair whipping over her shoulder. Although that brief display of magic had drained more energy than expected, witnessing*

*those flea-ridden beasts fall to their demise was more than worth it.*

*From underneath Deonis' snow-covered hood, Taytora swore she witnessed a rare sight: her brother grinned. The smile disappeared as quickly as it had come. I must be lightheaded from using that Spell, she thought. Brother never smiles.*

*'So, I take it from the distant squealing our pursuers are no longer pursuing?' Deonis asked as he sheathed his longsword riddled with nicks—a parting gift from their father before they began their journey.*

*Taytora sauntered over to Deonis and clasped his shoulder. 'My dear brother, have you no faith in me?'*

*Deonis tried to suppress a smile. 'Remind me never to get on your bad—'*

*A screech pulsed through Taytora's skull. She dropped to the snow in a heap. Where did that come from? she thought. Have we wandered into a pack of the beasts? Taytora covered her ears with her hands, trying to muffle the tear-wrenching wails. She lifted her head. A Squealer was tearing through the snow in full extension. Its peeled-back lips revealed row upon row of splintered teeth.*

*Taytora fumbled for her quiver. The sound-waves the beast*

*emitted made her brain feel like it was sizzling above a hearth. She propped herself down to her knees, and then, when she found enough strength, back to her feet. Opening her Gate to the Source had sapped a significant amount of energy, yes, but it was nothing compared to enduring a Squealer's trumpet.*

*Taytora nocked an eagle-feathered arrow, attempting to focus on the white blur barrelling towards her. Her brain seared. Hundreds of thoughts were spinning around her head like a whirlpool. There was a twang as she released her numb fingers. The arrow whistled through the snowflakes, finally meeting the gorlac's shoulder. Taytora let out a whimper. The Squealer didn't even break stride.*

*She reached over her shoulder again, but before she could grasp another arrow, her brother bellowed:*

*'No, this one's mine!'*

*Deonis' arms were extended above his head, a hefty boulder levitating above him. Grunting, he took a step forward and then sent the hunk of earth hurtling through the air, launching it like a catapult. It tumbled twice before it struck the gorlac's side. A thunderous crack resonated through the mountain range when it hit.*

*The beast lay motionless.*

*Earthwielding was a branch of magic to which Deonis had a close affinity. Taytora had never seen him use that Spell though.*

*How dare he? she thought. Has he been practicing without my knowledge?*

*'What was that?' Taytora snapped, not even bothering to hide her disdain.*

*'What was what?' Deonis asked. He was breathing heavily. Too heavily. Like one does when a Spell takes an immense toll on their body.*

*'That,' Taytora said aloud, gesturing to the mutilated corpse of the gorlac.*

*And he had the nerve to tell me not to use too much of The Eternal Source?*

*'Oh, that,' he said, laughing dryly. 'I learned it from a scroll Elder Mainellis gave me.'*

*Taytora raised her eyebrows.*

*'Don't look at me like that,' Deonis said. 'If we're to win the Golden Gauntlet some Spells must remain hidden.' He lowered his eyes as he added, 'And I was hoping not to use that particular one*

*until the finals.'*

*'Well then, how come you've kept me in the dark?'*

*Deonis chortled. 'Because chances are you'll be my opponent, dear sister.'*

Alex was interrupted by an impatient knocking on her door.

"Off your bottoms," Mom said as she burst into the room.

"You were both supposed to be downstairs five minutes ago." Her gaze fell to the book in Alex's hands and she rolled her eyes. "Read it after. Family comes first."

"Can I at least finish the chapter?" Alex asked feebly.

Her mom didn't even dignify her with a response.

"Five more minutes, please?" Alex's older brother Link pleaded. "Just *five*."

"Just five?" Mom repeated, rubbing her pointy chin.

Link nodded his head eagerly. Alex sensed a trap.

"How about this," Mom said, her eyes searing, "If you're not downstairs within five *seconds*, I will personally snap every video game disc in this household."

*Hardball is this woman's middle name*, Alex thought. She exaggerated a groan and then thumped the leather-bound book on her

desk.

“Wise decision,” Mom noted. She blew a lock of wavy hair out of her eyes before she disappeared.

Alex and Link crept after her downstairs, carefully skipping the second-to-last step that creaked as loud as a door in a haunted house. As the pair covertly passed the dining room, Alex was pleased to find the delectable smell of Mom’s pulled-pork burgers was still lingering from dinner. She would have had seconds if her ravenous brother hadn’t beaten her to it.

*Oh well, guess I’ll just have to fill up on dessert,* Alex thought darkly.

