

## 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

couldn't talk to him about the boys she had crushes on because . . . well, because that would just be plain weird. Writing the book, *Nocera*, had been the only thing with which they could relate to one another. But now that was all over. Now that the book was finished, it was back to reality. And Alex hated reality with a passion.

Link whooshed through her bedroom door at that moment, scaring her so bad she had to clench her jaw to stop from squealing.

“Do you ever knock?”

“Nope,” he said, showing her his teeth. “How’s the paper going?”

“How do you think?” Alex replied, rubbing her temples.

“Hard.”

Link pressed some buttons on her keyboard, causing the Internet tabs she'd been pirating to pop up. “*Hard?* What, do your fingers hurt from copying and pasting?” He picked up Alex's heavy Ancient Civilizations textbook from her desk, pretending to look interested in it. “You know, just throwing this out there, but another option is you could actually study the set material.”

“Nonsense,” Alex said, scoffing. “Don't be silly.”

Link collapsed onto her squeaky double bed in defeat,

running his fingers through his short-kept hair as he stared at the sloped ceiling. Alex wished she had hair like his. Obviously not as short, but just the exact same vibrancy and silkiness. She had inherited Mom's wavy locks that frizzed like crazy at the slightest hint of humidity.

Link sprung up from her bed and picked up their book, *Nocera*. He popped open the golden C-lock, then opened the book randomly in the middle and began reading. His lively golden eyes whipped from left to right as they worked down the page.

Much to her older brother's dismay, Alex had insisted they write the story the old-fashioned way: pencil and paper. Ever since Alex was little, her Grandma used to encourage her to write short stories. She would turn her nose up at Alex if she ever handed them to her typed. And because Alex valued her Grandma's feedback so much, she had always catered to her request.

Link let out a weak chuckle, his eyes never leaving the book as he read. "Have you ever thought about how weird these things are?" he asked. "Books, I mean. Like, just the overall concept of them. You and I thought up this entire world in our heads, right? And then we attempted to express it into words. Now, whoever reads this

book must use those exact words to fuel their own imagination.” He paced around her room, the book tucked under his armpit. “So, so when you really think about it, each word—nay, each letter we write—is sort of like colours on a palette. And those colours eventually come together to form one big abstract pai—”

“—Save the philosophical talk for your philosophy class, Link.”

“Painting!” he blurted. “I was going to say painting.”

“You’re so stupid,” Alex said, her face deadpan.

Link shrugged and then tossed the book onto her bed.

“Mentally challenged, some say.”

She slid her matte black laptop towards him. “Pwetty pwease? If you do my paper, I’ll clean your room.”

“Interesting proposition, Tweetie Bird,” Link said, pretending to twirl the ends of his non-existent moustache in thought. “But I’ll have to respectfully decline.”

“I hate you.”

“I love you too,” Link said as he meandered over to the door. “But all brotherly and sisterly love aside, you better get those fingers typing or Dad will kill you. Like *literally* kill you.”

“Yes, yes, I get it,” she said, shooing him away with an impatient hand. “Just leave already.”

Link paused in the doorway on his way out, his face suddenly serious. “Look, I’m sorry about what he said to you before. Downstairs, at dinner.”

“It’s fine,” Alex said. She had almost forgotten about her argument with her father.

“You know he only wants what’s best for you, right?” Link asked. “He just has a funny way of expressing his emotions.”

“Oh, my God,” Alex said, chuckling. “Just when I thought you couldn’t get any more perfect. Now you’ve begun apologizing on behalf of other people.” She looked up to the heavens and clutched the air. “*When will it end?*”

“Wow,” Link said, feigning a taken aback expression. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that.” He stormed out of the room, waited a few seconds, then poked his head back in the doorway like a nosy housewife. “I’m leaving at 7:30 tomorrow. If you’re not in my car before that aforementioned time, you can catch the bus to school.” He smirked as he added on, “*Literally.*”

“Having a license doesn’t automatically make you cool, you

know?”

“Oh, it *literally* does.”

“Literally, get lost!”

“*Literally?*”

Alex picked up a crushed Coca Cola can off the ground and tossed it at his head. He caught it effortlessly with one hand, a wide grin sprawled across his face.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ll recycle this *litter . . . rally*”

*Damn his quick reflexes, she thought, and his wits.*

After she finished her paper, Alex fell into a deep slumber, completely unaware that would be the last night she’d spend with her older brother.

## 2. LINCOLN

Link curled into a tight ball, shivering from the cold. His cheek tingled. Teeth chattered. At first, he thought Alex was playing a prank on him; maybe tipped a bucket of ice water on him for not doing her Ancient Civilizations paper. But when his eyes opened, Link found he wasn't in his luxurious queen-sized bed, or for that fact, even in his room. He was lying in a thick blanket of snow.

Link stood bolt upright, watching the icy snowflakes drift downward as he spun around in disbelief. The rich smell of pine cones and fresh snow wavered through the air. He was standing at the base of a massive, snow-capped mountain. Ridges and bare pine trees stretched as far as his eyes could see. White everywhere. Everything was coated in a dense layer of snow. His heart pounded against his ribcage like a crazed woodpecker.

Link glanced down. His body was draped in a cloak lined with fur, his hands in woollen gloves, and his feet in leather hiking boots. That wasn't what terrified him the most, though. There was something heavy resting on the outside of his thigh. And somehow, before he even opened the flap of his cloak, he knew what it was: a

sheathed sword. He gripped the faded leather hilt tentatively, feeling the cold steel of the diamond-shaped pommel even through his woollen gloves.

As his legs buckled and he dropped to his knees, the first thought that crossed Link's mind was that he was dreaming. After all, the last memory he had was playing his video game before he went to bed. And how else could he have ended up in these mountains dressed so ridiculously? His heart rate slowed thinking of the idea.

*Dreaming*, he thought. *Yes, I like the sound of that.*

To be sure, Link rolled up his right sleeve and shamefully pinched himself. He knew it was cliché, but he wasn't exactly spoilt with options. But one stinging arm later, he found out he was still trapped in the frosty nightmare he in which he had awakened.

Kneeling there helplessly in the snow, Link began to comprehend the reality of his surroundings. The numbing flakes settled on his face and peppered his shoulders. The wind's icy, searing fingers flapped through his clothes and whistled in his ears. His five senses were so sharply attuned that he couldn't kid himself any longer. This wasn't a vivid dream. Somehow it was a reality.



His vision blurred as he rose to his feet. For several minutes, he stood there, swaying, trying to catch his breath. Nothing was adding up. If this wasn't a dream, how could he have gone from the safety of his bed to waking up in the middle of a mountain range? Not only was he in a completely different climate altogether, but judging from his outdated clothes he had also gone backward in time.

*And here I thought you needed to own a DeLorean to time travel!*

“Can anyone hear me?” someone close by yelled.

The voice was oddly familiar, but far too strained to recognize. Footsteps approached, crunching slowly through the thick crust of ice and snow. Crawling on his hands and knees, Link moved to a grove of pine trees and pressed his back against one of their trunks. He wrapped his gloved fingers around the hilt of the sword, sliding it halfway out of its sheath, noting its unfamiliar weight—nothing at all like the flimsy branches he and Alex used to play fight with growing up. Behind him, the footsteps stopped.

“Please, someone help!” The voice was hysterical now.

*Alex?*

Link peeked his head out from behind the tree. His sister was wrapped in a thick cloak with a short bow strapped around her shoulder. His body reacted before his mind did. Link leaped out from his hiding place and sprinted towards her.

“Alex, it’s me!” he shouted, stumbling through the snow.  
“Are you OK?”

Her sapphire eyes looked as if they were about to pop out of their sockets. “Link? Oh, my God, Link!”

They embraced each other in a tight hug. Alex was reluctant to let go of his waist.

“Are you OK?” Link asked, examining his sister from head to toe at arm’s length. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. Just freezing,” Alex said, although he could tell she was fighting back tears.

His sister looked him up and down curiously. “Why the hell do we both look like we’re dressed for a Renaissance fair?”

Link ran a hand through his hair, taking in her cloak and short bow once more. *A short bow*, he thought. *Taytora’s weapon of choice*. His stomach lurched with fear.

“I honestly don’t know,” he mumbled, trying to appear calm,

which was an effort considering his body was pulsating with adrenaline.

Alex shifted her feet uneasily. A faint gleam from her chest caught his eye. A silver brooch in the shape of a gorlac was secured to her cloak. Link rubbed the back of his neck fiercely.

Alex noticed him staring at her chest and then followed his gaze. A moment later, tears streamed down her cheeks. “This is Glayridge’s brooch . . . Why am I—” She pointed to his chest with a shaky finger, “Why are *we* wearing our character’s brooches?”

Link paid her no mind. His brain was already powering ahead, his eyes fixated on their surroundings. Something told him they needed cover fast. “Follow me.”

“Follow you?” she asked. “Where? You don’t even know where we are!”

“Calm dow—”

“How can I calm down? Look at—”

Link grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a quick shake. “Keep your voice down,” he whispered through gritted teeth. “We don’t know where the hell we are, or what is out there.”

Alex must’ve known what he was insinuating. She

immediately wiped her tears away with the back of her hand, shooting a wary glance behind her. “Do you think that—”

“I don’t know,” Link interrupted. “Just be quiet and follow me.”

They had only walked a few feet before the shrieking started. The pain that entered Link’s ears made him feel as if his brain were going to implode like a black hole. His vision splintered. Thoughts scrambled. He whirled around, disorientated, searching for the source of the noise. Only bare foothills and mountains could be seen in the distance. They ran as fast as their feet could take them.

“Cover,” Link shouted. “Fast!”

Another squeal. Louder this time. The sound waves rattled through his skull, causing him to lose his balance and nearly topple over. He knew they couldn’t let these things get any closer or they’d be as good as dead.

The siblings sprinted to the base of a mountain, their fingers plugged in their ears, searching for a suitable hiding place. Several feet up, Link spotted what looked to be a small cave. The way up was steep and riddled with loose stones, but options were limited.

“Up there!” he yelled as he climbed up on all fours.

The way up was steeper than Link had anticipated and every muscle in his body burned before he had even gotten halfway. When he finally reached the cave, he glanced back down at Alex, and to his bewilderment, she hadn't even moved. She was still at the bottom of the mountain, staring over her shoulder at something in the distance, paralysed by what she saw.

“What the hell are you doing?” he yelled.

Link followed her gaze and cried out in shock. Two white blurs were rocketing towards them from the foothills in the distance. They were tearing through the white terrain like a pair of snowmobiles.

“Get up here now!”

Upon hearing his voice, Alex snapped out of her daze and followed her brother up the mountain. As Link was about to head down and meet her halfway, he realized she was not moving at all like his uncoordinated sister would. She was more sure-footed and balanced than he was climbing up, leaping from stone to stone with the elegance and finesse of an acrobat.

Link stared at her with a perplexed look on his face as she zig-zagged effortlessly up the steep incline. He couldn't believe what

he was witnessing. He had known her for fifteen years and the only time he had seen her move like this was when she was controlling a character in a video game.

The screeches from the creatures below reminded him of the peril they were in. Link dropped to his stomach, dangling out an arm for Alex to grab. Whatever was chasing them was right underneath them now, ascending the mountain. Alex reached for her brother's outstretched hand, barely managing to grip the tips of his fingers. As soon as their gloves met, Link wrenched her into the mouth of the cave with all his strength, just as one of the creatures lunged for them.

He closed his eyes, flinching, waiting to be torn apart by whatever this thing was. But when Link opened them, he found the beast wedged inside of the entrance. He and Alex scurried back as far as they could, out of reach of its flailing legs. It snapped at them in a frenzy, clawing the sides of the cave, trying to wriggle closer and take a chunk out of them. Its rough, forked tongue had encircled its lips before it let out another high-pitched squeal. The sound echoed through the cave, amplifying their pain tenfold. Link writhed on the ground in agony, jamming his fingers inside of his ears. They

were slowly popping.

*Please stop! Please stop! Please stop!*

And then it finally did. Link looked up to find an arrow embedded right above the singular eye of the beast. Dark blood was oozing down its face, in contrast with its snow-white fur. Alex sat beside him with her bow drawn, tilted on an angle. She was panting heavily.

Link stuck a finger inside his ear, wriggling it around to get some sound back. His head felt like someone had stuck a layer of thumbtacks into his brain. Through the gloom of the cave, Alex was clutching her lower leg. Fear shot through him like a defibrillator to the chest.

“Are you OK?” Link asked, scooting over to her. He could barely hear himself speak. His ears were still ringing.

Alex scrunched up her face as she spoke. He couldn’t make out a single word.

“What did you say?”

“I think it got me,” Link managed to hear her yell.

Alex dropped her backpack, bow and quiver to the side, then shrugged off her cloak and lay on her back. Link’s first reaction was

to look away, but he knew that would freak her out even more. The creature's claws had torn right through her leggings, leaving two grotesque gashes down the length of her left calf. His head was still throbbing as he inspected the wound. Even in the faint light, he could tell how deep his sister's cuts were. She was already losing a lot of blood.

“How bad is it?” Alex asked, her face contorted in pain.

“Just a little scratch.”

“What?” she yelled, tugging her right earlobe.

Link repeated himself louder.

“You're lying,” she moaned, trying to crane her head up to see.

“It's nothing. Look away,” Link ordered. He had to think quickly. Stop the bleeding somehow. Alex had never been a fan of blood. Seeing it always made her queasy and light-headed. He couldn't have her freaking out any more than she was. Or worse, passing out.

To see what he had to work with, Link tipped out all the items from both their backpacks and pouches onto the hard cave floor: A sheepskin map, rope, a vial filled with weird goo, scrolls,



blanket rolls, two waterskins, bread, cheese, and plenty of dried meat. *The same as what Taytora and Deonis carried on their journey through the Galbraz Mountains*, he reflected.

Link shook his head. There was no time to dwell on that. Stopping the bleeding was his priority. He unlaced Alex's boots and took them off, trying to roll her leggings up over the wound. It was no use. The higher he rolled the more pain it caused her. Instead, he proceeded to cut into the bottom of her pants with a knife from his belt.

Link jerked his head up. A sound like two rocks grinding together was coming from outside the cave. The remaining creature was clawing at the stone, trying to find a way in. Its snout was pressed against the entrance, sniffing madly for their scents, making excited, sharp yipping noises.

Link moved his head quickly from side to side, searching the cramped cave. There was only one entrance, and that was the way they came in. Unless it ripped out its dead friend, he figured they'd be safe for the time being.

When Link had finished hacking the bottom of Alex's leggings, he grabbed the waterskin and drizzled a little water over the

slashes, trying his best to cleanse them. He wrapped the portion of legging he had cut off tightly around her leg, then he propped her leg on top of the backpack, elevating it slightly so the blood rushed away from the wound. Mom had taught him this after a First Aid course she had attended. Link was grateful he had paid attention for once.

A shrill sound resonated from outside the cave. The creature was getting impatient. Alex's eyes were trained on the entrance.

"Relax, we'll be safe in here," Link said, even though he didn't believe the words himself.

"What the hell are they?" Alex asked.

"I don't know," he responded, sparing a glance at the dead beast in front of them. "But this big boy is plugging the entrance, so we should be safe for the time being. That's all that matters."

As he was treating Alex's wound, Link had completely forgotten about the creature. But now that he was done, it had his undivided attention. Even in death, it was a terrifying sight; Its mouth agape, filled with teeth as long as his forearm. Its gleaming hawk-like eye wide open, looking as if it were staring straight at him, still full of life. Like it could come back from the dead and rip him to shreds at any given moment.

Link lifted his eyes to the beast's cranium, fixated on the arrow protruding from its head. He was certain Alex had never fired a bow before in her life. She was hands down the most uncoordinated kid in her grade. Yet this arrow had landed directly in the middle of its eyes. To penetrate the beast's skull, she would've had to draw the bowstring back far, which required strength. Link had once witnessed his sister struggle to take the cap off a toothpaste tube.

“D-do you think it’s a—” Alex looked at him hesitantly, “a gorlac?”

The word made his entire body cringe, even though that was exactly what he was thinking. “I’m not sure,” he whispered. Then the idea came to him. “But I know a way we can find out.”

He reached for the map that had toppled out of the backpack, hesitating for a second before he slowly unfolded it. At the top of the map in big italic letters, read “Nocera.” Link massaged his jaw, the map shaking in his hands as he looked from familiar city to city, river to river.

He peered up at the dead gorlac jammed in the entrance, the bow by Alex’s side, his sword, and then their brooches. The elephant

in the room couldn't be avoided any longer. It was beyond the bounds of possibility. Hell, it defied logic, reason, and rationality. But somehow, Link knew he and his sister were in Nocera.

“What does it say,” Alex asked.

He handed her the map, gauging her expression as she read. Moments passed and she didn't say a word but just lay there, fixated on the map in her hands. After a few unnerving minutes, she slammed it down against the hard stone, tears pooling in her eyes.

“I don't understand. How can this be possible?” she asked.

“This is a book we wrote, for Pete's sake. We handed out birthday presents; I did my stupid paper, and then we went to bed. I don't recall stumbling into some freaking portal that transported us into our story. Do you?”

Link pressed his back against the cave wall, farthest from the gorlac, and stretched out his legs. Alex's eyes were still on him, waiting for an answer.

“Well, are you going to say something?”

“Like what?” he replied calmly.

She frowned. “Well, I don't know; some input would be nice.”

“I’ve got nothing,” he said, pursing his lips. “Absolutely nothing.”

“No,” Alex said, shaking her head. “*No*. I will not believe we’re inside of our story just because some stupid map says so.” She closed her eyes and massaged her temples. “I mean, this land isn’t even real. It’s a land we imagined, for goodness sakes.”

Link stared at the icicles protruding from the roof of the cave while softly yanking at his hair as he attempted to soak everything in. Thoughts were spinning around his head like a never-ending carousel. He wanted to comfort Alex, but he couldn’t quite think of the words to say. If he lied and told her they’d be OK, she’d see right through it. And if he told her the truth—that the chances of them surviving this mountain range was beyond microscopic—then she’d bawl her eyes out. Instead, they both sat in silence for what felt like hours, until Link had the bright idea to lighten the mood with a joke.

“Hey, if you see any hidden closets could you let me know?” he asked. “That could be our ticket out of here.”

“Now is not the time for Narnia jokes,” Alex said. But Link had seen her lips twitch ever so slightly—he counted that as a smile.

Alex sat up and readjusted the wrap around her leg. There

were no signs of any blood seeping through. Link thought that was a good sign. Suddenly a thought struck him, and he picked up the vial of goo from the cave floor. In their book, Taytora had applied a special concoction to heal Deonis' shoulder after the battle with the gorlacs. The goo accelerated healing and numbed pain, a remedy devised by an Orban elder.

He swished the thick leafy mixture in front of his eyes. "If we are inside of our book, then you know what this is?"

Alex squinted at the goo, considering his question. "The Herbs of Namayka."

Link slowly unwrapped the pelt. The bleeding had slowed a lot, so he guessed now was a better time than any. He splashed some more water over the wound and tried to be as gentle as he could while applying the paste. He had only dabbed a tiny blob on one of the gashes when Alex sighed in relief, imploring him to use more.

After he was finished, he hacked off a portion of a blanket roll and re-wrapped her gashes. No use using the same one, as it was covered in blood. He just hoped this goo was enough to ward off any looming infections.

Link laid down both their blanket rolls, hoping to give their

backs some form of comfort from the jagged stones. Then, he fumbled through their scattered items in the dark, eventually pulling out a woollen blanket, spreading it over them both for warmth. Despite the gorlac plugging the entrance and blocking all the wind from outside, they were still chilled to the bone. They were both from Phoenix, after all, and didn't adapt well to the cold.

The two laid inside the chilly cave for what felt like hours to Link. Huddled up together, using their backpacks as pillows. Every so often they took swigs from their water skins and hesitantly nibbled on the stale bread. Neither of them had much of an appetite, especially not with the dead beast blankly staring at them from the entrance.

Even though Link had to stop his eyes from closing involuntarily every so often, he was too tense to even think about sleep. How could he? If they were truly inside of Nocera, then their chances of surviving more than a few days were slim. Even if they did make it out of the cave, gorlacs, horriks, and other foul beasts patrolled these mountain ranges, picking off wayward travellers and even terrorizing villages.

Without Deonis and Taytora's battle prowess or magical

capabilities, what chance would they have? They were doomed the moment they awoke in this world. As scared as he was, though, he knew he had to put on a front for Alex's sake. It was what Dad would have done.

Link glanced over at the silhouette of the gorlac stuck in the cave. The beast was as big as a small car, and would no doubt be frozen stiff by dawn. To move it, he and Alex would need all the strength they could muster, so he set his mind on trying to get some sleep. But before he could even close his eyes, the world spun like he was lying on a merry-go-round.

Link scrunched his eyes shut, hoping the stomach-churning feeling would pass. But when he opened them again, he found he wasn't in the freezing cave anymore.



### 3. LINCOLN

Link's eyes struggled to focus. They were too droopy to open any wider. He heard a voice, a woman's raspy voice he thought, but he couldn't make out what she was saying. He managed to catch the word "anaesthetic," or was it "diabetic?" The ceiling above him was moving. His thoughts scrambled. The throbbing in his head made it difficult to concentrate. The smell of lavender soap drifted through the air. Bright lights were passing over him. So bright it felt as if he was staring directly into the sun.

Someone told Link to open his mouth. He listened. Cold water ran down his dry throat. He scrunched his eyes shut, attempting to rid himself of the agonizing headache. When he opened them, the world was dark again.

Link sat bolt upright, panting, eyes darting around his surroundings. His head felt clear, his thoughts coherent again. The figure of the dead gorlac was directly ahead of him, still as a statue. Alex was to his left. A silhouette propped up on her elbows, rubbing her eyes. He was back in the chilly cave again.

"What's wrong? Are you all right?" Alex asked, looking

around the cave for potential danger.

“Yeah,” Link said, short of breath. “Yeah, I think I just had a bad nightmare.”

She let out a lengthy yawn. “I was sleeping on your chest, doofus. You nearly knocked my head off.”

“Sorry,” he said, still trying to steady himself. “Just . . . just go back to sleep.”

Alex grunted and rolled over to her side, tucking her knees to her chest. It took Link a while to regain his composure. He was too scared to close his eyes again, to even think about sleep.

He stared at the thin icicles on the roof of the cave for ages, hands interlaced behind his head, trying to piece together everything that had just occurred. That was when the icy stalactites began spinning in circles above him. He shot up, pinning his back against the cave wall. Before long, complete darkness encased his vision.

The first thing Link noticed was the sound of laughter in the distance. Not real laughter. Fake, forced laughter, like from the crowd of a sitcom on TV. Then he recognized a funky bass tab and everything fell into place. It was the intro of Seinfeld.

He opened his eyes. It took them a while to adjust to the

blurry room. There was a bright green light to his left. *A heart monitor? Yes, he could hear the beeping now. Wait a second, a heart monitor?*

Link jerked his head up in shock, which caused pain to shoot through every part of his body. A pale green semi-circled curtain bordered his bed. The pungent smell of lemon disinfectant was heavy in the air. Dad was sitting bedside, inspecting his fingernails, positioned awkwardly in a foldable chair. He was within arm's length. Link attempted to reach out and shake him, ask him what was happening, but something stopped him.

His arm was restricted, encased by a thick layer of plaster. Panic creeped in. The monitor by his side was beeping as rapidly as a smoke alarm. In the distance, he heard Jerry talking George out of something on Seinfeld. Then whoever was watching the TV changed the channel.

Link attempted to sit up, but it felt like someone had stuck a knife deep into his ribcage. He collapsed back into the hospital bed, gasping. Looking down, he found a large gauze covered the left side of his body, blood splashes seeping through the fabric. Cuts and bruises riddled him from head to toe.

“Link, just relax,” Dad murmured. He was standing by his son’s side now, gently brushing the hair from his forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“What happened?”

Dad didn’t respond. Instead, he continued to stroke Link’s hair.

“Dad! What happened?”

Dad took Link’s good hand in both his own. His crystal blue eyes were bloodshot and watery. *Has he been crying?* Link thought. *Dad never cries.*

Dad looked down at the floor and took a deep breath. His voice wavered when he spoke. “You’ve been in a car accident, son.”

The heart monitor picked up the pace again. From the corner of his eye, Link could see it was nearing the hundred and twenties. His head reeled trying to remember anything about a car crash. The last thing he could recall was in Nocera, trapped in the cave with Alex, the gorlac crammed in the entrance. Or was that all just a dream?

“Car accident?” Link choked. “What car accident?” He attempted to sit up again, forgetting about his ribs. The crippling pain

immobilized him.

“Lay back down,” Dad pleaded. “Your injuries need to heal.”

“Dad, what the hell’s going on?”

The curtain opened abruptly and in hurried a nurse. “Lincoln, I need you to relax for me, please,” she said, placing a warm and reassuring hand on his forearm. Dad sat back in his chair crying, hunched over, knees to his elbows. Link had never seen him act like this before. It was scaring the hell out of him.

“This may come as a shock to you, but you were in a car accident on the way to school,” the nurse said gently. “You’ve been under general anaesthetic for the past three hours or so. You’ve just woken up from surgery. Right now, you’re in a Post-Anaesthesia Care Unit. You’re fine now, though, perfectly fine, so just try and calm down for me, please.”

The nurse's mouth continued to move, but all Link heard was white noise. As soon as she'd said the word “school,” it was like a trigger. The fog cleared. Memories found their way back to him.

He remembered waking up from his sleep and getting ready for school. He and Alex had eaten their breakfast—she had Lucky Charms and he had pancakes—and then they both got in his shabby

Mustang. Like always, it took a while for his engine to start. Link fiddled with the A/C for a bit, trying to position the vents so Alex had two facing her and he had two facing him. Then there was a gap. The last thing he could remember was buckling his seatbelt, but then the memories seemed to skip forwards.

There was complete and utter fear in Alex's sapphire eyes. She was screaming. He was screaming. The car was rolling, rattling them both around like two pennies in a tin can. There were shards of glass everywhere. And blood. Lots of blood. The memories were making Link sick to his stomach, and he tried his best to shut them out. But they kept coming, playing before his eyes without consent.

The paramedics were pulling Alex's limp body out from the mangled wreckage of crushed metal. And there he laid, in the middle of the road, pain shooting through his body, helplessly watching on as they lifted his unconscious sister onto a stretcher. *My little sister.*

"Where is Alex?" Link blurted out. "Is she OK?"

"Just a moment," the nurse said apprehensively. "I'm going to get Dr Mansell and tell him you've awoken; he'll answer all of the questions you have. Won't be but a sec." She disappeared in a hurry behind the curtain.

Link rubbed his eyes and then turned to Dad. He was expecting the worst at that point. “Where’s Alex?”

Dad looked around the room desperately, as if he was expecting someone else to answer the question. Everything went quiet. The only sound was from the TV blaring in the distance. Whoever was watching had changed the channel to a basketball game. The Celtics were up by four.

“Dad! Where is Alex?” he shouted.

Dad jumped a bit, then he cleared his throat, his crystal blue eyes sparkling with tears. Nothing could have prepared Link for what he said next.

“Alex is in a coma.”

At first, Link thought he hadn’t heard him right. Then he replayed the sentence repeatedly, trying to find ways he could have misheard him. Link shook his head reluctantly.

*He’s wrong, he thought. The nurses or doctors must have mixed up the clipboards or something. Yep, that’s it. Just a huge stuff up.*

Then, all at once the full weight of Dad’s words sunk in, and he laid there dumbfounded, unsure of how to breathe. Like he hadn’t

been doing it his whole life.

*Not Alex. Not my little sister. Somebody must be playing a sick joke on me. They have to be.*

“Right now, they’re trying their best to get her into a stable condition,” Dad continued, his voice breaking this time. “The other driver’s OK, though. He was in a pickup truck. His bull bar took the brunt of it—”

Link thumped the hospital bed with his good hand, unintentionally startling Dad. He wanted to scream, curse, smash the stupid heart monitor, anything he could get his hand on.

“This can’t be happening,” he whimpered.

Dad placed a shaky hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“She doesn’t deserve this,” Link said, jaw clenched. “She’s just a kid. It should be me!”

“Linco—”

“She’s only fifteen!”

“Come here.” Dad opened his arms and Link immediately buried his face into his chest. He ignored the pain in his ribs and let the tears fall.

“We have to be strong,” Dad sobbed. “She’d want us to be



strong.”

“It should be me!” he repeated.

Dad patted his son softly on the back of his head. “Shhh, don’t say that. Don’t say that. It’s unfair, I know. It’s unfair.”

Dad kept repeating the line “it’s unfair,” until it lost its meaning, and Link kept saying “it should be me,” until the words couldn’t find their way out of his mouth anymore. They remained like that for a while, a muddled tangle of tears and sobs, until Link figured he was finally ready to ask the question.

“Was it my fault?”

Dad’s body heaved against Link’s head. “That’s not important.”

“Dad, tell me,” he demanded. “I need to know.”

“I . . .” Dad paused and exhaled, “I honestly don’t know—”

“—You do.”

Dad cleared his throat and tried to strengthen his voice, but it was still shaky. “These things happen, Lincoln. It doesn’t matter whose fault it was. What’s done is done.”

He was deliberately evading his question. Which Link knew could only mean . . . . He wrapped his good arm around his Dad’s

waist and held him tight, his fingers clenching a handful of his blue and white flannelette shirt. At that moment, Link had not only forgotten how to breathe, but how to think—how to do anything.

All he felt was a gut-wrenching pain coursing throughout his body. A tightness in his chest like he was drowning. Drowning like he was weighed down by cinder blocks with only a small breath of air left in his lungs. That's when the unbearable realization hit him harder than the stranger's truck did.

*This is all my doing. Alex is in a coma because of me.*

Link couldn't remember how long he remained in Dad's embrace, but Dad was his rock at that moment, weathering the waves of tears that smashed against him. Dad tried his best to calm him down, offering him soothing words and holding him so tight it hurt. But no amount of wise words could block out the pain Link was experiencing.

Dad and Link parted when a young doctor with spiky, frosted tipped hair yanked open the curtain. He approached the foot of Link's bed, talking in the same soft, deliberate voice the nurse used. The type you'd use on a child or someone who had English as their second language.

Dr Mansell discussed the extent of Link's injuries, but he had tuned out by that stage. His sister was in a coma, fighting for her life. Why would he care what bones he had broken? He was alive and breathing and she could be on the verge of death. His stomach twisted at that thought.

Nonetheless, Link nodded at the doctor, acting like he was interested in what he was saying. He was sure Dad was paying attention. After several minutes, Dr Mansell left, and the nurse took his place to check his vitals. She informed Link that after surgery he wasn't supposed to eat solid foods, although he didn't have much of an appetite anyway. She jabbed a needle in his arm, took his blood, and then disappeared.

Dad was next to depart. He was swapping places with Mom who had been waiting in the ICU this whole time. He told Link she'd want to see him now that he had woken up. Link watched his father walk out the door with his head lowered. Then he was left alone. Memories resurfaced unwillingly.

They were right before the accident this time. Him, not forcing Alex to put her seatbelt on; him not checking for cars before he pulled out of the intersection. The truck driver in the rear-view

mirror, slamming on his brakes as he desperately tried to swerve to avoid them. Link scrunched his eyes shut, trying to stop the tears threatening to pour out, trying to rid himself of the unbearable memories. Luckily, it wasn't long before the curtain rattled, and in came Mom.

“My darling,” she said, half smiling and half crying. “How do you feel?” Her amber eyes were red and raw. Link wondered how long she'd been crying. He tried his best to force a smile, to show her he was OK. But the smile didn't reach his lips.

“How's Alex?” he practically blurted.

Mom stepped over to his good side and lightly hugged him, being cautious not to bump his arm or put pressure on his ribs. “No updates on her condition so far,” she said, her smile fading. Her eyes fell to his plastered arm, full of sympathy, and her voice softened.

“How are you feeling? Have you had something to eat yet?”

“Does she look OK?” Link asked, ignoring her questions.

“How bad are her injuries?”

“She's fine,” Mom said, smiling. She gently raised his head and fluffed up the pillow underneath. “Just a few cuts and bruises, no broken bones. Now, don't make me ask you again.”

“The nurse said I’m not allowed to eat.”

“For how long?”

“A few hours I think; she didn’t really specify. I’m not hungry anyway, Mom.”

“Nonsense, you just got out of surgery; you must be starving,” she said. “I’ll find the nurse and ask her how long the period is before you can eat.”

“Mom, I’m really not that hungry.”

“Suit yourself.” She placed her overstuffed handbag on the bedside table and scrimmaged through it impatiently. She was fighting back tears. Link couldn’t begin to imagine what these last few hours must have been like for her. Receiving the news her two children had been in an accident. Getting out of work and racing to the hospital, not knowing what to expect.

“I bought you some sports magazines and a book from the hospital gift shop,” she said, placing them by Link’s bedside table. “Hope you like them. I haven’t had the chance to go home yet. I’m just waiting until we’re updated on Alex’s condition. Want me to grab anything when I do?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Very well,” she said, forcing another smile. A long silence ensued. Link knew she was desperately trying to think of a topic to keep the conversation alive.

“Can you believe how much they’re charging for hospital parking?” she finally asked. But knowing it was a rhetorical question, he didn’t respond.

“Six dollars an hour,” she groaned. “Six dollars an hour to see your loved ones. How is that justifiable?”

“It’s not,” Link replied mechanically. “It’s criminal.” He knew this was Mom’s way of dealing with problems. Her coping mechanism, to pretend like they didn’t exist by masking them with small talk. So, he let her continue. He nodded occasionally and asked “Really?” whenever the occasion called for it.

Mom continued to discuss the problems with her colleagues at work, Link’s latest scholarship offers, and who was breaking up with who on the latest trashy TV show. For a while he got lost in her gossip, but only ever momentarily. No matter how interesting the stories she told were, his mind was focused on his lapse of judgment. If his little sister didn’t wake up from her coma, how could he ever live with himself? The guilt would be unimaginable.

After Mom had finished going over the reasons why she should host the next Tupperware party and not her best friend Angie, she tied her frizzy hair in a bun and smiled at Link weakly. “Oh, I almost forgot. I took the liberty of contacting Nadine. She should fly in tomorrow at 2:30 PM; that’s if I’ve calculated the time zones correctly . . . .” She bit the bottom of her lip in thought. “Jeepers, I hope I did . . . .”

Suddenly Link was filled with a deep remorse. Nadine had completely slipped his mind. He threw his head back and groaned.

“What,” Mom asked, concerned. “Need painkillers?”

“Her trip,” he said through gritted teeth. “What about her trip?”

Link’s girlfriend, Nadine, was in Indiana for her grandmother's funeral. The actual funeral was a few days ago, but she’d planned to spend the following week with her close relatives, catching up and reminiscing. To think Link had cut her trip short only added on to his ever-growing pang of guilt.

“What about her trip?” Mom parroted, eyebrows raised. “I’m sure if the shoe were on the other foot you’d be flying back to her as well.” She grabbed his hand, her thumb tracing circles in his palm.

“We all care about you, darling. All your friends and family are in the waiting room downstairs. Kenji’s here as well.” Her mouth curled into a smile. “And I’d never thought I’d see the day Elijah and Sam could be dragged away from their PlayStation. But, lo and behold, they’re down there.” Her smile faded when she saw his blank expression.

“I know, I just . . .” Link stopped and took a breath. “I don’t think I’m ready to see anyone just yet, Mom.”

Especially not his younger cousins Elijah and Samantha. They idolized Alex. How could he explain this to them? That he was the reason why his sister, their cousin, was fighting for her life?

Mom nodded, her face full of sincerity. “I understand. This is a lot to take in.” She took a deep breath and then kissed him softly on the cheek. “But just know Dad and I will be here every step of the way. Through thick and thin, Link. It’s the Hunter way.”

For once, Mom had nothing else to say. And in the silence that followed, another memory of the car crash wriggled its way into Link’s head. It was different from the others, though, a happy one, before the accident this time. Alex was smiling at him with her dimples, recording him on her phone as he rapped along to “It’s



Tricky” by Run-DMC on the radio. Would he ever see that smile again?

Link covered his eyes and took a shuddering breath. “Do you hate me?” he asked, his voice slightly uneven.

“Hate you?” Mom replied in shock. “My darling, how could I ever hate you?”

“Bec—” He cleared his throat, trying to find his voice.

“Because I’m the reason for all of this. If-If I had just looked both ways before I—”

“Don’t speak like that,” Mom said sternly. “You didn’t mean for any of this to happen.” Her hands tightened around his. “What’s done is done, Link. Look at me . . . Look at me.” He shifted his head up and considered her watery eyes. “She’s going to get through this, OK? Trust me. She will.”

Mom got up from her chair and climbed into the hospital bed beside him. Link wrapped his good arm around her and they both lay in silence for quite some time, only separating when the nurse came in to check his vitals.

When the nurse undid the pressure cuff around Link’s arm and left, he checked out the book Mom had bought him. In a

nutshell, the story was about a ninja who was single-handedly trying to destroy an army of samurai.

*This will be a riveting read,* Link thought dismally.

He read it while Mom flicked through one of her gossip magazines. Now and then she would stop to inform him about what was going on in the celebrity world, and he would nod and pretend as if he was intrigued. Two chapters into his ninja book, Link realized it was just a huge gore fest, with no indication of a plot line whatsoever. He felt it was his fault. He should've known what he was in for when he read the cover: *One Versus One Thousand*.

Seven chapters into his book, Link looked up to find it was twilight outside. By then his stomach was rumbling so bad that Mom kept accusing him of farting. Luckily, the hospital workers came around with a tray of roast beef and mashed potatoes for dinner. Link practically inhaled it as soon as the tray was put in front of him, and the belly rumbling ceased (as well as Mom's wild accusations). Just as the hospital staff has cleared away his empty tray, Mom received a text message from their not-so-tech-savvy Dad:

*No ^date on Alx cndition so far <3 u*

After decoding his message, Link and Mom both continued

to read their books as the night passed. Occasionally, Mom would get a message, and both their heads would spring up in anticipation. But none were from Dad. It was always a friend or relative, offering their condolences or wanting to visit. Link felt like a coward for not seeing them. But he knew he was nowhere near prepared. Perhaps he would be tomorrow.

A few hours later, a nurse came in and politely informed them visiting hours were over. Mom must have kissed Link one hundred times on the forehead before she told him she'd see him tomorrow morning. She was going to spend the night with Dad in the ICU. She left her phone with Link so they could keep him posted with any news, and then, with one last forehead kiss, she reluctantly departed.

It didn't take Link long to realize he wouldn't be getting to sleep anytime soon. He was a light sleeper, so he figured the odds were already stacked against him. But when you throw into the works—patients snoring, the heart monitors' agonizing, rhythmic beeping, nurses whispering to one another in the hallway, and a guy adjacent to his bed that had a raspy breathing apparatus—sleep was about as improbable as him beating LeBron James at one-on-one.

But it wasn't just the noises that kept Link up. His mind was working on overdrive, vividly replaying the car crash until it felt like he hadn't suffered any memory loss at all. He exhaled shakily, and pain surged through his body in sharp bursts. Never had he felt so powerless. Bedridden while his sister was in the same hospital fighting for her life.

The last twenty-four hours had felt so surreal, like they had happened to a stranger and not him. It still felt as if he were in a bad dream: the car crash, the cave in Nocera, everything. And a part of him hoped that's all it was. But the other part told him that was wishful thinking.

Lying in that firm hospital bed, it took a while before his eyes grew heavy. He closed them and drifted off. But instead of finding sleep, somehow Link found himself on the slope of a steep mountain.

## 4. LINCOLN

Panicking, Link stepped backward and tripped over his own feet. He kicked up snow as he tumbled down the mountain.

Something solid broke his momentum, knocking the wind out of his lungs: a tree. Using one of its branches as leverage, he pulled himself up, clutching his throbbing ribs.

Link was so high up the mountain he could see all the verdant pine trees, ridges, and sunken valleys that surrounded him. That's when he noticed two things: His arm resting on the tree wasn't broken anymore and his hand was covered in a familiar woollen glove. A shiver ran down his spine. Glancing down, he found he was wearing Deonis' fur-lined cloak again and carried his sword, his backpack, pouches, everything.

*Not this again!* he thought. *Wasn't this all just a dream? But wait, if I'm back in Nocera, does that mean . . .*

Link whirled around and immediately spotted her a few feet behind him. Only Alex wasn't moving. She was completely still, her face expressionless, leaning on a thick branch to support her injured calf. She was wearing all Taytora's clothes and weapons again.

“Alex, can you hear me?” he shouted. “Alex!”

Still no answer.

Something above caught his eye. Thousands of shimmering snowflakes were hanging in mid-air. And that’s when he realized there was no wind. He was halfway up a mountain, and there wasn’t so much as a breeze.

Then, without warning, it hit him. A burning sensation like someone had just lit his hair on fire. Visions flickered before his eyes.

Alex was waking up from her sleep in the cave. She was hesitantly chewing on a piece of bread. When she finished, she wiped the breadcrumbs from her gloved hands and attempted to move the gorlac jamming the entrance. Another pair of hands came into view, helping her shift the hefty beast.

*Wait; are those Deonis’ woollen gloves? My gloves?*

Link’s head was searing, getting hotter and hotter. Yes, it must have been him. He could tell by his boots and the battered handle of the longsword jutting from his waist.

Alex and what-must-have-been-him managed to shift the gorlac a few inches, enough for him to wriggle out. While she stayed

in the cave, Link scoped out the area in search of any dangers. Then when the coast was clear outside, they both departed.

The visions showed them traveling aimlessly through the snowy ranges, trying to use the sun as a compass like Deonis and Taytora did in the book. But a sea of dark grey clouds obscured their view, and they ended up more lost than ever. Link came up with the idea to scale a small mountain, as its high positioning could grant them a 360-degree view of the range. And so they commenced traveling up the gentlest side, hoping to reach the summit before sunset. And then with one last agonizing burn, the visions stopped.

Except now they weren't just visions, somehow they were Link's memories. Somehow that had all happened to him. He could remember it clearly now, like he was there the whole time, watching it through his own eyes: the effort it took to push the gorlac from the entrance, the taste of the hard bread they had for breakfast, even the conversations with Alex along the way.

Snowflakes settled on Link's sleeve. A steady wind rolled through, rippling through his garments and bringing with it a scent of bark, moist earth and fresh snow. The world had suddenly come to life again.

“Why are we stopping?” Alex’s voice rang out from behind him. “Are we having a break already? Good, coz I’m starving.”

Relief flooded Link’s body when he turned to find her hobbling towards him, moving once more. But the feeling quickly faded.

“How did we get here?” he demanded.

Alex regarded him with a baffled expression. “What do you mean?”

“Right here. How did we get here?”

“Umm, we walked.” She tilted her head to the side. “Why, what’s wrong?”

“I swear I was just in a hospital room,” Link said, running his fingers through his hair.

“A hospital room?” Alex asked, raising her eyebrows. “What are you talking about?”

“Impossible,” he muttered to himself.

Link scrunched his eyes shut, trying to clear his mind and form at least one rational thought. He knew full well he didn’t travel up this mountain, yet his memories and Alex were telling him otherwise. It was like he had just closed his eyes in the hospital room



and had been transported here.

“Tell me exactly what happened, right from when we woke up this morning,” he ordered.

“Is this a joke or something? Cause it’s not funny. You’ve been with me this whole time why would I—”

“Alex, tell me what happened,” Link said slowly. “This is serious.”

She looked at him warily, unsure of whether he was playing a trick on her or not. “Umm, we had breakfast, moved the fat heifer from the entrance, you got us lost, and we’ve been floundering up this mountain all afternoon. That’s pretty much it. You feeling all right?”

How she recounted it was the same in his visions—minus her snide commentary. But how could he have been in the book and in the real world at the same time? How could he possess memories from the hospital and simultaneously possess memories from Nocera, when he knew for a fact he wasn’t there?

Link rubbed his eyes, trying his best to regain his composure. Being two places at once . . . the feeling was so bizarre. He could clearly recall Dr Mansell telling him his injuries from the car crash,

talking to Mom and Dad about . . . and then it hit him. Alex was in a coma, and now she was here, awake, staring straight at him. A mix of conflicting emotions surged through his body. He grabbed her rosy cheeks and started kissing her forehead repeatedly.

“You’re awake,” he said, wrapping his arms around her and squeezing.

“Awake?” she mumbled, her head pressed against his chest. “What do you mean awake? Ow, you’re hurting me!”

Link released her, eyeing her up and down, still not believing this was real. In the hospital room, he felt physically sick knowing he might not see her awake again. And yet here she was: her pale face, dainty little nose, her sparkling sapphire eyes. If this was a dream, it was one of the realst he’d ever had, and he was going to cherish every last bit of it with her.

“Why are you looking at me weird?” Alex asked.

“I’m just glad you’re here,” he said, smiling from ear to ear.

She shielded her eyes from an oncoming gust of wind. “Glad I’m here? What in the world are you going on about?”

Link attempted to hug her once more, but she recoiled.

“What’s gotten into you?” she asked, pushing off his chest

with surprising force. “Stop with the hugging. And wipe that creepy grin off your face.”

“Sorry,” he said, but the grin remained. He was that overwhelmed with joy he could’ve cried.

“This mountain air must be getting to you,” Alex said. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m perfectly fine.”

“Link, I know when you’re lying to me,” she said, her nose wrinkling as she frowned. “Tell me what’s going on.”