Dad’s loose-fitting sock could be seen dangling off the edge of the sofa as the three tiptoed passed the dim lounge room and entered the kitchen.

“Keep watch,” Mom whispered, inclining her head to where Dad had been hibernating since dinner. She rummaged inside of the fridge, eventually pulling out a ganache-covered chocolate cake she’d strategically hidden earlier. Alex licked her lips at the mouth-watering sight.

“Malicious Murderers is on TV, Mom,” Alex said, trying to



draw her eyes away from the cake. “I doubt he’s going to move.”

MM was Dad’s favourite crime show, and if any family member was in the lounge room while an episode was on, they couldn’t so much as breathe loudly. He had nearly grounded Alex once for coughing during an intense murder scene.

Mom squinted at Alex as she pulled a pack of rainbow-colored candles out from a drawer. “Just keep watch, will you?”

Alex peeped her head around the kitchen divider. Dad was flicking through the TV absentmindedly as he picked fluff out of his belly button. *Charming*. Alex gathered there must’ve been a commercial break, considering Dad never tore his eyes away from the screen when MM was on.

“He’s coming this way!” she lied, turning to Mom with a mock look of horror on her face. Mom’s bulging eyes were all too much for Alex. She had to cover her mouth to refrain from laughing.

“Oh, you think that’s funny, do you?” Mom asked as she jabbed some candles into the thick icing. “Reminder: No cake for Alex.”

That shut her up. It wasn’t uncommon for Mom and Dad to

use cake as leverage over her: “Alex, can you put away the dishes?”

“But I don't—” “There's red velvet cake in the fridge.” “Fiinnnee.”

“We've talked about this,” Link whispered to Mom as he lit the candle wicks with a lighter. “You've got to stop letting her push your buttons. You make it too easy.”

“Yeah, Mom,” Alex said as she poked her mother's back repetitively with a finger. “Stop letting me push your buttons. Beep! Beep! Beep!”

Mom spun around and smacked her hand away, her lips twitching as she tried to fight off a smile. “One of these days you're going to be like the girl who cried wolf,” she warned with a threatening finger. “Nobody believes a liar, Alex, even when they're telling the truth.”

“It's the boy who cried wolf, not the girl,” Alex said, rolling her eyes skyward. “If you're going to talk some sense into me, at least do it right.”

“What. Do. We. Have. Here?” Dad's voice boomed from behind them. Alex turned to find a big smile etched across his round face. Dad massaged his salt-and-pepper goatee as his crystal blue eyes shifted from one guilty family member to the next. “Snakes in

the grass! All of you!”

“I told you to keep watch,” Mom said, scowling at Alex.

“I was! I—” but before she could explain, Alex was drowned out by Mom and Link singing “Happy Birthday” at the top of their lungs. She joined in with an exaggerated monotone voice as they shuffled over to the dining room table.

“And now I’m supposed to kiss the closest girl, right?” Dad asked eagerly as he cut into the cake. He attempted to kiss Alex on the cheek, but she managed to jerk her head away in time.

“Hey, get back here,” Dad grumbled. He clamped his arms around her. The smell of oil, grease, and sweat immediately filled her nostrils.

*Oh, the perks of having a mechanic as a father, she thought.*

“That’s enough, you two,” Mom said, cradling her face in her hands. “Can’t we pretend like we’re a civilized family? Just for one night?”

“I’m not stopping until I get a kiss,” Dad said childishly. He was now giving Alex a noogie.

“Will a kiss from me suffice?” Mom proposed, leaning over the table and pecking him on the lips.

Dad shrugged nonchalantly, then loosened his hold on his daughter. “I suppose that’ll work.”

“You two are disgusting,” Alex said, now flattening her frizzier-than-usual hair. “Get a room.”

Mom cut herself a generous slice of cake and then handed Alex a piece. “Speaking of rooms,” she said casually. “I want you back in yours after we’ve finished handing out presents. That paper *needs* to be completed by tonight.”

“Smooth segue,” Alex scoffed.

“Enough with the attitude,” Mom snapped.

Dad arched his bushy eyebrows. “You still haven’t finished it?” The tone of his voice was deep. Too deep. And just like that, Alex knew the time for games was over. “Is this the same paper you promised would be done by last week?”

Alex went to say something but then stopped stupidly. *Why did Mom have to bring this up? I thought she’d forgotten all about it.*

“It’s that book, isn’t it?” Dad asked, taking a bite of his cake and shaking his head in disbelief. “This is getting beyond a joke now, Alex.”

“You’re acting as if I’m the only one who writes it,” she said,

glancing to Link for help.

Her brother held his hands up as if someone was pointing a gun at him. “Don’t drag me into this,” he said, his mouth filled with chocolatey-brown sludge.