For a moment Link hesitated, mulling over whether he should tell her or not. But he quickly banished the thought: “Hey Alex, we were in a car crash and now you’re in a coma; you might never wake up again.” How could he?

Besides, he wasn’t even sure any of that was real. Reality and dreams were merging into one for him. His mind was so scrambled it was a struggle to form a coherent thought. So, at that stage, he thought it was best he kept his mouth shut until he figured out just what was really happening.

“Forget about it,” he said. “You were right, must be the mountain air.”

Alex didn't believe him. He could tell by the way she was watching him intently, trying to read his facial expressions. Luckily, Link had his poker face on.

"Let's get a move on," he said, trying to sound authoritative. "We've wasted enough time already."

"Correction: *you've* wasted enough time," she said as she limped past him. "Weirdo."

\*\*\*\*

Link patiently waited for Alex, watching his breaths form in the cold air in front of him. He was starting to doubt whether climbing this mountain was a good idea. Even though he couldn't quite remember coming up with the idea. They had been stumbling up the oversized hill for what felt like the better part of the day, but for all it was worth, they might as well have been moving at the pace of snails.

To make matters worse, the faint sun was already beginning its descent. It was a race against the clock. If they didn't make it to the summit before sundown, then their view of the mountain range

would be gloomy, and this would have all been for nothing. Not to mention they'd have to spend the night up there. Link doubted they'd get a wink of sleep with the fierce winds and ominous-looking snow storm on the way.

A harsh wind tugged at Link's cloak as he wheeled around to face Alex. She was a small figure in the distance, barely visible through the heavy snowflakes and thick mist. As he watched her try to catch snowflakes on her tongue, his mind was working in overdrive.

Link knew there had to be some trigger. Some reason why he was being thrown to and from reality and Nocera. At first, he thought it could've been a vivid hallucination from the painkillers the nurse gave him last night. But he dismissed the idea as quick as it popped up. Common side effects were light-headedness, an upset stomach or nausea, not finding yourself stuck in a fantasy land you wrote with your sister. He knew there had to be something else causing this, but what?

Alex trudged laboriously towards him, her boots sinking into the thick snow. One hand held her walking stick, the other rubbed her weary eyes as she yawned. That was when it came to him: *Sleep*.

Every time he'd slept in the real world, he had ended up in Nocera. When he went under anaesthesia after the car crash, he had woken up near the cave in Nocera. And just before, when he'd gone to sleep in the hospital room, he'd woken up on the mountain.

Could it be that simple though? Could sleep have been the trigger taking him from reality to Nocera? His theory would need testing back in the real world—if he ever did make it back.

It was a risky decision, considering as nightfall was nearing and the summit was still far off, but when Alex caught up, Link decided to call for a short break. He chose the most level part of the mountain he could find, concealed by a thick stand of snow-covered maple trees.

When they finished putting down their backpacks and weapons, Link unwrapped Alex's pelt and reapplied the Herbs of Namayka. The wound looked better than yesterday, and there were no signs of infection—from what he could tell anyway. But despite how good he was at the board game Operation, he was no doctor. When he finished, he re-wrapped Alex's leg and smeared some of the herbs on his elbow. He had cut it upon tumbling down the mountain.

Alex sat across from him, legs crossed in the snow, scrummaging through her backpack. She eventually pulled out her waterskin and pressed it to her lips, chugging it down like she'd never tasted water before. Then, as if she could feel Link's eyes on her, she stopped and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "What? I'm thirsty."

"Sip it," he said. "We need to limit it as much as possible."

Alex's shoulders slumped forwards and she stuffed the waterskin back into her backpack. "OK."

Of course, their characters never faced this water rationing problem in the book. Taytora and Deonis were what the people of Nocera referred to as "Gifted." The name applied to those that could access the mystical force that bound the world together called "The Eternal Source." And only the Gifted, much to the envy of the rest of the land, could unlock their Gate to The Source and become a vessel through which the magical energy flowed.

Alex's character, Taytora, just so happened to be extraordinary at using a branch of magic called Waterwielding. During her journey through the mountains, she could draw moisture from the air and refill the waterskins whenever need be. They, on the

other hand, didn't have that luxury. Once the water was gone, they were gone. Although they had their characters' clothes on, Link knew they were as opposite to one another as lions were to domestic cats.

He threw Alex a piece of dried meat and then began chewing one himself. There were no words that could fill the dreary silence between them. They both knew their chances of surviving these ranges were as slim as their malnourished Uncle Randy. They were without their heroes' magic, battle prowess, and even their vast knowledge of Nocera. Link and Alex had created the world, yes, but they had only lived in it for less than two days. Taytora and Deonis had lived in these lands their entire lives.

They didn't stop for long. After they ate their fill of bread, they continued their treacherous journey up the mountain. They had to keep moving if they wanted to reach the summit before nightfall. Link just prayed they could get a birds-eye view of the entire range from the top, or at least see a familiar sight that was in the book. As much as he hated the idea of climbing this mountain, it had to be better than wandering aimlessly through these ranges. There's no worse feeling than realizing you've been walking in circles.



In a perfect world, Link would have climbed to the top of the mountain and they would have spied Oakstone Road. It was the main road Taytora and Deonis had taken to get out of Galbraz Mountains. Traders and merchants who were bold enough to travel to Orban used it. But even so, they would often journey with a squadron of mages or skilled sellswords, for fear of becoming a gorlac's chew toy.

Even with the hood of his cloak pulled down, snowflakes managed to swirl onto Link's face like annoying, ice cold flies. His legs burned from exertion, and his bones felt like they were about to crack from the cold as they continued their trek. When the way ahead was too steep to walk, Link figured they'd travelled far enough, so he veered towards a ledge, creeping only as close as he dared.

The sun shone vaguely through a cluster of grey clouds as he looked down at the mountain range. Through the silver mist, a blockade of lofty mountains stretched as far as the horizon. For a few minutes, he stood, trying to devise potential routes as the wind ripped his cloak across his body. But with every route he formulated, the gargantuan mountains cut them off.

Link clenched his jaw to stop himself from crying out in

frustration. Had they climbed this mountain for nothing? A cold blast of wind knocked him off balance. Panicking, he took a step back, his heart nearly leaping out of his chest and into the jagged depths below.

Link turned to face Alex. She was sitting on a rock, her branch lying beside her in the snow. Her head was between her knees as she tried to catch her breath. He was pleased to see there were no signs of blood seeping through her wrappings.

“Good work,” he said, patting her on the shoulder. “We’ve covered a lot of ground today.”

Her head pricked up when he had touched her, a veil of snow clinging to her eyelashes. “See anything?”

“Mountains, mountains, and more mountains.”

“So, this has been a complete waste of time?” she asked, groaning.

“Not exactly,” Link said. “We’ll have a little break and then circle to the other side to see if we’ve missed anything. I reckon we’ve got another hour—”

“Whatever.” Alex scooped up her branch and then sat up, walking towards the ledge, shuffling her boots forwards inch by

inch.

“Careful,” he warned.

Alex waved a hand at him as if to say she had it under control, then she shielded her eyes as she scouted the mountain range.

“C’mon, let’s get a move on,” Link said, after several minutes. “We don’t have much time.” But the truth was she was making him nervous standing up there.

“I found it!” Alex exclaimed, turning to him with both dimples showing. “You seriously need to get your eyes checked!”

“Found what?” he asked, joining her on the ledge.

“Mount Hargul,” she said, pointing to something in the distance. “Wasn’t that what you were looking for?”

Link followed her finger and spotted it instantly. How could he have missed it? It was a giant mountain shaped like a crooked wizards’ hat. In their book, the heroes had used it to find true north. If they headed for that mountain, they were bound to come across their ticket out of here: Oakstone Road.

“I could kiss you right now, Alex,” he said, grinning stupidly.

“I’d punch you if you did,” she warned.

As Link started to say something witty back, the mountains spun around him. He tried to grab Alex for support, but his sister was circling him so fast she became nothing but a blur. For a split second, he was invaded by complete and utter darkness. Then the light hit his eyes like a solar flare.

“Sorry, pal, didn’t mean to wake you,” a nurse said. “Just checking your vitals.” He smiled at Link with a set of unnatural, pearly white teeth.

Link blinked a few times, trying to adjust his eyes to the blinding light. There was a pressure cuff wrapped firmly around one arm, making his blood pound, and an all-too-familiar plastered cast encased his other. His throat constricted. He was back in the hospital.

“Breakfast should be ready soon,” the nurse with the blinding teeth said. “Let me know if you need anything else.” He undid the cuff, snapped open the curtain and then disappeared, only leaving the smell of his wood and leather scented cologne behind.

Link struggled to breathe, like someone had just stacked cinder blocks on his chest. Everything was happening so quickly that his mind struggled to adjust. He was just with Alex at the top of that mountain, then, in literally the blink of an eye, he was transported

back into the hospital room, bedridden and wrapped snugly underneath a blanket.

He waited for a camera crew to emerge from behind the curtains then, to tell him he wasn't insane and this had all just been an elaborate prank set up by his best friend Kenji. But the only person who came through the curtains was the nurse with the fluorescent teeth.

"Are you OK?" he asked, frowning at the heart monitor. Link figured he must have heard the beeping.

"Fine," he said, short of breath. "I'm perfectly fine."

"Are you sure?" the nurse asked, arms folded in front of his chest. "Your monitor is telling a different story. Can you take some deep breaths for me please?"

He waited patiently by Link's bedside as he breathed in and out, but the beeping barely slowed. His mind was still trying to piece together what had just happened. How was it even possible? Being thrown to and from both worlds against his will? Was Nocera even real, or was it all just a dream? Then a thought hit him that made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle: What if he was dreaming right now?

“Bad nightmare or something?” the nurse asked, his eyes still locked onto the machine.

Link exhaled forcefully through his nose. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“It’s beginning to slow now,” the nurse said, blinding him with another smile.

*Colgate needs this guy as the face of their brand,* Link thought.

He pointed to a button on the side of Link’s hospital bed. “If you need anything, press this button, OK?”

He nodded obediently. “OK, thanks.”

“Maybe you should lay off reading this,” the nurse said, pointing to the gory cover of the book Mom had bought him. “*One versus One Thousand*. Could be the cause of your nightmares.”

Link smiled at him politely, only relaxing his face when he finally left the room.

*It’s not One versus One Thousand that’s giving me problems,* he thought. *It’s an entirely different book altogether.*

Link wasn’t allowed much peace and quiet after the nurse left. It wasn’t long before Mom’s voice rang out in the distance, her

high heels clonking across the hospital's linoleum floor. Link forced himself to take some steadying breaths before she entered.

Mom's head emerged through the curtain like a curious meerkat. "Oh good, you're awake."

"How can anyone sleep with those high heels of yours?" Dad's voice grumbled. "You've probably woken up all the patients on this ward."

"Oh, don't you start, Robert," Mom hissed. "I've had just about enough of you this morning." She entered the room and Dad soon followed, a glum expression on his face due to the scolding.

Mom flattened out the foldable chair and sat down beside Link, smoothing the creases out of her frilly skirt. Dad stood awkwardly to Mom's right as she had the only chair in the room.

"And how are you feeling this morning, Mr.?" Mom asked him conversationally.

"Excellent," Link lied, even managing to force a smile.

"You look pale," Mom said before she turned to Dad.

"Doesn't he look pale?"

Dad studied Link's complexion then shrugged. "He's fine; stop overreacting." He had one hand tucked into the pocket of his

mocha-coloured shorts, the other flicking absentmindedly through Link's ninja book on the bedside table.

“*Stop overreacting?*” Mom repeated disdainfully. “He looks like he's just seen a ghost.” She turned back to Link. “You need some breakfast; that's what it is. A bit of food in your belly. You haven't had much to eat since your surgery.” She glanced at her wristwatch and then bit her lip. “They said they'd be serving breakfast at eight, didn't they, Rob?”

Dad nodded automatically, his attention still on *One Versus One Thousand*.

“Well, it's six minutes past eight now.”

“Oh, gee, I wonder what's taking them so long,” Dad teased.

Before Mom could snap at him, he closed the book and rounded on Link. “So how was your sleep?”

*Sleep*. The meaning of the word seemed lost to him. Because for the past day, it felt as if he hadn't slept at all. Although he did feel groggy like he had just awoken, he knew full well he'd been journeying up a mountain for the better part of the day.

As much as he wanted to, Link couldn't tell them that though: the vivid dreams he'd been having whenever he went to



sleep; waking up in their heroes' clothes; getting chased by the gorlacs; Alex's injury. Because there was no way he could express himself without sounding like a complete nutcase. No way would they take him seriously, no matter how believable of a story he told.

"Why haven't the nurses treated this?" Dad asked, frowning as he lifted Link's unbroken arm.

"Treated what?" he responded, twisting his arm around so he could see his elbow. Panic washed over him like a tidal wave. On his arm was the same wound he had received from Nocera. The one he'd cut when he tumbled down the mountain and hit the tree.

Could this explain why all the dreams he'd been having had felt so real? Because, somehow, they *were* real? Link glanced down at his elbow and knew there was no denying it. The wound was one in a million: the shape of the continent Australia, or so Alex had described it.

Mom and Dad still gawked at him, waiting for a response.

"Must've got it from the crash," he lied.

Dad's bushy eyebrows furrowed, eyes fixated on the wound.

"You sure? I don't recall you having that yesterday."

"Yeah, I did," Link said, forcing a chuckle. "Maybe you need

glasses, Dad.”

“Not just me,” he grunted as he massaged his salt-and-pepper goatee, “Apparently, the nurses do as well.” He rounded on Mom.

“Did you see this last night?”

She shook her head. “Maybe he bumped it on the edge of his bed mid-sleep?”

They both continued to talk about what could’ve caused Link’s injury, but he had tuned out by that point. A thought suddenly struck him, sending a jolt of fear throughout his body. If he had this injury from tumbling down the mountain, did that mean that...

“Does Alex have two gashes on her left calf?” Link blurted without thinking how strange the question sounded.

Mom and Dad stopped mid-conversation and exchanged worried glances.

Dad rubbed the bald part of his head as if to re-jog his memory. “Yeah, I think so. But—But wait; how did you know that?”

Link’s stomach lurched with nerves as he drew the conclusion. If his hunch was correct, and the two worlds were somehow interconnected, then if he and Alex died in Nocera, they would die in real life. There was no avoiding it now. He knew he had

to tell his parents.

“Because I keep having these strange dreams about being in my book,” he begun. “But the weird thing is . . . they aren’t just dreams. They feel real—no, they are real. They’re so vivid; Li-Like I’m actually there.”

“Really?” Mom asked, her eyebrows raised worriedly. “Odd. How long have you been having them?”

“Ever since the car crash,” he replied. “Every time I go to sleep. The first time it happened I was under anaesthesia and we were being chased by gorlacs.”

“A gor-what now?” asked Dad, a bemused look on his face.

“One of the monsters in his fantasy book,” Mom said irritably, her eyes never leaving Link’s. “Keep going, darling.”

“When I went to sleep last night,” Link continued, “the whole thing happened again. I was transported back into Nocera, and then Alex and I were scaling a mountain for most of the day. And then when the nurse woke me up just before, I was suddenly snapped out of the book again.” He paused, suddenly aware of how crazy this all sounded. Now he was listening to himself speak even he thought he was insane. “I don’t know why this is all happening, and I know it

sounds crazy but they actually feel real, and I know they aren't just dreams.”

Mom nodded understandingly, even though there was no way she could have comprehended him. Then, she clasped her hands in his warm one. “You’ve been through a lot these past few days, Link. But just know we’ll always be by your side to help. They were probably just bad nightm—”

“They’re not nightmares, Mom,” he said irritably. “Listen, I didn’t injure my elbow from the crash or the hospital bed. I got it from tumbling down a mountain in Nocera. And before that, a gorlac slashed Alex’s calf as we were jumping into a cave. That’s how I knew about her injury.” He took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds, trying to relieve the tightness in his chest. Then he exhaled. “I’m not making this up. Believe me, I of all people know how ridiculous this all sounds, but I’m telling the truth.”

Mom fiddled with the locket of her gold necklace, the necklace Dad had bought her on their first anniversary. “Link, Alex got that injury from the car crash. Maybe . . . I don’t know. Maybe you saw it before you became unconscious?”

Mom glanced at Dad. He nodded slowly in agreement. The

truth was Link had expected this reaction from them. Why would they believe him when he barely even believed himself? If the shoe was on the other foot, and they were trying to explain this to him, he'd have laughed it off as a joke. But still, knowing that didn't make it hurt any less. If his own parents didn't even believe him, would anyone?

Mom pursed her lips. "You OK, darling?"

"Yeah," Link said, shaking his head and exaggerating a sigh. "Sorry, I'm just all over the place at the moment. I think I need some more rest. Is that OK?"

"Of course, of course," Mom said a little too quickly. She stood up and clutched Dad by the arm. "C'mon, Rob, let's go. We'll come back at around lunch time." She turned back to Link. "Is that all right with you?"

"Yeah, that's fine," he responded, faking a smile.

Just as Mom was about to reach for the curtain, she stopped and turned. "Are you sure you're OK, darling?"

"Yeah," he said, putting on an exaggerated yawn. "I just need a little rest. I'm fine. Honestly, Mom, I'm fine."

"OK, well, if you get bored, I quickly popped home this

morning and brought you some things.” She pointed to his laptop and a stack of books by his bedside table. “Don’t know if I picked any good ones, though. It’s hard to tell which ones are yours or Alex’s.”

“Anything will be better than this, Mom,” he said, pointing to the book *One Versus One Thousand*.

“I don’t know, Link. I had a bit of skim read and it was pretty riveting,” Dad said, causing Mom to whack him on the shoulder.

Link’s head collapsed back into his pillow when they both left. But he wasn’t the least bit tired. He was truthful when he said he needed some alone time, though. He needed to try and pinpoint what was causing this whole Nocera thing to happen. So far, he had figured out sleep might be the trigger between both worlds. But what good was that knowledge when he still didn’t know what was *causing* it to happen?

This all had started happening ever since the car crash. But why? Did his brain get so rattled in the accident it started creating vivid hallucinations of Nocera? Did someone slip him some hardcore drugs when he wasn’t paying attention? What was happening to him defeated logic on so many different levels.

Link pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a sigh.

*Someone admit me to a mental institution, please.*

When his breakfast finally got brought in, Link gave up racking his brain and decided to watch a movie on his laptop as he ate. An hour and a half later, he was left with a sour taste in his mouth. Not from the food, but from the awful excuse of a movie. *Another Hollywood remake*, Link thought. *Who funds this stuff?* As his Dad once said when they'd finished watching the new *Karate Kid* movie: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Link blocked out the pain in his ribs as he reached over and scooped up a few of the books Mom had brought. He sorted through them all, stopping when he came across a familiar leather-bound cover: *Nocera*.

It was funny; he had never really been the creative or imaginative type, but as soon as Alex had got this book, ideas came bursting out of his brain like fireworks. It wasn't uncommon for him to be staring out school windows, imagining the land of Nocera coming to life outside.

*But now I don't need school windows for that to happen. Apparently, all I need to do is fall asleep.*

Link opened the book and randomly started reading a page. goblins, magic, inuagis, giants—the whole land of Nocera dwelt inside of these parched pages. His eyes widened as the thought struck him: *Inside of these pages*. He looked down at the book, feeling foolish for even letting the thought cross his mind. *Surely not. These things happen in movies, not in real life.*

He and Alex had bought the book a year ago. Mom had left him in charge of his sister, and they'd wandered off through the city in search of second-hand stores—because Alex was low on pocket money, and they always seemed to get lucky finding unbelievable bargains at these stores. They had been browsing a cramped shop for several minutes when Alex had stopped dead in her tracks

“Look at this one!” she had shouted abruptly.

Link was in the gaming section at the time, torn between buying a newish war game in one hand, or a vintage Super Mario game in the other.

“Link, where the heck are you?”

“Wait a minute,” he had said, comparing the price stickers on the backs of each game.

“You *have* to see this.”



Giving up, Link had put down his games and made his way over to her. She was in the book section, holding a leather-bound one closely to her chest. Link had to admit that it wasn't like the other second-hand books on the bookcase with their faded and creased covers. It was practically brand-new, with a hand-embossed leather-bound cover and a fitted golden C-clasp. But no matter how appealing it looked, it was still just a book. He didn't understand why she was so excited.

Alex unclicked the clasp, flicking through the pages. To Link's surprise, it was blank inside.

"Well that was an anti-climax," he had said. "Put it back. Probably costs too much anyway."

"I already knew it was blank," Alex scoffed. "I'm still getting it."

"Why?" he asked in disbelief. "*It's blank.*"

"Then we'll just have to fill it up, won't we?"

"I'm telling you right now, it's going to cost a fortu—"

"Excuse me," Alex had called out to the old shopkeeper, paying him no mind. She raised the book above her head. "How much for this?"

The old shopkeeper squinted her eyes from across the counter and then smiled kind-heartedly. Or at least Link thought it was a smile as the leathery skin on her face quivered and struggled to move. “For you children, it’s free.”

To Link’s disapproval, his little sister had brought it home. And from that day onwards, they couldn’t help themselves. With Alex’s wild imagination and Link’s cunning mind, they collaborated on creating a world like no other. It was as if the book consumed them, beckoning them to write on its blank pages. And much to their parent's disapproval, they obeyed obligingly—for a whole year—until they had finished the story.

That was when the realization dawned on Link. As soon as they had finished writing the book, these dreams of Nocera had started happening. He stared at his toes peeking out of his blanket for a few minutes, trying to process this information.

*Could this book have the power to bring stories to life?*

Link clamped his jaw, feeling stupid for even thinking along those lines. He knew such a far-fetched theory could’ve only belonged in Hollywood. But as highly unlikely as it was, it was all he had to go on. Sure, it wasn’t the most rational theory, but then again

neither was entering your own make-believe story every time you went to sleep.

He flicked through the pencilled pages, questioning his sanity as he skim-read various paragraphs. Then he tossed the book onto the floor and reopened his laptop, clicking play on the first movie he found.

*Yep. I'm definitely losing my marbles.*

## 5. ALEX

*Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot.* One foot in front of the other, Alex crunched through the snow, dogging behind Link. Her legs had begun falling asleep, so she had resorted to reminding herself of the basics of walking. Every step resulted in some form of pain: the gashes down her calf, the blisters on her heels, the aching muscles from walking continuously for three days. The only thing that was keeping her moving was one of Dad's motivational lines.

There were these exercises she used to do in gymnastics called leverage holds. Whilst doing them, her body would always quiver after a few moments, but just as she'd consider giving up, Dad's deep voice would bellow from below: "Mind over matter, baby!" And she'd always hold it those few seconds longer just for him. As Alex trudged through the thick crust of snow, her hood tugged over her forehead, she imagined Dad behind her, shouting the line continuously.

The thought made her smile. But that smile quickly faded when she thought about their last conversation: a stupid fight over a paper she didn't do. It seemed so silly now. Would her last memory

be of them yelling at one another, hurling insults back and forth? It made Alex sick to her stomach even thinking about it. She missed his excruciatingly bad jokes and Mom's homemade cheesecakes. *God, especially her cheesecakes. Oh, how I'd kill for one right now.* Her stomach had been growling all day, sounding as if she were harbouring some sort of alien inside of her belly.

Alex waited for Link to pass the hilltop ahead so she could eat some of their bread. She had to do it behind his back, because if he had caught her, he would've yapped on about the necessities of rationing their food. So she figured if she did it out of his sight, then it'd be out of his mind, and she could skip his drawling lecture altogether.

*My genius knows no bounds,* she thought.

The two had lost sight of Mount Hargul the moment they'd climbed down the mountain. So, for three days Alex and her brother had been weaving through the ranges, through cold and sticky snow, hoping to spot the mountain shaped like a wizards' hat again.

To Alex, it didn't feel like they were walking in circles; it felt like they were trapped in a labyrinth. Every mountain, tree, shrub, and stone looked no different from the next one in her eyes. Link

would never admit they were lost, but Alex could see it in his eyes. Her brother couldn't lie to save his life.

Alex lowered her head as a powerful blast of wind sent snow swirling into her path. When the howling had subsided, she looked up again, and found Link was nearing a hilltop spotted by evergreen trees.

She was still finding it difficult to grasp that she and Link were wandering inside of a world they'd created. Most of the times when she'd write well into the night, Alex would often have dreams of Nocera when she went to bed. But as realistic and awesome as they all were, they were always just dreams, and every time she awoke, she found herself back in the real world. But this was different. For days, she and Link had been stuck in this freezing mountain range, no closer to finding out why they were there than they were on day one. Home was starting to become a distant memory.

*Just a few more steps till he's out of sight and I can dig into my heart's desire, she thought. Who would've known my mouth could water at the thought of stale bread?*

But to her dismay, Link paused when he reached atop the hill,

a stern expression covering his face.

“When are we stopping for a break?” Alex asked impatiently when she had caught up to him. Her hunger seemed to be getting the best of her. She was on the verge of becoming “hangry”: a ghastly transformation of hers Bruce Banner had nothing on.

“Glad you asked,” Link said. “Right now.”

“Oh, thank God,” she said, sighing as she collapsed butt-first into the snow.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Never better, bro,” Alex said, flashing him a mocking smile. “I love being on the brink of exhaustion, starvation, and dehydration.”

He chuckled as he shrugged off his backpack. “Have you ever thought about not using sarcasm in a sentence? Might be a refreshing change up.”

But she was paying him no mind. Her hands were already in her bag, rummaging around for the stale bread to quell her hunger pangs. Alex took the biggest bite of the hard bread her mouth would allow.

“I’ve, uh, I’ve got something I need to tell you,” Link said,

his golden eyes avoiding hers.

Alex's back stiffened. Link was using his important voice.

“What?” she asked, her mouth crammed full of wheaty sludge.

“This is going to sound crazy,” he said, running a hand through his hair and grabbing a fist full at the top. “Like, real crazy.”

“Look around you, Link,” she said, sweeping an encompassing arm at their surroundings. “We’re trapped inside of a book we wrote in our free time. What could be more crazy than this?”

Link let out a half-hearted laugh, then stared at the untouched hunk of cheese in his hand. Alex knew something was wrong. First his important voice, now the lingering silence.

She cleared her throat expectantly.

“I think we are Deonis and Taytora,” Link said with a face as hard as granite.

Alex raised an eyebrow as if he had just spoken Chinese.

“Um, care to elaborate?”

“Not just what we’re wearing, but actually—” He ruffled up his hair with a hand, “actually, ability-wise.”



“What the hell are you talking about?” she asked, scowling.

“I told you you’d think I was crazy,” he said, taking a rabbit nibble of his cheese. “Just bear with me, OK? Now, I know we don’t have the appearance of Taytora and Deonis, but I think it’s possible we may have, somehow, I don’t know—” he paused and swallowed his food, “obtained their abilities.”

Alex didn’t know how to react, so she just chuckled stupidly. “Their abilities?”

“You know?” Link said, lowering his voice again as if someone was listening in. “Their magic, sword and archery skills?”

As soon as he said “archery skills,” Alex’s mind wandered to when she’d shot the gorlac in the head. How she didn’t have to think about the motion; it was just a knee-jerk reaction to draw her bow and fire. It hadn’t dawned on her until then, but the whole time she’d been in Nocera it felt like she was in someone else’s body.

“Even the way you climbed that mountain when we were being chased by the gorlacs,” Link continued. “So light on your feet.” He shook his head, smiling at the memory. “I couldn’t believe it.”

Alex sat in silence with her hands jammed underneath her

armpits, truly trying to comprehend what he was saying. But the more she dwelt on it, the more absurd it sounded. They were Alex and Link from Phoenix, Arizona, not Taytora and Deonis from Orban.

“Why are you so confident?” she asked, nibbling on her bottom lip.

“Huh?”

“You’re acting like you know for certain we’re our characters,” she said. “How can you be so confident? You look like plain old Link to me, and I’m not in possession of a mirror, but I sure as hell know I don’t look as glamorous as Taytora.”

Link shifted his shoulders uneasily, then picked up a small pebble and held it in his palm. “This is why.”

“What are you do—”

“Quiet,” he said, glancing warily behind him.

For a few seconds, Alex stared at the pebble amusedly, unsure of what was meant to be happening. But then Link thrust his palm upwards, and the pebble shook slightly. Soon enough, it was levitating a few inches from his palm. Link exhaled, and the pebble dropped. *Earthwielding*. Alex’s jaw could have almost hit the

ground. Was her brother a Gifted?

When a Gifted opened their Gates, the Eternal Source would flow through them, immediately heightening their five senses and accelerating their body's healing. But that was just the beginning. In addition to those perks, the Gifted would have access to a multitude of magical branches: Teleporting, Divination, Telekinesis, and Bloodshifting just to name a few. To think her brother was one of them was making Alex lightheaded.

What did this mean for them? For her? If Link was a Gifted then did that mean she was as well? A cold chill ran through her body upon that thought. Taytora and Deonis were the ones that put an end to the Great War, aiding the Kingdoms of Mist and Meadows by vanquishing the Alzuri forces. They even slew the tyrant of the West himself: King Kilaydis. If she and Link were, in fact, their heroes, then the whole land of Nocera was doomed the moment they'd woken up in this nightmare.

Link suddenly gasped for air, his chest heaving, eyes screwed shut. Alex put a hand on his shoulder. He grabbed it feebly.

“Are you OK?” she asked.

“Yeah, I'm fi—” He sucked in a deep breath and tried again,

“fine.”

In the book, when a Gifted drew too much of the Source, it could prove to be fatal. And as small as Link’s pebble-levitating trick was, Alex knew it had taken an immense toll on his body. She yanked her waterskin out from her backpack, pressing it to his lips. He batted it away with a clumsy hand.

“I’m OK, I swear,” he panted. His hands told Alex a different story; they trembled so bad it looked like he had Parkinson’s.

“So, you’re a Gifted?” she asked, looking down at the pebble that had toppled out of his hands. “Does that mean that I . . . How long have you known?”

Alex felt horrible for asking Link when he was so fatigued, but she needed answers. Desperately.

“A couple days,” he groaned, massaging his temples with two fingers on either side.

Every branch of magic affected the body in different ways. Alex figured the Earthwielding Spell must have been giving Link headaches—among other things.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” she asked, not being able to hide the hurt in her voice.

“Because I only learned that Spell from one of the scrolls last night,” he said, finally lifting his head and glancing at her. His eyes were watery and half closed in pain. “And I was waiting until we took a break today before I showed you.” Astoundingly, he found the strength to chuckle as he added, “Because now I need to get my strength back.”

Link tried to put a comforting hand on her shoulder, but Alex shrugged it off and stood up abruptly.

“So, what does this mean?” she asked. “Like, for us. What are we supposed to do now?”

He massaged his forehead. “I don’t know yet; I’m still coming to grips with it all too. To be honest, I was hoping you’d know something I didn’t.”

“But these are our bodies,” Alex replied weakly, chewing her nails. “We can’t be Taytora and Deonis. We . . .” She spat out a nail. “We just can’t.”

“I never said we were Taytora and Deonis,” he said. “I said we might’ve obtained their abilities somehow. Put your gloves back on please; you’re going to get frostbite.”

Alex nibbled on another nail fold and then spat it out to the

side. “No, it relaxes me.”

Link grabbed her gloves which were by her feet, dusted the snow off, and then slid them onto her hands. “All you’ll have left is stumps if you keep chewing them.”

“I don’t care,” she replied dully. “Surely you’ve worked it out by now. If we are our characters, then you know what that means? The fate of this land literally rests on our shoulders.” She lifted her glassy eyes and found his. “What if we never make it back? What if we’re stuck here for—”

Link grabbed her two hands and squeezed them, cutting her short. “Look, Alex, I don’t know what this all means, how we got here, or even why we have our character’s powers. But I promise you one thing: I will find out, and I will get us both out of this book.”

Alex looked away, alarmed by the intensity in his voice. “You can’t promise something like that.”

Link held out his pinkie finger. “Yes, I can.”

“What are we?” she asked, chuckling. “Twelve?”

He wiggled his pinkie in her face. “C’mon; you know you want to. Pinkie promise.”

Alex fought back a smile. “OK, you loser. But only to shut

you up.”

As she wrapped her pinkie finger around his, a booming scream shook the tree branches around them. A flock of birds took flight overhead. Despite the crippling pain Link was in from using the Source, he lunged for his sword in the snow and ripped it out of its scabbard upon hearing the disturbance.

“Stay put,” Link ordered in a tone that broke no argument. He crouched down and zig-zagged out of the trees towards the noise, ducking here and there to avoid the evergreen branches that threatened to snag his cloak. Alex instinctively nocked an arrow and set off after him. She knew he’d scold her for it later, but there was no way she was going to be alone after hearing that noise. She had seen enough horror movies to know you never separate from the group.

Link scowled at his sister when he looked over his shoulder and realized she was following. Thankfully, he didn’t tell her to go back; he just ushered her to stay close by his side. The evergreens came to a stop when they reached the opposite side of the hill. As they looked down at the open and sunken valley beneath them, it didn’t take them long to find what the source of the noise was: a

giant.

The colossal creature was as blue as frost and taller than a two-story building. A grey-streaked beard reached all the way to his belly button, and he wore a white loincloth of what Alex presumed was gorlac's skin. The giant resembled a man in many ways, apart from his inhuman azure eyes and primitive features.

The giant was crouched low, on guard, scanning his surroundings frantically. He was holding a bare tree that had been fashioned into the likes of a club in two hands, ready to swing. Just what he was so on-edge about, though, Alex had no clue. There was nobody else in sight.

Then they came out of nowhere. From beneath him, three milk-white insects the length of cars emerged in unison, leaping out from the freshly fallen snow at various angles. There was a hollow crack as the giant's swing was true. The first insect soared end-over-end through the air like a thrown Slinky. A deep cry of pain shook through the valley. The second insect had latched its powerful mandibles onto the giant, its body curled around his forearm like a vine on a branch. The third had merely feinted an attack, burrowing itself back into the snow and disappearing out of sight.



*They're coordinating their attacks, Alex realized.*

A hard, chitinous casing covered the elongated insects like battle armour, and under their sleek bodies were rows of stubby, hooked legs. But it was what was on their backs Alex thought made them look the most intimidating. On each section of its carapace, a cruel horn protruded from it: A mohawk of razor-sharp knives.

Alex felt sick to her stomach. They were exactly how she had imagined them, from their milk-white shells and menacing jaws to their rows of stocky legs. They were called horriks, and the insects were her bright idea in the book.

Before battle, a horrik produced a potent toxin in which it coated its mandibles and teeth. One clean bite could kill a grown man in seconds. But judging by the scene that was unfolding in front of Alex, it took a lot more to bring down a giant.

The giant plucked the second horrik from his forearm like it was nothing but a tic and then he squished its head with a finger and thumb. There was a crack like an eggshell breaking. Violet-covered goo splattered his face. The giant dropped his tree-club and kicked his leg back and forth wildly. The third horrik had re-emerged from the snow and clamped onto his ankle, its mandibles sinking deep into

the flesh. The giant swayed, then fell to the ground with a thump, kicking up a cloud of snow.

Alex's eyes were fixed on the bearded behemoth, watching him as he crawled feebly on the ground, the horrik still wrapped around his ankle, injecting its venom into his bloodstream. He rolled onto his back, and then in one, last-ditch effort, smashed the side of his foot against a nearby tree, pinning the horrik. The insect dropped to the snow, coiling and shrivelling inward like a dying arachnid.

“Let's go,” Link said, his eyes still fixed on the scene unfolding in front of him. “We'll circle around this valley as a precaution.”

“A *precaution*?” Alex snapped. “A precaution from what?”

Her brother turned and furrowed his brow.

“Why are—” she stopped and chewed her gums. “We can't just—we can go down there and help him.”

Link grabbed her by the arm suddenly, as if he knew she was about to do something rash. “If you think we are going to waltz down into a nest of horriks just to try to save a dying giant that would probably kill us, given the chance, then you're out of your mind.”

The giant rolled onto his belly, and Alex was shocked to find his azure-coloured eyes were locked onto hers, filled with an unbearable anguish. He reached out a meaty arm in her direction, as if pleading for her to come and help him, or even to put him out of his misery, and then his arm flopped to the ground.

Before Link could object, Alex shrugged out of his hold and took off down the hill. She knew it was foolish, considering another horrik could emerge from the snow at any minute and decide she was its main menu, and because the creatures' venom would completely shut down the giant's respiratory system in a matter of minutes. But despite that, some part of her wanted the giant to know it wasn't alone. Even if it was only to be there as it passed.

The stitch jutted into Alex's side as she sidestepped the trees and stones that blocked her route. She cautiously passed one of the dead horriks. Its mandibles were still clicking and glistening with fresh venom even though its body had been crushed. Alex caught a musty and metallic whiff in the air that made her almost gag. The horriks violet-covered goo and insides had spilled out of its shell, staining the snow beneath it like spilled red wine.

The giant had rolled onto its back again, its enormous chest

heaving slowly. The only thing it seemed to be able to move was its eyes. They were watching her now, wide with fear.

“I’m here,” she said, panting, “I’m here. What can I do?”

The giant’s lips trembled and then they parted slightly.

“Pouch,” he whispered in a low and raspy voice.

“Pouch? What do you mean ‘pouch’?”

His azure eyes glanced down to his body. Alex followed them and saw a pouch hanging off his belt. She quickly ran to his waist and opened it. It was filled with an abundance of exotic-smelling violet leaves.

“Alex, let’s go now,” Link said. He had caught up to her, now bent forwards with his hands on his knees as he gasped for air. “We can’t help it. It’ll be dead in a matter of seconds.”

Alex shut out his voice as she ran back the giant’s ear with a handful of the leaves. “I’ve got the leaves; what do I do now?”

The giant took a shuddering breath before he spoke. “Chew,” he groaned softly. “Chew.” And then his eyes closed.

*Does he mean for me to put the leaves in his mouth?* she wondered. He could barely talk let alone chew. Then the thought dawned on her. *Maybe he meant for me to chew?*

Link still had his sword drawn, head turning swiftly from side to side, looking for any dangers.

“We can’t save him,” he said, his back to her. “Get that through your head. If we don’t move now, we’ll be dead in a matter of seconds.”

“I’m not leaving him!” she snapped.

The giant began convulsing. Alex had to step backward as he began thrashing about uncontrollably, almost knocking her over with the back of his hand.

Without considering the consequences, Alex threw a few leaves in her mouth and chewed, just as the giant had said. Immediately she wanted to spit them out. The texture was so rough it felt as if she was eating bark, and the taste was so pungently revolting she had to hold a hand over her mouth to stop herself from gagging. Nevertheless, she forced herself to keep chewing, grinding down the leaves with both her teeth and saliva.

Link was staring at his little sister in horror. “What the hell are you doing? Are you stupid? Those could be poisonous.”

Alex spat the ball of mush into her hands and approached the giant’s forearm. The wound was like nothing she’d ever seen before.

Two festering punctures the size of dinner plates covered his arm. The skin surrounding the bite mark was an electric blue, and coloured veins were beginning to spread up his body like tree roots. Alex felt lightheaded just looking at it.

The giant was still flopping around. Alex waited for his movements to slow, timing her approach wisely, and then she sped forward. She held her breath and quickly smeared the leaves onto one of the bite marks. She prayed this was what he had meant for her to do.

Link was standing beside her, searching her face in disbelief.

“Help me,” Alex pleaded as she moved her tongue around the inside of her mouth, trying to get some moisture back. “Chew some of the leaves. He has another bite mark on his ankle.”

Link gazed out towards the mountains behind them as if anticipating more horriks would crawl out of a cave at any second.

“Link, please,” she pleaded, her mouth full of the vile-tasting leaves.

Link turned to her and clenched his jaw, then finally sheathed his sword. “And you say *I’m* the stubborn one?”

## 6. ALEX

With her left hand, Alex clenched a handful of the giant, Foragoon's, bristling beard, just before a harsh wind threatened to whoosh her away as effortlessly as a dead leaf. Her eyes were stinging from the cold, so she tugged the hood of her cloak down to conceal them. Her brother was sitting on the other side of the giant's broad shoulders. Due to the gusts they had been enduring being this high up, it felt as if they were back on top of the mountain they'd first climbed.

Foragoon strode along in one of his usual contemplative silences. As a reward for saving him, he had promised to take the two as far as Oakstone Road. If it were up to Alex, she would've had him take them all the way to Iralda. There was nothing to ease the anxiety of being trapped in your own story like having a mammoth bodyguard to escort you to your destination.

Alex understood why Foragoon couldn't take them farther than Oakstone, though. Most people in Nocera had forgotten giants still existed. So, you could have imagined the shock for them if Foragoon were to come waltzing into their village making friendly

conversation.

Alex's stomach lurched as the giant cautiously lunged across a frozen stream. She wrapped her hand around his beard a second time as an added safety precaution before they landed with a sudden jolt. She and Link had been traveling on Foragoon's shoulders for two whole days, but when he did manoeuvres like this, she couldn't help but feel a little queasy.

And so, the trio pressed on, past the frozen stream towards a sheer wall of cliffs. Alex glanced back to find the mountain they'd climbed several days ago was now just a small mound on the horizon. At the rate they were going, she figured they would be out of these ranges in no time. The giant hummed at that moment, and then that hum slowly turned into a thunderous song that echoed through the mountains.

*Oh, winter white, pure and cold*

*Here is new as here is old*

*You capture all in your wake*

*From frozen ground to icy lake*

*Wrap your fingers around one and all*



*Your frigid frost comes after fall*

*Oh, winter white, pure and cold*

*A blinding blizzard to behold*

“I like that one!” Alex shouted over the howling winds.

“So you should,” the giant boomed proudly. “I thought of it myself.” With a swooping backhand, he uprooted a small tree that was blocking his path, sending it toppling end over end through the air. “Sing us a song from your homeland.”

“I don’t know any songs,” Alex confessed.

“Nonsense, everyone has a song or two deep down inside of them,” he rumbled, his huge eyeballs of azure locking onto hers, stacking on the pressure.

“Lin . . . Deonis knows several songs,” Alex lied. “You must hear his voice. They say it’s as pure as a mountain river.”

“Is that so?” Foragoon said excitedly, his eyes drifting over to Link on his opposite shoulder. “A mountain river you say? If you would be so kind, I would very much like to hear this voice of yours, young Deonis.”

A mischievous smile spread across her lips. If Foragoon’s

massive beard wasn't in the way, Alex had a feeling Link would have been giving her daggers.

But much to Link's credit, he cleared his throat and sang "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" which caused Alex to double over in laughter. Not because of the irony the song had with their current surroundings, but because it was his go-to song when they played karaoke. Link sounded like a mother pig screeching as it gave birth to piglets. But unfortunately for their family, he had a severe case of tone-deafness.

"Quiet," Foragoon snapped at Alex as she continued to laugh uncontrollably. "Let him sing."

As Foragoon swivelled his head to face Link, she caught a glimpse of the horrik bites on the back of his neck. Her laughing stopped. The leaves they applied had fought off the infection, but they did nothing to heal the gaping wounds they had left. Alex had asked Link if they could apply some of the Herbs of Namayka, but he said they needed to save it for themselves. But as Alex looked at the ghastly wounds again, she doubted the tiny vial they had would be enough to have a substantial effect anyways.

"Mountain river?" Foragoon scoffed when Link had finished

singing. “Why, your voice is as vile as the sewerage water that gushes from Iralda!”

They all cracked up over that. Luckily, Link wasn't the type to take offense.

After a long day of traveling on the giant's shoulders, they ended up setting up camp in an exposed valley so big it could've hosted a village. Alex and Link would never have dreamed of staying there the night if Foragoon wasn't traveling with them. Before they encountered their giant bodyguard, they had been setting up camp in thickets, caves, and clusters of pine trees. Anywhere that gave them any hint of concealment.

But Alex guessed someone the likes of Foragoon had no reason to hide. He was the top of the food chain in these mountains. If a horde of gorlacs were to swarm them, he would have probably licked his lips at the thought of more meat. Ever since the last remaining dragons were slain over a decade ago, giants were one of the most powerful creatures in Nocera. Alex thought she was lucky Link had added them into the book. Because if he hadn't, she doubted they'd both be breathing.

While Foragoon relaxed from walking all day, Alex and Link

ventured into a nearby dell in search of some wood to help get a fire started, or in the giant's case, a bonfire. The two barely got the chance to talk to one another when they rode on opposite shoulders all day, so usually when they stopped for a break or to set up camp they were full of conversation. Alex and Link proceeded through the dell as it dipped gradually and then levelled out at the bottom. It was there amongst the fallen rocks and snow they found the most dried oak wood—Foragoon had told them it was the perfect wood for a slow-burning fire.

“If he sings another song I swear my eardrums are going to explode,” Alex told Link on their sixth trip back to the dell.

“Just be thankful he's singing songs and not picking his teeth with our bones—like most giants would.”

She nodded. “Good point.”

“So, have you come up with any theories yet?” Link asked, picking up a branch and adding it to his pile.

“About?”

“This,” Link said, looking up at the cloudy, pale white sky. “Nocera. I don't know, like, why we have our character's powers. What's causing this all to happen?”

“I gave up on trying to work that out a long time ago,” Alex said as she snapped a large branch in two with her foot and picked up the remains. “I mean, obviously, my dream theory has been debunked. Unless we’ve both been asleep for over a week.” She tossed her head back and chuckled. “Either that or we’re both in comas.”

She glanced at Link, but he didn’t meet her eyes. He was looking absentmindedly into the distant mountains.

“Why? What’s your theory?” she asked.

Link averted his gaze and then he squinted his eyes in thought. “Do you remember that day we bought the blank book in the city?”