“But I—”

“Whatever you’re about to say, Alex, I don’t want to hear it,” Dad said, holding up a silencing hand. “You’re fifteen now; it’s time you grow up and start acting like it.”

“But Lin—”

“Lincoln can focus on his studies as well as that book, so there’s no reason why you can’t. Not once this year has he gotten a fail.” His eyes narrowed as he pointed his chocolate-tipped spoon at her. “You, on the other hand...”

As much as it pained Alex to admit it, Dad was right. It wasn’t that the studies were hard for her—they were quite simple—She just didn’t feel the need to overexert herself when any accomplishment she achieved would always be second to Link’s.

When Alex received a C+ on a paper, Link got an A+. If she cooked the family Pop-Tarts for breakfast, Link whipped up golden waffles topped with strawberries, bananas and maple syrup the next

morning. If Alex achieved a high score on one of the machines at her local arcade, Link achieved the highest points scored ever recorded in a high school basketball game.

Alex had been overshadowed by her brother for as long as she remembered, and she was getting sick and tired of the comparisons. Link was in his senior year, had a perfect attendance, was the star player for his high school's varsity basketball team, was senior-class president, volunteered at a children's hospital on weekends, and had a drop-dead gorgeous girlfriend. And as if that wasn't enough, her brother had an abundance of prestigious colleges around America begging him to accept their scholarships. He was one of the most sought-after student athletes in Arizona—or so Alex had read once in the paper. (She had been looking for the comics section at the time.)

She understood Dad's frustration, though. This wasn't the first time he'd lectured her about school being more important than her story. But to Alex, this book wasn't just an ordinary book. It was a portal into a whole different world. The world where she made the rules and no one told her what to do—as childish as it sounded.

It had all started one day when she and Link were tossing

story ideas back and forth. The next day those ideas escalated into solid brainstorming and writing sessions. Then, before she knew it, they had pictures, character profiles, and plot charts. Unknowingly, they'd completely immersed themselves in their make-believe land called Nocera. Alex had created the character Taytora, and Link had produced Deonis, and in this world, she and her brother were gods.

Each stroke of their pencils pitted armies against one another, conjured breathtaking cities, or made characters fall madly in love. But above all, each stroke of Alex's pencil distanced her further from reality to a world where she truly felt welcome. But now that was all over. Dad didn't know yet, but Alex and Link had finally finished the book before Mom had called them down. Alex was in the middle of reading the first chapter to her brother when she was interrupted.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" Dad prompted, his fingers interlaced.

"I'm not Link," Alex mumbled, looking down at her untouched slice of cake.

"What was that?" he asked, raising his eyebrows threateningly.

"If you haven't noticed, *Father*," Alex said louder, "I'm not

Lincoln.”

“Well perhaps it wouldn’t hurt you to start acting more like him, *Alexandra*,” Dad snapped.

Alex’s knuckles went white as her fingers tightened around her spoon. Dad knew it drove her crazy when he called her that. She thought it sounded so old-fashioned, like a character out of a Jane Austen novel.

“That’s enough. The both of you,” Mom butted in before Alex could make a remark about her Dad’s receding hairline. “Alex will finish the paper tonight, and that’ll be the end of it. We’re not going to ruin this night over a silly argument. Is that understood?”

Mom’s scorching amber eyes met Alex’s, causing her to look down at her plate like a scolded puppy. Dad liked to call Mom Tornado Trish because when she was in a temper, she had a knack of destroying everything in her path. Dad said this behind her back, of course; he wouldn’t have the cojones to say it to her face. So whenever Mom showed signs of approaching a category F5 tornado, every family member would take cover until she passed.

“Understood,” Alex said, defeated. “But for your information, *Robert*, we finished the book a few hours ago.”



If Dad was happy, his face did little to betray him. “Good,” he said calmly, biting into his cake. “Now you can focus on your grades.”

“Or better yet,” Alex said, flashing him a mischievous smile, “I can start writing a sequel.”

She didn’t speak to Dad for the rest of the night, not even when she handed him his presents. Alex had bought him sunglasses, cologne, and a gift card to the local automotive store—her whole monthly allowance.

After she had finished her cake and washed the family’s dishes, Alex headed upstairs to work on the rest of her paper. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t keep her mind off Nocera. She glanced over at the leather-bound book on her desktop, almost wanting to cry.

Other than this book being an escape from reality for Alex, it had also been responsible for bringing her and Link closer together. Sure, they’d always remained relatively close throughout their childhood, but before they had started the story, Alex had never shared any interests with her athletically gifted brother.

She didn’t follow sports, didn’t go to parties, and she

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