“Yeah, why?” Alex asked, remembering how she scored the sweet freebie from the old storekeeper.

“Now, I just want to reiterate the fact this is just a theory, OK?”

“Just get on with it, dimwit.”

Link sighed through his nose, the exhale visible in the cold. “I think everything we’ve ever written in that book has now come to life.” He glanced at her hesitantly as he continued. “That the

book's—I don't know, magical or something. Maybe even cursed.”

He rubbed the stubble on his chin with his spare hand, “God, now that I'm saying it out loud it seems even more stupid.”

“That's because it is stupid,” Alex said, trying to hold back her laughter. “Are you being serious right now? You think we're in Nocera because we scribbled a story down inside of some blank book?”

“Hey, I said it was just a theory,” Link said with a hurt look.

“OK, well, here's my theory on how to get us out of Nocera.” She stood up on her tippy toes and clicked her heels together three times. “There's no place like Phoenix, there's no place like Phoenix, there's no—”

“OK,” Link said, holding up a hand as he chuckled. “I get the point, Dorothy.”

Just as Alex was about to think of an ingenious reply involving him being Toto, a hair-raising shriek caught their attention. She knew that sound all too well. Her stomach twisted when she realized the noise had come from back at camp. The two dropped their firewood and bolted, dancing around the oak trees that blocked their paths. Alex overtook her brother easily, but upon realizing her

bow was back at camp and she had no way to defend herself, she slowed down to a jog and let him catch up.

The blood pounded in Alex's ears as they broke out of the trees and spilled out into the valley. Foragoon was standing stoutly with his club drawn, its end dripping with blood. At his feet was the mangled body of a gorlac. The giant stuck a finger in his ear and wiggled it around uncomfortably.

“Darn Squealer,” Foragoon grumbled. Then he seemed to notice Alex and Link for the first time. His face lit up. “Oh, there you lot are. Just in time for supper.” He looked down at the gorlac carcass and grinned. “There seems to have been a change with the main meal, though. Hope you don't mind.”

Foragoon skinned the gorlac with a sharpened rock as Alex and Link retrieved more firewood from the dell. When they made it back to camp, Foragoon had a fire burning in a matter of minutes by rubbing two branches together. Just like the giant had done every night with the goat, he tore Alex and her brother a generous amount of the gorlac meat that had been sizzling in the fire for several hours. Alex didn't think he understood how little their stomachs were, but he wouldn't catch them complaining. They both smiled at each other

as fat dripped down their chins. Anything was better than stale bread and mouldy cheese. And it was certainly a lot easier to fall asleep at night when one had a full belly.

“So,” Foragoon said from across the flickering bonfire, “why Oakstone? What adventures do two valiant villagers such as you seek on the main road?”

The giant’s question threw Alex off guard. The two of them had been so preoccupied with getting onto Oakstone and out of these mountains that they hadn’t even bothered planning what they’d do next. In the book, Taytora and Deonis journeyed to the city Iralda. But that was to enter in a tournament called The Golden Gauntlet. The chances of her and Link seeking admittance were as steep as it snowing in Phoenix.

She cast Link a look as if to say “I’ve got nothing; you answer him.”

“Iralda,” Link said casually as he tore off a hunk of meat with his teeth. “That’s where we’re headed.”

“Ah, Iralda,” Foragoon’s eyes drifted off at the word, almost as if he were reliving a dear memory. “The impenetrable city.” His eyes found them again over the dancing flames. “Do you know why



they call it that?”

Alex and Link were aware, but they both shook their heads as if to appear clueless. Foragoon looked pleased by their lack of knowledge.

“Because Iralda’s city walls are as high as the highest mountains, of course. Centuries ago, experienced Earthwielders, Telekinetic mages, and frost giants worked in tandem to create them. Six sieges!” Foragoon exclaimed suddenly, causing Alex to jump. “Six sieges and the walls still stand!”

“Did your ancestors help build them?” Link asked, seemingly more interested in the gorlac meat in his hand than anything Foragoon had to say.

Foragoon looked offended. “Young Deonis, *I* helped build them.”

“How old are you?” Alex asked before realizing how rude the question sounded. Grandma always used to snap at her when she would ask. “If you don’t mind me asking, that is,” she added on hastily.

“How old do you think I am?” Foragoon asked with a wry smile on his face. “And be careful not to insult me.” He grabbed a

handful of branches that looked an awful lot like twigs in his hands and threw them into the bonfire. The flame sizzled, and sparks shot upwards, vanishing into the night sky.

She and Link exchanged puzzled glances. Alex had known Foragoon was old, but he would have had to be well over a half a millennium to have built the walls. She didn't even know frost giants could live for that long. All she knew about them was they were a pivotal factor in the Kingdom of Mist's success in the Great War. But since then their numbers had dwindled, and they were now spread out through these mountains, picking off whatever meat they could to survive.

"Four hundred and fifty-four?" Alex asked, hoping her guess was under and not over.

"You warm my heart, Taytora," Foragoon said with a cheesy grin. "Five hundred and thirty-two. And thanks to the bravery of the both of you . . ." He looked up at the night sky and inhaled a deep breath, his nostrils the size of dinner plates. "I live to breathe another day." His azure eyes fell back to them, and he nodded his head in gratitude.

The three of them exchanged stories well into the night.

Foragoon told them tales of Iralda and in return, they told him stories about the likes of Robin Hood, Merlin, and Peter Pan. When they had finished telling them, Foragoon would always make snide comments about how their stories lacked giants. So not wanting to displease their humongous listener that could crush them like ants, they told him the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. They tweaked the ending, of course. Alex was sure the whole giant-dying part would not have gone down well with him. But even though she was telling stories about valour, chivalry, and magical weapons in make-believe worlds, her mind was solely focused on home.

She wondered what Mom and Dad would be doing right at that very moment and if they had called the police or gone out looking for them. Then the thought struck her: Maybe they hadn't even realized the two were missing? What if she and Link were in a parallel universe where time didn't even exist? And when they got back to the real world it would be like they had never left at all?

As Link continued telling his hybrid story of Goldilocks and the three giants, Alex took in a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut as hard as she could, trying to imagine the world where she truly belonged. But when she opened them, she was still sitting by the

crackling bonfire. Fresh tears fell down her face. She quickly wiped them away with the back of her hand before anyone noticed.

*At least I'm not in this alone, she thought. At least I have Link here with me.*

## 7. LINCOLN

“And so, the cub finally awakes from hibernation,” Mom’s voice chirped. “And my, oh my, what a mess he has left for his mother bear to clean up.”

Link opened his eyes to find Mom darting around his bedroom, picking up all his dirty dishes in a frenzy. She was in her work uniform: a high-waisted skirt and an aqua buttoned-up shirt with the logo of the graphic design company she worked for, Pine’s Designs.

Like always, Link’s mind took a few minutes to process what was happening. Five seconds ago, he was in Nocera trading stories with a giant as they sat by a bonfire, and now he was in the comfort of his own home. A week ago if this happened he would’ve panicked, been in hot sweats, feeling his body for any injuries he might have picked up. But this had become the norm for him.

Ever since the car crash, every time Link shut his eyes at night he was thrown into the book, and the same things that happened when he stumbled down the mountain repeated. Time would stand still, memories that weren’t his would become his,

followed by the excruciating burning sensation like someone had just poured hot lava over his head. It was as if he was living two different lives at once: One in reality, and one in Nocera. And he still had no idea what was causing it.

Link pulled the bed covers over his head to deflect the sunlight filtering in. “I told you not to wake me.”

“I know, I heard you,” Mom said, as she scooped up an empty coffee cup from his bedside table. “Kenji’s here.”

Link pulled the sheets off his head and craned his neck up. His best friend Kenji Nakamura was standing in the doorway, wearing an Oklahoma City basketball jersey he never ever washed. He gave Link a polite wave.

“Morning, Kenji,” Link said.

“Morning, Lincoln,” he answered, mimicking Link’s tired voice.

“Kenji’s parents let him have the day off school as well,” Mom explained. “So, perhaps you could both do something productive? Get out of the house maybe?” She shrugged. “Just spit-balling.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Peterson,” Kenji said over-enthusiastically.

Mom looked at her son impatiently, waiting for an answer.

“That was directed at you, hermit.”

“OK, yes, I got it,” Link answered, trying to scratch an itch inside of his cast but failing miserably.

Mom exhaled forcefully, blowing a lock of hair away from her forehead. “All right, well, I’m off to work. See you when I get home. Remember: Do something productive.”

Just as she was about to head out of the room, she wheeled around and grabbed another dirty plate, adding it to her stack.

“You’re a pig; you know that?”

“Love you too, Mom,” Link said, blowing her a kiss.

“Yeah, you better,” she said under her breath as she left.

“You look absolutely gorgeous this morning, Mrs. Peterson,” Kenji called out before he shut the door gently.

There was an awkward silence in the room as Mom closed the front door and her SUV roared to life outside.

“Soooo . . . How have you been?” Link asked, attempting to break the ice.

“How have I been?” Kenji repeated, stepping towards Link’s bed vindictively. “How have I been?”

In a flash, he grabbed a pillow from the bed and smothered Link's face with it. "I'll tell you how I've been, you miserable sack of shit. Fourteen years! Fourteen years of friendship and you ditch me for Nadine. Couldn't even see me in the hospital. Didn't even tell me you had been released. I've been worried sick; that's how I've been."

"OK, OK," Link shouted in between laughs. "I'm sorry."

"I can't hear you, buddy, speak up," Kenji replied, pushing down the pillow with more force.

Link couldn't just suffocate without putting up a fight. With his good hand, he flicked his best friend in the family jewels. Kenji quickly backed up, his face contorted in pain.

"Uncool, uncool," he whispered.

Link waited until he finished whimpering before he spoke. "Look, I know I've been a crappy friend, and you have every right to be mad at me. But I just needed my own space."

Kenji stood up slowly, his hands still cradling his nether regions. "Then why have you been seeing Nadine? I've known you longer than her."

"I've seen her twice; that's it."



That was the truth. Not only had Link been the world's worst best friend, but he had also been the world's worst boyfriend. Ever since he was discharged from hospital, he had been keeping to himself, racking his brain, trying to figure the whole Nocera mess out.

“Have you been replying to her texts?” Kenji asked, still in obvious pain.

“No, not really.”

“Good. At least I’m not the only one you’ve been neglecting.” Kenji put his hands on his knees and bent over, sucking in a deep breath. “Oh God, I feel sick.”

“Need ice?”

Kenji straightened up. “No time for ice. Do you not understand the rarity of this occasion? We have a day off. A free pass, my friend. And, luckily for you, I have the whole day planned. *Carpem dio.*”

“*Carpe diem,*” Link corrected. “And I, uh . . . I kind of already have plans for today.”

“OK, lay them on me,” Kenji said as he flicked his hair out of his eyes. Kenji was the point guard for Link’s high school basketball

team, the Aztecs. Without his brain on the court, they wouldn't have won the playoffs last year. Coach always joked that Kenji would be twice the player he was if he'd cut his hair. That maybe he would be able to see the players he was passing to. But for Link, picturing Kenji without his mop-head hair was just weird.

Link got out of bed and walked to the cupboard, pulling out a plain black tee and whacking it on. "I was going to check out this pawn shop fir—"

"Nice," Kenji said, smiling devilishly. "I like the way you're thinking. Do you really think my fake ID will work, though?"

"No, a P-A-W-N shop, Kenji," Link said, spelling it out for him. "Get your mind out of the gutter."

"You're joking, right?" he snapped. "You've got to be joking. A pawn shop? You do realize I never get days off school, right? I had tonsillitis once, and Mom still made me go. I had an oral presentation that day, Link. Let that imagery sink in."

"I'm trying to. But I can't imagine you not being able to talk." Link slid into some denim pants and headed to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Kenji shadowed him the whole way.

"You're being incredibly selfish right now," Kenji said as he

perched himself on the edge of the freestanding bathtub. “You’re not the only one with the day off, you know?”

Link didn’t answer him.

Kenji threw his hands up. “Oh, so now you’re trying to guilt trip me by giving me the cold shoulder?”

“Just do whatever you think is best,” Link said, dabbing his mouth with a hand towel.

“Don’t get short with me,” Kenji said.

“Kind of hard when your head barely comes up to my nipples.”

“Hah, good one,” Kenji said, springing to his feet. “But believe it or not, I’m actually only two inches shorter than the average adult male. And seeing as I didn’t hit puberty until I was fifteen, chances are I still have a few more growth spurts to go until I’m fully developed. So, when you think about it, the joke’s really on you, Link.”

“I’m sorry; did you say something?” Link said, brushing his hair with his fingertips as he looked at his reflection in the mirror. “I don’t speak Oompa Loompa.”

Almost forgetting, Link walked back into his room and

grabbed the book, *Nocera*, smiling wryly to himself at his witty comeback.

Although his Dad was a mechanic, Link had never really been into cars. Well, obviously he had been “into” cars in the general sense, but not infatuated with them like his Dad and Kenji were. They could talk for hours on end about car parts Link couldn’t even begin to pronounce. And sometimes, when Kenji was over, he spent more time in Dad’s garage than playing video games with Link.

He was just thankful Kenji had taken the day off school as well. Public transport was a pet hate of Link’s. But ever since his car had been written off, trains and buses had been his only mode of transport. Not that he’d gone out often, anyway. The only place he’d been visiting was the hospital.

“Just gave her a wax,” Kenji said as they approached his pride and joy: A silver and blue Nissan Skyline GT-R with a custom body kit. “Sexy, huh?”

“You ask me every time I approach your car.”

“And you never answer me.”

“Then stop asking me.”

Sliding into the passenger’s seat, Link put his feet on the

dashboard. Kenji quickly slapped them off and dusted off the spot where his shoes had been. “Neanderthal. Do I need to repeat the car rules to you again?”

“Noooo!” Link moaned. “Just start the damn car.”

Just as Kenji was about to turn the key in the ignition, he paused. “Uh, are you sure you’re all right with this?”

“With what?”

“You know, with the ‘me driving’ thing?” he continued hesitantly. “Especially after the . . . .”

“Crash?” Link finished for him.

“Yeah that,” Kenji said, looking down at the steering wheel.

“Just start the car,” he said, smiling with the corner of his mouth. “I’m perfectly fine.”

And Link was . . . just as long as he wasn’t the one driving.

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Link and Kenji weaved through the traffic in the Skyline, listening to the Red Hot Chili Peppers, the air conditioning on full blast. On the outskirts of the city, Phoenix’s red mountain ranges stretched out for

miles and miles. Far different to the tall, snow-capped ones he, Alex and Foragoon had been traversing through in his sleep.

“So, how’s the little terror?” Kenji asked, using the reflection of the review mirror to style his shaggy hair.

“Alex?” Link asked. “Her results came back. Brain’s functioning normally. Hasn’t suffered any trauma. So, good, I guess.”

“You don’t sound too happy,” Kenji noted.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled, staring out the passenger side window. “It’s just . . . if her results are so good, why hasn’t she woken up yet? I read online the longer the patient stays in a comatose state, the less likely the chances of reversibility will be.”

Kenji shook his head, eyes fixed on the slow-moving Prius that was blocking them ahead. “Don’t buy into that crap, man. You can’t trust what you read online. She’ll be fine. She’s a fighter.”

But, of course, Kenji didn’t know the full story. That even though Alex was in a stable condition in the real world, she was still in insurmountable danger in Nocera. One day, Link was typing on his laptop, trying to catch up on his schoolwork when it happened. A tiny scratch suddenly appeared on his right cheek. It wasn’t painful,

more of a shock really, enough to get his attention.

Later that night, when Link had entered Nocera and the memories sizzled into his brain, he learned he had scratched his cheek walking through a thicket. Ever since that day, the hospital had become his second home. Because he knew if the nurses were to find an injury on Alex, Dad and Mom would probably start WWII.

Link figured if he were always by Alex's side in the hospital, then he could be on standby to clean up a new wound, or if the injury was bad enough, quickly change her gown. Then, when he entered Nocera that night, he could apply the Herbs of Namayka to accelerate her healing and hide the evidence in the real world. So far, his plan had been working, but for how long would it last? They were in Nocera after all. As much as Link wanted to go back and rewrite the story, it wasn't a land full of fluffy clouds and unicorns.

To make matters worse, Alex wasn't the only one in danger. The very moment Link woke up and went about his daily schedule in the real world, someone else would be controlling his body in Nocera. Functioning like the autopilot feature of an aircraft does. That someone would mimic Link's behavioural patterns: walk like him, talk like him, and apparently in Alex's eyes, they *were* him.

Link got eight hours' worth of sleep on an average night, which equated to eight hours' worth of time in Nocera. So, for those other sixteen hours, his autopilot was in complete control: making important decisions, carrying conversations with Alex, risking his life, and basically doing whatever the hell he pleased.

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"It's too beautiful to be eaten," Kenji said, taking pictures of his giant stack of pancakes from various angles. "It's a work of art."

"Well, if it's still there by the time I finish my eggs Benedict I'm chowing that down as well," Link said.

"You wish, fat boy." Kenji opened a packet of maple syrup with his teeth and drizzled it over his pancakes. When he was done, he scrunched up the empty packet and threw it across the quiet cafe and into the bin. "Nothing but net."

A man with long ear hairs shook his head in disapproval before continuing to go about his crossword.

"Tough crowd," Link said, taking a long sip of his orange juice.



“When are you going to come back to practice, man?” Kenji asked. “The boys miss you.”

Link wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then glanced down at his cast, raising his eyebrows. Kenji followed his gaze.

“Once that’s off, obviously,” he added hastily.

“I don’t know—I just . . . .” Link trailed off. Kenji pounced on the opportunity.

“It could help you get your mind off things,” he said, finally slicing into his food. “And I’m sure as heck it would make your Mom happy.”

Link let out a chuckle. “Very discreet. She asked you to hang out with me today, didn’t she?”

Kenji fought back a smile, his mouth full of pancakes.

“What? No. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He swallowed forcefully. “Anyways, the Aztecs need their star shooting guard back. So swing us a text when old righty is back in action.”

“I’ll think about it,” Link said. But by then he had already made his decision. Basketball was the farthest thing from his mind.

Something caught Link’s attention outside of the café

window. A man was standing directly in the middle of an intersection, barely flinching as cars drove past him. He wore a grey overcoat and fedora hat and stared straight in Link's direction.

The traffic came to a halt as the lights turned red. A group of school kids walked across the cross walk, some pushing one another playfully, some obsessed with their phones as they walked. But when the children finally passed, the man in all grey was nowhere to be seen.

"Did you see that?" Link asked Kenji, pointing. "Some weirdo was just standing in the middle of the intersection. Cars were passing by him and everything. He didn't even flinch."

"Where?" Kenji asked, rising out of his chair to see. "Wait a second; you're just trying to distract me so you can steal my food, aren't you?" He tapped the side of his nose twice with his forefinger. "I'm onto you, buddy."

Kenji sat back down and resumed the attack on his pancakes. Link stared out at the spot where the man had stood.

*Weird, he thought. It was like he was looking straight at me.*

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The faded sign of Pam's Pawn Shop loomed over Link's head in bright yellow cursive lettering; the place he and Alex had visited more than a year ago. Link had no idea why, but his body was quivering like he was back in the Galbraz Mountains, suffering from hypothermia.

He knew it was foolish, but some part of him hoped the old lady, Pam, would have some answers to his whole Nocera dilemma. If the book truly was responsible for bringing their story to life, then Link figured finding out its origins could potentially free him and his sister from their peculiar imprisonment. And this was a second-hand shop after all, which meant someone must have either given the book away, or traded it in for cash. He just needed to track down who that person was. All that was left to do now was to put all his faith in the memory of an old woman.

"Need help reading?" Kenji asked, following his gaze at the store sign.

"Funny," Link said, opening the door and motioning him forwards. "Ladies first."

"Nah, not my kind of pawn shop," Kenji said. "I'll be back in

a minute, anyway. I'm going to check out that smoothie place across the road. Me and Chad went there last week. Their Banana Blitz will blow your mind."

"I've been hospitalized for less than a week, and you've already replaced me with Chad?" Link asked.

"Hey, you weren't there when I needed you," Kenji said with a shrug and a wry smile. He looked both ways before he crossed the road, both hands in his pockets.

"Get me one of those Banana Blitzes, then," Link called out. "No ice, though. You know I have sensitive teeth."

It took Link a few minutes to regain his composure; then he wiped his clammy hands on the front of his jeans and walked into the store. The A/C was refreshing as he walked in, but at the sight of the shopkeeper, he went back to the hot sweats he had been enduring outside. For some reason, Link felt more nervous than he would before a basketball playoff game as he walked through the aisles of TVs and surround sound systems.

The old lady was standing on a small ladder, directly across the pawn shop. She was hanging up a guitar on a hook, her back to him. Link swivelled his head from side to side. They were the only

two in the store.

“I was beginning to think you’d never show,” Pam called out, her back still to him.

“You know me?” Link asked, his voice faltering on the words.

Pam turned away from the shelf, startled. “Oh! Sorry, darling; I was expecting one of my workers. She’s running late again, you see. How can I help you?” She stepped down from the ladder and waddled towards him. White and wispy hair came down to her shoulders, and she had a hump in her back that could have rivalled the Hunchback of Notre Dame’s.

“Uh, do you recall ever seeing this book?” Link asked, holding the cover out for her to see.

Pam took the book from his hand, flipped it over and studied the back, running her long knobby fingers along the spine and lock. “The cover’s beautiful. But to answer your question: no, no I don’t think I’ve ever seen this before.”

Link’s heart sunk in his chest.

Pam popped open the lock and flicked through all the handwritten pages. “Is this your journal, darling?”

“No, it’s not,” Link said. “I got this book from you a year ago. You gave it to me and my younger sister for free.”

Pam cocked her head to the side and chuckled. “Really? You must have caught me on a good day,”

Link felt like smacking his forehead in frustration. But he couldn’t concede defeat just yet. *I must refresh her memory somehow*, he thought.

Link cleared his throat then stuck his arm out to his side. “She was this tall, blond hair, blue eyes. Kept yelling across the store. Was very rude. I was in the gaming section and she was by the bookcase.”

Pam looked at him pensively for a few seconds and then chuckled. “I’m sorry sweetheart, but it’s hard enough for me to remember all of my customers in a day, let alone a year ago.”

Link rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palms. He’d been hedging his bets she’d at least know something. *Maybe Alex was right*, he thought. *Just a wild theory after all.*

A woman with auburn hair walked through the door, purse dangling from the crook of her elbow. She looked to be in her late thirties. A patch of freckles surrounded her nose.

“Sorry I’m late; flat tire,” she said hurriedly as she approached Pam.

“You had a flat tire last week,” Pam said, without breaking eye contact with Link.

“Well, I’ve got another one this week,” the auburn-haired lady replied irritably.

“You can start by sorting the DVDs back into alphabetical order,” Pam said, clearly dismissing her.

But the woman didn’t leave. She turned to face Link, her long hair almost whipping him in the eyes. “Um, do you happen to be Hunter by any chance?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s my last name,” he answered hesitantly, “Why’s that?”

“I was asked to give you this.” She extended her arm and handed him an orange canister with a white screw cap.

“By who?” Link asked.

“By whom,” Pam corrected with a pleasant smile.

The auburn-haired lady shrugged her bony shoulders. “Some weird guy outside dressed like a 1920s mobster.”

Panic engulfed him like an inferno. Could it have been the

same man who was standing in the middle of the intersection? Link looked over his shoulder, half expecting to see him through the cluttered windows full of jewellery.

He turned back to the auburn-haired lady. “Was he dressed in all grey?”

“Yeah,” she answered. “Know him?”

He shook his head, perplexed by the canister clenched in his shaky hand.

Pam looked at him sincerely. “Sorry I can’t be of more help about the book, dear.”

“That’s OK,” he said, putting on a fake smile. “You two ladies have a lovely day. See you.”

Stepping out of the shop's air conditioning and into the scorching sun, Link immediately unscrewed the canister. Inside, there was a curled piece of paper and what had to be over thirty pills. Link unfurled the paper.

*Sleep well, Hunter.*

*Kind regards,*

*Xavier*

*XO*





## 8. LINCOLN

Link pressed the attack this time. Twisting and extending his body, swinging his branch at different angles to thwart Alex's defences. She parried his barrage effortlessly, stepped to the side, then lunged forwards at her brother with a stabbing strike. Her momentum was her own worst enemy. All Link had to do was turn and disarm the branch she was holding with a swift upward flick. She fell hard on her side.

“Almost had you,” Alex grunted, thumping the dirt in anger.

“No, you didn't,” Link chuckled, as he picked up her branch and threw it back. She caught it without breaking eye contact with him. “One more round. Then we'll eat.”

His sister must have been starving, because suddenly she sprung forwards with a newfound determination. Alex's branch flashed before his eyes with alarming speed and precision. Link managed to check most of the blows, all but one. The last strike whistled as it narrowly missed his ear. Link took a few steps backward, off balance, trying to regain his composure.

He was still adjusting to how quick her movements were. She

reminded him of a mamba: coiled one moment, sinking its fangs into your flesh the next. Link was just lucky he had the superior defence. Well technically “he” didn’t, but Deonis did.

It had been almost a week since they reluctantly parted ways with the gentle giant, Foragoon. Alex was an emotional wreck, sobbing and in hysterics, begging him not to leave. Link practically had to yank her off his ankles so they could go. As a parting gift, Foragoon had given Alex a few of the violet leaves that healed the horrik-inflicted wounds. He gave Link nothing, which was understandable seeing as he had wanted to abandon the giant when he was dying.

Since the giant's departure, the two siblings had been keeping tight to the main road, just like their two characters had. Deonis and Taytora had followed Oakstone until they reached the city Iralda, only stopping in a town called Vardis along the way. If Link had read the map correctly, Vardis was the town in which they would be arriving tomorrow.

Link would’ve gladly bypassed Vardis without a second thought. But they needed to buy a horse there just like the heroes had. Plus, he felt a warm meal and a good night’s rest were more

than welcome.

Link knew he should stop being a worrywart. They weren't as defenceless as they had been when they had first woken up in Nocera. Discovering they possessed Taytora and Deonis' abilities had changed the whole dynamic of their situation. They were mentally stronger, and after a few days of training, the siblings started to become physically stronger.

During daylight they travelled and, as the sun began its descent, they would find somewhere secluded to camp and hone their skills. A typical evening consisted of Alex firing arrows into tree trunks and Link slashing imaginary opponents with his sword or practicing Spells from scrolls. And sometimes, like that evening, for instance, they would spar with each other while wielding sturdy branches.

Alex was getting so good with her bow and arrow that one day they decided to try their luck and wandered into some woodlands just west of Oakstone. After several hours' worth of hunting, she emerged holding the ears of a dead hare and wore a grin from ear to ear. Later that night they skinned it, chowed down on half, and went to sleep with full bellies.

Link knew he couldn't rely on her hunting every day, though. Small animals were scarce on that road, and it wasn't often they came across any woodlands. And even when they did, they wouldn't dare to travel too deep in them. This was Nocera after all. Bears and wolves were the least of their worries.

Alex casually tossed her branch to her right hand, then back again to her left. She circled her brother counter-clockwise, then without warning she thrust her branch forward like a frog loosely flicking out its tongue. Link managed to jerk his head back in time, her branch stopping inches away from his eyes. He was close to soiling himself.

They had only been sparring with branches for the past three days. But slowly and surely, they were both beginning to get the hang of it. Of course, they didn't have the slightest clue as to what they were doing; they were fighting purely out of instinct.

Link found if he shut his mind off completely and let his body take over, it would show him how to react to each situation. He often found himself marvelling over what was happening in front of his eyes. It was like his body was some sort of pre-programmed killing machine.

The siblings stepped forwards at the same time, their branches cracking together as they met in the middle, the impact sending violent waves rattling throughout Link's body. As he was in close, he wrapped his leg around the back of his sister's calve and pushed her forwards. She fell backward, kicking up dirt and snow in the air. Link poked her neck softly with the tip of his branch as she lay on the ground, panting.

“Dead,” he said.

“Cheat,” Alex said, snarling. “This is a sword fight. You never said anything about using your feet.”

“Anything goes in a sword fight,” he said, chuckling.

“Besides, these are branches, not swords. So, technically, this should be called a branch fight.”

Judging by her flaring nostrils, Alex didn't like his joke. She stood up, shook the dirt out of her long blond hair and pretended to walk away. A few steps later, she turned and leaped at him with a vicious overhead strike. Link knocked her telegraphed attack aside and then swung at her torso. Alex rolled harmlessly underneath his strike. He turned to find her branch pressed to his chest.

His sister's jaw dropped in surprise. “No way.”

Smiling, Link batted her branch away from his chest. “So, this is what it feels like to lose, huh?”

“No way,” she said again. “If only Dad were here to see this. Man, he’d be ripping into you right now.” She shook her head in disbelief. “I still can’t believe it. I actually beat you, Lincoln Hunter, in a physical activity. *A physical activity.*”

“And it only took you fifteen years,” he said slyly.

“What did you say?” Alex asked.

“I said it only took you fifteen years.”

“I’m sorry; one more time?” she said cupping a hand behind her ear. “I don’t speak loser.”

“And you say *I’m* a sore winner?” he said, laughing.

Throwing his branch away, Link dropped down into a dried gully where they’d set up camp earlier. It was a few meters wide, and its sides were narrow and steep, which made it the ideal place to sleep for the night. Now that they weren’t journeying with Foragoon they had to be strategic as to where they set up camp. Concealment was their best defence.

Link took off his gloves and held his right hand above some kindling he had gathered earlier, attempting to open his Gate to the

elusive power that resided deep within him. Trying to find it could only be explained as fumbling around for a light switch in a pitch-black room, or trying to scratch an itch you just couldn't quite reach.

After a few minutes of searching aimlessly, Link unlocked his Gate to The Eternal Source, and immediately his senses heightened.

Suddenly he was aware of things he had been oblivious to before: an orchestra of crickets chirping a stone's throw away; an owl perched on top of a branch, picking at its feathers in the distance; the gentle breeze blowing from the east, rustling the branches and leaves tranquilly as it glided past them.

If Link focused hard enough, he could even feel the worms squirming underneath his feet as they burrowed their way aimlessly through the soil. Alex would always ask him what it felt like, to open the Gate to The Source, and he'd always find himself tongue-tied, because no words did this feeling any justice.

The feeling of ceasing his thoughts, and being so connected and lost with the beauty of the world around him, so absorbed by the present, that the past and future held no relevance. The feeling of



separating you, me, this and that, time and space. To release himself from the bondage of his mind and find the only thing that mattered was the here and now.

Link branched out to all the heat sources radiating around him, just like the scroll from his backpack taught him to do. The process of Firewelding was simple enough to him. Then again, that might have something to do with the fact he created the laws of magic in their story. First, one needed a heat source, the most obvious one being the sun. Once the heat source was gathered, then the Eternal Source was used as the fuel. The oxygen would then react chemically and *voila*: there was fire.

It took Link a few painstaking minutes, but once he had converged the heat sources together, he scrunched his eyes shut and focused all the energy and drew it towards the palm of his hand. He flicked his palm backward to create the necessary Chain needed to activate the Spell he was attempting.

In one concise burst, a tiny tongue of flame flicked out from Link's hand and caught onto the kindling he had prepared. Exhaling forcefully, he rested his back against the steepest side of the gully, arching his head back to try to stop the world from swaying around

him. When he tilted his head forwards, Alex was crouched down, cupping her hands around the small flame, blowing on it to make it grow.

Unlike most magic systems that required a wand, staffs or words for the spell to be triggered, in Nocera, all that was needed was a precise sequence of body movements called a Chain. These Chains could range from a slight flick of the hand to complicated steps or arm movements. And if these movements weren't executed flawlessly, the consequences for the Gifted could be dire. The more advanced the Spell, the more movements the Chain would require and the basic ones required the least.

Unluckily for Link, though, out of the four elements—fire, earth, wind and water—Firewielding was the most energy-draining to undertake. Not because if one lost control, more often or not he'd end up burning himself, but because the toll it took on one's body was tremendous. Any Spell depleted a little bit of energy, but Fire Spells were notorious for taking great amounts of it. Which was why the creation of that little flicker of flames made Link feel like he had just finished running a marathon.

“Are you OK?” Alex asked, jumping down into the gully

beside him.

Link had steadied his breathing before he responded. “Fine.”

“Is it getting easier?”

“A little,” he lied.

Alex placed some twigs into the flames, her eyes watching him intently as the fire expanded. She still hadn’t unlocked her Gates yet. It wasn’t from lack of trying, though; she had been at it almost every hour like clockwork.

It took Link a few days to find the evasive energy source, and even longer just to move a pebble so much as a millimetre. On top of that, practicing the Spells proved to be so gruelling he had resorted to only attempting them at night. If he were to practice during the day, he’d have to stop every half-hour to catch his breath and recuperate.

Link had only learned a handful of Spells from the scrolls in Deonis’ backpack: moving small piles of rocks or clumps of dirt; emitting tiny embers from the palms of his hands. Nothing too great, especially not in comparison to what Deonis and Taytora were already capable of at that stage in the book. Link knew the heroes weren’t heading to the Golden Gauntlet for fun.

Alex scrimmaged inside of her backpack and pulled out a loaf

of bread, tearing two chunks from it. She handed him a piece and nibbled on the other. Thankfully, she had learned to savour her food instead of scarfing it down like it was her last meal. If only they had some of the hare left, but they had to gobble it before the meat rotted.

Now Alex sat with her legs folded, a glum expression upon her face.

“You OK?” Link asked her.

“Yeah, fine. Just thinking about tomorrow,” she responded.

“We’ll be fine,” he said. “We just have to act confident, keep to ourselves and not draw any unwanted attention.”

“I know.”

“We have to watch the way we speak as well,” he said, “Hide our American accents. Watch our slang and your contractions. Just leave all the talking to me, actually. And remember, our names are Deonis and Taytora now, so no more slip ups. I swear by the end of our journey Foragoon started calling me Link.”

Alex laughed feebly. “You seem more nervous than me.”

Link ripped off a tiny piece of bread and threw it in his mouth. “I’ve always been a worrywart, you know that.”

“What I don’t get, though,” Alex said, suddenly looking

concerned, “is if Vardis is so dangerous, like, then why are we even going there? Why not stick to the main road? Aren’t we trying to avoid civilization until we get to Iralda?”

Holding out his arms, Link let his outstretched fingers embrace the warmth of the crackling fire. “Because we have to follow the plot.”

“The plot?”

“The plot,” he repeated, matching her ditsy tone. “We have to do everything Taytora and Deonis did in the book: Buy a horse to share in Vardis, stock up on rations, stay two nights, then set off for Iralda the next day.”

Alex scrunched up her face like she had just tasted Dad’s not-so-famous cabbage stew. “But why? We haven’t been following the plot so far. Taytora and Deonis didn’t have a giant escort them through the mountains.”

“Well, I didn’t say we had to follow it down to a tee. Just, you know, sort of use it as a guideline. My logic is if Taytora and Deonis didn’t die in the books, then if we do exactly what they did, we won’t die either.”

“Fine logic, Link. Real fine,” Alex said dismally.

“Almost as fine as your sarcasm.”

His sister sat in silence for a bit, chewing her lip nervously.

“Have you thought about what we’re going to do once we get to Iralda? Because you said we need to follow the plot, but obviously, we can’t follow it that far.”

“I haven’t given it much thought,” Link mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. He had been so focused on getting them to the town Vardis it had completely slipped his mind.

Iralda was the capital of the Kingdom of Mist, the Kingdom they were in now. And once every year, newly discovered Gifted would participate in a tournament called The Golden Gauntlet. During the combat, elite Mages from various cities would scout the talent, and if they saw any Gifted they liked, they would recruit them into their squadron.

The pay for even a low-ranking Mage was substantially high, which was why Taytora and Deonis were headed there in the first place: To compete, earn a spot into a squadron, and feed their family back in Orban. But for Alex and Link to follow in their characters’ footsteps was completely out of the question. Although the combatants used blunted swords, and could wear thick armour, if

they so desired, deaths were still a common occurrence in the tournament. It turned out magic was far more lethal than any blade or armour.

“What about if we both got jobs and worked in Iralda?” Alex said with a gleam in her eyes.

The suggestion made his head perk up. He hadn’t even thought of this possibility. Although most Gifted would practically jump at the opportunity to partake in the tournament (most for the substantial pay, of course), there were some that would acquire everyday jobs.

With his Fire magic, Link could do as much work as four blacksmiths, or he could utilize his Earth magic and become a builder. And, in due time, with Alex’s Air and Water magic she could steer a boat better than any captain could ever dream. Sensing she might have been on to something, Link stood up and paced around the fire, weighing up the pros and cons in his head.

“Think about it,” Alex said, watching him as he walked. “If we enter The Golden Gauntlet we’re as good as dead. For one, I haven’t even unlocked my Gate yet, and two, all you can do is spit little embers and move clumps of dirt.”

She was right. Entering the tournament was completely out of the question. Especially since every injury she attained in Nocera appeared on her in the real world. Even when sparring with branches Link had been cautious not to harm her. And what safer place to be than the Kingdom of Mist's capital, Iralda?

Link's main priority had been to keep Alex out of harm's way. Until he solved the whole "getting out of Nocera" conundrum, that was. Somehow, he knew the man in the fedora hat was behind this. Or at least had to know what was happening to him. But ever since that day in the city, Link had never seen him again. He was still struggling to fathom a rational thought about the note he was given: *Sleep well, Hunter, Kind regards, Xavier, XO.*

First of all, how did this Xavier know his last name? And just what exactly did he mean by sleep well? Did he know about Link's dreams of Nocera? And what about the pills? With no prescription label, it was impossible to know exactly what they were. But something was telling Link they were sleeping pills—a twisted joke, seeing as sleep had eluded him lately.

"Well, what do you think?" Alex asked.

"I think you're a genius," he replied distantly.



She looked at him abashed. “Aw, shucks, you’re making me blush.”

“But Iralda is still a long way away,” he said. “We need to focus on tomorrow, on Vardis. Two young kids with a pocket full of gold who talk funny. We’ll practically have targets painted on our backs.”

“I’ve taken acting classes before,” Alex said matter-of-factly. “I’ll be fine.” She stood up, pinched the flaps of her cloak with both hands, performed a polite curtsy, and proceeded to speak in a strong British accent. “Good evening, Your Highness. Splendid weather we are hav—”

There was a rustling in the distance. Link had held up his hand to silence her. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Alex asked, dropping the flaps of her cloak.

The rustling noise sounded again, louder this time. A stirring in the bushes right above them. Something was up there. An animal? A person? Link couldn’t decide. He pointed to Alex’s bow that was a few yards away, then he held a finger to his lips, reiterating the fact that they needed to stay quiet. She nodded and slowly got to her feet, readying her bow.

Link held out a hand, signalling her to stay put; then, he firmly grasped a root sticking out from the gully and used it as leverage to pull himself out.

Crouching down, he slowly drew his sword from its sheath, searching into the darkness for the source of the noise. Then he saw him. Goosebumps immediately riddled Link's body from head to toe. His hand shook as he struggled to keep his sword steady, which now felt as if it weighed one hundred pounds.

In the distance was the man in the grey fedora hat and overcoat, half hidden behind the trunk of a tree. Darkness obscured his eyes, but his mouth was twisted in an unmistakable, ominous smile.

"Xavier!" Link shouted, darting off in his direction, chopping down branches and shrubs to clear a path. But when Link reached the spot where he had been, the man was gone.

## 9. ALEX

Pale beams of sunlight shot through the stems of the pine-trees, slicing through the thin mist that obscured the floor of the woods. The air was calm and crisp, far more peaceful than the fierce winds they had endured upon climbing the mountain weeks ago.

Alex looked up and witnessed a pair of four-winged birds, swooping from branch to branch, singing tranquilly overhead. She had never experienced anything so beautiful. Only a few times in her life had she been awake to witness the sunrise, and that morning was one of them.

After a restless night's sleep and a light breakfast, she and her brother were heading back to Oakstone. With his knife, Link had marked various trees on the way to the gully in case they wound up getting themselves lost. Now they were tediously trying to locate those marks to find their way back.

Alex yawned and rubbed the sleep from her eyes, just managing to open them in time to avoid tripping over a fallen branch. No matter how breathtaking a sunrise may be, sleep was far too important to her. And she didn't get a wink of it the night before,

no thanks to her brother.

Last night he had completely lost the plot. Swore there was someone called Xavier watching them, wearing a fedora hat and an overcoat of all things. But when they both crept out into the darkness, weapons drawn, there was no one.

It wasn't just that night either. Ever since that day Link tumbled down the mountain he had been acting weird. Asking her how they got all the way up there when clearly they'd been walking up the mountain all morning. Mumbling to her "I'm awake," and then hugging and kissing her like she had just been resurrected from the dead. And then there were days where he was so distant, almost as if he were on another planet altogether. Those days she could barely get a word out of him.

Alex knew there was something he wasn't telling her; she just needed to figure out what. Trying to get an answer out of him, though, was like attempting to plug a bullet hole with a Band-Aid.

Soon the wall of pine trees dwindled, and the mist slowly disappeared. By the time they made it to Oakstone, the sun had poked its head out from hiding completely, spreading its golden glow over Nocera.

Alex figured as they walked it was a better time than any. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to focus on unlocking her Gate to the pesky Source for the thousandth time. Link told her she had to be patient, to concentrate, and search deep within herself.

*But just what in the world did he mean by that?* she thought. *How is one supposed to “Search deep within themselves?”*

If you asked Alex, she'd say her brother had been watching too many Tai Chi videos. After several unsuccessful minutes, she concluded her Gate to the Eternal Source must have been padlocked.

*Typical Link, making everything look so easy,* she thought glumly. *But it took him two minutes to unlock his.*

They continued to trek along the dirt road as it twisted and turned through jagged cliffs and dewy grasslands, glistening in the morning sunlight. The two climbed a steady slope and found themselves surrounded by unfamiliar flora. As they pressed forwards, pale branches twisted and curled abnormally, leaves were so vibrant they seemed fluorescent; stems spiralled like the jam in Swiss rolls, and flower petals seemed to flutter and dance.

Alex was infatuated by the exotic foliage surrounding her, so much so that Link had to keep doubling back to keep her moving.

When he wasn't looking, she stepped towards an enormous plant with iridescent blossoms. As she approached, the flowers' colours changed from indigo to a deep magenta, and then again to maroon. She didn't know whether it was the way the sunlight was hitting them, or whether they were naturally like this, but the blossoms seemed almost luminous. Alex took off her glove and extended an arm towards one of the flowers. The blossom recoiled at her touch. She didn't even see the vine coming.

In an instant, a green tendril had wrapped around her forearm, jerking her towards the plant with startling strength. She widened her stance and leaned backward, trying to counteract the momentum she had going forward. Another vine lashed out as quickly as a whip and coiled around her ankle, joining in the tug-of-war battle. She hopped helplessly forwards. A third vine wrapped around her throat. Alex tried to call for her brother, but her airway was so restricted the only noise that came out was a feeble wheeze of air.

As she neared the plant, its centre opened vertically, revealing an oval of jagged, shark-like teeth. Alex let out a hoarse shriek, turning away from the mouth in disgust.

*I'm going to die, she told herself. Eaten alive by a Venus*

*flytrap on steroids. Of all things.*

That's when Link's sword came to the rescue. His blade slashed and hacked through the vines like a string trimmer through grass. The carnivorous plant hissed as each of its limbs was severed, shuffling backward with its teeth still bared.

Before the beast could cast any more of its vines, Link thrust his arms forward and cast a fireball. The glowing ball of flames hit its mark. The creature caught alight, engulfed in bright orange, screeching like a starved cat. Link helped his sister to her feet.

"Keep your hands to yourself," he told her, "*please.*"

A brush with death was what it took for it to truly sink in: It wasn't the plant that was the odd one out in this world; it was Alex and her brother.

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The pair marched on, climbing steadily up Oakstone as it wrapped around hills and curved around a blockade of high cliffs. Alex was exasperated and weary by the time they reached the thick woodland, and every muscle in her legs was painful to touch. Her prayers were

answered after traveling a few miles, though, because the road descended, and the woods gradually thinned out until some thatched roof cottages with smoke wafting from their chimneys could be seen.

Alex and her brother waltzed deeper into the village.

Dirt-stained children emerged, chasing chickens around with sticks. Good-wives could be seen from their windows shaking sheets or hanging up the laundry over their windowsills. A sounder of swine rolled in their muddy pens. Merchants sat cross-legged, displaying their goods on top of pelts, shouting out their best deals as the two passed. Alex felt as if she had just wandered onto the set of a movie.

The sun was beginning its descent as they followed the dirt-packed road that cut through the village, their eyes darting every which way in bewilderment. If Alex's hunger pangs weren't bad enough, as she passed more cottages, the smell of what she presumed to be pork or venison sizzling over hearths flooded her nostrils.

The dirt-packed road led them through picketed farms and stables filled with horses, cows, and expanses of yellow-brown grass with patches of bare earth. Soon enough, the small cottages diminished, replacing them were stout two-story ones made of logs with peaked roofs.



It didn't take them long to find the inn where their characters had stayed overnight in the book. The Sleeping Willow was the biggest building in Vardis. A towering five-story inn of varnished oak with an enormous green willow painted all the way up the building. Underneath the wide-boughed tree were painted many detailed creatures sound asleep: gorracs, oxen, vipers, eagles, and griffins. All the emblems represented each of the five cities in the Kingdom of Mist.

There was barely a seat empty as the two parted the inn's double doors and entered the common room. The Sleeping Willow bustled with conversation between men and women seated at candlelit tables, card games and arm wrestling games underway, and ladies locked at the elbows, giggling and dancing merrily with one another.

Alex and her brother ignored the odd lingering stare or two at their fur-lined cloaks as they approached the innkeeper behind the bar. She smiled with crooked teeth as she took their gold and escorted them to a cramped room just outside the staircase on the third floor. The innkeeper informed them she would ring the bell when supper was ready.

The pair unclasped their cloaks, laid down their weapons, and then changed into some dry clothes. The thing Alex was most looking forward to, other than the tantalizing stew she could smell from downstairs, was a nice hot bath to wipe away the dirt and grime of travel. But just as she was about to ask Link whether the innkeeper had mentioned anything about a bathhouse, the bell for supper clamoured from downstairs.

The siblings followed the crowd of travellers down the staircase as they made their way to the common room. They slid into some seats at the back.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” Link had told her when she had questioned his choice of seating.

He tried to wave down a serving boy carrying bowls of stew and thick slices of bread, but the boy couldn’t see her brother past the tall stack of wooden kegs.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” Alex reminded him coyly.

His daggers silenced her.

At that moment, the most beautiful voice Alex had ever heard filled the room, giving her goose bumps from head to toe. Whoever this singer was, he sounded like Christmas in a bottle. She tried to

rise out of her chair and catch a glimpse of him, but the stacked kegs and a group of dancing women were blocking her view.

The serving boy passed again, this time with a replenished tray of food, but once again he walked straight past her and Link.

“That’s it,” her brother said, slamming his hands down on the table. “If you want something done right, you’ve got to do it yourself.” He sprung out of his seat and stalked towards the serving boy on the other side of the common room.

The crowd erupted in applause as the singer finished his second song. Alex felt obliged to join in even though she was barely listening. She thought the gist of it was the telling of a massive battle between two legendary Mages, although she could’ve been wrong.

Alex couldn’t live without matching a face with this angel’s tear-jerking voice, so she twisted out of her seat again. The dancing ladies had stopped, but the chair the singer was supposed to be in was empty. Link sat down across the table, but despite her tummy’s protests, Alex didn’t care if he had brought food; she was too preoccupied trying to catch sight of the singer.

“I wonder what song the thief plays this time,” a playful voice that wasn’t Link’s spoke across the table.

Alex turned to find a boy that looked to be her age sitting in Link's chair. He had a mass of sandy blond hair falling to his shoulders, wore an oversized forest green tunic with golden trimmings, and had a pair of hypnotic, turquoise-coloured eyes.

Alex gawked, mesmerized by his chiselled facial features for so long she hadn't even thought of how to respond. *Heck, even his eyebrows are perfect.* She turned helplessly in her chair, looking for Link, but he was across the common room in a heated discussion with the serving boy that had been eluding them.

"I-I'm sorry," Alex stuttered. "Do you have me confused with someone else?"

The boy put both elbows on the table and rested his head on his hands, those drop-dead eyes never leaving hers. Alex found it hard to keep eye contact with him.

"I need your opinion on something," the boy said coolly.

"The opinion of a complete stranger?" she asked.

The boy hadn't heard her. He was gazing intently across the room, his angular eyebrows furrowed. "Tell me: what do you think of this singer's voice?"

Alex twisted in her chair to find that the dancing girls had

stopped for a rest, and she could finally catch a glimpse of the singer. He was a middle-aged man with pitch black eyes and a receding hairline. His ears stuck out like the handles on coffee mugs. Alex knew it was shallow of her, but she felt a little disappointed.

“I love his voice,” she said, still gazing at the singer as he begun to pluck his bronze harp.

“Really?” The boy asked, a puzzled expression covering his face.

“Yes,” Alex said. “Why is that so hard to believe?”

“It’s not. You just have . . . ” The boy paused and smiled, and as he did, a gorgeous dimple emerged on his left cheek. Alex’s heart almost exploded right then and there. “. . . a peculiar taste.”

“And you must be tone deaf,” she replied with a chuckle.

The boy’s smile was replaced with a cute but serious frown. “What’s your name?”

The man with the big ears began singing. What came out of his mouth almost made Alex cringe as if she’d just smelt Dad’s toxic armpit odour. That’s when she realized this wasn’t the same singer she had heard before. Alex rounded on the cute boy sitting across from her.

“Who played before this singer?” she asked a little too eagerly.

“You mean, who played before the thief that steals other singers’ songs and butchers their tone, structure and entire melody?” the boy said, his finger tracing the outline of a knot in the wooden table.

Alex nodded hesitantly, sensing a bit of pent up resentment from him.

“That depends. If I answer, will you give me your name?”

“And how do you know I won’t make one up?” Alex replied devilishly. She hoped he didn’t think she was flirting. Because she was certain she didn’t even know how.

The boy’s turquoise eyes lifted from the table and found Alex’s, making her wonder what shade of pink her face would be from blushing.

“Call it faith in a stranger.”

“Very well,” he said when she hadn’t responded. He wet his lips with his tongue. “I’ll begin. My name is Lioden Thyme, anonymous lady, and I just so happen to be the singer. Now,” he cocked his head and smiled at her enchantingly, “might I have your

name?”

Before Alex could respond, Link sat down beside her, nearly shoving her out of her own chair. Her brother put down two bowls of overflowing stew and then wrapped a protective arm around her neck. He proceeded to glare at Lioden. Alex was finding it hard to breathe with all the sudden tension in the room.

Lioden stood up and bowed his head respectfully. “My apologies, I did not know she was spoken for.” And then with one last glance at Alex, he walked away, leaving the aroma of sage and rose petals in his trail.

Alex elbowed Link in the ribs. “Did you have to? Ew, he thinks we’re together. Get off my seat.”

“What did he want?” Link asked, taking back his seat from across the table.

“None of your business,” she replied hastily.

“Need I remind you that we are in a fantasy world you and I created?” He asked in an even tone.

“No, you *needn’t*,” Alex answered, taking her bowl of stew and dunking a slice of bread. “I’m well aware. He was just asking for my opinion on something.”

“Good,” Link said, lifting his head from his stew and sweeping out a hand at the common room. “Because everyone you see here, they are just characters. They don’t exist outside of this world like we do.”



## 10. LINCOLN

The faint moonlight streamed through the gaps of the window blinds, softly touching Alex's untroubled face as she lay in the hospital bed. Her arms rested straight by her sides. The only part of her that moved was her chest. She would have looked healthy if it wasn't for all the tubes sticking out of her, giving her the necessary nutrients and fluids to keep her alive.

Link had been visiting her every night for the past two weeks, and over everything, what wounded him most was her immobility. It was unnatural for him to witness his hyper little sister lying so still. Before the accident, even when Alex was asleep she'd continuously be tossing or turning or throwing her arms about. Some nights Link would even find her sleepwalking, rummaging through jars in the kitchen in a rampage like she was the Cookie Monster.

To Link, witnessing her laying there so motionless just wasn't right. She should have been bouncing around the room, making jokes at other people's expense, using her sarcasm so often you didn't know whether she was being serious or just making fun of you—not in a coma because of her older brother's carelessness.

A female nurse with short, pixie-cut hair and kind blue eyes entered the room, no doubt to do some more physical examinations on Alex or to monitor her hygiene. Alex had recently been moved to a High Dependency Unit. That way they could watch her more vigilantly and give her the constant care she needed.

The nurse smiled at Link courteously and asked how he was as she made her way to Alex's side. It was their duty to do things like brush her teeth, groom her nails, and unfortunately to change her diapers. If the nurse's jobs weren't already hard enough, they also had to reposition Alex every few hours and do motion exercises to keep her muscles from deteriorating. Link tried to help them out as much as he could, but a lot of the times they stubbornly refused and told him, "It's what we get paid to do."

The pixie-haired nurse was combing Alex's blond hair, struggling to break through one of her tangled tresses. When she was done, she grabbed Alex's limp hand and cleaned underneath her fingernails. A tear rolled down Link's cheek as he watched. It was agonizing for him to see her like this, so helpless and vulnerable.

He still hadn't told his little sister yet. Link could never find the right combination of words to say. In fact, he didn't even think

the right combination of words even existed. How do you tell your own sister she is in a coma? But regardless, he knew it wasn't his secret to keep. Sooner or later he'd have to bite the bullet. He just hoped it was later rather than sooner.

At that moment, Nadine walked into the room holding two cups of takeaway coffee and some potato chips tucked underneath her arm. Link couldn't remember the last time he had eaten. For the first time in a long while, he smiled. It felt unnatural, like using a muscle for the first time. "Thanks, babe."

In all his life, Link had never been in the presence of someone as amazingly beautiful as his girlfriend. He would tell anyone who would listen that, and not because he wanted brownie points or because he felt obligated to as her boyfriend. He truly meant it.

Nadine had these piercing, jade green eyes that could level you if she looked your way, a cute little button nose, and wavy hair that cascaded down to the small of her back like a glorious, golden waterfall. But for Link, hearing her speak was the sweetest of all. Her voice was so warming and full of vigour it could bring a smile to his lips on even his worst days.

Nadine wasn't Link's first girlfriend, but he knew she would be his last. Because when he looked at her, he knew, as they say in the rom-coms, she was the "one." He could see his kids having her cute button nose, her fair and flawless skin, her intense eyes—the whole shebang. And Link wanted it all with her: the picketed white fence, the Labrador, the reliable Nissan they used to take their kids to basketball practice and games. (According to him, their kids didn't have a say in what sport they wanted to play.)

"What?" Nadine asked, chuckling. "Have I got something on my face?"

Link had forgotten he was staring at her with a goofy smile, oblivious to her staring straight back at him with her fair eyebrows raised.

"No," he said, "you've got something on your neck, though."

"What?"

"An ugly head."

"Hmm, funny," she said, looking unimpressed. "You know, I have a right mind to pour this coffee all over you."

Link shrugged. "Do it. You paid for it."

"With money out of your wallet," she said, smiling

sheepishly. “What’s yours is mine, right, Honey?”

“Touché.”

Nadine handed him his coffee then sat down on his lap. Link clenched his teeth to stop himself from groaning. His quadriceps muscles were screaming out in agony. For the past week, he had been trying to perfect the Spells that were written on the scrolls. The day before, he had drawn too much of the Eternal Source. So much so that his muscles were sore to the touch and agonizing headaches had been terrorizing him throughout the day.

Link knew it was stupid of him to channel that much of the mystical energy. But it’s what he needed to do for them to survive. In their book, Deonis and Taytora were far more advanced than Link and Alex with their magic. And there was no way Link was going to let them fall behind.

Not everything was looking pear-shaped, though. Alex had finally unlocked her Gates in Nocera. She was so ecstatic when she had accomplished it, sprinting down the Sleeping Willows staircase to tell Link, only to get halfway down before her feet failed her and she toppled down the remainder of the way. Link had warned her to be careful. That even if you don’t cast a Spell, opening your Gateway

uses a tremendous amount of the Source and depletes your strength.

Alex had rubbed the lump on the back of her head and rolled her eyes at him. Telling him how he was just jealous she was going to be a better Mage than him. And sure enough, when Link had awoken from Nocera, the lump on his sister's head was there on her in the real world.

So far Link had been lucky. Besides the slashes to Alex's calf, the lump, and a few cuts and bruises here and there, she had been fine. And further down the track, when she bolstered her knowledge of the Source, she could study the art of Healing and make Link's job substantially easier.

Thankfully, there hadn't been any hiccups in Nocera so far. They were still safe and sound at the Sleeping Willow. And the very next morning, they would buy the horse from Vardis' stables and set off for Iralda. Link just hoped everything went to plan from there onwards.

Nadine nestled her head in the crook of his shoulder and neck. Like always, her hair smelt like pomegranate and mandarin—she had a never-ending supply of the unique conditioner in her bathroom cupboard.

Link yawned.

“Sleepy?” Nadine asked.

“What gave me away?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Our relationship has just developed to the level where I can read your mind.” She lifted her head and found his eyes. “Seriously, though, those bags need to go. When was the last time you had a good night’s rest?”

“Before the crash,” he answered.

*Back to when I wasn’t being shadowed by a mysterious man in an overcoat, he thought.*

Link hadn’t seen the fedora-hatted man since the last time he was in Nocera, almost a week ago. If he ever did find him, though, he had a million and one questions lined up, and Link wouldn’t let him leave his sight until he answered every one of them. Link knew he was behind all of this, or at least knew what was happening to him. How else could he have switched between both worlds like he could?

Link just wished things could have gone back to normal. Before the car crash, before they even wrote the book. It felt like he was drowning in the ocean, trying to swim to a shore that was just a

mirage, and every time he rose for a big gulp of air, he was smashed back under by another crippling wave. When Link closed his eyes at night, he wanted to actually dream. Not be fighting for his life in a parallel universe against bloodthirsty gorlacs and horriks. He wouldn't wish the torture he was going through on even his worst enemies.

“What are you thinking about?” Nadine asked curiously, pecking Link on the cheek. She wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him closer.

“Alex,” he lied.

Nadine chewed the bottom of her lip nervously, looking over at Link's little sister on the bed. Neither of them spoke for a while.

“What do you reckon she's dreaming about?” Nadine asked after a few minutes.

“My bet is Nocera,” Link said.

Nadine raised her button nose at him. “I'll take you up on that bet, sir.”

“Is that so? Well, what's your guess then?”

Nadine smiled at him sheepishly. “It's obvious, isn't it? Shamus.”



“Stop it,” Link said, letting out an involuntary snort of laughter.

“Why are you laughing?” Nadine asked, pinching his nose playfully. “I’m serious. Alex has always had the hots for him. This can’t be news to you?”

Link shook his head at her as he took a sip of his coffee. Shamus was a year younger than him, played running back for their high school football team, and had been known to be a womanizer. He had bad news written all over him. Link knew Nadine was just trying to rile him up.

“No, Shamus wouldn’t dare,” he said.

“Oh yeah? And why’s that?”

“Because he knows I’d kill him.”

Nadine threw her head back and laughed. “You can’t protect her from boys forever, Lincoln.”

“I know,” he said smiling. “But I’ll die trying.”

Nadine tilted her head forwards, resting her forehead on his. They stared deeply into each other’s eyes.

“No, don’t stop,” she said.

“Stop what?”

“Smiling,” she said. “I love it when you smile.”

“Like this?” Link asked through gritted teeth, toying with her.

Nadine clutched his jaw with her hand, squishing his cheeks together. “No, not like that, goofball. You always have to ruin everything.”

She sprung off his lap and headed for Alex’s bedside table. Link liked what Nadine was wearing that night: Skin-tight jeans that complimented her curvy figure, a loose tie-dyed t-shirt, and navy blue Converse shoes on her feet. Her hair was swept across her left shoulder, and he noticed she wasn’t wearing any makeup. Just the way he liked it. No fake eyelashes, foundation, contoured features. Just the pure, raw and unfiltered Nadine.

Tonight was only one of a handful of times he had met up with Nadine since the accident. She had wanted to go out and catch a movie, but Link couldn’t bring himself to leave Alex’s side. Especially not at that point of time in the book. Although they may have seemed safe in Vardis, they could have been attacked by inebriated soldiers, rowdy sellswords, more unknown creatures—the possibilities were endless. Especially in Nocera.

Nadine was flicking through something on the table. Link

assumed it was one of his Mom's gossip magazines. Then he realized all his schoolwork was there. All the schoolwork he hadn't even started. Nadine came from an extremely proud and academic family. So much so that her parents threatened to kick her sister out of the house for getting a B minus . . . her sister was fifteen at the time.

When it came to Link's schoolwork, Nadine had been his major driving force, lashing at his back whenever he slacked off. If it wasn't for her, he wouldn't have been sitting on the grades he was. Nadine's back was to him, but he could almost sense the disappointment on her face.

She sighed, her eyes scanning through the paperwork. "Link, c'mon this is simple. It will take you twenty minutes tops. You know you can't fall behind in math otherwise your GPA will drop substantially."

*GPA, GPA, GPA.* It was all Link had been hearing from his parents these past few weeks, and now his girlfriend had joined the choir.

Nadine took a swig of her coffee and cast him a sympathetic look. "Look, I know it's not my place to say, but I really think you

should come back to school.”

“I’m not ready to go back yet,” he said flatly. “I told you that.”

“But you’ve got that physics paper due in—”

“Are we really doing this?” Link interrupted. “My grades are seriously the last thing on my mind right now.”

“I know that—”

“Just drop it, please,” he said, massaging his eyelids in frustration. “I don’t have the energy to argue with you.”

“Who said anything about arguing?” Nadine asked. “I don’t want to argue. I’m just saying. Do you really think it’s wise to put your life on hold, Link?” She took a mouthful of her coffee then gave a sidelong glance at Alex. “You know she wouldn’t want that.”

“And how the hell would you possibly know what Alex wants?” he shouted.

“I’m only trying to help you,” Nadine whimpered, clearly shocked by his outburst. “How can you not see that? Everyone’s worried. You’re sleeping all day, and when you’re not in your room your here and-and-and . . . .” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Link clenched his jaw so tightly it clicked. “And what? Is it

such a crime to be by my sister's side while she's in a *coma*?"

Nadine looked at him startled. "No, that's not what I'm saying. Y-You're putting words in my mouth."

"Well, what are you saying?" he asked, annoyed.

"I just don't understand why—" she stopped mid-sentence, playing with the ends of her hair like she always did when she was nervous. "I mean, they've got nurses looking after her twenty-four seven and—"

"I don't care about the nurses," he snapped. "I'm her big brother. I need to be here, right by her side. You wouldn't understand."

Nadine wiped her glistening eyes. "I do understand, baby."

"No, you don't," Link snapped. "You honestly have no idea what I'm going through right now."

"Then tell me," Nadine spluttered, "talk to me." She took a shuddering breath, her eyes searching his frantically.

Link hesitated for a moment, contemplating whether he should tell her about what had occurred to him those past few weeks. The words were almost on the way out of his lips when he stopped himself and shook his head. He wasn't in the mood to explain the

whole Nocera situation in depth, and he didn't want her to look at him like he belonged in a mental institution—just like his parents had.

“Forget it,” Link ended up saying.

“You're right, Link,” Nadine yelled, suddenly slamming down her coffee. “I don't know what you're going through because you won't freaking tell me! It's not healthy to bottle everything up.” She walked over and took both of his hands in hers, lowering her voice to a pleading whisper. “Just talk to me, *please*.”

Link pulled his hands away from hers and cleared his throat, caught off guard by her sudden change of tone. “No, it's not that easy.”

“I can't read your mind, Link,” Nadine sobbed.

“I'm not asking you to,” he said.

Link stared at his feet in silence for a few minutes, hoping this argument would somehow die down.

Nadine crouched down so her jade green eyes were level with his. “I love you. You don't have to go through this alone, babe; I'm right by your side.”

Link turned away from her gaze. Because he knew if he were

to look at her any longer, he'd burst into tears himself. But she grabbed the bottom of his chin and nudged it up, forcing him to look at her again. "Hey, I said I love you."

"I love you, too," he said back, and then the tears came out of nowhere. Without even realizing, he was in her arms, his face resting against her chest, sobbing. Like always, Nadine had found a way past his guarded emotions, and everything he had suppressed over the past few weeks poured out of him like open floodgates: The guilt of causing his own sister to be bedridden, the stress of entering his story every time he slept, the resentment he could sense from his parents for what he had done to their daughter. He released everything.

The whole time Link wept Nadine stayed by his side, crying with him, offering him soothing words and holding him close. When the pixie-haired nurse came back in to inform them visiting hours were over, Link had to look at his wristwatch twice, barely believing how fast the time had gone.

"C'mon, Link," Nadine said, running her fingernails through the back of his hair. "You can sleep at my house tonight if you want."

Link rubbed his teary eyes with the collar of his shirt then nodded at her wordlessly. They both headed for the door, but then Link noticed he had forgotten two things: One, the coffee cup he had left on the bedside table; and two, the routine kiss on Alex's forehead he always gave her whenever he left. As he walked over to grab the coffee cup, something caught his attention from outside the window. Link parted the blinds and looked out into the street across from the hospital.

Standing underneath a street light, illuminated by the glow, was the man in the fedora hat: Xavier. His head was cocked up, looking straight in Link's direction. He even had the nerve to give him a wave.

In an instant, Link had pushed past Nadine and headed out the doors. He didn't have time to wait for the elevators so he headed for the stairs, leaping down them three by three. Nadine's voice called out to him as he neared the bottom of the staircase, but there was no way he was stopping. He had tunnel vision for only the man in the fedora hat.

Patients and nurses parted on the ground level when they saw Link sprinting towards them, which he was thankful for, because he



had no intention of braking. Link pushed through the hospital's revolving doors, darting out into the street and toward the direction where he saw the street light. But when he arrived at the spot where the man had been standing, he was gone.

*Has he pulled the same disappearing act he did in Nocera?*

Link wondered.

He spun around, hoping to see him running off in some direction. If only he could have opened the Gates to the Source and enhanced his eyesight, then he would've been able to spot him.

There was a whistle from across the street. Link's head snapped in the direction of the noise. The man called Xavier was standing in an alley fifty yards away, casually resting against the side of a building, puffing on a cigarette. His fedora hat was tilted forwards on an angle, concealing his eyes. Link's heart raced as he slowly approached, putting one foot cautiously in front of the other.

"Took you long enough," the man said, his voice calm and measured. "A basketball prodigy with two left feet. That's a first."

"Who are you?" Link asked, chest heaving, "And why have you been following me?"

Xavier didn't reply. Instead, he just cocked his head back and

blew a puff of smoke into the night sky. He was looking directly ahead at the opposite alley's graffitied brick wall, barely even acknowledging Link's presence.

"Answer me!" Link shouted, clenching his hands into balls.

"Meet me tomorrow, Layla's Café, nine AM," he said. He flicked his cigarette butt into the pavement and ground it out with his heel, then turned his back on Link and said, "And, Hunter, do use those sleeping pills I gave you; you're starting to look like a malnourished zombie."

"What? Hey, where do you think you're going?" Link shouted as the man walked away. "I want answers now! Hey, are you even listening to me?"

Link's anger suddenly got the best of him, and he raced towards him. He reached out to grab Xavier's shoulder, to yank him around to face him, but Link's hand only clutched thin air.

What was supposed to be the man's shoulder had turned into black wisps of smoke, unfurling around Link's fingers like tiny snakes. He couldn't believe his eyes. As he looked down at his hands trying to comprehend what was happening, Xavier's whole body dissolved into the dark smoke. Link watched on in shock as, from

head to toe, the man in the fedora hat blew away with the wind and faded into the night sky.

## 11. LINCOLN

“Would you like something else to go with your coffee?” the waitress asked expectantly, her notepad and stubbed pencil at the ready.

Link looked out through the sun-drenched café window, out into the packed street. Still no sign of him. He drummed his fingernails rhythmically on the table.

“Not just yet, sorry,” he responded. “Still waiting for somebody.”

Her bobbed haircut bounced as she nodded and moved onto the next table.

Link took a deep breath to compose himself. The air was thick with the smell of freshly ground coffee, cooking oil and mouth-watering bacon.

The café was buzzing with activity: Waitresses weaved between tables, skilfully balancing their trays piled with dishes or newly prepared meals. Customers queued up from the counter to the front door, chatting amongst themselves to kill time. Squealing children, throwing a tantrum because their parents had denied them

their favourite cake. After having spent the last few weeks in either his room or Alex's hospital room, being out in public was overwhelming for Link to say the least.

Over the sizzling of the frying pans and the clinks of cutlery, he managed to hear the café's door bells ring as they opened. Link's head picked up in anticipation. But it was just a mother holding her bouncy daughter by the hand.

He glanced at his G Shock wristwatch. Six past ten. *And he was the one that told me not to be late?* He clasped the warm coffee mug with both hands before taking a sip. He didn't get a wink of sleep the night before, which meant he hadn't entered Nocera. Which meant for the past twenty-four hours, and counting, he had been left in the dark. None of his autopilot's memories, visions—nothing. He had never been this nervous, even before one of his basketball games.

Link knew his autopilot and Alex had bought the horse by now and were back on Oakstone Road. He also knew anything could happen on a main road. Especially one leading in and out of a capital city.

He spotted a hangnail and chewed it. When he was done, he

moved on to biting his fingernails. A bad habit he had picked up, courtesy of Alex. But he needed to keep himself distracted or he was liable to go insane. His stomach rumbled. Link figured it must have been the natural laxative in the caffeine kicking in. But his number two would just have to wait. He needed answers.

He wondered how his encounter with the man in the fedora hat would play out. Would he be hostile or would he cooperate and answer all of Link's questions? But if all he wanted to do was talk then why didn't he do it last night? Obviously, he wasn't busy, seeing as he had been stalking Link from outside the hospital.

But the vanishing act was what bugged Link the most. Was this guy even human, or did he just pull off the best disappearing act in magician history? All Link knew was this man, Xavier, had the answers he needed. And if push came to shove, he would wring those answers out of his head if need be.

Closing his eyes, Link sucked in a deep breath, hoping to exterminate the butterflies fluttering about in his stomach. But no matter how many deep breaths he took, he couldn't stop his mind from imagining how his and Xavier's encounter would play out.

“Boy, that traffic was crazy.”

Link's heart nearly leaped out of his chest. He looked up to find the man in the fedora hat settling into the seat across from him. How he had gotten there without him noticing, Link had no clue.

"They were doing roadwork on Interstate 7," he said with a snicker. "Traffic was so congested it probably would have been faster if I walked." He slapped his belly a few times. "Hah, who am I kidding? I wouldn't have walked."

Link stared at the man in stunned disbelief as he placed his fedora hat on the table, twisted in his seat, and then draped his overcoat across the back of his chair. *Maybe he has me mistaken me for another person?* Link barely knew this man, and he was talking to him like he was a close friend or relative. Far different to the way he had spoken to him last night.

"Have you ordered yet?" the man asked, his eyes scanning the laminated menu on the table intently. "Word on the street is they do the best waffles in town here." He looked to be in his mid-twenties. His skin was a sickly pale, and his hair was combed over neatly to the side, blacker than a raven's shadow at midnight.

When he didn't respond, Xavier averted his eyes from the menu and looked directly into his. Link's heart almost leaped out of

his chest and headed for the café door. Never had he seen a pair of eyes so unnaturally ice-blue. It looked like the man was wearing coloured contact lenses. In contrast to his fair skin it made him look freakish.

“Hello, Earth to Hunter?” he said, waving a hand in front of Link’s eyes.

He had lost the ability to talk. Like his brain was struggling to connect with his tongue. “W-w-who are you?” he managed to stutter.

“M-m-my name’s Xavier,” he stammered back, mocking him with a smile. His teeth were as white as his skin.

“Why have you been following me?” Link asked, suddenly finding his voice.

“Straight down to business, hey? I like it.” Xavier rubbed his tummy with a hand. “But can we order first? I could literally eat a figurative horse right now.”

“We can eat afterward,” Link said, clenching his jaw. “Hell, I’ll even pay for your meal if you like.” He reached for his backpack underneath his feet and pulled out the book, slamming it down forcefully on the table. “Right after you tell me what you know about this.”



A few of the customers shot worried glances in their direction, whispering to one another. But Link couldn't care less if he was making a scene.

Xavier looked down at the book with a blank expression and then suddenly hunched over, hooting with laughter. "Oh man, you're still toting that thing around? I thought you would've given up after your encounter with Pam!"

Xavier continued to laugh for several minutes, and every time Link thought he was about to stop, he would start up again even louder. Link scowled at him as he writhed around in his seat, slamming the table in hysterics.

"Kid, I don't know what to tell you, but that book is just a plain old book," Xavier finally said through fits of laughter. "I'm the one who brought Nocera to life."

Link leaned forwards in his chair, suddenly hanging on his every word. "Brought Nocera to life? What do you mean?"

Xavier let out a half-sigh, half-chuckle, wiping a tear of laughter from underneath his eye. "All right, all right, I'm really craving some waffles, so I'll make this quick." He cleared his throat and straightened his tie, his face suddenly serious. "Using a

blueprint, AKA that book, I created the world you and your sister could only imagine and turned it into reality.” He made a rainbow with his hand as he said the last bit.

Link almost spat his mouthful of coffee in Xavier’s face. “So, you’re telling me you’re behind all of this? You’re the reason why every time I go to sleep at night I enter Nocera?”

“Precisely.”

“Is this some sort of joke?”

Xavier leaned back in his chair relaxedly, interlacing his bony fingers. “You’re confused. I get it. It’s perfectly natural.”

Link gazed at him in disbelief, finally concluding either he was on some hard-core drugs, or he’d just escaped from an insane asylum. He got out his seat, slid his backpack over his shoulder, and then drained his cup of coffee in one gulp. “OK, well I’m going to head off now. You’re obviously mentally challenged.”

“Denial is the first stage of acceptance.”

Link clenched his jaw and fought the urge to smack Xavier across his face. “You want to know what I think? I think you’re just some creeper who’s been following me. That’s how you knew my name, that’s how you—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever makes you sleep at night,” Xavier said, grinning. “But then again, you haven’t been getting much sleep at night; have you, Hunter?”

“Enjoy your waffles, weirdo,” Link said, as he headed towards the door.

Just as he was about to reach for the handle, Xavier’s voice rang out. “Not to point holes in your logic, but if I’m just a crackpot, how is it I know about your dreams of Nocera?”

Link stormed back to the table. “You overheard me telling my parents about them in the hospital, that’s how.”

“Nice theory,” Xavier said, casually crossing his legs. “But how does that explain me being physically in Nocera though, hmm?”

“You’re . . .” Link scuffed up his hair, desperately trying to find a plausible explanation. “I don’t know; you’re just a figment of my imagination. That’s why you turned to smoke when I grabbed you.”

But even he knew that couldn’t be true, because how else would Xavier have handed the orange canister to the auburn-haired lady at the pawn store?

Xavier wet his lips with his tongue. “That’s not what you

truly believe, though, is it kid?” He made a tepee with his hands. “Sit down; we still have much to discuss.”

“No!” Link shouted. “No, I don’t want to play your stupid games. I’m over this crap. I want to go back to my normal life. I want Alex to wake up and . . . and when I shut my eyes at night, I want to have normal dreams!”

“Then I’m afraid Alex’s destiny has already been predetermined,” Xavier said, followed by an exaggerated sigh.

Link’s body reacted to the words, and he swiped the salt and pepper shaker off the table with a hand. The customers gasped as the glass shattered against the floor behind him. “You leave my sister alone; you hear me?”

“You’re in no position to be making threats,” Xavier said coolly, as he straightened up his tie. “Now, please,” he gestured towards Link’s seat, “sit.”

Link considered him for a few seconds, sitting there leisurely with that pretentious look on his face. His mind told him to head for the door and never look back, but as crazy as it all sounded, there just seemed to be a hint of truth about what he was saying, however minuscule it was. *How else would he have known about my dreams*

*of Nocera? Link thought. And how else would he have been able to enter Nocera himself?*

Link swallowed his pride, which was as jagged as a razor blade, then took off his backpack and sat once more. The customers had their phones out now, pointed at him and Xavier. Some were taking pictures of their altercation, some were recording. He paid them no mind. He was only intent on finding answers.

“Finished throwing your tantrum, Hunty Wunty?” Xavier asked, tilting his head to the side.

Link maintained eye contact with him but refrained from speaking. In the eighteen years he had lived on this planet, he had never wanted to hit someone so badly before in his life.

“Start talking,” Link demanded through gritted teeth.

Xavier smiled from ear to ear. “Very well. First things first, Alex isn’t in a coma. She’s in a . . . ” his freakish blue eyes were trained on the ceiling in thought, “she’s in a trance. Yes, let’s go with ‘trance.’ She’s in a Xavier-induced trance in which she inhabits the world of Nocera twenty-four seven. And I’m afraid she won’t be waking up anytime soon.”

“Why not?” Link asked, his voice faltering slightly.

“Because to wake your dear sister up from her trance, you must . . . Drumroll . . .” Xavier drummed his index fingers rhythmically on the table. “Finish *The Book of Nocera*.”

Link’s jaw tensed so tightly it felt as if his teeth were about to shatter. “You’re out of your mind.”

“Ah, so you’ve already worked it out? Smart lad. You should really stop doing that by the way,” Xavier said, clicking his teeth together. “Bad for your pearly whites. Could end up giving you lockjaw.” He fiddled with the buttons on his cufflinks. “I’m going to give you some credit and assume by now you’ve already put two and two together. That you and your sister are, in fact, Deonis and Taytora—thank me later for doing that, by the way. I was tempted to decline your access to the Eternal Source, but then I said to myself, I said, Xavier, what fun would that be? They would die before they made it to the second half of the book. And that’s when the story really picks up speed. Oh, did I mention I read your book? Riveting read. Riveting read. Quite a few one-dimensional characters, though, but you made up for it with an enthralling plot. Yessiree.”

Xavier looked around for the waitress expectantly, all the while rubbing his tummy. “I swear they never come when you want

them to. But lo and behold, they'll interrupt us mid-sentence. You watch, now I've said it I've jinxed us." He turned back to Link, his face suddenly serious. "You and Alex were chased by gorlacs at the start of the book, just like your heroes Taytora and Deonis were, correct? Now, help me out here, Hunter, because I'm really drawing a blank, but how does your book end?"

"We can't kill Kilydis," Link hissed. "It's impossible."

Xavier leaned back in his chair triumphantly, a pleasant look covering his hollowed face. "Oh, you can . . . and you will. To wake your beloved sister from her trance, you must do exactly what Taytora and Deonis did to finish the book: Kill the story's big bad antagonist, King Kilydis."

Link could feel his blood boiling underneath his flesh.

Kilydis was a villain in their book that was so monstrously powerful he could win wars just by sitting on his throne. From a distance, he could tap into the minds of his enemies, controlling their thoughts and body. It took Taytora and Deonis at the height of their training to defeat him. And even then, they got lucky. If Xavier meant for them to defeat Kilydis, then he knew they were already destined for failure.

Link shot up from his seat and hurled the wooden table between them on its side. “Why are you doing this? Tell me why?”

“No,” Xavier said, shaking his head like a stubborn toddler.

“*Why?*”

Xavier leaned forward in his chair, his freakish eyes interlocked on Link’s. “Because you’re not ready.”

Link’s fingernails dug into the palm of his hands. “I’m not ready?”

“You’re not ready,” he repeated confidently.

Cold rage rushed through Link, and in an instant, he had closed the distance between them, attempting to throttle Xavier. But just like the night before, his hands clutched thin air, and what was supposed to be his head was now a thick cloud of dark smoke. The wisps slowly came back to reform his slender face.

“Whoopsie,” Xavier said with a crooked smile, “it seems we both lost our heads for a second there.”

“Excuse me, sir! Sir!” another waitress’ voice rang out. Her high heels clonked as she made her way to their table, hips swinging.

“Told you she’d interrupt us mid-conversation,” Xavier said, shaking his head disappointedly.



“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” the waitress said.

“No!” Link shouted defiantly, “No, I’m not leaving until he tells me why he’s doing this!”

The waitress raised her badly plucked eyebrows, a hand on her hip. “Why who’s doing what?”

“Him,” Link snapped, pointing to Xavier.

She looked at the chair opposite him and cocked her head. “Who?” she replied, dumbfounded.

“Oh yeah, kid,” Xavier said, tidying his hair. “I should’ve mentioned this earlier, but uh . . .” He laughed nervously. “You’re the only one who can see me.”

Xavier scooped up his fedora hat and overcoat, a cruel smirk etched upon his lips. “Oh, this is just too much,” he said, cackling as he watched Link’s stunned expression. “No, I couldn’t possibly take another bite. Who needs waffles when I can just indulge in this moment right here? I feel like I need to cleanse my palate just so I can taste this all over again. I mean, look at your face! This is just scrumptious, delectable, an assault on the taste buds!” He started sucking the tips of each of his fingers. “Mmm, if only I could take this moment home in a doggy bag, then I . . .” His voice died away

as his body transformed into smoke and dissipated.

And there Link was, left speechless, standing in between a toppled table and shattered shakers, with the whole café's eyes trained on him—the lunatic who had just been having an argument with himself.

## 12. LINCOLN

Link ran his fingers through the mane of his horse, Wildfire, as it noisily chewed the handful of grass it had just grazed. Looking out ahead, he caught a glimpse of the rising sun as it peered over Iralda's immense southern wall, gently bathing the world in its soft amber glow.

Every hair on his body stood on end, thinking of all the hardships that lay ahead of him and Alex in that bustling city. Since that day in the café, Link had dwelt on Xavier's words almost every waking minute, trying to find a compromise besides killing Kilaydis. But deep down, he knew there wasn't one. If Xavier had created this world and thrown them in the brink of it, then Link knew he and his sister were just ants in an ant farm, completely at his mercy.

Iralda was where Link and Alex's long road to killing Kilaydis had begun. It was where Taytora and Deonis entered the Golden Gauntlet and made their way to the finals. After the tournament, the heroes were drafted into a squadron led by a character they had created named Talox. Link knew he was imperative to the story's plot, a vital key they needed to defeat

Kilaydis.

But before they could even think about the Golden Gauntlet, they would first need to prove their worth to the battle-hardened mages at Baylor's Academy. Undergo their rigorous training schedules, attend all their classes, and devote all of their time and energy into becoming a weapon of magical destruction.

The only advantage they had over Taytora and Deonis was they knew every plot twist of the story, every main character, every city. So Link knew the moment they strayed from what happened in the book, was the moment they'd become goners.

Alex's grey, scrawny horse nudged his way past Wildfire to get some attention. Link stroked his nose gently, causing the horse's eyes to grow heavy. To his displeasure, Alex had named him after the cat they owned back home: Mr Fluffles. The same cat that peed and pooped outside his door and hissed at Link whenever he walked past.

"You like that, don't you, boy?" he asked.

The horse nuzzled his head into Link's chest and whinnied quietly.

*Maybe this particular Mr Fluffles isn't so bad after all, he*

thought.

Link had insisted Alex get a bigger horse when they were at a stable in Vardis, a horse that might be able to carry her to Iralda without collapsing from physical exhaustion. But when Alex had made up her mind, Link knew it was futile to try to tell her otherwise.

The stable owner had said the stallion was on its last legs, so they were doing him a favour by taking the horse from him. But after three days of journeying from Vardis, Link had to beg to differ. Mr Fluffles had twice the endurance as his swollen horse, Wildfire. Always spurring forwards even after a day's worth of traveling, always whinnying and snorting whenever they stopped in one place for too long.

Alex had told Link Mr Fluffles reminded her of one of Grandma's horses back on her ranch in Texas, which she used to visit nearly every year on school holidays. Looking back now, Link wished he had visited the ranch as much as his sister. To him, riding a horse was like trying to stay astride a bucking bull.

As there was no need for horses in Orban's mountainous terrain, it meant Deonis and Taytora had never ridden one before in

their lives. Which meant Link had to acquire the skill on his own. No shortcuts. That thought made him sullen.

Link stomped his way through some thick undergrowth, using the Eternal Source to intensify his sense of smell. He closed his eyes and inhaled, sifting through the hundreds of scents. If he focused hard enough, he could almost taste the fresh minerals in the air. The smell guided him down to the steady stream.

Link's heart raced as he approached her, dreading what he knew he had to tell her now his hand had been forced.

Alex was kneeling over the stream, her back to him. Behind her was one of Taytora's scrolls. It was rolled out in the dirt, and even from there Link could see all the detailed step-by-step illustrations of how to perform the Chain of the Spell she was attempting.

As he got closer, he realized Alex was levitating a giant ball of water, her eyes closed in concentration. The waterskins she was supposed to be filling lay scattered by her side. No surprise really, ever since she'd unlocked her Gate she had been infatuated over manipulating water. Just like the real Taytora, Alex had a close affinity to the elements of wind and water, just as Link had with

Deonis' elements of fire and earth.

“If I were you, I’d take a dip in this stream before we set off today,” Alex said, flicking her hair over her shoulder. “I could smell you from a mile away. What do you want?”

Link leaned his shoulder against the nearest tree and chuckled. She was getting better at branching out her senses.

“Just observing,” he said.

Alex slowly stood up, and the ball of glistening water rose with her. “Well, observe from a distance; you’re ruining my concentration.”

“Make me,” Link said, folding his arms stubbornly.

Alex moved both her hands in semi-circles, and the water shifted as if it were a giant blob of playdough being manipulated in her hands. The ball of water soon turned into a strand, and that strand swirled around her gracefully, like a crystal-clear snake.

Link was so completely infatuated with the beauty and control of her water magic he hadn’t even seen her wrist flick. In the blink of an eye, Alex had used the strand of water as if it were a whip and slapped him in the face. Link took a few steps back, holding his wet and welting cheek.

“Sorry!” she said, both hands over her mouth, “I didn’t think that would work.”

“Is that right?” he said, rubbing his tender jaw. “Two can play that game.”

Link closed his eyes and pushed open his Gate, focusing solely on the earth beneath his boots as his body buzzed. He could sense the faint tremors of small animals in the distance—hares, by the way they were bounding—the weight distribution of Alex’s stance in front of him, even the deep roots of the trees as they spread deeply through the ground like veins.

Link disregarded all this information, and instead focused on what was in front of him. The water Alex hit him with had fallen to the ground and mixed in with the dirt. He solidified his stance and delved deeper into the Source, took two quick steps forward, swept both his arms outwards in an arc, then thrust them both above his head abruptly—the exact Chain the earth scroll in his backpack had shown him.

As he lifted his hands, a small wave of mud rose from the earth like a blanket, smothering Alex from head to toe. The impact of the Spell caused her to fall backwards on her butt. She cursed out



loud as she wiped the sludge out of her eyes with a hand.

“You’re going to pay for that,” she said, spitting out a mouthful of mud.

“Stop,” Link warned her, knowing what was about to come next, “or you’re going to get hurt.”

Alex sprinted at him full pelt, and before Link had time to even think of another Spell, she had tackled him to the ground and climbed on top of him, slapping his face repetitively. He wasn’t used to her being this strong.

“OK, OK,” he shouted, laughing. “You win. Now get off.”

“Not until you admit that your little sister just whooped your butt.”

“Never!” he yelled, tilting his head to avoid one of her erratic slaps.

“OK, then I’m just going to have to slap the words out of you.”

Alex continued her relentless slap barrage until she ran out of energy, then she rolled off Link and they both burst out into laughter. They laid there for quite some time, side by side, covered in mud, watching the clouds of their make-believe world roll over them in the

baby blue sky. The moment was almost too perfect. Making it all the harder for Link to say what he knew needed to be said.

“I have something to tell you,” he finally said after building up the nerve.

Alex rolled over to face him, propping her head on a hand.

“What is it?”

Link’s eyes were tracking a cumulus cloud above, fixed on its movement as it briefly blocked out the sun and dimmed the land of Nocera. “When I tell you, promise you won’t hate me?”

Alex’s sapphire eyes widened. “Tell me, Link; you’re really starting to freak me out.”

His eyes watered so he covered them with the back of his hand. Never in Link’s life had he been faced with anything as hard as this.

“What’s wrong?” Alex asked, placing a hand on her brother’s shoulder and shaking him gently. “Don’t cry. If you cry, I’m going to cry. You know I have no control over my tear ducts.”

Link scrunched his eyes shut, attempting to stop the tears from pouring out, then he sucked in a deep breath and composed himself. “I know why we’re in this world.”

Alex looked at him, puzzled, like when a puppy hears a weird noise and cocks its head to the side. “Is it the same theory you had last time? That the book’s cursed?”

“No, no, not that,” he said. “I just—I just need you to listen, OK?”

“OK,” she echoed softly.

And so, Link told his little sister everything: the car crash, her being in a trance, him being shifted between worlds, Xavier, the physical bridge between Nocera and the real world. He spared no details. At first, Alex didn’t believe him, but after the realization had dawned on her he might be telling the truth, she asked him question after question. Questions like if Mom and Dad were OK, how the accident happened, what the crash had to do in relation to the dreams of Nocera. Link answered them all to the best of his abilities, but the others he assumed only Xavier held the key to unlocking.

After he had finished, Alex sat up with her head in between her legs, cradling her knees with her arms as she sobbed. Link wrapped an arm around her and held her close, trying to find the right combination of words that would give her the most reassurance. After they both had sat in silence for what felt like an eternity, the

best he could conjure up was:

“We’ll be OK, I promise.”

“So right now, I’m in a hospital room, stuck in a trance?” she asked. “And you could either be sleeping or going about your day in the real world?”

Link nodded. “Right now, I’m sleeping. If I wasn’t, though, you’d be dealing with the autopilot version of me.”

“I can’t—” Alex said, massaging her temples frustratingly. “My mind just can’t process all of this information.”

Link pulled her close to him with an arm. She pushed off his chest.

“Do you think we can actually kill him?” she asked, wiping her runny nose with her sleeve. “Kilaydis, I mean?”

“Yes,” Link lied as he cleared his throat. “I . . . I think we can.”

“You’re such a bad liar,” she said, scoffing. “Even I know it’s suicide. But I guess we don’t have a choice, do we?” She stood up abruptly and knuckled the small of her back. “We better get our horses saddled; we’ve got a tournament to win.”

“Don’t do that,” Link said.

“Do what?” she mumbled.

“Pretend like every thing’s OK.”

“I’m fine; I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Alex, stop.”

“At least now we know why we’re trapped here, right?” she said, waving her hands in the air. “Now all we have to do is kill Kilaydis. You remember him? That overpowered villain we created that’s over, like, a hundred years old?”

Link stood up and put both his hands on Alex’s shoulders, waiting until she held his gaze before he spoke. “I pinkie promised I’d get you out of this world, Alex Hunter, and I would rather die than break a pinkie promise; you hear me?”

“Am I interrupting anything?” A voice Link hadn’t heard since the café sounded to his right.

Shoving Alex behind him, Link propelled open his Gates and drew upon the Source. He flicked his wrist and turned towards the voice. A blazing fireball flickering idly in one hand, his steel gripped firmly in the other. Xavier stood across from them with his arms folded, dressed in his usual attire: all grey.

“Easy boy, easy,” Xavier said, hands out in front of him as if

calming down a rabid dog.

“Who is it?” Alex whispered from behind him.

“Xavier,” Link said, his eyes never leaving him.

“Where is he standing?” she asked. “I can’t see him.”

As soon as Link pointed to his whereabouts, Alex scooped up her bow and quiver and nocked an arrow. Before he could tell her it was pointless, she had released her fingers and sent the arrow whizzing through the air. The shot was on target, but Link knew the attack would fly straight through Xavier, just like it had when he had touched him in the alleyway and the café.

That’s why Link was so surprised when he heard a sickening thud, like a dart hitting a waterlogged dartboard. When he looked up, it took his eyes a few seconds to comprehend the scene that was happening in front of him.

Xavier was clutching at his chest as blood oozed from an embedded arrow, staining his grey suit with a dark pool of scarlet. He attempted to yank the arrow out, but at the last moment seemed to think better of it, and instead, dropped his quivering hands to his sides as if to concede defeat. Xavier took one last look at the arrow protruding out of him, let out a wheeze of air, then collapsed

backwards into the earth, motionless.

Link was stuck in both minds. *Should I congratulate Alex or move closer and check to see if he's actually dead?* He did neither. Instead, he just stood there awkwardly, looking at Xavier's body and watching carefully for any signs of life from a distance.

"Did I get him?" Alex asked.

"What do you think?" he answered, his eyes never leaving Xavier's body.

"I can't see him, remember?" Alex said. "All I saw was my arrow hit an invisible wall and then drop."

"Yeah, you hit him," he answered breathlessly.

Link extinguished his fireball as his throat constricted, still not believing any of this was real. Maybe it was only the real world in which objects passed through Xavier? Maybe in Nocera he remained materialized and was susceptible to damage?

"Well, why aren't you celebrating then?" Alex asked, reaching backward in her quiver for another arrow. "Is he still squirming or something? Does he need another arrow?"

Link didn't answer her. His mind was powering ahead. If Xavier was dead, what would that mean for them? Would they wake

up from these dreams of Nocera? Or had Alex just sealed them in this world for eternity?

Link's train of thought was derailed when Xavier began chuckling hysterically. He bounced to his feet with a conniving smile and then jerked the arrow out of his chest as if it were some kid's suction dart, tossing it to the ground carelessly. The arrow had left a hole in his chest and clothes the size of a nickel. But as Link watched, Xavier's flesh had begun to knit itself back together. A minute later it was as if the wound had never existed; the only trace being the pool of blood-soaked fabric.

"So, how was my performance?" Xavier asked promptly. "I always wanted to do a death scene. I know what you're thinking; the wheezing was a bit over the top, but I felt like I had to do something a bit left-field to make myself stand out, you know? Maybe I should have staggered a bit before I dropped to my knees?" He took off his hat and crumpled it in anger. "Damn it. I swear at times I'm my own worst critic."

"How did you—" Link started, but the words eluded him. "What did you—"

"Unbelievable," remarked Xavier, scowling. "I created the



entire land you and your sister conjured up in your spare time, and yet you're amazed a harmless little arrow had no effect on me? Sort out your priorities, Hunter." He glanced down at his suit then punched the air angrily. "Damn it! Tell your brat of a sister she just ruined my ageless ensemble. I'm colour clashing now. Red doesn't go with grey."

Link's body trembled with rage. He was tired of Xavier's incessant blabbering, over his trickery, sick of his avoidance of answering his questions, and even his stupid, pale white hollowed face was starting to make his blood boil.

"Why are you doing this to us?" Link roared, causing Alex to jump beside him. "We deserve some answers at least."

"Link, why are you—" Alex started, but he cut her off with a raised hand.

"Why are we in this world?" Xavier asked, imitating Link's voice surprisingly well. "I want to go back home. Why is this happening to me of all people? Honest to God, kid, you're making my ears bleed."

"Do you get some sick pleasure out of torturing us?" Link asked. "Is that why you're doing this?"

“You call this torture?” Xavier asked, grinning darkly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. “My dear boy, I’m only tickling you with a feather right now.”

“Look at yourself,” Link spat. “You- You’re a monster. If you created this world and can heal yourself like that, then obviously you have more powers. And you- you’re just abusing them when you could be helping people!”

“Hmm, you know what,” Xavier said, massaging his jagged jaw thoughtfully, “I’ve never really thought of it that way, Hunter.” He pressed a cigarette to his lips then nodded slowly. “I tell you what: you’ve really opened my eyes up, kid. I’m going to change my ways from now on, I swear it. No more darkness and despair. I’ll only spread rainbows, sunshine and happiness to those that walk this Earth from now on!”

Link attempted to speak but Xavier talked over the top of him.

“Hold that thought,” he said, patting the outside of his pockets in search of something. “Can you bring that fireball back and give me a light? I seem to have misplaced my lighter.”

Link scowled at him.

“Rude.” Xavier snapped his fingers. An ember emerged from his index finger. He lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply and blew a steady stream of smoke into the air. “You can stop looking now; I found it.”

“Link, what’s going on?” Alex asked. “You can’t just leave me in the dark.”

“I’ll explain later,” he said. “I promise.”

“Enough chit-chat,” Xavier said irritably, flicking his ash into the stream beside them. “We have to get a move on. Got a long ride ahead of us. Well, technically you guys do, because you know, I can fly and teleport around this world when need be.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not bragging either; just stating facts.”

“We’ll leave when we’re ready,” Link said, gripping the handle of his sword tighter. “Not when you tell us to.”

Xavier feigned a look of surprise. “Is that so? Well, I’m not the sharpest tool in the shed, but even I know you guys need to get to Iralda quick-smart. I don’t know if you’ve read the book but at this stage, Taytora and Deonis could do a lot more than make puddles and levitate pebbles. So, let’s go.” He clapped his hands together, and shouted, “*ANDALE, ANDALE! ARRIBA, ARRIBA!*”

“Not until you tell us why you’re doing this,” Link said, planting his feet into the ground defiantly. As much as he wanted to get to Iralda as quickly as possible, he had too much pride to let Xavier dance them around like two puppets. He and Alex would move on their own accord.

Xavier took a long drag of his cigarette, his eyelids half closed in annoyance. “What part of ‘you’re not ready’ don’t you understand?”

“I am ready.”

“Far from it, Hunter.”

Xavier cracked his neck and then took to the air, gliding towards Link and landing only a foot away. Xavier’s head barely came up to his chin. He tilted his head up and blew a puff of smoke in his face. Link scrunched up his eyes, expecting the smell or heat to hit him. Neither did.

“I hope I’m not wrong about you, kid. I really do,” Xavier said, almost solemnly. His ice blue eyes were locked onto Link’s, searching for something, like Xavier could look past his eyes and see into his soul. Link shifted his shoulders uncomfortably.

And then the staring contest stopped. Xavier rolled up his

sleeve and glanced at his silver wristwatch. He looked up at the sky, studying the sun. “Hmm, by the positioning of that blazing fireball up there I’d say it’s about 10.23 AM. We’d better get a move on if we want to reach Iralda before tomorrow night.” Xavier giddily motioned them to follow him. “C’mon guys, I’ll lead the way.”

He flicked his cigarette butt into the stream behind him and whistled a pleasant tune, waltzing past them and heading back in the direction of their campsite. But when he realized neither Link nor Alex were following him, the whistling stopped, and so did he.

“We’re not moving,” Link said. “No matter what.”

“*No matter what?*” Xavier wheeled around to face them, pinching the bridge of his nose in annoyance. “Please tell me I’m not sensing a power struggle here? I hope not. I hate power struggles.” He cleared his throat and then swelled his chest out like a puffer fish. The next time he spoke his voice was as deep as a baritone.

“Thanks, Cheryl. Expect to see some partly cloudy weather over Glayridge today with a low of fourteen degrees. Those Glayridgians just can’t catch a break, can they? On a brighter note, as spring begins to rear its beautiful head, Veridan is set to experience some sunny weather for the first time in months today with a high of

64. Now, over to Iralda. There's some threatening storm clouds formulating from the north, south, west, and east, with some torrential rain and gale force winds expected within the next minute or so. I, for one, would not want to be caught outside without an umbrella. Back to you, Cheryl."

Without so much as an explanation, Xavier shot his arms into the air and tilted his head up at the sky. The world dimmed, and the hairs on the back of Link's neck prickled when he followed Xavier's gaze. Warped storm clouds blanketed out the sun, drifting together more quickly than he had ever seen clouds move. They were combining as one big cumulonimbus formation right above their heads.

Flocks of birds took flight overhead, fleeing as fast as they could from the impending storm. Link looked back down at Xavier, arms outstretched, his eyes full of focus, then back to the darkened sky. His heart almost came to a complete stop when he realized Xavier was the one influencing the weather.

Alex tugged him by the arm. "Please tell me what the heck is going on. Is he the one doing this?"

"I think so." Link wrapped an arm around his little sister's

shoulder, both their eyes fixated on the dense storm clouds forming above them. The sky was flashing neon blue now. Gusts of wind ripped through the woods, snapping twigs and swirling dead leaves in their faces. Alex managed to catch her Spell Scroll just as it was blowing away.

“Let there be rain!” Xavier roared. And as soon as the words had rolled off his tongue, cold rain trickled down from the sky, slowly at first, but after a few minutes, it felt like they were in the heart of a hurricane. Link and Alex darted for shelter underneath a cluster of trees by their campsite, their hoods up and their heads tucked down. All the while Xavier stuck to them both like a parasitic leech, laughing over the sounds of the downpour.

“Neat trick, huh?” Xavier asked while they huddled underneath the bough of the biggest tree they could find. “Guess you were right, kid; I did have more powers up my sleeve.”

Link jammed his hands underneath his armpits and glared at Xavier. Raindrops were falling straight through his body, leaving tiny wisps of black smoke as they hit, sizzling like oil in a hot fry pan.

“Great,” Alex said, blowing a breath of hot air into her

cupped hands. “You just had to piss him off, didn’t you?”

“Me? I’m not the one who fired an arrow at him and ruined his suit,” Link shot back.

“Ruined his suit?” Alex repeated incredulously, her teeth chattering from the cold.

“Guys, guys,” Xavier said, holding his hands up. “Stop the bickering. You should be counting your blessings. At least there isn’t any light—”

Link plugged his fingers into his ears as a loud crack of lightning sounded over his head. Blue flashed as the bolt split the trunk of a nearby tree, sending pieces of bark flying. They both dropped to the ground in panic, hands covering their heads like they were in the middle of a battle zone.

“Guess I spoke too soon,” Xavier said, giggling.



### 13. ALEX

Alex dug her heels into Mr Fluffles' sides and spurred him ahead of Link's slothful horse Wildfire. The scent of mixed herbs and spices filled her nostrils as she cantered past a group of merchants wheeling their wagons. She weaved in and out the clusters of travellers; most of them on foot, some atop horses or mules. There were farm folk carrying their produce, singers plucking the strings of their viols and harps, and dirt-smudged kids chasing one another and giggling.

Alex lifted her gaze to the colossal, ivory stone wall reaching up into the clouds above and felt dizzy. How many years would it have taken to make them? How many frost giants, Earth, and telekinetic mages worked laboriously from dusk till dawn?

*I should have asked Foragoon when I had the chance, she thought dismally.*

Even from a mile away, Alex could see the outline of catapults and archers patrolling the parapets. Besides their sheer size, the main reason Iralda's four walls had been impenetrable for close to a decade was a credit to their archers' unmatched skills with a bow

and arrow.

Iralda's archers were some of the best in the land. Those among them that were Gifted dedicated their lives to studying an ocular branch of magic. Combine this with being handed a bow and arrow as soon as they popped out of the womb, and the very best of them could skewer a hare from a thousand yards away.

“On a scale of one to ten, how nervous are you?” Link asked as he caught up to his sister. He was riding on top of Wildfire, although Alex wouldn't exactly call it “riding.” To her it looked more like “trying not to fall off.”

Before she could respond, her brother threw his head back and paused for a moment, then sneezed out loud. The cold storm Xavier had cast down resulted in him catching a cold. For a whole day they had to travel to Iralda through the nonstop downpour. Their horses trudging through mud so deep it sucked them in like quicksand, having to make numerous detours around flooded paths. Not even being able to make a fire to keep them warm, the rain had gotten so bad Alex had even toyed with the idea of building an ark.

Luckily, Link put his ego aside and gave a five-minute, heartfelt apology to Xavier, eventually persuading him to call off the

storm. They had learned the hard way it wasn't wise to get on Xavier's bad side.

"Pretty nervous," Alex answered, taking off her gloves to show Link her fingernails. She had nibbled them so much they were practically half missing. "About an eleven, I'd say."

Link's throat tightened. "Same."

*Wait a second, no reassuring words, no pep talks? Alex thought. No cheesy lines like, "Don't worry, Alex; we're going to get through this, OK?"*

"Am I speaking to the autopilot Link right now or the real one?" Alex asked over the honeyed voices of the singers behind them, strumming their instruments. The question sounded stranger out loud than in her head.

Link glanced at her warily, as if contemplating whether he should answer or not. "Autopilot."

Alex nibbled her bottom lip. "Man, this is weird."

"Why?" he asked, shifting uneasily in his saddle. "It's still me, Alex."

"No, it's not," she said, shaking her head. "You're not the Link I grew up with."

“I have all the same memories, mannerisms—”

“You’re not Link,” she said, cutting him off. “So—so do us both a favour and just stop pretending to be, OK?”

Alex felt it was all unfair. Unfair she was stuck in Nocera twenty-four-seven while he was out there living his life, getting to see Mom, Dad, his friends. Unfair he got to do the normal things she’d never get to: experience prom, get her driver’s license, go to college. And Alex would never admit this to him because she knew it would’ve crushed him like a wrecking ball to the chest, but a part of her hated the fact he was responsible for the accident.

“What’s wrong, Alex?” Link asked.

“Oh, I don’t know, Auto Link,” she said, her voice oozing with sarcasm. “Maybe because right now, I’m simultaneously in Nocera while also lying in a hospital room in what everyone thinks is a coma but is actually a trance. Or maybe it’s the fact we are being tortured by some mystery, diabolical, wise-cracking God, who’s hell-bent on destroying our lives? Take your pick.”

Link’s face softened. “Alex, you have every right to be angry. But I promise—”

“You missed your cue for reassuring words a while back,

Auto Link,” she snapped. “If you want to impersonate my brother you’ve got to do a better job than this.”

The crowd of people ahead came to a halt in front of two guards clad in leather armour and draped in royal blue cloaks down to their feet, the customary cloaks for all mages in Iralda. As the siblings dogged behind the crowd, Alex could see her brother staring at her in her peripheral vision. She had to give him credit; even though this was autopilot Link, he was acting exactly like her brother would. That scared her. A lot.

The more Alex dwelt on it, the more she figured she should apologize to him. What she said was a little too harsh. Besides, when the real Link came back to Nocera he’d obtain all of Auto Link’s memories, or at least that’s how her brother had explained it. And she didn’t want him to feel any crummier than he already did.

“I’m sorry,” Alex whispered sincerely, slowing her horse down to a trot to match Wildfire. “I shouldn’t be taking this all out on you. It’s Xavier I should be mad at.”

“No, you have every right to be mad at me,” Link said, slouching his shoulders forwards. “I’m the one that caused the accident. Maybe if I hadn’t we wouldn’t be in Nocera right now.”

For the remainder of the short ride to Iralda's bronze gates, not a word was said between them. Alex felt awful. Even though this was Auto Link, he still shared the same memories and emotions her real brother did. She couldn't bring herself to imagine how hard it must have been for him, seeing the whole car crash play out before his eyes. And even in the real world, seeing her lifeless in a hospital room in what everyone presumed to be a coma.

Only Link knew the truth. And he couldn't tell a soul because no one would believe him. Even Alex had thought he was crazy when he first told her what was happening, and she was the one trapped in Nocera with him.

The crowd ahead swarmed one by one into the gates, like grains of sand through an hour glass. As Alex and Link neared, they both dismounted their horses—well, technically, Alex did; Link ended up getting his foot stuck in one of the stirrups.

One guard stood to the right of the gate, tall and taut, his blond hair tied back in a ponytail, hand resting on the pommel of his sword. The other was a burly, dark-skinned man, with a gut so big it could rival their Dad's beer belly. On both of their left arms was an iron armband with Iralda's enamelled emblem: an eagle mid-flight

clutching a crystal orb with its talons. The bird had its beak wide open, and a royal blue spiral flowed out from it, creating the emblem's backdrop.

Alex cast a look down at the trimmings of their cloaks. Both these guards were gold cloaks. There were three rankings of mages in Iralda: copper trimmings for an Apprentice, silver for an Adept, and gold for a Master—one of the highest achievable rankings in the Order of Mist.

The guards had been letting past the travellers with scarcely a look, but as Alex and Link approached, both their heads lifted.

“Stop,” the tall man ordered in a voice as rough as sandpaper, “and whatever you do, do not state your business.” He stepped towards them, cloak flapping at his heels. His sharp, emerald eyes scanned over the pair of them, and then his thin lips curled upward. “Interesting. Interesting indeed.”

The burly man approached now, massaging his whiskers, his coffee-coloured eyes gauging them as well. “Tough one . . . all yours, Valencius.”

“Good. Because I think I have worked it out,” the tall man answered. Valencius repositioned the leather vambrace on his

forearm, almost as if he were preparing for battle.

“Then, by all means.” The dark-skinned man said, rolling out an arm.

“Brother and sister,” Valencius said.

“Obviously,” the burly man spat.

“From . . .” Valencius’ smile deepened as his eyes found the gorlac brooch pinned to Alex’s fur cloak. “. . . From the city of Glayridge.”

She and Link exchanged a glance and then both shook their heads at the guard.

“From a village, then,” Valencius said, unfazed by his error. “Yes, a very cold village judging by your attire.”

Link nodded apprehensively.

Valencius thrust a bony hand out, his palm facing the sky. “Pay up,” he ordered his fellow guard.

The burly man scrunched up his round face in displeasure. “But you haven’t—”

“They both have the Gift,” Valencius said almost as if he were bored. “They are here to seek entry into Baylor’s Academy.”

The burly man turned to them, his brow creased in anger.



“Well, is he right?”

“Yes,” Alex said, unsure of what could have given them away.

The dark-skinned man groaned and fumbled inside of his pouch. He pulled out two gold pieces and then reluctantly handed it to Valencius. “Well, go on then. Tell us how you knew.”

“Look closely,” Valencius said, pocketing the coins and inclining his head towards Link. “There are small scorch marks on this one’s sleeve. Firewielder. An inexperienced one at that.” He pointed to Alex half-heartedly. “And this one has a Waterwielding scroll peeping its head out from her horse’s pouch. Not very discreet.”

Veins throbbed in the burly man's neck. “Uh, Damn you and your hawk-like eyes!”

“Forgive my friend, Kreudo,” Valencius said, shaking his head. “If only he spent half as much time on his ocular skills as he did his drinking. To this day, I am still confused as to how he obtained his gold cloak.”

Kreudo hobbled back to his position by the gates, laughing off the insult.

“Proceed,” Valencius said, gesturing the two forwards with a hand. “And good luck with your training. If you survive long enough to make it to the Golden Gauntlet, perhaps I shall place a bet on the two of you.” He snickered to himself. “Who am I fooling? I *will* place a bet on the two of you. I have a gambling problem.”

Alex and Link laughed at him nervously as they headed through the arched gate and down a long, torch-lit tunnel running the entire length of the wall. The tunnel was manned by an assortment of mages positioned on opposite sides of one another, standing erect and motionless.

“Did we just get Sherlock Holmed?” Alex whispered to Link.

“I think so,” he said, dumbfounded. “And it was *freaking* awesome.”

They walked through the tunnel, passing underneath several spiked portcullis, their tips poking downwards threateningly like stalactites in a cave. The rows of mages watched them intently, making Alex feel violated with their supernatural eyesight.

Most academy students only tapped into the Eternal Source in combat or training, but Alex knew experienced mages such as these were taught to leave their Gates ajar from dusk till dawn. They took

full advantage of their heightened senses, making them super intuitive weapons for Queen Enrah, the ruler of the Kingdom of Mist.

Alex stepped out of the tunnel and back into the sun's vague light, tasting the cold air once more. Her eyes burst open, marvelling at the expansive beauty sprawled out before her eyes. Vardis was miniature in comparison to what she saw here.

The first thing that caught her attention was a mountain rocketing into the clouds like a jagged fang. But upon closer inspection, she realized the mountain wasn't in fact a mountain. It was an enormous castle, rising steadily higher and higher until it reached its pointed peak; Queen Enrah's Keep, or as the city folk referred to it: Dragon's Tooth.

Surrounding the mountain, shrouded in mist, lay valleys and hills that swarmed with domes, towers, barracks, bridges, and granaries. All their architecture bathed in white, blue and grey colours. When the buildings came to a stop, the villages started, spreading out towards the city walls. Even from where they stood, smoke could be seen rising from huts, with tanning racks outside, stables filled with mares and stallions, and corn, wheat and barley

fields stretched for miles on end.

“We are the architects, Alex,” Link said, taking in a breath of fresh air and gazing out at their city wide-eyed. “Everything you see here, we created. Xavier may have brought it to life but—” He snapped his head towards Alex. “Wait; are you crying?”

“No,” she mumbled, rubbing her eyes. “There’s an eyelash in my eye, that’s all.”

Link laughed through his nose. “But you’re crying out of both them?”

“Shut up,” she hissed, “I’m allowed to tear up. It’s like when a mother looks at her baby for the first time. No one laughs at her, do they?”

“Valid point,” he said, suppressing a grin.

Baylor’s was positioned at the northernmost side of Iralda. As the architects, Alex and Link knew there were four flagstone roads that led from each of Iralda’s walls. These roads came together to form a crossroad in the heart of the city. And there, directly in the middle of the crossroad, surrounded by a circular moat that looked more like a giant lake, was Queen Enrah’s Keep.

The two looked at each other wide-eyed as they followed the

throng of travellers that had preceded them. On either side of them, plains of tall brown grass stretched out for miles on end, swaying in the gentle breeze like ripples in a pond. Their horses' hooves clonked against the stone pathway as they leaned out of their saddles and gazed at their surroundings with mouths open. By the time they had made it past the sleepy hamlets and golden-green corn fields that lay on the outskirts of the city, Alex's thighs were cramping and her bum was pulsating with pain.

In front of their horses, gangs of children trampled over wildflowers and leaped across rocks as they chased one another, their wooden sticks cracking together when they met. Link cursed at them and told them to get out of the way, but when he wasn't looking, Alex handed them some dried meat she had brought from Vardis. They snatched it eagerly and sped off in the opposite direction.

A tremendous six-legged beast caught Alex's attention in the distance. It was as big as an army tank, and had woolly, lemon-coloured hair all over. The beast had warm doe eyes and a pair of horns on its head that were shaped like boomerangs.

"Look, Link, *look, look, look,*" she said, pointing to the powerful creature that was now grazing on a patch of dead grass.

“An infirta.”

Infirtas were used for hauling heavy items like timber or stones, transporting mass goods from city to city, or even carrying squadrons of soldiers to battle. But due to their gentle and unintelligent behaviour, they were as useful on a battlefield as a blunted sword. They were the epitome of a gentle giant.

The infirta turned its boulder-sized head as Alex passed, its blank brown eyes tracking her, mouth moving sideways as its square teeth chewed the grass. It pawed at the ground, thumped its beaver-like tail on the ground twice, flared its nostrils, and then stomped away in search of a new grazing ground.

The siblings cantered past streams, fiery red from the reflection of the setting sun, through verdant green woods, and wheat fields that reached Alex’s hips, until finally, they approached the outer regions of the inner city.

Pale white and blue buildings multiplied and grew taller as they veered off the main road and weaved through the city’s cobbled and winding streets. Men and women wore dirt-stained and ragged dresses, tunics and leggings. Some of the wealthier wore doublets lined with jewels and silk gowns that rippled in the breeze like

liquid.

They passed a long line of market stalls where men and women packed away skewers of meat, fresh vegetables and shiny goods. The mouth-watering smells of spices, marinades, and delicate pastries wafted through the air as they cantered by. Puppeteers were bagging away their puppets for the day and deconstructing their stands. A juggler with a pointed goatee seemed to be able to influence the balls he was hurling, making some drop fast and the others freeze in mid-air.

Cheat, she thought. He must be using magic.

Alex had a wide grin as she passed them all. She had to remind herself to come back during the daytime. Partly because she knew her stomach would end up resenting her if she didn't. And partly because she'd kick herself if she missed out on experiencing this literally out-of-this-world culture.

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Mr Fluffles' big brown eyes watched Alex intently, his oversized teeth noisily chewing the handful of oats she had just given him. She

looked around at his straw-covered dwelling. It was half the size of her room back in Phoenix.

*How can a full-grown horse be expected to live here?* she wondered.

The academy forbade live animals to dwell in their compounds, or for that matter, any non-Gifted. So, as much as it pained Alex, she was going to have to part ways with her noble steed.

Alex knew it wasn't all bad, though. They had chosen the closest stable to Baylor's Academy. So, if she ever got time off her training, Fluffles would only ever be a short walk away. But still, to her, leaving him was pure agony. She was even starting to like him more than the real Mr Fluffles back home.

Kissing Fluffles softly on his white spotted nose, Alex offered him her last apple. He chewed it gratefully, his watchful eyes never leaving hers. The mammal couldn't understand a word she spoke. But he didn't have to. Her body language was loud and clear. The horse somehow knew she was leaving.

Link tugged Alex away by the arm. Mr Fluffles whinnied out loud, flaring his nostrils and whipping his head from side to side,



almost as if he knew this may be the last time he'd see her for a long while.

"I'm sorry Mr Fluffles," Alex called out, trying to wriggle out of brother's grasp. "I'll be back soon! I-I'll miss you; make sure to—" Link jerked her by the arm harder. "Make lots of friends! Mommy loves you."

*Man, I really do suck at goodbyes.*

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The afternoon sun hung low in the cloudless sky as Alex and Link got their first look at their new school. The academy had the same oval-like structure as the Colosseum, with an enormous grey statue twice the size of Lady Liberty standing stoutly in the centre. Wavy hair fell to the statue's shoulders, and both of its hands rested on the pommel of a greatsword it had stuck into the earth.

Alex assumed the statue was the founder of the academy, Kilaydis' father Baylor, as it depicted the same fair and narrow features their species, the Dagorians, tended to possess. Baylor, unlike his two sons that succeeded him, was one of the good guys.

On top of building the academy, Baylor showed the land that being granted access to the Eternal Source wasn't in fact a curse, it was a gift. That magic shouldn't be feared or even hidden, but instead tamed and allowed to flourish.

Gazing out at the academy, Alex's stomach lurched as she thought about what would be expected from them the next few months: non-stop training barked at them by the master mages, mental and physical demands they'd be expected to meet, and bruises and cuts their bodies would endure. If Taytora and Deonis struggled through their time here, Alex suspected they were going to flounder like fish on dry land.

A dreadful thought crossed her mind as she gawked at the mountainous statue: When she and Link had written the book, they had fast-forwarded their characters' time at Baylor's Academy and even most of the Golden Gauntlet. So, what she and her brother were about to walk into now was completely unscripted. Her breathing quickened when she thought about that. Behind the academy's doors was the unknown. The unpredictable, unimaginable unknown.

As the pair moved closer and closer to the massive structure, something outside the entrance Alex had first thought was a statue

moved. That was when she looked again and realized it was alive.

A ten-foot creature, half the size of Foragoon and clad in silver plate armour from head to toe guarded the entrance. In its left hand, the creature carried a rectangular shield; in its right, it held a spear so long and sharp it could have skewered Alex and Link like satay meat. The strange sight triggered something inside of Alex, and her body became rigid.

“Nope,” she said to Link. “I can’t do this. Nope.”

Her brother whirled around, the motion causing his cloak to flap across his body. “Can’t what?”

Alex shook her head at him vigorously, causing her hair to flick her in the eyes. “Do this. I’ve tried to put on a brave face, but this is it. I can’t put another foot forwards . . . I won’t.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“T-This!” she spluttered, hands gesturing towards the academy. “Look at that humongous guard, Link. I have no memory of that being in our book. Behind that creature—Behind that door is-is God-knows-what! This is the part where we time skip in our book.”

“*Really?*” Link asked, looking at her in utter disbelief as he

stormed towards her. “You’re deciding to get cold feet right now? Right as we’re about to enter the academy?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Alex said sarcastically, “would you have preferred I flipped out back at the Sleeping Willow? The stable, maybe?”

“Yes!” Link yelled, throwing his hands out to the side. “Yes, any time would be better than right now. Right as we’re about to walk into the academy.”

She squinted at him in annoyance, trying to find a good analogy that would best explain her thought process. “Haven’t you ever heard of people freezing up when they’re about to jump out of a plane? Baylor Academy is that plane right now.”

“Right,” Link said, stepping behind her and grabbing her shoulders. “And when someone freezes up sometimes all they need is a little push.” He shoved her forwards, but she dug both her heels into the ground.

“No, don’t!” Alex pleaded. “We can’t do this.”

“Yes, we ca-an,” he sang annoyingly.

“No, we can’t! We’re not Taytora and Deonis.”

Link stopped pushing and sighed in defeat. “Really? You’re

still having doubts about your abilities? Look what we've accomplished so far, Alex. We've unlocked our Gates, even taught ourselves to use elemental magic. All in a month. All without any training. Imagine what we could be capable of when we're actually taught by Baylor's seasoned mages."

"OK, let's just say by some miracle we do survive our training here," Alex said. "We make the cut into the Golden Gauntlet; both enter to final and get selected into the squadron as our characters did . . . . Who's to say we can actually defeat K ilaydis?"

"You're looking too deeply into this," he said, clamping his jaw.

"No, I'm just being realistic and looking at the big picture," she retorted.

Link combed his fringe back over his head with his fingers. "Well, we have no other choice. It's the only way to get you out of your—" He paused for a moment, as if the word was a bitter taste in his mouth. "Trance."

Alex chewed the bottom of her lip. "Maybe I'll just be trapped in here for eternity then."

Without warning, Link groaned and then kicked up a pile of

dirt in anger. With his back to her, he looked out upon the city they had spent all day traveling through, hands on his hips.

*Did I say something wrong?* Alex worried.

After a few minutes, Link's anger seemed to have subsided. When he spoke, his voice had a quiver in it.

“Every day I see you in that hospital room, a part of me dies, Alex. Wasting away little by little, so disconnected from the world around you. And knowing I'm responsible for it all . . . .” Link held a hand to his face, massaging his eyelids. He took a composing breath and then turned to face her. “If killing Kilydis is the only chance I have of saving you, even if that chance is one in a million, I'm going to take it. Can you understand that?” Link pursed his lips, his golden eyes wet with tears that hadn't fallen. “I'd give anything to see my bubbly little sister bouncing around in the real world again.” He paused awkwardly and then cleared his throat. “So, are you coming or am I going to have to carry you over my shoulder?”

Alex offered him a gloved hand, a big smile spreading across her face. “No need. We'll jump out of this plane together.”

## 14. ALEX

As they both cautiously approached the oversized guard, Alex's legs trembled like a plate of jelly on top of a washing machine. She craned her head up at the creature like she used to when looking at Foragoon. Through the dark slits of the creature's helm, two moss-coloured eyes peered down at her. Two human eyes.

The guard's full suit of armour clunked and clamoured as it shuffled to the side, revealing a dark, stone wall, carved from top to bottom with intricate symbols. Directly in the middle of the wall was a circle with two layers. The innermost layer contained a sunken hand imprint.

"Place your hand on the wall and tap into the Source," a woman's tired, deep voice rumbled. Alex's eyes sprung open in surprise. She was not expecting the guard to be a lady. But now that Alex looked closer, she could see strands of frizzy, mud-coloured hair creeping out the bottom of her helm.

Alex nudged Link with her elbow as if to say "you go," but he barely moved an inch. So, she shoved him a second time, harder. He got the hint. Link walked nervously towards the wall. He took off

his glove and placed a shaky palm on the imprint which looked wide enough to fit a giant's hand.

After a few nerve-wracking seconds, Link's hand emanated a golden colour with flecks of crimson. The light pulsated for a few seconds and then spread outwards, slowly filling the wall's slender symbols with its radiant energy. Once the light reached the second layer of the circle, the layer rotated clockwise around Link's hand, until it finally came to a stop.

He quickly drew his hand back, startled, as the wall began to part in the middle, eventually revealing a small flight of stone steps leading to a double door embellished with carvings.

Link walked through the parted wall, stumbling slightly as he gawked at his surroundings, then he turned to Alex and motioned her forwards with a hand. Just as she was about to follow him, the shaft of the guard's spear came down abruptly and blocked her path.

“Wouldn't do that if I were you,” she warned.

“Why?” Alex asked.

On the other side of the wall, Link looked on in confusion.

“He parted the wall, so only he can pass,” she explained. “If you tried to follow . . . well, let's just say it wouldn't end nicely for



you. Years of nasty enchantments placed by Rhygma himself.”

Alex’s body instantly froze up upon hearing the name.

Rhygma—Kilaydis’ former younger brother. The greatest enchanter in Nocera that had ever lived. The first one to have ventured into the Spiritrealm. Who knew what kind of hidden dangers lay sealed behind this wall? Alex took a few wary steps backward.

The guard lifted the spear that had been pressing against Alex’s chest. Judging by her moss-coloured eyes, she seemed pleased by her sudden fear. “I once witnessed thousands of ice shards, flying out of the entrance like a flock of birds, stick a man all over.” The guard shook her head as if to relive the terrible memory. “Messy stuff.”

Upon hearing her story, Alex took one more step back, just as an added precaution. Both sides of the wall closed in, grating against the stone floor. On the other end of the entrance, Link yelled out her name, his voice heavy with panic. The last thing Alex seen before the wall closed was him running towards her.

The guard chuckled. “Bit dramatic that one.”

“He means well,” Alex said, smiling. “He just has separation anxiety.”

There was an awkward silence until the guard cleared her throat and resumed her neutral position: shoulders back, head straight, and her shield and spear tucked close to her sides.

“Place your hand on the wall and open your Gates,” the guard repeated in a tone that made Alex think she’d repeated it a million times.

She did as Link had and took off the glove on her right hand; she then approached the wall with the sealed enchantments behind it. She extended her arm up towards the imprint and then felt her face go hot with embarrassment when she realized she couldn’t reach it. Alex tried standing on her tippy toes, jumping up and down, but it was no use. *Damn my shortness!*

The guard stared directly ahead, oblivious to her struggles.

“Uh, excuse me,” Alex said, chewing on her lower lip. “I can’t seem to reach the, umm...”

“Oh right,” the guard said, suddenly springing out of her erect position. She placed her weapons down, dropped to her knees, and then gently lifted Alex up by the hips. Even though she was trying to be gentle, Alex could feel the guard’s gauntlets jutting into the bottom of her ribs.

“Thank you,” Alex said, as she reached towards the imprint.

“You’re very welcome,” she said. “Don’t feel embarrassed, you wouldn’t believe how often this happens.”

Alex reached out for the cold stone and scrunched her eyes shut, searching for the Gate she had opened so many times before. When she jarred the entrance open, she was surprised to find her hand glowing a lime green colour with swirls of bright yellow. Then, just like Link’s energy did, it spread outwards and filled the symbols like new buds in springtime.

When the outer circle rotated, unlocked, and the wall parted open, the guard lowered her down and resumed her position by the wall. Alex waved her goodbye then walked through the entrance. She was met by a flustered Link.

“Are you OK?” he asked, holding either side of her cheeks like a worried mother. “What happened?”

“I was only gone for a few minutes, Link. Calm down.”

“You’re right; you’re right. Sorry.” He dropped his hands and then let out a deep sigh of relief. “So, what was the colour of your Mark?”

“My Mark?”

Link looked at her as if her head was hollow. “Yes, your Mark. You know, the colour of your Spirit? When you opened the wall.”

It all made sense to her then. *That was why Link had different colours when the symbols lit up.* In their book, other than Elemental, one of the most fundamental branches of magic to learn was a branch called Spiritwielding. It was where the wielder would directly utilize their spirit, converting it into energy and using it for offensive or defensive purposes. Just like no two faces were alike, every Gifted had a unique assortment of colours, called a Mark, to represent their spirit.

“Well?” Link asked. “What were they?”

A big smile spread across Alex’s face when the realization came to her. “The same coloured Mark Taytora had in the book.”

Link shoved her shoulder playfully, “See? What did I tell you? We are Taytora and Deonis. We may not be as good looking, but we’ve got all their freakish, God-like abilities. They’re just buried somewhere deep, deep down inside of us.” He smiled at her goofily. She couldn’t help but smile back. “We’ve got this in the bag, Alex. They might as well throw us both in the finals right now.”

“Whoa, whoa,” she said, holding her hands up. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. This is a marathon, not a sprint.”

“It was a joke; lighten up.” He turned around and eyed the new set of doors in front of them. “Ready for your first day of school?”

Alex readjusted her bow slung around her shoulders. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Alex followed Link as he leaped up the stone steps two by two until they were facing a carved door bound by golden hinges. He reached out for the polished brass knocker, rapped it three times, then he fidgeted with the gorlac brooch on his cloak as they both waited in silence.

After a few seconds, Alex could hear the door being unfastened from the other side, and then they swung outwards to reveal two gold cloaks and a furnished, marbled hall with numerous archways leading from it.

“Proceed to the desk,” a dusty-haired guard said, beckoning them forwards with a gracious smile.

On the left and right sides of the hall were enormous tapestries bursting with colour. Looking closely, Alex realized they

depicted tellings of some famous battles. There were fireballs blazing through the air, giants swinging their clubs and horses being charged into a wall of spears.

Alex was so infatuated over the artwork, she didn't even realize Link had abandoned her and was standing by the large desk at the end of the hall. She quickly power-walked towards him, her eyes still studying all the magical warfare as she passed.

"If you would be so kind as to follow me," a timid, mousy-faced man behind the desk said when Alex had finally caught up to Link. They followed him wordlessly through one of the archways and up a winding staircase, only stopping when they reached another set of doors. The man knocked twice, waited for the approval of the person on the other side, herded them through the door and then disappeared.

In the chamber, behind a cluttered desk full of scrolls and tablets, sat a plump, pompous little man by the name of Hilsbry. He informed Alex and Link, in between sips of wine from his goblet, that he dealt with all the new students at Baylor and that here they honed the mind before the weapon, so he would be signing the two of them up for literacy lessons right away.

Alex told Hilsbry they could already read and write, but he wasn't convinced, saying he was a cunning fox who could not be so easily deceived. To prove her point, Alex had to physically get up, walk across the chamber to one of the many bookcases he had, and start reading one of them. Hilsbry spat a mouthful of wine all over his white doublet before Alex could even finish the first paragraph.

After it became apparent to Hilsbry how capable they were at reading and writing, he lead them out of his chamber and back down the flight of stairs, followed by some heavy oak doors bound by golden hinges.

The three of them stepped out into an immense arena buzzing with activity. Alex noticed the field was segregated into different sectors, just like spokes on a wheel. And each of those sections was filled with different surroundings. There was a sector covered with wild trees and grass taller than her head, another full of sand and rocky terrain, one spotted with blazing torches and straw dummies, and then one sector that was a giant lake with stone columns peeping out of the water.

Directly in the middle of the arena was the statue of Baylor, reaching up into the twilight sky, looking bigger than Alex ever

could have imagined. And all throughout the expansive area were hundreds of students sparring with one another, and mages conducting lessons, even though it was nearly dark.

“You will be staying at the bottom levels of the sword,” Hilsbry said as they walked briskly across one of the paved pathways that segregated each sector.

“The sword?” Link asked, spinning around as he gaped at the different scenery.

“Yes, the sword,” Hilsbry answered, annoyed.

They passed by a huddle of students all dressed in blue surcoats, each wearing a different mix of armour. In the middle of the cluster was an old man with five straw dummies surrounding him. Silver hair was swept behind his head, and he wore a royal blue cloak with white trimmings. Alex had never seen those coloured trimmings before. She wondered if they were allocated to the master mages of the academy.

The group of students suddenly retreated backward, and her jaw nearly dropped to the ground in shock. The silver-haired man was now covered head to toe in a dark purple and blue Mark, the energy flickering all over his body like tongues of flames.



In the blink of an eye, five tentacle-like arms lashed out from the man's aura, beheading all the straw dummies simultaneously. The tentacles retracted back to the mage and then his energy faded away as quick as it came.

The crowd of students burst into applause, wolf whistling and cheering in approval at their mage's technique. Alex felt like clapping herself until Link tugged her forwards and told her to keep up. But she didn't care if she was holding up Hilsbry and her brother. She knew she had just witnessed her first display of Spiritwielding.

To Alex's surprise, when they walked closer to the statue of Baylor, she realized it wasn't a statue at all; it was a gigantic, stone castle. Now that she looked up, she could see hundreds of chamber windows lit by flickering candles, and students pouring in and out of doors that were positioned at the arches of its two feet and the tip of the sword sticking into the ground.

Hilsbry guided them to the sword's entrance and up a spiralling staircase that seemed to never end. He finally stopped on the seventeenth floor and bent over, frantically trying to suck in air like a goldfish out of its bowl. Alex found it amusing considering she had barely broken a sweat. That might have had something to do

with the fact she had inherited Taytora's stamina, though.

"This is your stop, Taytora," Hilsbry said through huffs and puffs. "Your chamber is down that corridor, third right."

"What about Lin—" Alex cleared her throat. "Deonis?"

"Your brother is on the twenty-third level," he answered crudely, his face slowly turning from a bright red to a light pink as he got his breath back. "Boys and girls have separate dwellings here."

Alex stared at Hilsbry in disbelief; suddenly, she felt physically ill. He couldn't be serious, could he? Link was the only person keeping her sane. *If he were to leave me*— she felt like curling up like a child right then and there.

"You should be thankful I even managed to fit you both in," Hilsbry continued, wiping away beads of sweat from his forehead. "It is July, three months out from the Golden Gauntlet. Baylor's is always near full capacity this time of the year." He wrinkled his nose as two tall boys passed by, laughing and pushing one another. "Yes, this place is practically writhing with children trying to get their grubby little hands on some prize money." He cleared his throat and then forced a smile. "No offense, of course," he added on.

"There has to be something you can do," Alex said, panic

now creeping into her voice.

“I am afraid not,” Hilsbry said, placing a pudgy little hand on her shoulder and trying to look sympathetic. “Would that I could. Would that I could. Now, a few guidelines before I depart. Here at Baylor’s, all our students are regarded as equals. Whether you are a lord, a singer, a farm boy, a beggar—your status prior to entering this academy is irrelevant. As for magic, you will be permitted to wield it in classes only; any Spells used outside of that and I will see to it myself that Mereen gives you a good kick on the way out of the academy.”

“Mereen?” Link asked before Alex could.

Hilsbry rolled his eyes. “You could not have missed her. That vile, half-giant that intimidates all the drunks and beggars away from the academy. Rather dim-witted creatures, giants; nevertheless, put a few stones in their hands, and they can build you a city wall.” He giggled at his own joke, looking rather pleased with himself.

“I happen to like giants,” Alex said, squinting at him in annoyance.

Hilsbry exaggerated a chuckle. “My dear girl, if you ever happened to cross one, I daresay you would not be singing the same

song.”

The blood pounded in Alex’s ears as she tried to contain her rage. “I have met one. And if it weren't for him, Deonis and I wouldn’t be standing here right now. He fought off three horriks and—”

“Quite the imagination,” Hilsbry interrupted curtly. “Now back to important matters. As both your reading and writing skills are surprisingly beyond average, I have skipped the literacy lessons and enrolled you straight into the fundamental classes. You start tomorrow.” He reached into the pocket of his wine-stained doublet and handed Alex a folded piece of paper. “Your timetable. Do not lose it. The books for all your classes are already awaiting you in your chamber. I suggest you begin reading them immediately. Here at Baylor’s we like to hone the mind—”

“Before we hone the sword,” Alex finished with a teasing smile.

To her pleasure, Hilsbry glared at her, looking as if he had just downed a shot of alcohol. “Yes. Well then, we best be off, Deonis.”

He gazed up at the staircase apprehensively which continued

to spiral upwards and out of sight. “On second thought, my good lad, you don’t think you could find your own way to your chamber, do you?”

“I think I could manage,” Link answered, clearly annoyed.

Hilsbry sighed in relief, then handed Link his own timetable. “Hailsi have mercy. I am really getting too old for this. Twenty-third level, Deonis, eighth door on the right.” And with that, he waddled back down the staircase.

Link looked at Alex anxiously, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. Unlike Hilsbry’s, his was a caring and heartfelt gesture. “Relax. Just breathe. After what we’ve been through this past month, sleeping six floors away from one another will be a walk in the park.”

“Almost forgot,” Hilsbry said, panting frantically as he reappeared from the staircase. “Dinner will be ready in the Great Hall shortly.”

Link’s fingers tightened on Alex’s shoulder upon hearing the voice, leading her to believe he disliked Hilsbry just as much as she did. “And where exactly is the Great Hall?”

“Baylor’s belly, ironically,” Hilsbry said with a sheepish grin

before disappearing.

After the two had said their temporary goodbyes, Alex lumbered to her chamber and put away her weapons and belongings before dinner. The first thing she realized was she was all alone.

A fireplace crackled at the far end of the room and two straw beds and two desks pressed up against either side of the grey stone walls. Mountains of clothes and belongings layered the left side of the room. As Alex looked closer, she was confident she could see the silhouette of a rat nibbling on something under the bed. But that wasn't the worst thing. Among the dirty clothes on the ground, there was a chamber pot filled to the brim with what she presumed to be pee. She turned her head away in disgust.

*Great. Looks like I have a slob for a roommate.*

Alex walked over to her side of the chamber, shrugged off her cloak, bow and quiver, then sprawled herself across the bed, stretching her cramped muscles. After camping out in the wilderness and sleeping on jagged stones and thorny bushes, this bed felt as if she were on a giant cloud.

She nestled her head into her pillow. If her belly wasn't rumbling so loudly, she might have even been tempted to have a

little nap.

“Comfy?” A voice whispered from across the room.

Alex immediately shot up and snapped her head towards the noise. A scrawny girl stepped out from a shadow in the corner, eyeing her suspiciously. Her head was tilted to the side, her dark, tangled hair flowing all the way down to her knees.

“Hello, you must be my roommate,” Alex said politely, trying to hide the fear in her voice.

“Roommate?” the girl asked, tilting her head on even more of an angle. “What is that?” She had a strong lisp, sounding like a snake hissing when she spoke her S’s and T’s.

“Never mind,” Alex said, getting out of her bed and approaching her. She danced around the cluttered objects on her side of the room, feeling as if she was walking through a minefield. She extended her hand out to shake the stranger’s. “My name’s Taytora; what’s yours?”

“You talk funny,” the girl hissed, retreating into the shadows. “Weird tongue. Stay away.”

Alex pulled back her hand, realizing approaching her wasn’t such a good idea.

*Is my American accent startling her? And here I thought I was doing a good job at masking it.*

“Why aren’t you in the Great Hall?” Alex asked, trying to spark up a conversation. “Won’t uh, won’t dinner be ready soon?”

The girl giggled wickedly, which gave Alex goose bumps all over, and then pressed a cylinder-like object to her lips. At first, she thought it was a flute. But then there was a sharp “tha” sound, followed by a shriek. Alex looked down to find a needle skewered through the rat that had been under her bed moments ago. That’s when she realized the girl was holding a blow dart.

“Who cares?” the girl asked, re-emerging from the shadows and holding up the dead rat by the tail. “Got food already.”

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“I’m telling you, Link, she’s got screws loose,” Alex said, as they walked up the staircase she presumed to be positioned in Baylor’s left thigh. “You know what she reminds me of? That girl out of ‘The Grudge.’ That’s who I’m rooming with, Link—the frigging girl out of ‘The Grudge.’”



Link scuffed up his hair as he studied the timetable in his hands. “You think you have it bad? I’m sharing a chamber with a fourteen-year-old boy that won’t shut up. Just keeps going on about how he’s the only Gifted in his family.”

“At least he talks,” she countered. “This girl just dwells in the shadows, watching my every move. This must be Hilsbry’s sick way of getting revenge—rooming me up with her. That pretentious little—”

“Enough,” Link said, holding up a silencing hand.

They continued to follow the masses of students as they climbed the last flight of stairs. As they reached the top, the floor plateaued out into an enormous hall, twice the size of the one they walked into when they had first entered Baylor’s. The hall was filled with six rows of varnished, wooden tables, crowded with hundreds of students squabbling over the food laid before them like a flock of seagulls at the beach.

Alex’s mouth was practically drooling at the variety of meats she could see on offer: goose, ox, venison, duck, hare, boar. Then she spotted wheels of rich cheeses and fresh batches of thick bread.

*This is just like Thanksgiving all over again,* Alex thought.

Just as she was about to head towards a table with a couple of free chairs, Link mumbled to himself.

“You can’t do this . . . Because it’s unfair and you know it.”

Alex frowned at him, wondering just who in the heck he was talking to.

Link pursed his lips, looking like he was about to lose his cool at any moment. “You’ve caused enough havoc already; you can’t interfere with the plot . . . Why? Because you can’t just change the story around whenever it suits you . . . No . . . No, I refuse to play your stupid games anymore.”

That’s when she realized he must have been talking to Xavier. Her hands formed into fists. “What did he say?”

Link scratched a spot above his forehead as he tried to act natural. “Nothing. Just Xavier being his usual pesky self.”

Alex whacked him on the arm. “Link, what did he say?”

“He said . . .” He let out a sigh, rubbing the spot where she had just hit him. “He said he has created a character in the academy—a character so strong he could take out the entire competition without even breaking a sweat.”

Alex’s heart almost came to a complete stop. “What? He

can't do that, can he?"

Link's eyes darted from student to student, almost as if he was beginning to weigh up the competition. "Apparently, he can. His world, his rules—or so he put it."

Alex chewed on the inside of her gums. Never in her life had she felt as powerless as she did then. If Xavier could just create characters out of thin air and change the whole structure of their story whenever he felt like it, then just how were they supposed to finish the book and defeat Kilaydis?

*As if we didn't have enough problems already,* Alex thought.

"Who's the character?" Alex asked her brother, her voice almost breaking.

"He's not telling," Link said. "All he gave me was a riddle: 'If unmasking Xavier's character is all you seek, unravel the serpent before things get bleak.'"

Alex turned to him, her eyes narrowed. "That's it?"

"That's it," he echoed.

She eyed off the students, repeating the riddle in her head until she knew it off by heart. She tried to look for the most threatening student—the character a diabolical psychopath would be

the most inclined to create. But something told her it wouldn't be as easy as picking one out of the crowd. Over three hundred students and they had to narrow it down to just one?

*The first day of school is always the worst.*

## 15. LINCOLN

Dad mixed his mashed potatoes and peas with his fork, looking like a child uninterested in his food. He was on his sixth bottle of light beer and it wasn't even seven o'clock yet—Link knew alcohol was his way of coping. Mom was sitting opposite him, taking delicate bites off the edge of her fork, not even so much as sparing him a glance.

And there Link was in the middle of the table, trying to find an engaging topic in a hope to spark some conversation. But he had already asked them both how work was, and the only exciting thing he did that day was watch a documentary on the '95-'96 Chicago Bulls, so all the usual topics were run dry. Besides, he could never seem to get more than a sentence out of them both anyway.

“Salt,” Dad mumbled, never taking his eyes off his plate. Mom reached out for the salt shaker and wordlessly slid it across the table. She resumed nibbling at her food like a guinea pig. The silence that ensued was agonizing. A piercing sound louder to Link than any gorlac's shrieking.

“So, your Mom and I have been talking,” Dad announced to

no one in particular. Then his eyes drifted over to his son as if expecting a response.

“About?” Link asked, sawing off a chunk of the medium-rare steak and chewing it.

Dad and Mom exchanged a quick glance. Mom nodded slowly.

“We both have agreed that it’s time you return to school this week,” Mom said timidly, as if she was expecting a hostile reaction.

“All right,” Link said, shovelling another piece of meat into his mouth.

“That’s it?” Dad asked, bewildered. “Not going to put up a fight?”

Link put down his knife and fork and then dabbed his mouth with a napkin. “What’s the use?”

“Lincoln,” Mom said, sighing, “we just want the bes—”

“You know what’s funny?” he asked, crumpling his napkin and throwing it on the table. “I think that conversation right there is the most you guys have spoken to me in the past month.”

“That’s not true,” Mom said dismissively.

“Isn’t it?”

Dad stirred in his seat, his gaze drifting to his son. “You know full well your Mom and I have been extremely busy at work.”

Link leaned against the backrest of his chair and returned the intensity of his father’s gaze. “So busy you’ve resorted to treating your son as if he were a ghost?”

“A ghost?” Mom rubbed her forehead with the heel of her palm. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Ever since the accident you’ve been treating me—”

“We are grieving parents,” Dad snarled. “How would you have us react? All chirpy like the Brady Bunch family? Our daughter—” He paused, took in a deep breath, and then took a mouthful of beer. “Your sister is in a hospital room right now, fighting for her life.”

“You don’t think I’m aware of that?” Link snapped. “You think that’s news to me? I’m the one who caused it. W-Why would I need a reminder of that, Dad?”

All of a sudden the room was filled with an all-too-familiar silence. It was almost as if the mere mention of Alex or her condition was taboo to them.

*The way they’re acting is as if she’s already dead, Link*

thought.

He slammed his hands down on the table, causing all the cutlery to bounce. “Tell me I stuffed up!” he demanded, shooting out of his chair. “I want to hear you both say it. ‘I wasn’t looking, I pulled out of the intersection, I’m the reason she’s in the hospital room right now.’ *Tell me I stuffed up.*”

Dad stood up now, his eyes blazing. “Watch your tone.”

“I want you both to admit it,” he spluttered, ignoring Dad and turning to Mom. “I can’t deal with th-this silence anymore. *I can’t.*”

“This was an accident, Lincoln,” Mom said. “We’re not going to blame you for something that’s out of your control. What you’re feeling right now is remorse, guilt—and it’s completely normal.”

Dad rested his hands on the back of his chair and softened his expression. “All of us are grieving, Lincoln,” he whispered, almost as if he was trying Mom’s approach of lowering his voice. “Your Mother and I are both back at work, trying to take our mind off things. That’s why we thought it would be best to get you back in school, back to basketball—”

“It’s not that easy,” Link interrupted.



“Why, Lincoln?” Dad suddenly boomed, dropping the good cop act. “Why isn’t it that easy? What about your potential scholarships? Not showing up to school, practice, missing that many games. This is your senior year; you need to be showing these scouts what you’re made of. Not lazing about napping all day.”

“We understand what you’re going through, honey,” Mom chimed in compassionately, “but we think it’s imperative you at least try and put this aside and focus on your future—as hard as it may be.”

Link rubbed his jaw, grinning at them in disbelief. “So, that’s what this is all about? My basketball scholarship?”

“Don’t twist our words,” Dad said seething. “This is about what’s best for you. We’ve always wanted what’s best for you. This scholarship will pave the way for your education and—”

“Don’t give me that,” he said. “You don’t give a damn about my education.”

“Excuse me?” Dad asked, his bushy eyebrows knitting together.

“Don’t you think it’s kind of sad, Dad?” Link asked, scoffing. “You trying to live your childhood dream through me? It’s not my

fault you couldn't make it big.”

Mom looked at him up and down tentatively as if she didn't even recognize her own son. “What has gotten into you?”

Link clamped his jaw, trying to suppress all the emotions swimming up to the surface. He was embarrassed. Embarrassed for lashing out at his parents. Embarrassed for what he had done to his sister. So embarrassed with himself it was a struggle to look at his reflection for any longer than five seconds.

Link turned his back on them and walked towards the staircase.

“Lincoln where are you going?” Dad shouted. “This conversation is nowhere near . . . .”

His voice trailed off as Link stepped into his room and locked the door. He almost did a complete 180 when he spotted Xavier sitting in a roller chair across the room. The man in the fedora hat was certainly making himself at home. Xavier's legs were crossed relaxedly, and he was wearing his signature crooked smile, grey overcoat and fedora hat.

Link was tempted to throw something at him, but he was confident he knew what the outcome would be. So instead, he

walked across his room and started sifting through his drawers, paying Xavier no mind. If he had learned anything those past few days, it was that it was best to treat him like a fly on the wall.

“Wow, that was heavy,” Xavier said, attempting to look sympathetic. “I overheard the whole thing. Want to talk about it, kid?”

. . . An annoying fly Link just wanted to douse in several cans’ worth of insect spray.

Xavier raised the brim of his fedora hat and cast Link a long, calculated look with his abnormal, ice-cold eyes. “Hmm, judging by your recent behaviour I’d say there’s definitely an underlying problem. But. What. Can. It. Be?”

Xavier rubbed his jaw, studying him like a psychologist would a patient. “Help me out here, Hunter; let’s both try to shed some light on this. Work out what forces are powering these sudden whirlwinds of emotions that, one by one, are slowly wiping out your loved ones . . . .”

Xavier continued to prattle on as Link slammed shut a drawer and started fishing through the next one, trying to think of anything but his annoying voice.

“Is it the resentment you feel being projected by your parents?” Xavier asked teasingly. “Or perhaps the emotional turmoil you’re experiencing being responsible for the car crash?”

Link didn’t answer either of his questions, but after a few seconds, Xavier giggled knowingly. “Oh wait, I’ve got it! It’s my riddle, isn’t it? It’s doing your head in. I would give you a hint and help you out; but you see, according to you, I’m just a monster who abuses his powers when he should be helping people.”

Finally, Link found the little orange canister he was looking for, but his heart sank when he shook it and realized there were no pills left. He groaned and pegged the canister across the room.

“I’m out; get me some new ones, Doc,” he said as he collapsed into the bed and stretched out his limbs.

Xavier scoffed in reply. “What do I look like? Your drug dealer?”

“Well, a fair few mobsters were drug dealers back in the 1920s; weren’t they?” Link said, feigning a look of deep thought.

Xavier straightened his tie and smiled crookedly, seeming pleased Link was finally talking to him again. Link had been giving him the cold shoulder ever since Xavier had given him the riddle.

“This, my friend, is not a mobster get-up,” Xavier said, “I’ll have you know this attire was all the rage back then.”

“So were bell bottoms in the seventies,” Link said, “but you don’t see anybody wearing them now.”

Xavier exaggerated a hearty laugh that lasted for several minutes, wiping away an imaginary tear underneath his eyes when he had finished. “Oh man, I haven’t laughed like that in a while . . . Good looking and witty; you’re the ultimate package. Nadine’s got herself a keeper. Oh, and FYI, that canister was filled with multivitamins, not sleeping tablets.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Don’t get mad at me,” Xavier said, taken back. “I’m just looking out for your health. I noticed you hadn’t been eating the recommended two servings of fruit a day so I took matters into my own hands.” He smiled at Link cheekily. “Your skin has been glowing ever since.”

“Just what’s your deal?” Link blurted out, rolling on his side to face him. “Because I’m really racking my brain trying to figure this out. Just what exactly do you get out of torturing me?”

Xavier sucked air through his teeth. “There you go again,

throwing around that T-word. How is this torture? We're having a nice civil conversation with one another."

"Yes, but you see, this weird thing keeps happening to me. Every time I fall asleep—"

"Oh, wait, don't tell me," Xavier said excitedly, straightening up in the chair. "You keep entering the fantasy land you and your sister created?"

"Good guess," Link said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Now tell me why you're doing this. And if you say 'you're not ready' I swear to God I will—" He breathed out through his nostrils, trying to contain the rage.

Xavier smiled to himself knowingly. "Careful, Hunter. Curiosity is a dangerous thing. I heard it killed a cat once."

"And I heard ambiguity killed a dog."

Xavier pretended to look taken aback. "Are you calling me a dog?"

"If the shoe fits."

Xavier stretched out a leg and then looked down at his foot, creasing his brow in thought. "What size is the shoe in question? I'm a nine myself."

Link reached for his iPod on the bedside table and then rolled over to his opposite side, concluding that talking to him was pointless. He jammed the headphones in his ears and clicked play on a new album he had downloaded. But two minutes into the song, an annoying voice spoke over the track.

“Psst. Whatchu listening to?” Xavier whispered.

“Really?” Link moaned, smothering his face with a pillow.

“You’re even in my headphones now?”

Link thought back to all of Xavier’s abilities—the ones he knew of, at least. He could disappear at will, conjure entire fantasy worlds and throw them right in the brink of them, create embers from his fingertips, transmit his voice through Link’s headphones. He seemed to have a never-ending list of tricks and gimmicks.

“What exactly are you?” Link asked, casting him a wary glance. “Are you a... Are you a demon or something?”

Xavier held a hand up to his mouth. “Well, I never.”

“Answer.”

“No, I am not a demon,” Xavier said. “I’m much, much, much more powerful.”

“Lucifer?” Link asked, feeling stupid.

“I promise you, Hunter, the only time I possess a pitchfork is when I’m doing my gardening,” Xavier said, snickering. “You humans and your ideologies.”

“What are you then?” Link asked, grating his teeth together. He was getting sick and tired of Xavier never answering his questions directly.

“Y. N. R.,” Xavier said.

“What’s that?”

“An abbreviation.”

“For?”

“I’m not allowed to say. I don’t want to anger you.”

*You’re not ready.* Link closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath, trying desperately to stop his chest from heaving. *I’ll give him one thing; he certainly knows how to wind me up.*

“Why,” Link groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Enlighten me, please. *Why* are you allowing me to be in this world as well as Nocera? *Why* not put me in a trance with Alex? Just give me something—anything—to go on. And if you tell me I’m not ready one more time, I swear to—”

“Because you intrigue me, kid,” Xavier said, plucking a



cigarette out of its packet and jamming it in his mouth. “Does that answer your question?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Xavier shrugged. “Can’t say I didn’t try.” He wheeled the roller chair over to the foot of Link’s bed, his face suddenly full of intrigue. “Do you *really* think you can save her, Hunter? Wake your dear sister up from her trance?”

It was hard for Link to determine if Xavier was genuinely interested in his response, or if he was just trying to stir him up. So, Link decided it was best to tread lightly as to avoid falling into one of his traps.

“You’re asking me a question now?” he said casually.

“Maybe it’s my turn to be ambiguous.”

“Just answer the question, smart Alec,” Xavier said, lighting his cigarette. “It’s my job to be sassy and quick-witted, not yours.”

“No, I don’t,” Link said grimly.

Xavier cast Link a disappointed look, took a puff and then exhaled the smoke through his nose. “How very unfortunate.”

“I don’t think I can save her . . . I know I can,” Link said, meeting his freakish eyes. “And I know that’s exactly what you want

to hear, because you're twisted. You want me to fight back, resist, make things interesting. But I don't care; I'll give you what you want. But I'll tell you one thing, and you better listen up closely: No matter what you throw at me, or what obstacles you put in my way, I will bring my sister back to this world. Mark my words."

"Is that so?" Xavier asked, pretending to look impressed.

Link nodded. "Put a thousand Kilydises in front of me and I'd kill them all for Alex."

"That's the spirit, kid." Xavier blew a stream of smoke out the corner of his mouth and gave Link what appeared to be a genuine smile.

"Now if you'll excuse me," Link said, fluffing up his pillow and wriggling himself underneath the blanket, "I think I'm running late for my first class at the academy. Oh, and I have this rather annoying riddle that needs solving."

"That you do," Xavier said, smiling admirably. "That you do."

## 16. ALEX

The centre of the Great Hall bustled with hungry and rowdy students, shouldering one another to try and get the crispiest pieces of bacon, pouring their goblets to the brim using pitchers of milk, and fighting one another to attain the freshest baked bread. Alex and her brother had distanced themselves from the anarchy, and instead sat in the corner of the hall, right underneath a wall of brightly woven cloths.

Alex rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, then leaned across the table and skewered a few pieces of fatty bacon with her fork. The movement was pure agony considering every muscle in her back ached from her swordplay class the day before. It had been two weeks since her first day at the academy. And in those two weeks, the pain had never once taken a day off.

For six days a week Baylor students were expected to be up before the sun, training, reading, and writing for ten hours until that same sun set. To say the first few days were a shock to Alex's system would be an understatement. Mundane movements such as reaching for a goblet or putting on her boots had become

excruciating tests of willpower. But slowly and surely, Alex was beginning to get adjusted to the rigorous routine of a Baylor's Academy student.

Hilsbry had assigned her and Link to the five basic classes for beginner students: Swordplay, Elemental magic, archery, Horsemanship, and Spiritwielding. After a fortnight's worth of training, Alex was turning heads in water and wind magic in her Elemental classes, was keeping up with the best of them in archery, being called the horse whisperer in her Horsemanship class, and was holding her own in her Basic Swordplay class.

If only it was the same for her Spiritwielding. Alex had spent hours upon hours scouring through the Academy's library, reading all the books and scrolls she could find on the subject. She had mastered the theory of Spiritwielding, but the practicality was as elusive to her as the highest score on the Donkey Kong machine at her local arcade which she had been trying to obtain for years.

The biggest shock to Alex was she came from a technologically superior world, which put her at a disadvantage from the get-go. No toothbrushes meant she had to brush her teeth with a raggedy old cloth every morning and night. No porcelain toilets

meant she had to squat over a feral hole with a smell so pungent it could burn her nostril hairs. No hair products meant that birds were literally trying to nest in her wild mane.

On top of that, public hygiene was practically non-existent. It wasn't uncommon for Nocereans to only bathe once a month. Three hundred sweaty, dirt-covered students all huddled together in one castle—Alex had never smelt such vile odours, even when she had walked into the toilet after Link had finished a number-two.

And then there was the stairs. Alex wished she and her brother could go back in time and invent elevators for Nocera. Her legs were so painful to the touch that a gentle breeze could have rolled through and caused her to howl in agony.

But the worst part for Alex was that all these things were an everyday reminder of how out of place she was in this world. As much as she tried to hide it from Link, she thought about home almost every waking minute of the day: If Mom was watching episodes of Law and Order without her; if Dad had got his old Dodge Challenger up and running yet; if the real Mr Fluffles missed his Mummy; even if anyone at school cared about what had happened to her. The flat-out training was a welcome distraction, but as intense as

it was, nothing could ever keep Alex's mind off home.

“Unravel the serpent,” Link mumbled as he massaged his stubble. “*Unravel the serpent.*”

Link had been trying to dissect this riddle ever since Xavier had given it, but so far to no avail. Alex threw some more bacon in her mouth, watching Link nearly yank out his hair in frustration trying to solve it for the millionth time. She had to admit it was pretty entertaining.

“Unravel could mean to untangle, to untwist, to pull apart . . . .” Link's eyebrows furrowed. “Or it could mean to solve, or perhaps decipher. But as for the serpent part, that's extremely vague. It could be the character's appearance he's talking about, their mannerisms, maybe even their Spells.”

“Spells?” Alex asked with a crammed mouthful of bacon.

Link suppressed a smile. “Yes, chipmunk. Spells. Like, I don't know, the character could be a Shifter and transform themselves into a giant two-headed snake or something.”

She almost regurgitated her bacon upon that thought. Shifting was a branch of magic where the user drank the blood of a creature before battle. Then, infusing the Eternal Source with the

aforementioned blood, they could then transform themselves into that exact creature. *An oh-so-twisted branch of magic that only Link's mind could have conjured up.*

“Quite the imagination,” Alex said as she tried her best to imitate Hilsbry’s belittling voice.

Link pursed his lips then ate the remainder of his food in silence, with not so much as a faint chuckle at her impersonation. Alex could tell the riddle was getting to him. She had been trying her best to lighten up the mood, but she felt as if he was making it impossible.

“Get any reading done last night?” Link asked after a few minutes, clearly trying to change the subject.

“Look at these bags,” Alex said, pointing to the bottom of her eyelids. “Look at them. I can’t sleep with Miss Creepy lurking about now, can I? I’ve already read *The Fundamentals of Swordplay* and *Broadbeck’s Book of Basic Branches* twice.” She paused for a moment in thought. “No, wait, actually three times!”

“OK, OK,” Link said, looking genuinely afraid. “Sorry I asked.”

“I hate *Basic Branches*,” someone whispered from beside

them. Alex turned to the noise.

A chubby boy with oak coloured eyes was sitting two chairs away from her. He had muddy hair that was wavier than noodles, pasty skin, and a patch of freckles surrounded his bulbous nose. She wondered if he had he been listening to their conversation the entire time. The boy raised his head; when he realized Alex and Link had heard him, he seemed to sink lower into his chair.

For a few minutes, there was nothing but a drawn out uncomfortable silence. Alex broke it by asking him what his name was.

The boy scratched his head as if the question had stumped him. “Uh, Winstell,” he whispered to himself. It didn’t take Alex long to realize he wasn’t strong on eye contact.

*And I thought I was shy?*

“Pleasure to meet you, Winstell; this is my brother Deonis,” Alex said gesturing across the table to Link. “And my name is—”

“I know your names,” Winstell murmured, his eyes fixed firmly on his feet. “You’re both in nearly all of my classes.”

Alex desperately tried to recall this boy in her memory—wavy hair, pasty face—but no matter how hard she tried



she couldn't seem to remember him. She felt utterly horrible.

Usually she was the kid no one remembered.

“Uh, last lesson in Spiritwielding, I lost control Channelling and almost blew off my arm,” Winstell said glumly, almost as if he was trying to jog their memories.

“Oh,” Link exclaimed, grinning stupidly. “I remember you now. You certainly made the academy's Healers earn their gold that day.”

Alex glared at her brother. His grin quickly faded.

“Sorry for disturbing you,” Winstell said, fidgeting with the sleeve of his doublet. “You can, uh—” He cleared his throat. “Carry on with your conversation if you like.”

“Why do you hate the *Book of Basic Branches*?” Alex asked Winstell, pretending as if she hadn't heard him.

Winstell's eyes briefly met hers as if to verify the question was intended for him, then they quickly fell back to his feet.

“Because Broadbeck tends to drift off-topic nearly every chapter. If he were to, uh, be more specific, I believe the book would be half the size.”

“Agreed,” Alex said. “And the students here would have half

the headaches trying to read it.”

A hint of a smile played on Winstell’s lips. He attempted to shovel a spoonful of porridge in his mouth, but his elbow had knocked the table before the airplane could land. The cutlery hit the floor with a sharp clank. Winstell leaned over in his chair to pick the spoon up, his face pink with embarrassment. As he bent downward, a button from the bottom of his doublet popped off, exposing his snow-white belly.

“Holy cow, he’s enormous,” Link exclaimed.

Thinking he was talking about Winstell, Alex almost lunged across the table and smacked her brother in the face. But then she realized Link’s back was turned, and his gaze was fixed on a behemoth of a man who had just walked through the doors of the great hall.

The man had an unkempt ginger beard and walked with his shoulders pinched back. Upon closer examination, Alex concluded his biceps were bigger than her head. Link was right, the man was enormous.

“That’s Daedrox,” Winstell said as he tucked the bottom of his doublet hastily into his pants. “He’s one of the favourites to take

home the prize.”

Alex knew by *the prize*, Winstell was referring to the polished Golden Gauntlet embedded with a Summoning Shard the champion of the tournament would receive. But looking at the size of Daedrox’s hands and forearms, if he won, they’d have to do some drastic resizing.

“There’s no way he can be a student,” Link remarked as he gawked at the man.

“Uh, he, uh, he is,” Winstell said apprehensively, his eyes darting back and forth between Alex and Link. “Believe it or not, Daedrox is only seventeen. That being said, uh, you do know there are no age restrictions at Baylor’s?”

Alex and her brother exchanged puzzled glances.

“Some students discover they’re Gifted early,” Winstell continued. “Whereas some, they uh, they take a bit more time.” He inclined his head to a shaggy-haired man with a stubbled jaw, his mouth crammed full of oats. The man had to be in his mid-twenties, yet he was wearing the same royal blue surcoats that Baylor’s students wore.

“Late bloomers,” Alex mumbled to herself, looking around

the Great Hall at all the other students. Some she had assumed were just kids her age with young faces, others she thought had just developed early. But now Winstell had mentioned it, it was as if the fog had been cleared.

Alex could now see students that looked like they were ten- or even eight-year-olds. Students that seemed like they'd be better suited teaching instead of learning among them.

*This is insane, she thought. How can we be expected to compete against fully grown adults and children who look like they belong in kindergarten?*

Alex looked over at Daedrox, gorging on an entire chicken carcass in one hand and a wheel of cheese as big as a plate in the other. Towering over his fellow students even when he was sitting down and they were standing.

“But Daydress—or whatever his name is—looks like he’s thirty or something,” Link said to Winstell, matching Alex’s bewildered expression.

“Uh, his name is Daedrox,” Winstell corrected. “Some say he’s a half-giant. I uh, I’m not convinced myself. He specializes in Earth and Telekinesis magic. They say he discovered he was Gifted

at an early age, but has been training in secret to take out the ultimate prize.” Winstell fiddled with one of his buttons. “Some people do that. Worth a lot of money, the, uh, the, uh, Golden Gauntlet.”

Alex didn't know what surprised her more: this enormous killing machine they called Daedrox, or how much knowledge Winstell had just spontaneously blurted out.

Alex glanced over at Link to find the lines of his face pressed together in thought. From his expression, she knew exactly what he was thinking: Winstell's knowledge of the students could help them track down Xavier's character.

Alex thought about snapping at Link. *Manipulating someone for his own personal gains? How dare he?* But then she thought about their predicament: Trapped inside a fantasy world they had created, in the middle of an epic war between East and West. Death was literally around every corner. So, she left Link to his own devices. Besides, her brother may have intended to use Winstell, but Alex was actually enjoying his company. She saw a bit of herself in him, minus the crippling shyness.

Winstell reached across the table and plucked a lumpy, charcoal coloured egg from a platter. He sliced the peculiar-looking

food in half, took three almond-shaped seeds from the middle, and then took a spoonful from one of the halves. The food's interior was bright pink and had a creamy texture.

“What is that?” Alex asked.

Winstell looked at her suspiciously as he swallowed his mouthful. “You've, uh, you've never tried one before?”

Alex shook her head, feeling silly.

“Karabanes, a, uh, a fruit native to the Kingdom of Meadows.” Winstell offered her his remaining half. “All yours.”

Alex studied the Karabane in her hand, feeling its rough and bumpy exterior. She scooped half a spoonful of the creamy substance, held it before her nose and then took a sniff. The fruit smelled of sour cream and citrus. She extended her tongue hesitantly, ready to retract it back if her taste buds picked up anything gag-inducing.

Winstell watched her eagerly as she took her first taste. The substance was overpoweringly tangy but at the same time had a creamy taste and consistency. Alex's mind was already thinking of all the cakes and tarts that could be made with the Karabane. She also suspected the fruit would go well on toast. A great alternative to

marmalade.

“Tastes amazing,” Alex said, taking a bigger spoonful this time.

Winstell smiled at her sheepishly.

“So, Winstell, are there any other favourites to win the tournament?” Link asked conversationally.

Winstell grinned at her brother despite the fact Link had pronounced his name wrong. His eyes began to eagerly scan the clustered tables surrounding him. “Athuros,” he said, directing his head towards a tiny boy in the opposite corner with his back pressed against the stone wall.

The boy seemed no older than ten, with brilliant blue eyes and curly brown hair that reached his ears. His introverted body language and the fact he was sitting alone suggested he wasn’t much of a social butterfly. But this kid looked about as harmless as a beagle puppy in a pet shop window.

*Maybe I’m looking at the wrong student?*

“Don’t uh, don’t let his small stature fool you,” Winstell remarked, as if he could tell what Alex was thinking. “He comes from a long line of renowned Shifters. It’s said he can transform

himself into one of those, uh, uh, what are they called? Ah, yes, those wretched Velekais. I've heard of students being able to shift their body parts before, an arm or a leg maybe, but to be able to shift his whole body at such a young age. . . ” Winstell shook his head from side to side as if the mere thought scared him.

“Who else?” Link asked a little too eagerly. Winstell didn't seem to mind one bit. He grinned shyly and pointed across the hall to a limber, dark-skinned girl with luscious hair rippling down her back in ringlets. She had a coffee-coloured birthmark on her neck the shape of a crescent.

“Zudane',” Winstell whispered almost dreamily.

On the other side of the hall, the girl Zudane' seemed to be in the middle of entertaining a group of students with the reenactment of a battle. She stood on top of a chair as she performed wild gestures. At one point, she seemed to be a grizzly bear gnawing on someone's arm, then the next she was wielding her spoon like a sword, slashing the air with wild strikes.

*If this performance is anything to go by, I may have found my next charades partner,* Alex thought.

“The greatest Spiritwielder to have ever attended Baylor's,”



Winstell boasted as if he had something to do with it. “Uh, and that’s not speculation either, that’s a fact . . . and the way she uses a longsword, it’s as if the steel is actually, like uh, like, like—what’s the expression?” Winstell trailed off and then looked down at his feet in thought.

“An extension of her arm?” Alex suggested.

“Yes,” Winstell exclaimed, his neck jiggling as he nodded, “an extension.” His big, oak-coloured eyes continued to watch Zudane’ intently. The same look Alex had seen Link give to Nadine. Winstell was love-struck.

“How do you know all this if you’re in the core classes with us?” Link asked Winstell. “I mean, if these students were favourites wouldn’t most of them be in advanced classes?”

Winstell finally averted his eyes from Zudane’ then beamed proudly, as if he had expected this question to come up eventually. “My father is the Coinskeeper for the tournament. He always tries to get inside information from me before the Gauntlet, but uh, obviously it’s against the rules.” Winstell chuckled feebly, then leaned in without making any eye contact and whispered, “Between you and me, though, he has paid spies everywhere.”

“Coinskeeper?” Alex blurted, scooping some more of the zesty Karabane fruit onto her spoon. *Who would’ve thought I’d be so confused by my own book?*

“Yes, uh, I should explain, should I not?” Winstell said. “My father runs the gambling business for the entire tournament. It’s his establishment’s job to gauge the students’ abilities and adjust their betting odds accordingly. Uh, if he gets them wrong, his establishment loses money, you see.”

Alex made a mental note the next time she was around Winstell she needed to have a quill and paper at the ready. Her mind was practically overheating trying to process all the knowledge he had just dropped.

“So, any others?” Link asked rudely.

Winstell pressed a goblet of milk to his lips, swallowed, and then looked across the hall with envious eyes. “Lioden.”

Alex almost spat out her mouthful of Karabane upon hearing his name. For some reason, she couldn’t look up; like her body was chucking a tantrum and ignoring the signals her brain was trying to send it. *Stop overreacting Alex. Maybe Lioden is a common name in Nocera, like Matthew, James, or Adam is in our world.*

“Hey, look, Taytora,” Link said, chuckling, “it’s that creepy guy from the Sleeping Willow.”

*Damn it.*

Sure enough, when Alex looked up, she found Lioden sitting by himself two tables across, biting his lower lip thoughtfully as he scratched onto a piece of parchment with a quill. An older student with a crooked nose leaned over Lioden’s shoulder to grab a hunk of cheese, bumping his hand as he wrote. Lioden gave the man daggers. The man quickly strutted away.

“Perfect Lioden,” Winstell said with disdain as he glared across the hall. “With his perfect hair, perfect singing, perfect teleporting and illusionary magic, perfect—”

“You umm . . . you have a milk moustache, Winstell,” Link butted in, pointing to his upper lip.

“A what? Oh.” Winstell wiped his mouth hastily with the back of his hand, clearly embarrassed. “Where are my manners? First dropping my spoon and now this. If Father were to see me—”

“Why do you hate Lioden?” Alex asked Winstell, a part of her hoping Lioden wasn’t some big bully or arrogant douche bag.

“Uh, I don’t exactly hate him in the sense,” Winstell said

with a faint smile. “Just sibling rivalry, I guess. Not like I’m much of a rival to him, though. He could probably best me in his sleep.”

“He’s your brother?” Alex asked in disbelief.

“Younger brother,” Winstell stated glumly. “Not like that makes a difference. He’s uh, he’s always been Father’s favourite.”

Alex looked over at Lioden, then back at Winstell, noticing Lioden’s chiselled features and Winstell’s round ones, their different eye colours, even their body language. These two were as opposite as cats and dogs. She wouldn’t have picked them as cousins, let alone brothers.

That was when the realization occurred to her: this was exactly what people must have thought when they found out she and Link were brother and sister. He was six-foot six and freakishly good at any sport, and she was a self-proclaimed Oompa Loompa who had a habit of colliding with inanimate objects.

Alex just wanted to cuddle Winstell. She could practically feel his pain radiating from here. She knew how it felt to stand in the shadow of a perfect sibling.

Winstell took another swig of milk, cautiously wiping away any signs of a milk moustache afterward. “Uh, and that, uh, and that

brings me to my final two favourites.” Winstell paused, his eyes moving back and forth between Alex and Link as he took another, long gulp of milk.

*Is he suggesting what I think he is?* Alex wondered.

Link erupted in laughter, causing most of the students in the hall to look his way, then his face turned into confusion when he realized Winstell might not be joking. “Wha-What do you mean? Are you—” Link cleared his throat. “Are you talking about us?”

“In scarcely two weeks of being at the academy,” Winstell said, “the two of you have learned more than I have in two years. Everyone’s talking: the students, my father's spies, even Baylor’s masters.”

Link looked at Alex baffled, then back at Winstell. “But how could we possibly . . . .” He scratched his head. “I mean, we aren’t even in any of the advanced classes?”

“The uh, the Golden Gauntlet is in less than three months,” Winstell said, oblivious to another milk moustache above his upper lip. “If I were a gambler, which, uh, despite my father's profession I am not, I would be betting all of my coins on the both of you.”

Alex and Link looked at him in bewilderment.

Winstell's eyes darted from side to side, then down the length of his nose. "Do I, uh, do I have another milk moustache above my lip or something?"

## 17. ALEX

“C’mon,” Alex shouted out to Winstell during training one day in the arena. “One more time!”

The crimson sun sliced through the gaps between the ivy-covered pillars as she looked out into the distance, searching for him. The sector she had chosen for them to train in that day wasn’t well thought out. There were too many hiding spots for Winstell to recuperate. It was like playing a drawn-out game of cat and mouse.

“You said ‘one more time’ the last time,” Winstell wailed from nearby. “Besides, I’ve used too much of the Source. Any more and I’ll pass out.”

Alex scrunched up her eyes in frustration. *Man, he’d be awful at hide-and-go-seek.*

“Don’t give me that nonsense,” Alex shouted. “Dig deeper. As Master Lefario would say: ‘Repetition, repetition, repetition!’”

With the back of her gloved hand, Alex wiped away the beads of sweat from her forehead, her boots sinking into the pale white sand as she circled clockwise around the source of Winstell’s voice.

“I’m not lying, Taytora; I’ve got nothing left,” he cried.

Alex didn’t answer. Instead, she pinned her back against a broken pillar, a stone’s throw away from where she predicted he was hiding. In her peripheral vision, there were three students playing tag in the sector to her left, skimming across the lake gracefully as if they had skis attached to their feet, kicking up small waves as they changed direction. *Show offs*. Alex figured they must have been in an advanced class to be able to use that Water Spell.

“Taytora,” Winstell shouted urgently, “did you hear me?”

Alex poked her head out from her hiding spot and saw Winstell’s frightened face darting from pillar to pillar, frantically searching. He was looking in the wrong directions.

“Fine,” he shouted in defeat. “But this is the last time.”

By then, Alex had already performed the necessary Chain of Movements for the Spell.

She manipulated the air currents around her, focused on compacting them into the palm of her hand, then stepped out from behind the pillar and thrust her arm towards Winstell.

Winstell’s oak-coloured eyes bulged as he witnessed the spiralling sphere of air heading straight towards him. But thankfully,



he didn't freeze up like Alex thought he would. He pummelled his fists into the earth. A wall of sand shot up and protected him from her attack. There was the sound of a muffled impact, like a mitt catching a softball, and then the wall of sand collapsed.

"That one was amazing," Alex yelled as she tramped towards Winstell. "You timed it perfectly. At first, I thought you weren't going to block it, but then . . . ." That was when she noticed Winstell laying on his back, gagging for air, his pink face covered in a thick sheen of sweat and sand.

*Yikes, she thought. Maybe he was telling the truth about having used too much of the Source.*

"You all right, Winstell?" Alex asked, thrusting her hands out for him to grab. "Here, let me help you."

"No, let me lie here for a bit," he said, panting. "I still see stars."

She performed a figure eight with her left hand and then drew the moisture out of the air, slowly forming a pool of water above Winstell's head. Then she dropped it. It splashed over his curly hair and ran down his face in rivulets.

Winstell sat up and spat out a stream of water. "Refreshing.

Thanks.”

Alex helped him to his feet and dusted the sand off his sweaty surcoat and rusty pauldrons. “Good training session today, buddy; I’m proud of you. How about we wash up and then I’ll meet you back in the Great Hall for dinner? We’ve earned it.”

Winstell nodded, a confused expression covering his freckly, wet face. “What does ‘buddy’ mean?”

“Umm,” Alex said, chewing the bottom of her lip in thought, “in my village it means *friend*.”

The word seemed odd when she said it out loud. *Friend*. Maybe because she’d never had one before? Although she did have Macey back home, she tended to drift from group to group, and none could be trusted with any of Alex’s secrets. *Blabbermouths*. And then there was Link. But he was her brother, so she felt as if that didn’t count because they were obligated to at least pretend to like one another. But as for Winstell, Alex could say with no uncertainties he was her first genuine friend.

As the weeks passed and fresh buds bloomed around them and the earth seemed to reawaken, Winstell and Alex were inseparable. He had shown her all his favourite books in the

academy's expansive library, escorted her through the winding backstreets of the city, where she tasted sweet lemon cakes and even bought herself a new, sleek bow.

In their Swordplay lessons together, Alex went out of her way to get Winstell as her sparring partner, just so the other students couldn't leave him bruised and battered (he was always overly grateful about that). On most Sundays, after they had tended to their horses, Alex and Link would head down to the different sectors and teach him all the things they'd learned about magic.

Winstell and Alex could talk for hours on end about the silliest things. Things as trivial as whether Fluffles likes his nose stroked compared to having his mane brushed. Or things as complex as in-depth analyses about their favourite books. Turns out Winstell was a few brain cells short of a genius. He came from a very distinguished family, and on his sixteenth name day either he or his brother, Lioden, was destined to receive a massive inheritance. Their father owned quite a profitable gambling company.

But for some reason Alex couldn't quite figure out, she had the feeling her friendship with Winstell was bugging Link. Maybe he thought Alex shouldn't be getting too attached to people who

technically weren't even real?

But the way she saw it, killing Kilydis wasn't going to be an easy fix. It took Taytora and Deonis three years of intensive training. They slew experienced mages, hordes of western mountain giants, and worked their way up through the military ranks to become distinguished gold cloaks. Alex figured she was going to be in this world for a while, so why not sit back, kick up her feet and enjoy the most of it?

Nocera was her reality now. Unlike Link, who got to visit the real world frequently, she was stuck in this land indefinitely. So if she wanted to make friends, she was going to make friends. And who was to say Winstell wasn't real, anyways? He was real enough to her, as real as a friend as she'd ever had. He was also a welcome distraction from everything taking place: The trance, more than likely never being able to see her parents again, the gruelling training, her creepy roommate, Xavier's infuriating riddle. Winstell took her mind off it all.

"Buddy," Winstell repeated with a fuzzy smile. "I like the sound of that."

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Several spoonfuls into her chicken, carrot and corn stew, Alex wondered where Winstell was. He knew the Great Hall menu off by heart, and he never missed a meal.

*Maybe his bath was too hot and he had to wait for it to cool down?*

Alex lifted her eyes from her steaming stew just in time to see Link walking through the embellished oak doors of the Great Hall. Both his arms were tensed, struggling to carry a burgundy chest with gold trimmings. There was a thump as he dropped it onto the table.

Every student at Baylor's got paid a modest amount every week, and as Alex proved to have no self-control, Link had been holding onto her payments. He had spent the whole day in Iralda's inner city, using their combined savings to purchase sets of armour for them both in preparation for the Golden Gauntlet. "Necessary luxuries," as he called them.

Alex was dying to see what he had bought her. She had given him all her measurements, but she was still a bit anxious. Mom had

once sent Link to the corner store to buy a carton of eggs, bacon and a loaf of bread for breakfast. He had come home with a bottle of pancake mix and whipped cream, saying he had made an executive decision on behalf of the family to have pancakes instead. He faced the full wrath of Tornado Trish that day.

“I knew I’d find you here,” Link said, his face hot and sweaty from the effort it took hauling the chest up the stairs.

“Let me see it,” Alex said, reaching for the chest lid.

“Uh, uh,” he said, smacking her hand away gently. “Patience is a virtue. How was training?”

“I almost killed Winstell,” Alex said flatly. “Now, can I see the armour?”

“What’s the magic wor—”

Alex gasped when she opened the lid and found a set of boiled leather armour as pale as Winstell’s skin. She pulled them out piece by piece, taking notice of how light each one was, and sprawled them across the table.

There were vambraces, boots, pauldrons and a breastplate that had shaped breasts moulded into them larger than what she actually possessed. Despite the setback in the cleavage department,

she couldn't help but to smile like an idiot. She was more excited about a set of armour than she had ever been about a dress.

*What the heck is wrong with me?*

“These must have cost a fortune,” Alex remarked.

“All armour is expensive,” Link said, “but in comparison to the others, boiled armour is relatively cheap. Plate armour—now that's what costs the big bucks.”

“You bought yourself plate armour?” she asked sourly, remembering how in one of her fantasy video games it was the rarest armour you could acquire.

“Yeah,” Link said, “and boy was that an effort to haul up the stairs. My set's in my room. Couldn't be bothered bringing it up to show you, though.”

Suddenly Alex felt disappointed. Like Link had outdone her and Mom and Dad had bought him the better Christmas present again.

“How come you didn't get me plate armour?” she asked sourly.

“Relax,” Link said, running a hand through his hair and settling into a seat. He leaned over the table and started piling slabs

of meat onto a plate. “Your greatest strength is your speed, Alex. You’re faster than everyone in swordplay, including me, and I’ve seen you run away from gorlacs. If we were back in the real world you’d be setting track and field records; I’m telling you now.”

Alex folded her arms and glared at him. “Just what are you getting at?”

“I bought you light armour to better complement your speed,” he said, ripping the meat off a drumstick with his teeth. “Plate armour—my armour—would weigh you down too much.”

“OK,” Alex mumbled, still a bit unsure of his plans logic. Wordlessly, she placed the pieces of her armour back into the chest.

“What’s up?” he asked as he sucked the grease off his fingers.

“Nothing. It’s just . . . .” she paused, trying to think how best to phrase how she was feeling. “I thought you wanted me protected? If every injury I acquire pops up on me in our world wouldn’t plate armour give me the most protection?”

“Plate armour also weighs about forty pounds,” Link said, his face unmoving. “It’s like trying to fight while piggy-backing a small child. Just trust me, OK?”



“My life is in your hands,” Alex said, smiling curtly and getting out of her seat.

“Where are you going?” he asked, frowning.

“I’m going to look for Winstell; he never misses a meal. Are you coming?”

Link pursed his lips, considering her question, then he looked back down at his full plate of meat. “Nah, I’ll catch up with you after. I haven’t eaten all day.”

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“Let go of me! Let go of me!” Alex heard Winstell wail as she approached the bottom of the staircase that led to his floor.

Without a second thought, she leaped up the steps two by two, her stomach lurching with nerves.

“I just want a piece,” a girl’s monotone voice spoke. “A nice thick piece. They weren’t serving any in the Great Hall at breakfast, you see.”

“Please don’t,” Winstell pleaded. “Please.”

“Shut-up!” A boy’s deep voice echoed through the corridor.

“Pigs can’t speak, remember. They can only oink.”

When Alex reached the top of the staircase, she was met with an unsightly scene. Through the deserted corridor lit by flickering torches, Winstell was propped against the stone wall, his throat being clutched tightly by a hulk of a boy: Daedrox. Beside him, a girl was bent over, raising the bottom of Winstell’s tunic as she hovered a knife over his bare belly.

“Let go of him,” Alex shouted, both fists clenched as she stormed towards them. “Let go of him right now.”

Daedrox whipped his head around, alarmed at first, then his face softened when he realized who it was making the threats.

He had a short ginger mohawk, a patchy beard, and a set of intense amber eyes that could burn holes through you if you met his gaze. But his size was what shocked Alex the most. He had to be a head taller than Link and twice as wide. A basketball player on steroids.

Daedrox tightened his grip around Winstell’s neck, like an act of defiance against Alex’s threat. The veins on his forearm bulged in response. Winstell sent her a panicked glance as he clutched futilely at the boy’s arm, gagging and wheezing out loud for

air.

The girl straightened up, a smile tugging on the corner of her mouth. She twirled the curved knife effortlessly around her fingers as she meandered towards Alex; hair so thick and tangled it was on the verge of becoming dreadlocks. Eyes so hollow and black it was hard to distinguish where her iris or pupils started or ended.

Normally, Alex would have been intimidated by the likes of these two, but the adrenaline pumping through her body was making a compelling argument. For a split second, she toyed with the idea of opening her Gate and letting loose on them, but the no magic outside of class rule was quickly at the forefront of her mind. Besides, chances are she wouldn't have even posed a challenge versing one of them, let alone two.

“We just want some bacon,” the girl said in an emotionless voice as she stood over Alex. “It would such a shame to let this plump little piggy go without so much as a slice, don't you agree?”

“No, I don't,” Alex said, arching her head up to counter her hollow stare. “Now let go of him right now or you'll have to deal with me.”

The girl smirked at Alex's challenge with her dry, cracked

lips as she tossed the knife from hand to hand. “Then by all means, come get him, little one.”

“Get her, Bidell!” Daedrox rumbled from behind. “Carve her a better face!”

*His voice is as low as his IQ,* Alex thought.

She took a cautious step back from Bidell as she weighed up everything logically, just like Link would do. *Two against one. One with a knife. Both could defeat me in their sleep.*

After several tension-filled seconds, she concluded she'd be stupid to pick a fight with these two. So, she turned and walked away. Then, just as she figured Bidell had dropped her guard, Alex twisted her hip around and whipped her foot out, letting momentum do the rest. Her heel collided with the left side of Bidell's jaw. The knife spilled out of her hands as she hit the ground in a daze.

As Alex looked up to focus her attention on Daedrox, she was startled to find a flaming torch spinning end-to-end flying straight at her. She'd almost forgotten Daedrox was highly skilled in Telekinesis. Alex panicked, and could do nothing but cower as she waited for the torch to hit. But it never did.

There was a thud, followed by a buzzing sound, like static

electricity. Alex looked up to find a rippling shield of transparent magenta energy protecting her. The torch was lying extinguished on the ground. The shield quickly dissipated as Zudane', the girl with the crescent-shaped birthmark on her neck, stepped in front of her.

*Was it her that cast the Ward?*

Now that the torch was out and there was no light, all that could be seen of Daedrox was his beastly silhouette. He took a few steps forwards, stopping in front of a paneless window, the moonlight shining upon his face. It wasn't hard to tell he was livid: nostrils flaring, eyes bulged in fury, body quivering in rage. He was showing all the signs and symptoms. But then the most shocking thing happened. Daedrox's rage cooled as quickly as it had come. And he simply smiled at Alex and Zudane'. Just smiled.

Alex's body tensed as Daedrox closed even more of the distance between them, but to her relief, he bent over and scooped up his delirious friend, Bidell, throwing her on top of his shoulder as if she were as light as a soft teddy.

Daedrox's eyes honed in on Alex's. "You'll pay for that." He turned to Winstell who was still whimpering against the stone wall. "You too, piggy. Mark my words." Then he walked away in the

opposite direction through the dim corridor.

Alex immediately ran to Winstell's aid. He was massaging his red and raw throat as he tried to get his breathing back to normal. Zudane' picked up the torch Daedrox had thrown and set the end ablaze with a simple Fire Spell, giving them some light. She crouched down beside Winstell as well.

"Are you all right?" Alex asked, trying to hide the panic in her voice.

Winstell couldn't even meet her eyes. He kept mumbling nonsense to himself with his head down. It was normal for him to be um'ing and uh'ing, but he was struggling to form a coherent sentence at that point. There was blood trickling from his nose which he seemed oblivious to. But before Alex could wipe it away with her sleeve, Zudane' was dabbing it tenderly with a small cloth.

Alex felt disgusted with herself she wasn't there sooner. *Maybe none of this would have happened if I wasn't so preoccupied stuffing my face.* She felt like such an idiot. She should've known something was up when Winstell wasn't at dinner.

"Isiah smiles down upon you two," a nonchalant voice spoke from behind them. "I honestly thought Daedrox was about to kick up

dust and charge.”

The voice was too pubescent to be a master mage. Alex swivelled her head around. A lanky boy with prominent cheekbones had emerged from the staircase. Long, jet black hair was swept back behind his head, and he had the worst hunchbacked posture Alex had ever seen. There were patches of acne covering his face, and he had eyes as grey as storm clouds that gave her the impression he was wise beyond his years.

Alex thought she had seen him in a couple of her basic classes, but she couldn't be sure.

“Luckily for Daedrox he came to his senses and went the other way,” Zudane' said to the boy, which Alex presumed was her friend. She gazed down the end of the corridor where Daedrox had disappeared. “I have a right mind to go after him.”

“I'd highly advise against that,” the acne-riddled boy said. “They say Daedrox knows over a thousand ways to kill someone.”

“Tall tales, Phen,” Zudane' said, annoyed. “Oh, where are my manners? This is my friend, Phenetrest. The name's a mouthful, I know, so just call him Phen if you like. My name's Zudane'.”

“I'm Taytora,” Alex said, feeling obliged to introduce herself,

“and this is Winstell.”

“Winstell,” Zudane’ repeated, smiling with the corner of her lips. “It suits you.” She bowed her head slightly, her rippling hair almost reaching her knees. “How are you holding up, Winstell?”

“I-I’m, I’m fine,” he managed to splutter. “I-It’s fine; it really is. Bidell never ends up cutting off a piece; she always plays around.”

“They’ve done this to you before?” Alex asked, feeling another surge of anger coming on.

Winstell nodded, his wet cheeks jiggling. “Not Daedrox. But uh, but Bidell has.”

Zudane’ regarded Winstell with misty eyes and a sympathetic smile. Just like Alex, she was at a complete loss for words. What were you supposed to say to that? Alex had been bullied before, called names, even been pushed around a few times. But nothing the likes of this. This was the type of bullying that scarred someone for life.

Zudane’ stuffed away the bloody cloth in the fold of her doublet. She and Alex grabbed either side of Winstell and helped him to his feet.



“I can’t thank you enough,” Alex said, turning to Zudane’.  
“Without your help, we’d probably both be dog mince right now.”

“Uh, s-speaking of that,” Winstell said. “Won’t you lose your position at the academy for—” He paused, and then sniffled loudly.  
“For, you know?”

“Using magic outside of class?” the lanky boy Phen finished, his arms folded confidently. “That’s why I was positioned at the staircase; to keep watch and make sure there were no masters in sight.”

“Oh, that was what you were doing?” Zudane’ said. “From where I was standing it seemed as if you were trying to save your own skin.”

Phen jerked his head back in horror. “You would think so lowly of me?”

“Phenetrest, you are many things, my dear, but a lion is not one of them.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Zudane’ waltzed towards him and brushed his hair back tenderly, almost as if she was petting a domesticated animal. “Yes, you’re just an adorable little kitten who thinks his meows are roars,

aren't you?"

Phen slapped her hand away and then scratched a spot above his eyebrow, fighting off a smile. "Remind me why I am friends with you again?"

"Because before me, you didn't have any," Zudane' said without a moment's pause.

Phen pouted his lower lip. "Harsh, but true."

"How did you cast a Ward that massive?" Alex asked Zudane', reflecting on the massive shield of energy she had produced to protect her from Daedrox's Telekinesis attack.

In her Spiritwielding class, the biggest Ward Alex could project was the size of a nickel. And even that drained her strength entirely. For mages, Wards were a convenient alternative for shields in battle. Instead of lugging around a forty-pound sheet of metal, they could keep a hand free and cast a protective barrier if the occasion called for it.

Zudane' smiled at Alex cheekily. "The real question is how did a little girl like you get her leg up so high to strike Bidell's jaw?"

"No," Phen interrupted, "the real question is how many jelly swans are left in the Great Hall right now? I, for one, do not want to

wait around to find out.”

“J-Jelly swans?” Winstell stuttered, his head piping up. “I *love* jelly swans.”

Phen threw his hands up. “Then what are we waiting for? You heard him. Time is of the essence.”

Zudane’ cast Phen a dirty look. “Forgive my impatient friend. His enormous appetite does not seem to reflect on his gaunt body.” She turned back to Alex and Winstell. “Could we sit with the two of you at lunch?”

Despite the fact her belly was about to burst after all the chicken stew she’d previously eaten, Alex blurted out “yes” a little too quickly. *Damn it, can’t you act subtly for once in your life?*

Winstell nodded his head eagerly, causing his nose to trickle blood again.

*We are each as bad as the other.*

## 18. LINCOLN

Pushing off his opponent, Link cut to the basket, cleanly catching the ball Kenji bounce-passed him along the way. When he reached the paint, he dipped down and leaped off the ground with both feet, manoeuvring his body mid-flight around the opposing team's centre, Landon Radowsky.

The ample-framed kid had effortlessly swatted away all his team's shots that night. Link didn't give him the opportunity to block him, though. He cocked his right arm back behind his head and slammed it down into the basket right in between Radowsky's outstretched arms. The crowd shot out of the gym's bleachers and erupted into fits of screaming and applause.

The air was thick with the smell of waxed wood, leather and damp sweat. Shoes squeaked on top of the adhesive hardwood. Coaches were screaming plays from the sidelines; fans raised their homemade signs, squealing out for their favourite players. Link had never felt more at home.

He readjusted the positioning of his spandex armband as he followed his team in transition to the other side of the court. Out of

the corner of his eye, he could see the cheerleaders standing near the baseline, waving their white and orange pom-poms as they danced in unison and chanted:

*Link's heading to the basket,*

*He's moving down the floor,*

*We are the mighty Aztecs and—*

*Oh, wait! Link's already scored.*

Link looked up into the top row of the gym's bleachers, searching for Nadine. He found her instantly. She was the only one in the crowd with a book in her hand, head down as she read, oblivious to the neck-and-neck basketball game unfolding around her.

Nadine had her feet crossed and propped up on the back of the seat in front of her, twirling her hair around her finger as she read. Link wasn't surprised. She had never been a fan of sports; in fact, she rarely ever watched any of his games.

One day, when Link and Nadine had scored tickets to a Chicago Bulls-Phoenix Suns game, Link asked her if she knew who MJ was. She responded with, "Of course I know who Michael Jackson is, Link. He was the most influential artist of the twentieth

century.”

Given the choice, Link was sure she'd rather be at home reading than watching him play that night. But seeing as his car had been written off, and Kenji was getting custom side skirts applied to his Skyline, Nadine was their lift in.

Link was glad she hadn't been watching, though. Besides a few assists and that dunk he had made over Radowsky, he hadn't done anything of worth that night. And as Kenji had reminded him countless times, there could be college scouts watching. But how could he focus on something as trivial as putting a leather basketball in a circular hoop when he was fighting for his sister's life in a parallel universe?

Link had berated himself for not helping Alex look for Winstell ever since that day in the corridors. What if Zidane' hadn't been there to save her? Would Alex be alive right now? This wasn't a harmless high school where the bullies settled on beating up their victims. Some of the students that attended Baylor's Academy were mentally unstable, thieves, murderers even. Ever since that day Link knew there could be no more momentary lapses of judgment. Alex had to be under his supervision at all times.

He rested a hand on the chest of his opposing shooting guard Adam Howler as he danced around the three-point arc, trying but failing miserably to shake him and get himself open. Link thought he was short for a shooting guard—barely six feet—but he made up for it with a wide and strong body. A body he used to power his way to the hoop against weaker defenders.

Adam had dark skin, shoulders the size of basketballs and an '80s fade so clean-cut it would make the Fresh Prince of Bel Air envious. He used to play for their team, the Aztecs, before he had a falling out with Kenji. And as Link was Kenji's best friend, he had inherited some of that hatred by association. Adam hadn't even shaken Link's hand before the game.

Adam feinted to the left, waited for Link to take the bait, then shot to the right. Link followed. His body crashed into Radowsky who was setting the screen. Adam had a clear path to the basket, with not a player in sight. Link circled the heavy-footed centre, then closed some of the distance between them until he was right at Adam's tail.

Adam caught the pass from his fellow point guard and then lunged towards the hoop. As a last resort, Link grabbed him in

mid-air and intentionally fouled him. Adam's feet flew from underneath him, and his body slammed into the hardwood, causing the ref to blow his whistle instantly. Link felt awful, but it was what coach Harper had drilled into him from an early age: Foul and let them earn their points at the line. No easy buckets.

Adam didn't seem too pleased about the foul, though. He slapped away the hand Link offered to help him to his feet, swearing at him under his breath while massaging the side of his ribs he'd landed on.

Link looked up into the bleachers, hoping Nadine was so enthralled by her book that she missed his physical altercation. But when he spotted her, Link found she was not alone. Xavier was sitting in the seat beside her, his fedora hat tilted on an angle, an arm leisurely wrapped around the back of her seat. Link's arm tensed, his fingernails digging into his palms. Even if Nadine couldn't see him, the fact he knew Xavier was there, so close to her . . .

Adam nudged Link with his shoulder as he made his way to the free throw line, snapping him back into the game.

"It must be hardwired into your brain," Adam mumbled.

"What?" Link answered, truly puzzled.



“Crashing,” he replied with an arrogant smile. “First your car, now this.”

“What did you just say?” Link yelled as he stepped towards him, but Kenji blocked his path and pushed him backward.

“Don’t let him get to you,” Kenji whispered as he pushed. “Don’t be stupid. Scouts, remember?”

Adam dribbled the ball with force as he stepped to the line and prepared for his free throw shot, a wry smile still spread across his face.

“That’s what I thought,” Adam said. He bent his knees and then followed through, sinking his first bucket. The home crowd booed in retaliation. As the referee passed the ball back to him for his second shot, his eyes found Link’s.

“They should charge you for homicide,” Adam whispered loudly enough for Link to hear. “I mean, what kind of a monster kills his own sister?”

Link’s body acted on the words. Just as Adam was about to release his second shot, Link slammed a shoulder into him, pinned him to the ground, then pummelled his face with both fists.

And that was all he could remember before he was ejected

from the game.

\*\*\*\*

Nadine braked slowly as they approached the red light, her long nails drumming the steering wheel as she looked blankly out the driver's side window. She had barely said a word the whole ride home, which Link knew meant she was in deep thought. *The calm before the storm.*

Link was in the passenger's seat, both his feet on the dash, an ice pack pressed to his cut and swollen knuckles. Kenji was in the backseat, hunched forwards, his arms wrapped around either side of Link's and Nadine's headrests. Personal space wasn't in his vocabulary.

"No, no," Kenji blurted, breaking the long silence, "I can't do it. I refuse to just sweep this under the rug. I mean, you turned his face into a freaking smashed tomato, Link. It was gruesome. But you know what the worst part is? His wounds will heal, whereas you could've just blown your shot at colleges we average kids can only dream of. There goes your future. So was it all worth it, tough guy?"

“I stand by what I did,” Link responded, rubbing his tender knuckles.

“Look, I sympathize with you, I really do, I understand what that asshole said was wrong, but to react the way you did in a gym possibly full of college scouts is just . . . I can’t even find the right words to express your level of stupidity.”

“Whatever,” Link mumbled, hoping this would shut him up. It seemed to have the opposite effect.

“Whatever?” he repeated incredulously. “*Whatever?* You’re one of the best high school talents I’ve ever seen, Link. And I’m not just saying that because I’m on your team, or because I’m your best friend. You legitimately are.” He tapped a finger to his temple repetitively. “These players—these dropkicks like Adam try to get in your head every single game. You know why? Because they know it’s the only way they can possibly affect your game. And tonight . . . Tonight you let them.” He finally sunk back into his chair and let out an exasperated sigh. “Nadine, I love you, but you have to talk some sense into your boy, get him under wraps. Because I’m about to strangle him; I swear to God.”

Despite the noticeable difference in their ethnicities, anyone

would think by the way Kenji acted he was Link's older brother.

Link gritted his teeth, which sent a wave of pain up the right side of his face, since one of Adam's teammates had sucker-punched him during the melee.

"You're lucky I even played tonight," is all he could manage to say.

"I'm lucky?" Kenji repeated with a scoff. "What on Earth are you talking about? This isn't about me. I'm fresh out of growth spurts, Link. I faced the fact I couldn't make it into the NBA a long time ago. But you, man, if you played like you did last year, you could have any pick of college in America. *Any*. And then who knows? Turn some heads there and you could be on your way to the NBA."

Kenji groaned and then thumped the back of Link's headrest. "People would kill to have a quarter of the talent you do, you jackass; so I'm not going to just stand aside and let you pour it all down the drain. *I refuse to.*"

This time, Link didn't even dignify Kenji with a response. He was too stubborn to admit Kenji was right. Word would get out about the brawl, and no doubt there would be an article in the paper about

it tomorrow. No coach or college wanted a player with a short temper. But in saying that, what kind of a future did he have anyway?

As long as this Nocera thing loomed over Link's head like the great storm cloud it was, he was never going to be able to devote himself one hundred percent to basketball. Not until he killed Kilaydis at least, which was about as probable as winning the lottery without purchasing a ticket. And although he was remorseful for the way he had acted at the game, deep down, if he were to replay the scene over again, he would've reacted exactly the same way. There are some lines you just don't cross, and for him, family was one of them.

"Nadine, are you going to weigh in here?" Kenji asked. "I mean, is this a good cop-bad cop thing? I feel like I'm the parent who's doing all the disciplining while you're just taking a back seat." He paused and chuckled. "Which is ironic, since I'm the one who's in the backseat."

Nadine reached for the knob on the radio and turned up the volume. "I've got nothing to say to him."

"Just say it," Link grumbled, turning down the volume.

“There’s no use postponing it.”

“Postponing what?” she asked.

“My lecture.”

Nadine turned the volume back up. Link reached for the knob but she slapped his forearm. “Stop. I really have nothing to say to you, Link.”

“What’s the point in—”

“OK, I’ll tell you what’s on my mind,” she yelled over the radio presenter’s voice. “In the four years I’ve been with you, I’ve never seen you behave like that. It scared the hell out of me, and I’m just . . . .” She stopped and then blinked quickly. Her long lashes fluttered to stop the oncoming tears. When Nadine spoke next, her voice had softened. “I’m just so disappointed in you. Disappointed you would throw away your future at the drop of the hat, just because of what some lowlife said. I thought you were above all that, Link.”

“I was sticking up for Alex,” Link said feebly. But even he knew that was a weak excuse.

“Do you really think your sister would’ve wanted to see that?” she responded, as she bopped the radio with her fist, turning it

off completely. “She hates fighting just as much as I do.”

Just drop me off here,” Link said, closing his eyes and taking a long, deep breath. “I’ve had enough of you two ganging up on me.”

“Ganging up?” Nadine repeated. “Oh God, don’t be so melodramatic, Link.”

“Drop him off, Nadine,” Kenji groaned from the backseat. “A long walk would do good to clear his big, fat head.”

Link pulled the lever underneath his chair, causing his seat to slide backward into Kenji’s knees. He cursed out loud in anger.

“Real mature,” Kenji snarled as he rubbed his knee caps tenderly. “That’s it; I’m never passing you the ball ag—”

Nadine pegged an empty water bottle over her shoulder at him, then she turned to Link and rested a delicate hand on his swollen one. “What’s bothering you, Link; is it something more than the crash? You’ve been so . . . ” She pursed her lips. “I don’t know, so withdrawn lately. Not yourself. Why are you punishing yourself like this?”

Link screwed his face at her. “Why do you think?”

“I know it’s not just that,” Nadine said, dabbing her eyes with the baggy sleeve of her grey sweater. “There’s something else. I-I’m

not stupid.”

They pulled into the driveway at Kenji’s parents’ red-bricked house. There was a portable basketball hoop sitting out on the front lawn. Kenji had adjusted the rim’s height so he could dunk the ball.

*Cheat.*

Link cast a sideways glance at Nadine and then let out a mix between a sigh and a chuckle. “You honestly wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Nadine put the car in park and then shrugged. “You’ve got nothing to lose.”

Kenji’s anger seemed to have subsided because he reached out a hand and squeezed Link’s shoulder. “C’mon, buddy; tell us what’s bugging you.”

There was a long silence that followed. A silence Link used to mull over if there was any worth telling them both about Nocera. He figured there were two ways this could go. Outcome number one: They were sceptical at first; maybe even think he was pulling their leg. But maybe—and that was a big maybe—if he was convincing enough telling his side of the story they might come around to believing him.



And then there was the dreaded outcome number two: He told them and they'd assume the worst; that he had completely lost his marbles, and his mind was as fried as a phone in a microwave. It was the outcome that had been eating him up inside, preventing him from telling them both about Nocera since the car accident. The fear of them seeing him in an entirely different light.

“Promise me two things, though,” Link said, as he gazed out the window at the house across the street’s manicured garden. He noticed there was not a bush or branch out of place. The people that lived there must have had OCD. “There will be no interruptions. *Zilch*. And all judgment will be withheld until I’m finished speaking.”

Link whipped his head around when there was no response.

“Well?”

Nadine nodded obediently, but when Link looked at Kenji, he raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Problem?” Link asked.

“No, it’s just . . . OK, there’s two things,” Kenji stopped and scratched the tip of his nose. “One: Did you really just say ‘zilch?’ And two: The way you're building it up sounds like you've killed

someone.”

“This is serious, Kenji,” Link said, scowling.

“What?” he asked, offended. “I was just making sure. I watch a lot of crime shows; I know how to get rid of a body if need be.” He interlaced his hands behind his head and settled into his seat, looking at Link innocently. Link was still giving him daggers. “You’re right; you’re right. I’m sorry.” Kenji rolled his arm outward. “Please. By all means, continue.”

So Link told them everything. He started at the very beginning with the car crash before school and then gradually worked his way towards seeing Xavier in the bleachers at the game. Just like when he told Alex, he spared no details. Telling them about the physical link between both worlds, the mind-boggling riddle Xavier had left him with. He left no stone unturned.

Astonishingly, the whole time he talked they both stuck to their promises and refrained from speaking. Link didn't even know why he was telling them. It wasn't like they could have magically appeared in Nocera and given him a hand at killing Kilaydis. But nevertheless, after what seemed like an hour, Link had finally finished, and what felt like a great weight had been lifted off his

shoulders.

“Well?” Link asked when he had finished speaking. His stomach lurched with fear as he waited for their responses. But neither of them seemed eager to give them.

Nadine pretended to be interested in her fluffy pink steering wheel cover. And when Link looked back at Kenji, he struggled to meet his eyes. Almost as if Link were Medusa and his gaze could’ve turned him into stone.

“Nadine,” Link said, facing back to her.

“It’s just . . .” Her eyes reluctantly locked onto his, and he was shocked to find they were filled with sympathy. No, not sympathy. This was the kind of look she’d give someone she pitied. “It’s a lot to process.”

“Do you believe me?”

Her gaze fell for a split second to a rip in her denim jeans, then back to his eyes. *Hesitation*. That was answer enough on its own.

“Of course, I believe you, Link,” she whispered.

His fingernails dug into the leathered seat. “If you’re going to lie at least put some effort in,” he said, not even bothering to hide the

disdain in his voice. “I knew it would be a waste of time. This is the exact same reaction Mom and Dad gave me after I told them.”

“Well, it is a bit . . . .” Nadine trailed off, looking into the backseat as if encouraging Kenji to back her up.

“Far-fetched?” Link finished for her. “What about you, Kenji? Do you think I’m insane too?”

Kenji didn’t answer, which Link found extremely unusual seeing as the only time he ever stopped talking was when his mouth was crammed with food.

“No comment,” Kenji muttered.

Link swivelled his body to face him in the backseat. “Are you serious? I just spilled my heart out about what has been happening to me these past two months, and that’s all you can muster? *No comment.*”

“You wouldn’t like what I have to say, Link.” Kenji licked his lips. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I can smell my Mom’s homemade burgers from here—” He reached for the door handle, but Link leaned over and grabbed him by the sleeve of his shirt.

“Lock the doors, Nadine; he’s not leaving,” Link said.

Kenji looked down angrily at his hand. “Dude, what the hell?”

You're wrinkling my shirt. Let go."

"Not until you say it."

"No." He knocked Link's hand away and then smoothed the wrinkles on his sleeve. His eyes fell back to the door handle. Nadine jabbed a button and the car doors locked all around them. Kenji threw his head back and groaned like an upset toddler who had just been told he couldn't have his favourite, sugary cereal.

"Say it," Link repeated.

"No, because I'm tired of being the bad guy," he complained. "Everyone's always like, 'Oh my God, Kenji, you can't just go saying those things. Does your mouth have no filter?' So, for once I'm going to bite my tongue."

"Just tell us, Kenji," Nadine chimed in.

Kenji's eyes darted back and forth between Link and Nadine's faces, then he let out a defeated sigh. "I think it's . . ." He rubbed his eyes tiresomely. "It's what we learned about last semester in psychology."

*Psychology.* Kenji had barely started, and Link didn't like the sound of it.

"Go on," he probed.

Kenji cleared his throat as if he were a wizened lecturer preparing to give a speech to his class. “There’s these rare cases—very rare actually—that when someone goes through a traumatic experience or undergoes insurmountable levels of anguish, they have been known to create these . . . ” He paused, almost as if he was too afraid to say his next words. “Coping mechanisms. Now, these coping mechanisms—as the name implies—are designed to help the person . . . well, cope, obviously. In other words, they’re a way of dealing with the grief.”

Link was rendered speechless, and could do nothing but stare at Kenji dumbfounded. He was still struggling to comprehend the full weight of his words.

“This guy, this Xavier guy and the whole Nocera thing” Kenji said. “I think it’s all just an incredibly elaborate and welcome distraction you created in your head.”

“A welcome distraction from what?” Link asked, but a part of him already knew the answer.

“A welcome distraction from what’s happened with Alex,” Nadine answered solemnly.

Kenji nodded his head in agreement, his eyes studying Link’s

cautiously as if he was waiting for him to flip out. “Link, I think you created this Xavier guy and the whole Nocera thing as a way of dealing with the pain the accident caused.” He shrugged lazily. “But then again, I failed psychology that semester, so take my advice with a grain of salt.”

## 19. ALEX

A waft of stale sweat and musty metal infiltrated Alex's nostrils as she entered the deserted armoury. Blunted weapons, wrangled pieces of steel and sun-dried leather covered the walls from top to bottom.

She was returning the pieces of armour she had worn from their Waterwielding lesson prior. Their Master Garidion had devised a game called "Capture the Orb." The match was played in the sector filled with a giant lake and consisted of two squadrons and two orbs. The gist of the game was for the squadrons to try to steal the other's orb and bring it back to their side of the lake. The catch was the players were only permitted to use Waterwielding. Alex's squadron lacked cohesion and leadership, and so, ultimately, they had lost. Alex hated losing.

Alex was in the middle of hanging up her chest plate on a set of hooks when Zudane' emerged to her left. She had been the leader of the opposite squadron; the squadron that had made hers look like a herd of frantic, disorganized sheep fleeing from a pack of wolves. Alex wished Zudane' had been their captain, but instead Garidion



had elected a man named Terekon.

At first glance, Alex felt Terekon wouldn't be fit leading a fantasy league team let alone their squadron. He was the stereotypical wannabe alpha male: walking with his arms out unnecessarily to the side as if he had imaginary lats, overflowing with arrogance, looking down his nose at his teammates as he addressed them.

Alex knew they had lost the game before it had commenced. Especially after Terekon had announced his "master plan," which consisted of the squadron running in bullheadedly and hoping for the best.

Alex noticed Zudane' had already changed out of her woollen undergarments and into the Academy's regal blue surcoat. Before the Healers had gotten to her, her left cheek had become so swollen it looked like she was experiencing a life-threatening allergic reaction. Alex noticed she was all better now, though. *Back to her flawless self.*

"Good as new," Alex remarked with a smile.

"Yes," Zudane' said, pursing her lips and clutching her cheek gently. "I was very fortunate compared to some of the other

students.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked as she undid the straps on her vambraces. *Is she referring to Terekon?* He was the only one who was seriously injured that she knew of. He dislocated his shoulder and broke a few ribs during the match. *I guess bravery can't solely shield your anatomy. But wait; didn't she say "students" plural?*

Zudane' knitted her brow at Alex. “Hailsi have mercy; you don't know?”

“No,” she said unsurely. “Am I supposed to?”

“You broke Jerrich's jaw,” Zudane' informed Alex, as she helped slide off one of her vambraces. “He can barely talk. Won't be able to eat solid foods for a week . . . or so they are saying.”

Alex regarded Zudane' with an alarmed expression, trying to work out who this Jerrich person was in her head. Could he have been one of the boys she had hit with the Water Whip Spell she'd learned from one of Taytora's scrolls? The impact was enough to knock his helmet off so it wouldn't have been much of a stretch to think she'd broken his jaw as well. She didn't intend to hurt him; he had just blocked her path to the orb.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Zudane’ shrugged lazily. “It happens. They aren’t training us to crop fields or thread fabric. Mages uphold the peace in the Kingdom of Mist. It’s a necessity we are battle-hardened.”

“I need to go visit him,” Alex said in a panicked voice. “Tell him I’m sorry. I-I can’t believe . . . What wing is he in?”

“Relax, Tay,” Zudane’ said, fighting off a grin as she placed both hands on her shoulders and squeezed. “He would have done the same to you if he could. Besides, he’s not the type to hold grudges.” She slid off her second vambrace and threw it on top of a rack with the others. “How did you do that anyway?”

“I learned it from a scroll,” Alex said distantly, assuming she was talking about her Water Whip Spell. Her mind was still fixed on Jerrich.

“No one taught you?” Zudane’ asked, her exotic eyes scanning Alex’s.

“Sorry?”

“You learned from the scroll by yourself?”

Alex nodded.

“No master?”

“No master,” she echoed.

“Teach me,” Zudane’ demanded, her face deadly serious.

“Teach me how to Waterwield like you. You understand the craft like no one else does. Even Master Garidion said so.”

“What are you talking about?” Alex asked. “Were you not just out there? My squadron lost. *Badly.*”

Zudane’ knitted her brow at her. “Tay, you were swatting away my squadron as if they were flies. Outcomes aside, you fought valiantly.”

Alex’s mind spun in confusion, Zudane’s request throwing her completely off guard. She was humbled Garidion would say that, but she only knew a handful of Spells and Zudane’ was treating her like she was some sort of expert Waterwielder.

“You taught Winstell,” Zudane’ pressed, sensing her hesitation. “He’s improved so much now he might actually make it past round two.”

Zudane’ smiled at Alex widely as if an idea had just come to her. “Teach me and I’ll teach you how to harness your Spirit. Only if you want to learn, of course,” she added on quickly.

This offer took Alex by surprise. Spiritwielding: her biggest

weakness. And who better to be under the tutelage of than the person who everyone claimed to be the greatest Spiritwielding talent to have ever stepped foot into the academy? Who was she kidding? This proposition was too good to pass up.

Absentmindedly, Alex offered Zudane' her pinkie finger. "You've got yourself a deal. But I must warn you, I'm not as good a Waterwielder as you think I am."

Zudane' looked down at her projected finger, frowning at it in confusion. "Is it broken?"

That was when Alex realized how weird the custom must have been to her. How some things that existed in her world could appear so foreign in Zudane's eyes. It was just a habit she'd developed with Link whenever they came to an agreement about something. In their eyes, it was stronger than any pact. The Hunters never broke a pinkie promise.

"It's a thing we do back in our village," Alex said. "Sort of like a pact. All you do is wrap your same finger around mine and then it's done."

"So sort of like a blood pact? Without the blood?" Zudane' asked, her frown deepening.

“Yes,” Alex chuckled. “A slightly less extreme version.”

“Orban,” Zudane’ said distastefully as she intertwined her finger around Alex’s. “The village with such strange customs.” She showed her teeth. “I’d very much like to visit there one day.”

Alex smiled at her goofily, watching her as she plucked a blunted sword from the nearest rack and twirled the weapon around her fingers with impeccable grace and dexterity.

Ever since that day in the corridors, Winstell, Zudane’, Phenetrest and Alex had practically merged into one group. Unfortunately, they weren’t all in the same classes, but that didn’t stop them from going out of their way to catch up in between lessons or at meals. Alex had named them the “Fantastic Four” which they all seemed ecstatic about. Little did they know she had ripped off the name from Marvel.

To Alex, Zudane’ was like the big tomboyish sister she never had but always wanted. Phen was the wisecracking goofball of the group that didn’t know when to stop talking, and Winstell was the withdrawn know-it-all who was so socially awkward it was almost too adorable. And within the Fantastic Four, Alex had never felt more accepted in her entire life.

“Just out of curiosity,” Alex said. “Why do you want to strengthen your Waterwielding when your Spiritwielding is so good? I mean, when you saved Winstell that day in the corridors you didn’t even break a sweat. That Ward you projected was the size of a door.”

“Do you know how many known branches of magic there are?” Zudane’ asked Alex placidly, as she performed a flawless shoulder strike followed by a leg.

“Forty-nine,” Alex replied methodically.

*Being the author of your own book certainly has its perks,* she thought.

“Hailsi, I did not expect you to answer that,” Zudane’ said, astounded, then her face turned serious as she continued to swing her sword. “Yes, forty-nine. And I want to learn them all. Every last Chain, every last Spell, every last Branch of magic.” She smirked at Alex as she added on, “*Buddy.*”

Before Alex could open her mouth, she answered her question.

“Winstell,” Zudane’ said, chuckling. And that was all the explanation she needed.

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The bell chimed loudly from the tower to Alex's left as she paced down the gravelled pathway. She was late. And as a result, she had made these unlikely scenarios in her head about the different ways her swordplay Master Nenwir would punish her tardiness.

Hanging her up from the roof and letting the students wail on her like a piñata was her most imaginative one yet. But even she knew Master Nenwir wasn't that maniacal. Alex figured he'd probably just pit her against three students at once during sparring as punishment. She could live with that. She had taken on two opponents simultaneously before. She didn't win, but she had kept them both at bay.

Zudane' was to blame for her tardiness. Her, and the fact Alex was too polite for her own good. Zudane' was in the Advanced Swordplay class, as well as Link and Lioden, so after Waterwielding was finished, she generally had a free period. Which meant after their class had dropped off their items at the armoury, she had nowhere to be and had all the time in the world to chit chat.

Gossiping was new to Alex, so most of the conversation was



spent with her nodding, waiting for the perfect opportunity to butt in and tell her how late she was running. But the opportunity never came. Turned out Zudane' had this uncanny ability where she could talk without having to take a breath.

"I like your thinking," Lioden's musical voice sounded from Alex's right. "Perfect weather for a brisk walk." His long legs were catching up with her quick strides effortlessly, his head lulled back as he looked admirably up at the sky.

Even though they were in the same Waterwielding class, aside from the occasional awkward stare, Alex and Lioden hadn't really interacted with one another since she had been enrolled. But of course, that might have had something to do with the fact that he thought she and Link were an item. *Pause to vomit in mouth.*

If only there were some way she could have told him without having to speak to him. Alex knew it was childish, but she literally couldn't string together a coherent sentence when she was around him. She had tried to talk to him in the lesson beforehand, prior to their squadron being butchered by Zudane's, but even her thoughts seemed to get scrambled in his presence.

Alex was stuck in an awkward position. She wanted Lioden

to talk to her, but at the same time, she was in a rush to get to her lesson. Be late to class, or talk with the cute boy? Never had she been so conflicted.

“Can you walk and talk?” she asked, hoping she could kill two birds with one stone. “I’m kind of running late.”

“Certainly, I’ll walk you to your lesson,” he replied, dropping his gaze from the sky to face her.

Immediately Alex realized there was no trace of the nasty cut that was above his eyebrow. *Those Healers really are something. If only they could mend broken bones as easily as flesh wounds. Poor Jerrich.*

“I’m still trying to determine how best to repay you,” Lioden said.

“For what?” Alex asked, although she was pretty sure he was talking about saving him from the pellet of water Zudane’ had pegged at his head. Alex had tackled him to the ground in the nick of time. The Spell had soared harmlessly above them.

“For keeping this on my shoulders,” Lioden said with a cheeky smile, gesturing to his face.

“Well, in your case, being headless certainly would have

been an improvement,” Alex said coyly.

Lioden straightened the collar of his sky-blue jerkin and then stared down at the gravel beneath his feet, a wounded expression covering his face. “Apologies. My ordinary features must not suit your requirements in a man.”

Alex felt a pang of guilt. Lioden must have been comparing himself to Link because he still thought they were together. “I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry . . . It was just an ill-tasted joke.”

“As was mine, it seems,” Lioden said, lifting his head up and smiling wryly.

And that’s when Alex realized she’d met her match in the sarcasm department.

Alex figured as they were on the subject, it was a perfect time to clear the air. “Umm, just so you know, Deonis isn’t my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Lioden asked quizzically.

*Damn it, she thought. What expression would Lioden be most familiar with?*

“He’s not my lover,” Alex ended up electing. “He’s my . . . ” She let out a nervous sigh. “He’s actually my brother.”

“And I thought I was the singer,” Lioden remarked with a smirk. “Nice rhyming. But I’m afraid Winstell already beat you to it. He informed me this morning. Extremely protective brother I gather?”

Alex bit her bottom lip to stop the smile. “You honestly have no idea.”

Wordlessly, they both stepped off the gravelled pathway and then onto a cobbled one that lead directly to Baylor’s feet. The silence continued to grow as they passed sandy dunes dipping and rising like small hills to their left, and row upon row of charred and headless straw dummies to their right. And still, Lioden didn’t so much as cough.

Maybe it was up to her to break the silence? Alex panicked as she thought about what she could have possibly said. She had never been good at small talk. It was the first time she had ever spoken to him; they had no common ground at all, and Lioden had already commented on the weather.

*Damn it, Alex, this silence has dragged on for too long, just say the first thing that pops into your head!*

“I like your voice,” Alex blurted, immediately wishing she

could travel back in time and slap herself in the face before she said that again.

“You do?” Lioden laughed enchantingly, looking at her genuinely surprised.

*There’s no going back now. Commit.*

“Well, I mean, yeah. The lyrics were a bit depressing but your voice, well . . . Well, your voice is kind of amazing.”

“Thank you,” Lioden said with a wide smile. “Although in my defence, it’s hard to put a cheerful spin on two of the greatest mages duelling for their Kingdom’s freedom and longevity.”

“You really take pride in your singing, don’t you?”

“Yes, Taytora,” Lioden said, smiling. “I really, *really* do.”

“Ah, so you found out my name?”

“Among other things,” he said. “That’s probably the only benefit of being the Coinskeeper’s son. He has webs everywhere.”

“I don’t know if I should be concerned for my wellbeing,” Alex teased.

“With an overprotective brother like yours, I wouldn’t be.”

Alex clenched her jaw, desperately trying to suppress the giggle that was bubbling up to the surface. She was nowhere near

comfortable enough to laugh around him yet. Link once described it as a hyena's cackle after inhaling a balloon full of helium. And she was certain that was him holding back.

As Alex and Lioden approached Baylor's stone ankle, they passed a group of giggling girls. They all nudged one another as Lioden passed, their eyes stuck to him like caramel on teeth. When the girls spotted Alex by his side, those looks of lust turned into confusion.

Lioden briefly rested his hand on the small of Alex's back as they stepped through the castle doors. The girls were now glaring. *Did he do that intentionally because he knew they were watching?* Alex would never know.

The agonizing silence they experienced before seemed to rear its head again as they climbed the flights of steps to her Swordplay class. Alex's lips were sealed. It was his turn to break it now. She wasn't going to blurt out a stupid compliment this time. She had learned her lesson the hard way.

"I like your hair," Lioden said, casting a sideways glance at her lion's mane.

"What?" she asked, thinking she must've misinterpreted him.

“You said you liked my voice,” Lioden explained as they reached the doors to her Swordplay lesson. “I like your hair.”

“Thanks,” Alex said, then she didn’t know what came over her, but it happened. She let out the dreaded, ear deafening hyena cackle. “I’m sorry,” she said, holding a hand over her mouth as if it was an involuntary action.

“For what?” Lioden asked, looking completely natural.

He must be trying not to hurt my feelings, she thought.

“My laugh,” Alex said. “Don’t pretend like you didn’t hear it. It sounds like a gorlac’s squeal.”

“That?” Lioden said as he pushed the double door outwards and entered the room. “That was nothing; wait until you hear mine.” And the way he said it so convincingly made Alex think he was actually telling the truth.

Lioden walked across the chamber, heading directly for Master Nenwir who was in the middle of demonstrating the correct body position for a downward thrust. *Is this kid insane? He’s going to get me killed.*

“Sorry to intrude on your lesson, Master Nenwir,” Lioden said, smiling broadly. “But I was just borrowing Taytora for a

moment.” He gestured to Alex lurking by the doorway. “She was teaching me the finer points of Waterwielding.”

That threw Alex’s blending in with the class plan out the window. Now it seemed she was about to face the full wrath of Nenwir. Students could barely sneeze in his presence without receiving a scolding. As Alex looked at Nenwir’s startled expression, she was starting to think her piñata idea wasn’t too extreme after all.

The whole class had paused, frozen as they all looked at their master expectantly, waiting to see how her tardiness would be dealt with. All except for Winstell, who was glaring at Alex in a mix of anger and confusion. Anger as to why she was so late, and confusion as to why Lioden was with her, Alex figured.

But uncharacteristically, Nenwir’s leathery face softened, and were Alex’s eyes deceiving her or was he smiling?

“Ah, Lioden, my dear boy,” Nenwir said in a gentle, unfamiliar voice Alex had never heard. “What an unexpected surprise.” He beckoned Lioden closer with a hand. “Come forth, come forth. Now this, class, is one of the finest swordsmen I have ever had the privilege of teaching.” Nenwir wrapped an arm around Lioden’s shoulder admirably, like a proud father would his son.



Nenwir's intelligent blue eyes looked as if they were sparkling with tears of joy. Alex was struggling to process what had just taken place. Did Nenwir have a second personality she didn't know about? Who was this impostor?

“Sharper than a blade fresh off the grindstone,” Nenwir continued as he patted Lioden firmly on the shoulder. “Sturdier than a stout ox—Taytora, would you fall into the back of the class, please?—Quicker than a gorlac at full stride . . . .”

Alex quickly grabbed a sword from the racks and fell into place behind Winstell and Phen. Winstell immediately spun around and shot her a “Why were you hanging out with my older brother?” look.

“I'll explain later,” Alex mumbled under her breath. Winstell didn't seem too overjoyed with her answer. He raised his eyebrows and mumbled something to Phenetrest. Alex wondered what he was getting so upset about. Lioden was just walking her to class.

Through a gap in the students in front of her, Alex managed to see Nenwir offering Lioden the hilt of his wooden sword.

“My boy, if you would be so kind,” Nenwir practically purred. “Would you please demonstrate a downward thrust for the

class?”

“Master, with all due respect, I- I-” Lioden stuttered, struggling to find a permissible excuse.

“You have a free lesson, do you not?” Nenwir asked, the skin of his forehead wrinkling as he frowned.

Lioden pursed his lips and took the weapon from Nenwir’s clutches in defeat.

“Ah, sensational!” Nenwir exclaimed as soon as the sword had touched Lioden’s hands. “Observe, students; observe. Look at the way Lioden grips the sword. Not too tight, nor too rigid, neither delicate nor flimsy—just the perfect balance of both control and assuredness.”

And so, the comical lesson continued. Nenwir sent flurries of compliments at Lioden each time he executed a strike or stance, and Lioden deflected them all with his genuine humility. Alex found it hard to keep from guffawing the whole lesson.

Nenwir dismissed Lioden towards the end of the class and then split the students into two groups for sparring to practice the strikes and stances they had just observed.

Before Link had been moved into the advanced class, he used

to be so good he'd have to pair up with Nenwir just for some competition. Which meant Alex and Winstell were partners most the time. But that day, Alex found Winstell wanted nothing to do with her. As she walked towards him, he had hurriedly grabbed Phen by the elbow and moved to the other side of the chamber, leaving her partnerless.

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Thanks to Nenwir, the flight of stairs Alex now walked up felt as if she was scaling Mt Hargul. Every surge of pain reminded her of a time he had slipped past her defences and swatted her with the edge of his wooden sword. But as he so eloquently put it, "every single bruise is a lesson in itself."

Thanks to Winstell, Alex had no one to pair up with, which meant she had to go toe-to-toe with the Swordplay master himself. She now understood why Link complained so much after each sparring session with him.

By the time Alex reached her chamber, she could have practically collapsed onto the stone ground and slept like a baby—if it weren't for all her roommate's mess on the floor. She still didn't know her real name. The students referred to her as "Skemptra,"

which Alex was told was a spine-tingling make-believe beast in Nocera that slithered out at night and planted nightmares in children's brains. And the worst part was that's what the Masters referred to her by as well. Skemptra was in Basic Swordplay and Spiritwielding with Alex, but besides that, she didn't know anything about her.

Skemptra sat on the edge of her bed, eying Alex off as she undressed from her jerkin and slipped into some comfy woollen clothes. If she were in the real world, Alex would have been so uncomfortable changing in front of a stranger. But in Nocera, public nudity was as common as a tavern brawl. She once saw Zudane' change in front of their class after a Waterwielding lesson, baring her breasts and all. Not one male student looked her way or even batted an eyelid. Alex's jaw had nearly hit the ground in disbelief.

Alex nestled her body underneath her woollen blanket and then pulled it to her chin. It itched more than her auntie's fleece jumpers she sent every year at Christmas. Alex figured it must have slipped her mind that their family lived in one of the hottest cities in America. Either that or she just wanted to show off how insane her knitting skills were.

Alex's roommate was still staring, but she had become accustomed to her weird habits and relentless eye contact. Alex had soon realized that no matter what, she'd never venture over to Alex's side of the room. And besides, from that day Alex had stupidly tried to introduce herself, she had also stayed well away from her roommate's side. It was mutual toleration.

"Sweet dreams," Alex said, even though she knew very well the girl they called Skemptra never slept.

"Sleep well, Taytora," she hissed back softly.

But Alex didn't. No matter how heavy her eyelids were or how exhausted her body was, sleep seemed to elude her. She kept replaying her encounter with the chivalrous Lioden. Her cheeks hurt from smiling when she thought about his dry comments, witty banter, and how he gallantly sacrificed himself and saved her from the wrath of Nenwir, probably knowing full well he'd be roped into executing strikes and stances in front of the class.

With so many distractions around her, it had been so easy to forget the tournament was only in two months' time, even though Link had constantly been in her ear about solving the riddle before the first round commenced. He figured if they solved it ASAP, then

they could devote their time to formulating a plan to take down the serpent, studying his/her strengths and weakness, different Spells, their battle tendencies and patterns and such.

Alex thought Link was going about it the wrong way. They couldn't just completely forget about the rest of the competition. Zidane' the Spiritwielding whiz, Daedrox the gigantic freak of nature, Lioden the teleporting master and Swordplay extraordinaire.

Alex's plan—which she felt was pure genius—was to focus on their own training, devoting themselves one hundred and ten percent to their craft. Spying on every other student was taking up too much of their time. Unless they found out who the serpent was quick-smart, it wasn't like they could keep tabs on every single student at the academy.

Link was too stubborn to take her plan under consideration, though. Alex believed her brother could stand under a storm cloud while he was soaked to the bone and still argue with you it wasn't raining.

*If only stupid Xavier hadn't given us this stupid riddle, she thought. Why couldn't he have given us a crossword or something? I'm good at those.*

“If unmasking Xavier’s character is all you seek, unravel the serpent before things get bleak.”

It was so ambiguous to her that it was infuriating. If they were talking about looks then the student would ideally be of a slender build, possibly have bright yellow eyes and a forked and wayward tongue.

*No, that would be way too obvious, she thought. Maybe something subtler? Maybe it has nothing to do with appearances. Maybe it’s their behaviour?*

Alex sprung up from her bed and glanced over at Skemptra on the other side of the chamber, the hair prickling on the back of her neck. She was still gazing at Alex, unmoved from the last time she saw her. Her empty eyes shimmered in the pale moonlight streaming through the window; her smile so crooked it was almost diagonal.

Skemptra, the girl who was named after a slithering, make-believe creature, the girl who hissed when she spoke, the girl who ate rats instead of sausages and pastries in the Great Hall. Xavier couldn’t have made it more obvious than if he had painted “serpent” on her forehead. Had that madman roomed her with the most powerful student in the academy? The very character he had

created?



## 20. ALEX

Link lunged off Wildfire ungracefully, his boots sinking into the muddy bank below him. Alex had to purse her lips to refrain from laughing at another one of his horrible dismounts. Alex thought with all the Saturdays he'd spent around horses he'd have dismounting down pat by now. But she was wrong. She supposed she shouldn't laugh, this was how uncoordinated she must have looked when playing basketball.

"Do you know how silly that sounds?" Link asked her as he wiped the specks of mud from his face. "You think your roommate is the serpent because she has a lisp? Next thing you know, she'll pull off a scab and you'll accuse her of shedding her skin!" He chuckled stupidly at his own joke.

Alex gently pulled on the reins as she guided Mr. Fluffles down to the river, trying not to let his comment get to her. The air was heavy with the smell of sweet wildflower, weeds and damp soil.

Fluffles lowered his head and scooped up the water as if his tongue were a ladle. Alex ran her fingers through his silver mane as he guzzled it down.

“Say what you will,” Alex said. “But I researched Skemptra in the library this morning and-”

“-Skemptra?”

“It’s what the students call her,” she explained. “A make-believe beast that comes out at night and plants nightmares in-”

“-I’ve heard enough.”

Alex scowled at him. “The picture in the book had a woman’s upper half, but a snake’s lower half, Link. Need I say more?”

He didn’t answer. It had become impossible for Alex to tell the difference between auto Link or the real Link anymore, but as of lately he seemed to be on another planet altogether.

On the other side of the riverbank, a group of kids were half naked, flinging piles of mud at each other as they cried out in laughter. *Oh to be young with no insecurities.*

It was a Sunday, so Alex and Link figured they’d grab both their horses and head down to one of Iralda’s outlying villages. Alex felt trapped enough living at Baylor’s large quarters, so she couldn’t imagine the sense of confinement the horses must have been experiencing in those tiny stables.

As soon as they had veered off the dirt pathways and into the open countryside, there was no stopping Fluffles. He had spurred ahead through the open plains and sprawling meadows, leaving Link and Wildfire trailing in his wake. Moments like that made Alex glad she'd saved him from death-row at the stables in Vardis.

A child's head playfully emerged from their side of the river, unnerving Wildfire and causing him rear his hind legs and whiny. Link gritted his teeth, his biceps bulging as he struggled with the reigns to try and keep his horse calm.

"Just relax," she said, "he's spooked, and your stress is only going to pile on to his."

"I'm not stressed," Link grumbled.

"Yes, you are," she said, as she took the reins from him and averted Wildfire's attention to her, "and to make matters worse, you're trapping him."

"Trapping him?"

"You're backing him into the trees," she explained, as she led Wildfire onto an open area of the bank. "Horses don't like being cornered. They like to have options to run in case things go wrong."

"Oh," Link said stupidly. Alex handed the reins back to him

once she managed to calm down Wildfire.

“Are you OK?” she asked him. “You’re acting really weird today.”

He pursed his lips. “Perfectly fine.”

“Lincoln Hunter.”

He exhaled deeply through his nose. “It’s something Kenji said about Xavier. I can’t stop thinking about it.” He shook his head then looked skyward. “I don’t know. . . It’s . . . It’s stupid.”

“Anything Kenji says is stupid,” Alex said. Then it occurred to her. “. . . Wait, you told Kenji about Xavier?”

Link nodded. “And about Nocera. I told Nadine as well.”

“*And*,” she said, drawing out the word expectantly, “how did they both take it?”

“They took it really well,” Link replied. “They’ve been real supportive. Singing me lullabies and making me hot chocolate every night before bed, giving me words of wisdom to help me through the tough times.”

“The truth, Link,” she said, unimpressed. Sarcasm was her thing, not his.

Link ruffed up his hair. “They think I’m completely and

utterly insane. And . . . .” He lowered his eyes. “And Kenji thinks Xavier is just a hallucination. A hallucination I conjured up to help me cope with the pain of causing the accident and putting you in a coma. That the whole entering Nocera when I sleep thing is all in my head.” Link clamped his jaw as he waited nervously for her to respond.

Alex closed the distance between her and her brother, then stood on her tippy toes and looked him straight in the eyes. “Look at me. Take in all my features. Do I look like a hallucination to you? Do you really think your dim-witted mind could replicate my hilarious, winnable personality, and on top of that, my devilish good looks?”

Link glanced down at his feet and smiled. “No. No, I guess not. How stupid of me.”

“Besides,” she said, “you know you should take Kenji’s words with a grain of salt anyways.”

Link’s smile deepened. “That’s exactly what he said. But—” He paused and pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s just . . . .”

“Spit it out,” she ordered.

“How come I’m the only one that can see him? Xavier, I

mean. Why aren't you able to see him or talk to him?"

"Maybe he's afraid I'll destroy him with my quick-witted comebacks?" Alex suggested, shrugging. "Who knows? Best not to linger on it. Especially seeing as we've got a tournament to worry about. Oh, and a mind-numbing riddle to solve. Aren't we just spoilt?"

When Alex turned back around to the lake, she was met by a strange scene. Fluffles was grooming the top of the boy's hair tenderly. The boy giggled and then doggy paddled back to the other side of the river to his friends. Courtesy of Fluffles, he now had a massive cowlick poking out of the water like a shark fin as he swam.

"Good boy," Alex said, stroking in between Fluffles' withers proudly. "Very good boy."

"About that riddle," Link said with his back to her. He was still trying to calm down Wildfire by petting his taut shoulders. "I think Daedrox might be the serpent."

"Daedrox," Alex scoffed. "If anything, that man-child resembles an elephant, not a serpent."

"I've done my research," Link said, mimicking her. He led Wildfire cautiously back down to the river for a drink. Alex

followed.

“He’s a descendant of an ancient assassin’s guild called Viper’s Venom,” Link continued. “The guild used different types of potent snake venom as a recipe for their poisons.”

“OK, now you’re just splitting hairs,” she said. “How’s that any different to the Skemptra hissing thing?”

“Ugh, fine then,” Link said, pursing his lips, “We’ll add her to our list of serpent suspects. That just means more work for you, though. You need to find out as much as you can about her: what lessons she has, her background, everything. I’ll do the same for Daedrox. The quicker we unravel who this serpent is, the greater chance we’ll have of finding out their weaknesses and defeating them. If we both miss out on the finals then killing Kilyadis becomes a thousand times harder.”

“As if it wasn’t hard enough already,” she said dryly.

The boy with the cowlick swam back to their side of the lake, accompanied by his group of friends this time. No doubt to see if Fluffles would groom him again like last time. Before Wildfire could get spooked out, Link led him up the bank and well away from the kids.

“What time do you think it is?” Alex called out to the kids as they treaded water.

The children covered their eyes with their hands as they gazed at the sun.

“Midday,” a girl with buck teeth replied.

“I’d say lunch time as well, ma’am,” another boy parroted before he squirted water from his mouth.

“Well, if it’s lunchtime, shouldn’t you guys be having lunch?”

They all looked at her oddly as if she had just said the darnedest thing—until she reached into a pouch hanging off Fluffles and pulled out two loaves of freshly baked bread. They all splashed out of the water and flocked to her with their hands out. Luckily, she had just enough to go around.

After the kids had scoffed down the bread, Alex delved back into the pouch and pulled out two handfuls of tangy lemon cakes for seconds, handing two to each child. The boy Fluffles licked practically inhaled his two, but the girl with the buck teeth nibbled hers delicately until she was the only one with any left and her friends were left looking at her with envious eyes. Once they had all



finished, they sprinted back into the river merrily, shouting their thank-yous and goodbyes over their shoulders.

“Unfair,” Link said sulkily as Alex caught up to him. “I was looking forward to those lemon cakes.”

“We’ll just have to get some more on the way home, won’t we, fatso?” she said as she clasped him on the shoulder.

“Why are you in such a chirpy mood?” Link asked as he put his foot in the stirrup and mounted Wildfire.

It wouldn’t have been wise for Alex to tell him she was swooning over Lioden. Especially seeing as it was hard enough trying to convince Winstell nothing was going on between them. So, she just shrugged and said. “Just because.”

Link eyed her off suspiciously. “You’re meeting up with someone, aren’t you? That’s why you asked the kids the time?”

“Oh no, you got me,” Alex said, raising her hands as if she was surrendering.

“Who?” Link probed.

“A boy,” she said, pretending to look abashed.

Link scowled.

“Zudane’,” Alex admitted, as she hopped on top of Fluffles

and kicked him into gear. “She’s teaching me Spiritwielding and in exchange, I’m teaching her how to Waterwield.”

“Well, well. Look at you,” Link said with a wry smile.

“What?” she asked. “Why are you smiling?”

“I’m just . . . .” His smile widened. “Just proud of how serious you’ve been taking this all. That day we woke up in Nocera I had been dreading telling you the truth. The accident, the coma, how I was being thrown to and from both worlds. No matter how hard I tried, I could never seem to muster up enough courage to tell you. Because never in my wildest dreams would I imagine you’d take it this well.”

Alex shifted in her saddle, his long-winded confession making her feel oddly uncomfortable. “How did you think I’d react?”

“I don’t know,” Link said, frowning vaguely in thought. “The complete opposite of this. A lot more tantrums and hissy fits, I guess.”

“That does sound a lot like Alex,” she admitted. She dug her heels into Fluffles sides and spurred him up a steep, muddy slope.

“But I’m not Alex in this world . . . I’m Taytora.”

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The sun slashed through the gaps of the canopy high above them, exposing the dead leaves and fallen branches beneath their feet in bright splotches. Zudane' cocked her arm back, like a pitcher about to launch a baseball at the plate—but instead of a baseball, she was holding onto a luminous sphere of her magenta-coloured Spirit. A gust of wind stirred through the branches above, swirling fallen leaves down upon her long, rippling hair.

Alex parted her Gates. Zudane' took a step forward and flung her arm out. Her compacted ball of energy whizzed through the air, closing in on Alex's head. Alex held her hands in front of her eyes, flicked her hands outward and then back. Once the Chain was complete, a lime green Ward emerged, shielding her from Zudane's Spell. Her energy broke against Alex's barrier in a radiant clash of purple and green. The impact of the attack sent Alex staggering backward.

“You call that a Ward?” Zudane' barked. “That was the size of a plate. Again.”

“But—”

“*Again*,” she spoke over the top of Alex.

Alex had originally thought Nenwir was a ruthless instructor, but after one training session with Zudane’, his classes were starting to look pleasant in comparison. As soon as Alex had finished fastening her helmet, Zudane’ had flicked a switch, and her nice girl demeanour had completely vanished. Alex had soon found out why she was a favourite to win the tournament. This girl took her training very, very seriously.

But despite her complaining, Alex had to admit, Zudane’s tough love approach was working. After one session with her, Alex’s Ward had almost doubled in width and density. She just hoped she’d be able to return the favour when it came to her turn teaching her Waterwielding. After all, Zudane’ had set the bar pretty high.

“What you’re forgetting,” Zudane’ said, “is that Spiritwielding is far, far different than the four elements. There’s no manipulating the tongues of a flame, moulding the earth beneath your feet, using moisture to create water.” She thumped her chest plate repetitively with a fist. “Because Spiritwielding comes from inside of you. The raw energy lying dormant deep down inside of

you. It's your job to uncover it, to understand it, to unleash it.”

Zudane's expression softened and so did her voice. “But that's not to say Spiritwielding and the four elements don't share any similarities.”

Zudane' lunged forwards, her arms and legs moving in quick succession as she performed a compact and rapid Chain. She shot an arm above her head, her palm facing the sky. Magenta energy sprawled from her hands, slowly building in mass to form a disc-like shape. The Spell now hovering above Zudane's head was the size of a merry-go-round.

The disc of energy rippled with multiple shades of purple, glowing so brightly Alex had to shield her eyes from it. Her throat tightened. Alex knew channelling this kind of energy was life threatening. If Zudane' lost control of her Spirit at any moment, the disc could explode like a grenade. She had seen it happen to a few students in her Spiritwielding class—usually the more arrogant ones. Alex had never seen them channel as much Spirit as this, though. She could feel Zudane's raw energy pulsating towards her like ripples in a pond.

“Your Spirit can be manipulated,” Zudane' shouted over the

buzzing. “Moulded, even, just like any of the elements can. It can be solidified to block attacks, like your Ward, for example. Or amplified and compacted to cut down your foes.” She smiled with the corner of her lips. “Like this for example.”

Zudane’ flicked an arm, and her magenta Frisbee took off in Alex’s direction. The Spell had weaved in and out of trees before it zoomed harmlessly over her head. There was a loud crack like splintering wood followed by a terrific thud. Alex ducked and took cover. When she found the nerve to open her eyes, she found that Zudane’s Spell had sawed an evergreen tree cleanly in half.

It was at that moment Alex came to the decision that if she had to compete against Zudane’ in the tournament, she was going to slap herself so hard she’d wake herself up from her trance.

After Zudane’ finished hurling her last spheres of Spirit at her, she finally called the training to an end. Never had Alex ever been pushed so hard since her time at Baylor’s. Every muscle in her body spasmed; the woollen undergarments beneath her armour clung to her body with cold sweat. Alex was starting to think her Sundays could have been better spent with Winstell in the library, or playing a board game called Burning Plains with Phen.

Zudane' grabbed Alex underneath both armpits and helped her to her feet, smiling at her with pearly white teeth. "And now you know the real reason why Winstell and Phenetrest never train with me."

\*\*\*\*

After a much-needed break, Alex and Zudane' walked over to the lake on the other side of the arena. Well, Zudane' walked; Alex more or less limped seeing as her legs felt as unsteady as ramen noodles. Thankfully, Waterwielding wasn't as taxing on the body as Spiritwielding was. Alex needed as much time to recuperate as she could get.

As they both stood on top of one of the lakes stone columns peeping its head out of the water, Alex started Zudane' off by getting her to perform a few warm-up techniques Master Garidion had taught them. The techniques emphasized on focus and control: levitating multiple balls of water, spinning them all individually in different directions. Child's play for Alex.

When she finally felt as if her energy had been replenished,

Alex took Zudane' to the shallowest area of the lake and positioned her opposite to her in waist-deep water.

“Unlike the raw power of Spiritwielding, Water Wielding is fluid and graceful,” Alex described, putting a twist on Zudane's own explanation. “Poise, patience and a clear mind are key. For you cannot focus when your mind is misty.” As Alex said the words, her hands moved on their own, drawing as much moisture from the air as she could, merging it all towards her and Zudane'. A few seconds later, there was a heavy layer of mist between them.

Her little party trick got the desired reaction. Zudane' clapped her hands together then swiped at the mist playfully with a hand.

“How did you do that?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“In due time, young grasshopper,” Alex said, “In due time.”

Zudane' tilted her head sideways. “Did you just call me a grassho—”

“Moving on,” Alex said, as she demonstrated to Zudane' an advanced exercise she had learned from a book called Bastion's Guide to Water Wielding. The exercise was way beyond Zudane's capabilities, but as childish as it sounded, Alex wanted to pay her back for driving her so hard during their Spiritwielding training.



The exercise involved levitating and passing a sphere of water slowly in a figure eight from one to another. Alex would circle the sphere around her back and then return it to Zudane' and she'd do the same. It sounded simple enough, but to be able to transfer the sphere of water to another, they needed to be on the same wavelength, so to speak. Their exchange needed to be fluid, and their movements slow and steady like a gentle current moving back and forth. If one of them were off a beat, then the sphere would collapse, and they'd have to begin the exercise again.

Alex soon found Zudane' couldn't even make two figure eights without dropping the ball. This would then set off a vicious cycle because she would get even more flustered the next time the sphere came around. But to Zudane's credit, every time the sphere collapsed, she sucked in a deep breath and formed another. Not once did she look like she would give up.

"So how many branches do you have left to learn?" Alex asked casually as she circled the sphere of water behind her back.

Zudane' wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead as she waited for the ball to come back her way. "Forty-seven," she said modestly. "I think Summoning and Seizing will be my biggest

hurdles.” Zudane’ took control levitating the sphere from Alex, her face scrunching as she focused. “Can you stop talking, please? I need to concentrate.”

“No, you don’t need to concentrate,” Alex said, as she tapped the side of her head with a finger. “You need to stop using this. Free your mind. Picture each of your thoughts and distractions as ravens in the sky. Take pleasure in watching them all disappear in the horizon.”

Alex was the best in her improv class.

“You’re right, it’s just . . . .” The ball of water collapsed, splashing Zudane’ in the face. “Hard.”

“You think this is hard?” Alex asked, laughing. “I almost collapsed of exhaustion during my training.”

Zudane’ chuckled briefly, bit her lip in concentration and drew another sphere of water from the lake. She managed to make three circuits this time before she lost control. Zudane’ was a persistent one; Alex would give her that. She was learning much more quickly than she had anticipated.

“Just why are you so determined to learn all the branches?” Alex asked, not bothering to beat around the bush anymore. “You

could win the Golden Gauntlet with your Spiritwielding alone. So why not focus on bolstering your knowledge in that?"

Zudane' frowned and dropped the sphere instantly.

*Did my question throw her off guard?* Alex wondered.

"A story for another time," Zudane' answered politely. She let out a huff of air and brushed her fringe away with a hand.

"Does the question bother you?" Alex asked.

"Yes," she replied curtly.

"Good," Alex said, as she formed another sphere and sent it her way. "Another raven disappearing in the horizon."

"For someone so wise shouldn't you have a few more wrinkles?" Zudane' asked.

"*A few more?*" Alex repeated, shocked. "I didn't know I had any to begin with."

"Very well," Zudane' said, her face relenting. "I was young-Eleven, maybe twelve. It was the time of year when the coastal raids happen. This year it was my village's turn." The sphere of water shuddered and then collapsed. Zudane' paused, sucked in a deep breath, and then morphed a new one.

"I had only just learned to unlock my Gate. I was still

learning the basics of Spiritwielding: the pathways, the channelling of my energy. So, when the raiders hit, my family and I were defenceless. Huddled up together in the corner of mother's room, my hands covering my younger brother's mouth to stop the sounds of sobbing from escaping . . .” Zudane' scrunched her eyes shut, and the sphere dropped. But this didn't deter her in the slightest; in the blink of an eye, a new sphere had arisen and taken its place.

“Zudane' you don't have—”

“No, it's fine, I can do this.”

Surprisingly, Zudane' managed to loop the sphere behind her back and then levitate it all the way over to Alex.

“One of the raiders must have been a Gifted,” Zudane' continued, “because the beams of the house splintered and collapsed. The house caved in, and that's when something stirred in me—some sort of protective instinct. To this very day, I still don't know how I did it, but I cast a Ward so big it shielded my entire family.”

Zudane' hung her head low and let out a quivering sigh. “I tried holding it for as long as I could, but the weight of the house . . . I-I just . . .” Two tears streamed down either side of her cheek. But she didn't bother to wipe them away. “The Ward faltered. Crushed

them all. Except for me, of course.”

Thinking she was finished, Alex attempted to say. “I’m so sorr—”

“I managed to blast my way through the rubble of the house, albeit as severely injured as I was,” Zudane’ said with a strange smile. “But I’m so glad I did. Because that’s when I saw the river of blue cloaks emerge from the West—the Kingdom of Mist soldiers—cutting the wretched raiders down as effortlessly as a honed sword through long grass.”

The sphere of water circled around Zudane’ so fluidly Alex couldn’t believe her own eyes. Where had this sudden control come from? Zudane’s peculiar smile faded, and she finally wiped the tears away with the back of her hand.

“And there’s your raven,” she said, looking up at Alex through glassy eyes. “Does that answer your question?”

She handed Alex the sphere, but this time, Alex was the one to drop it.

“You feel as if you’re responsible,” Alex mumbled. “You feel as if you weren’t strong enough to protect them. And that’s why you want t—”

“I don’t feel,” Zudane’ said bitterly. “I know.” She looked down at her shimmering reflection in the water. “Mark my words, Tay; I will learn all the branches and become the greatest mage in this land and beyond. I will protect those who need protecting. Not these lords drunk with power who’ve never worked a field in their lives. Never been out at sea knowing that if they come back empty-handed it could mean the death of a family member.”

The water pushed and pulled around Zudane’, making small waves that crashed against the stone columns around them. Zudane’ seemed oblivious to it all. “Revenge is not what I seek, though. Only peace. And Hailsi be damned; I’ll fight for it until I take my very last breath.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Zudane’,” Alex whispered, “You were holding the weight of an entire house. Y-You were twelve; you can’t hold yourself accountable—”

“They could still be alive today if I had been strong enough,” Zudane’ said, looking at Alex with a strange, blank expression. “If I had learned to open my Gate earlier, or-or maybe even held the Ward for just a few moments longer, at least until the soldiers arrived.” Her head sunk as she let out a heavy sigh; her long hair obscured her

face, making it impossible for Alex to get a read on her expression.

The water finally settled around them.

“I think we have made good progress today,” Zudane’ mumbled softly. “My mind seems a lot less . . . .” She looked up at Alex and then smiled faintly, her eyes still glistening with tears. “For lack of word, misty.”

“You’re welcome,” Alex choked, still at a loss for words about what she had just confided.

“And Tay,” she began, “what was said here today—”

“Between you and me,” Alex finished with a nod. “I know.”

Zudane’ bowed her head gratefully. “Thank you, my fellow grasshopper.”

She waded through the water, climbing up onto a pathway and then heading towards Baylor's feet. But despite the obvious weight that was on her shoulders, Zudane’ walked with the same impeccable posture she’d always had. Alex watched her until she disappeared into the distance, feeling guilty for probing her insistently, but at the same time feeling as if this training session had brought them a whole lot closer.

*I guess even Wonder Woman had her weaknesses.*





## 21. ALEX

“You can take off your blindfold now,” Lioden’s disarming voice whispered in Alex’s left ear, covering her entire body with goose bumps.

She chuckled goofily. “I can’t. I’m too nervous.”

The air was ripe with the scent of spicy flowers, rich earth, and fragrant pine needles, and there was a gushing sound in the distance, like a fast-flowing river. Alex had been blindfolded the whole journey, so she had resorted to unlocking her Gate and strengthening her remaining senses. Cheating she knew, but the suspense was killing her.

The two had been riding atop Lioden’s grey mare Crescent for what felt like the better part of a day. The whole journey he had insisted she be blindfolded. In their last Waterwielding class together Lioden had proposed to take her to a secret spot only he knew about. After Alex had asked him to repeat himself (just to make sure she hadn’t misinterpreted him) and got some colour back into her face, she had agreed. Only on one condition, though.

In their last lesson, to work on their magical stamina, Master

Garidion had the class levitating bowls of water that were turned upside down for as long as they could. If a student spilled so much as a drop, they had to sit out. Alex had playfully made a deal with Lioden that if he could hold up his bowl longer than she could, she would agree to his terribly disguised “date” proposal.

Alex knew Lioden couldn’t beat her—not many in the class could—but it was still funny watching his body tremble and face strain as he determinedly tried to keep the bowl upright. He had dropped to his knees in exhaustion, cursing under his breath as the clay bowl shattered on the ground.

The truth was, though, that whether he was to win or lose, Alex was still going to say yes. She just wanted to see what lengths Lioden would go to. And the kid didn’t disappoint. Garidion had to carry him into the shade and force water down his throat. Alex was still feeling guilty for putting him through that ordeal.

Before Alex could reach up and pull the blindfold off , Lioden was untying the knot from the back. The way his fingers grazed the back of her neck made her heart beat faster. When she finally opened her eyes, the view was more magical than anything she could have imagined.

They were standing on the bank of a river swarming with multi-coloured flora and fauna. The gushing noise she had heard earlier belonged to a breathtaking waterfall to her right, bubbling and foaming as the water crashed into the rocks of the riverbed below. As she bent forwards and looked down, the water was so crystal clear she could see a school of trout streamlining past, and even the smooth, smoke-coloured rocks covering the bottom of the river.

Alex glanced up and smiled. Royal blue-coloured birds smaller than her fists were singing enchantingly overhead while chasing one another from branch to branch. She twirled around. The sun was dipping below a canopy of trees, bathing the woods in its amber light one last time before it said its goodbyes for the evening. Alex thought this was serenity at its finest.

“And you say that no one knows about this place?” she asked, dumbfounded.

“Oh, people know about this place,” Lioden said as he tied up Crescent to a branch, “but this isn’t the place I’m taking you to.”

He ruffed up Crescent’s mane good-naturedly and then approached her, thrusting out his hand.

“Take it.”

Alex leaned over and looked into the fast-flowing river. Was he crazy? Did he want to jump in there together? The water would no doubt be below sixty degrees. Not to mention the current looked strong enough to drag away a hippopotamus.

“We’re not jumping in, are we?” she asked. “Surely not.”

“No questions,” Lioden said as he wiggled the fingers of his outstretched hand, “just take it.”

“I think I have every right to ask questions, Lioden. You have just abducted me, blindfolded me and—”

That’s all Alex could say before he had snatched her hand and had given it a squeeze.

“Don’t let go,” he ordered.

Seconds later, there was a cracking, whip-like sound, and Alex looked up to find Lioden’s head deteriorating away into what she could only describe as ash. The blood pounded in her ears as she tried to let go of his hand, but Lioden gripped hers even tighter, refusing to part.

The world darkened, and her body was completely immobilized, tingling with pins and needles all over. It felt like she had been locked in a deep freezer for a few hours. Then the feeling

went away as quickly as it came. When Alex opened her eyes, she was safe and sound, standing with Lioden in a spacious cave.

Alex was stupefied. She presumed they must have been directly behind the waterfall because the roaring water was crashing down from an opening in front of her. *But how did we get here?*

She turned to ask Lioden, but as she did, another sight rendered her speechless. A golden blanket with rose-coloured trimmings was sprawled across the cave's hard floor, and on top of that blanket was a basket with exposed food: fresh trout, sweet strawberries, an abundance of cheeses, freshly baked bread, and lemon tarts. And wineskins. Lots of wineskins.

Alex didn't know how to react so she edged towards the gushing curtain of water, only as close as she dared. There was a small part in the waterfall where she could see out into the land below. The riverbank where she and Lioden had been standing just seconds ago was a hundred feet below them.

Alex felt idiotic it had taken her so long to figure it out. The very first day she had met Winstell he had mentioned his older brother was a Teleporter.

“You could've given me notice you were about to teleport,”

Alex said, her back still to him. “Just to mentally prepare me. It’s not the most pleasant feeling, you know.”

Alex turned to find Lioden standing awkwardly atop the blanket, fidgeting with the collar of his white and gold doublet. His lips were pursed. Alex had never seen him this on edge before. So drained of his confidence.

“It’s too much, isn’t it?” Lioden blurted, running a hand through his hair as he sat down and huffed, “Blast, I knew it was. Even the woman at the fish market said I was coming on too strong.” He cradled his head in his hands. “Why did I get so many wineskins? A town drunk couldn’t even drink this much. *So idiotic.*”

“It’s perfect,” Alex said, not being able to contain her smile. She stepped away from the rapidly flowing water and took a seat, cross-legged, beside him.

“Not too overwhelming?” Lioden asked unsurely, casting her a sidelong glance.

“Not too overwhelming,” she echoed. “But I mean—” She stopped awkwardly, trying to select the right words to express herself. “Why, though?”

“Why what?” Lioden asked quizzically.

“Why go through all this trouble?” she cleared her throat as she added on, “for me?”

Alex felt so stupid saying it out loud, but she knew if she didn't ask it then, it would've bugged her for eternity. She needed to know his exact reasoning. The nicest thing a guy had ever done for her was give her his pencil in sociology, and even then, he had hastily asked for it back. So, when a guy sets up an extravagant picnic date that would make most Disney princesses envious, of course her mind was going to wonder.

A trace of a smile played on Lioden's lips as he reached for something behind him.

“Spiced wine?” he asked, offering her a pre-filled copper goblet.

Alex had almost forgotten there was no legal age to drink in Nocera.

“I, uh, I, uh,” she paused, realizing how much she was sounding like Winstell. “I don't drink wine.”

“No matter,” Lioden said, quickly flicking his wrist and emptying the goblet over his shoulder. “I brought blueberry iced tea as a backup. Although I daresay the ice has probably melted by now.

The ride back took longer than I had expected.” He picked up a pitcher from the basket and poured it into her goblet.

“Thank you,” she said after he had handed it to her. “But you’re not as crafty as you think you are. There’s a question that still needs answering.”

“And answer it I cannot.”

“And why can you not?”

“Because—” Lioden exhaled through his nose deeply.

“Because I am rather terrible at expressing my emotions.”

“A singer who can’t express his emotions?” Alex said, chuckling in disbelief. “You must be one in a million.”

“Rats, you seemed to have caught me out,” he said unconvincingly.

“The truth, Lioden,” she said, her face deadpan.

“The truth,” he repeated rubbing his chin. “The truth is that I believe I have overwhelmed you enough for one day. I shall now bite my tongue so as not to risk scaring you off for good, Taytora.”

Alex had smiled when he had said her name, even if it wasn’t her real one. Then, upon realizing she looked like an idiot, smiling for no apparent reason, she changed her face back to a neutral. *Play.*



*It. Cool.*

“I give up,” Alex said, throwing her hands up. “You’re faster at dodging a subject than you are at Teleporting.”

Lioden smiled triumphantly as he served the trout, bread, and cheeses onto two plates.

“As your favourite element is water,” he said as he handed her a plate, “mine just so happens to be the element of surprise.”

“Oh really? The Masters at Baylor’s never told me about this element before,” she teased.

“Not surprising, really,” he said, scoffing. “It’s a newly discovered fifth element. Only the advanced students are being taught it.”

“Well, maybe if I studied as much as you did then I’d be considered an ‘advanced student’ as well,” she said coyly.

“Studied?” Lioden scoffed. “I’ve never studied a day in my life.”

Alex frowned. “But I always see you scribbling on parchment in the Great Hall?”

Lioden raised his eyebrows, almost as if he was encouraging her to work it out.

“You were never studying,” she said. “You were—”

“Writing songs,” Lioden finished, smiling with a closed mouth full of trout.

“But how are you . . .” Alex paused stupidly. “Teleporting is one of the hardest Branches of magic, and you can make anyone look ridiculous with a sword in your hand. Are you telling me that’s all natural talent?”

“Enough about me,” Lioden said, turning to her expectantly, “let’s hear about Taytora.”

Now it was Alex’s turn to change the subject. Either that or make up a completely made-up back story for herself in which she didn’t originate from America and wasn’t from a technologically superior parallel universe.

“Caught this yourself?” Alex asked as she took a bite of the fish. It was seasoned with butter, salt, and pepper.

“Who’s avoiding the subject now?” Lioden teased. “Luckily for you, I’ll indulge your whims—just this once. I bought it from the fish market this morning.” He smiled crookedly. “Scaled it myself, though; that counts for something, right?”

Alex tried to respond, but the butter was running down her

chin, so she quickly wiped it away with her sleeve. *Damn it, Alex, where is your etiquette? Be a lady.*

When she turned to see if Lioden had witnessed her mess-up, Alex found he had whipped out a golden viol. The instrument had a painted ivy-green snake wrapped around it.

*Yep, she thought. He's definitely a firm believer in the element of surprise.*

"May I?" Lioden asked, glancing down at his instrument.

Alex sucked in air through her teeth. "Do you really want to risk scaring me away?"

Lioden mocked a look of sadness.

"You may," she relented, bowing her head, "But no more tellings of famous mage duels. I want something happy, something uplifting."

"Your request has been taken under advisement," Lioden said, nodding his head. "Just a forewarning, though: My pitch might be a bit off; I didn't account on this waterfall being so loud."

"Stop making excuses," Alex said teasingly as she took a sip of her lukewarm tea and waited for him to begin.

She had no recollection of when Lioden started or finished

playing. The whole time it was as if she was in a beautiful trance, adrift in the music, watching absentmindedly as his fingers moved up and down the strings with impeccable timing and finesse. His voice was even more mesmerizing than when she had heard him in the Sleeping Willow. Pure and high, his face clinging on every emotion, every word, every change in pitch.

Lioden's first song was foggy, but his second was about a high lord's forbidden love for a tavern wench. And then his last was just like Alex had requested: an uplifting song about the two-headed deity Isiah and Hailsi. Both were interconnected—one side representing hope, purity and righteousness; the other, despair, greed and deceitfulness. And together they formed the world with their unparalleled magic.

“The lyrics were beautiful,” was all Alex could say when he had finished.

And then Lioden had smiled. A different smile from the others she had seen. This one was humbled, proud even. At that point, Alex could tell he was as passionate about his singing as she was her story writing. Nothing could wipe the smile off her face when Grandma had complimented one of her passages.

Lioden lifted his gaze, studying her deeply with those hypnotizing, turquoise eyes. “You are still here, which means I haven’t scared you off yet, which I think means I can risk one more surprise.”

Alex shook her head like an unrelenting child. “No. I told you I don’t like surprises.”

“You say you don’t, but your lips are telling me otherwise.”

She hadn’t even realized she was smiling. *Darn this Lioden kid and his chivalrous swagger.*

“Fine,” she said, exhaling forcefully. “Blindfold or no blindfold?”

“I think I can trust you enough to cover your own eyes.”

Alex unwillingly shielded her eyes with her hands, pondering if she should sneak a peek, but not wanting to get caught in the process. *Has he written me a song?*

The silence was agonizing, and just as she was considering branching out her remaining senses, Lioden had pressed a strawberry to her lips.

*The little Romeo is hand feeding me,* she thought.

Alex was on the verge of biting into it until she realized the

thing he had pressed to her lips was not, in fact, a strawberry. Strawberries weren't moist and strawberries sure as heck didn't move. Alex's stomach twisted. She was kissing Lioden Thyme's lips.

## 22. LINCOLN

Link awoke to an insistent knocking at his bedroom door. He sprang up from his bed in shock, groggily stumbling over to unlock it. Managing to come to his senses just as he reached for the door, he looked back at his sky-blue sheets that were covered in splotches of deep scarlet. He reached for his face. Dried blood caked it. He had almost forgotten he had been injured in Nocera.

“Lincoln, hurry up. The door!” Moms' voice rang.

“Just a minute, jeez.”

Link knew he needed to hide the wound, either that or endure one thousand and one questions from Mom. His stomach twisted as he unzipped his schoolbag, rummaging through it until he pulled out a half-empty water bottle. He drizzled the water all over his face.

He couldn't understand why he hadn't woken up sooner. Usually, when he would obtain an injury in Nocera, he would jolt awake in the real world, as if he'd just had a bad nightmare. But how he had slept through a beat down from Zidane', he had no idea.

*I must've been so sleep deprived that I didn't feel a thing,*

Link thought.

He grabbed a dirty shirt from his clothes basket and rubbed the blood off his face as best as he could, then positioned his blanket to conceal the bloody sheets on the bed. All the while Mom's relentless knocking continued.

As Link couldn't find Alex anywhere at Baylor's, he had resorted to stick fighting with Zudane'. She wasn't as quick as Alex was, but she was a technical and a more well-rounded opponent. She was completely aware of her surroundings, backing Link into objects, making him circle around so the sun would blind his eyes and then striking.

Out of all Alex's friends, she was by far Link's favourite. He found Winstell to be too withdrawn and self-critical, and Phen's sense of humour rubbed him the wrong way, but Zudane' had this air about her: compassionate, caring, always striving to get the best out of everyone around her.

Most students would refrain from using their Spells around one another and hold their cards close to their chests, saving them for the tournament. But not Zudane'. She'd teach those that wanted to learn her advanced Spells. Go through the Chains over and over with them until they nailed it. To her, this wasn't an academy where the



strong prevailed and the weak got left behind. This was a team, a massive three hundred strong team. And she wanted everyone to excel. Link admired her for that.

“Are you even dressed yet?” Mom shouted through the crack of the door.

*Dressed?* Then it occurred to him: It was a Saturday, no school. *So why the heck is she hammering on my door?*

“Dressed for what?” Link snapped back, finally unlatching the lock.

“Your interview,” Mom said, thrusting the door open angrily, almost taking him out in the process. “Coach Aldridge should be here in . . . .” She glanced down at her faded gold wrist watch. “Twenty minutes. Oh, how time flies when you’re cleaning.” Her gaze lifted straight to Link’s split eyebrow, which in turn made her eyebrows furrow. “What in the—Have you been fighting again?”

“No,” Link said, pausing so he could come up with a believable story. “I split it at practice last night.”

“Since when did you practice on Fridays?” Mom asked as she inched her face closer to his, examining the injury. “Hasn’t it always been Tuesdays and Thursdays?”

“Kenji and I went down to the courts for a shoot around,” he lied. “What’s with the questions?”

“What’s with the attitude?” Mom shot back, scowling. “Just hop in the shower, please.” She cast another glance at his eyebrow, her frown deepening. “I’ll try to patch that up as best I can. Now, have you thought about what you’re going to wear? Personally . . . .”

“Mom,” Link began, but she had spoken over the top of him.

“I’d recommend that dapper maroon dress shirt with the white polka dots you wore with Nadine on Valentine’s Day. Not too casual, but not too overdressed. Just teetering somewhere in the middle.”

“I’ve already cancelled it,” he spluttered before she could get another word in.

Mom scoffed at her son in disbelief, as if he’d just spoken in some foreign language she couldn’t comprehend. “What?”

“I couldn’t find Coach Alford’s—or whatever his name is—number,” he explained, “so I called up NAU directly a few days ago and called it off. They said they’d relay the message to him.”

Mom pursed her thin lips, eying him off suspiciously as if she presumed this was all just a joke. “Stop wasting my time, Lincoln.

Just jump in the shower, will you? I'll start ironing your clothes."

Mom set off towards his cupboard, likely in search of his maroon shirt, but Link clutched her shoulder and stopped her.

"Mom," he said slowly, deliberately, so there was no way she could misinterpret him. "I've already called the college and cancelled."

"Why on earth—" She began, then held a hand to her mouth in shock. "Why—" But the words failed her again. "How could you be so idiotic? First footage emerges of you shouting and knocking over tables at that café, then you go and make the papers with your kerfuffle with Adam. NAU was the only decent college left that was genuinely interested in you, Link! How are you going to get any exposure playing on a college team nobody's heard of?"

"See, that's the thing," he said calmly. "I don't want to play for any colleges."

"What, and you think you can just go straight from high school into the NBA?" Mom shook her head at him in disbelief.

"Highly unlikely, Link. Highly unlikely."

"No, you're not understanding," he said. "I don't want to go to any colleges. *Period.*"

Mom started laughing. Not a pleasant, cheery laugh either. A maniacal “you better be kidding me, Lincoln, or I’m going to kill you” laugh.

“We have poured thousands and thousands of dollars into your education,” she whispered dauntingly, pressing the heel of her palm against her forehead. “Put a roof over your head, for Pete’s sakes your father even gave you his old car. Do you know how many hours he’s—”

“I didn’t ask you—”

“This is your future you’re talking about,” Mom spoke over the top of him as if he hadn’t given this any thought. “If you go through with this, five-ten years from now you’ll-you’ll . . .” She trailed off, then her eyes snapped back to him as if a sudden thought had engulfed her. “You’re coming downstairs with me right now. You’re going to ring the college back up, tell them it was all just a big misunderstanding.” She attempted to grab his wrist, but he jerked it away.

“Mom, stop,” he said, clenching his jaw to stop himself from losing his cool. “I’m really not in the mood for this.”

“Oh, you’re never in the mood for this, are you?” she spat.

“You think you’re the only one mourning, Link? Your father and I are going through the exact same thing you are. So, it’s time you man up and—”

“You have no idea what I’m going through!” Link roared.

“None of you do! And you never will! So just shut-up. *Please.*”

Mom eyed her son up and down in shock, exhaled, and then began pacing around the room to compose herself. She stopped dead in her tracks as she passed his desk.

Link’s cork board was propped against the wall. Covering it from top to bottom was the map of Nocera, decorated with multi-coloured thumbtacks. Sprawled across his desk were photocopied excerpts from the book, smudged notes, and Alex’s detailed illustrations—all his valuable research and detailed planning over the past few months.

Mom reached for one of the thumbtacks that were jammed into the map and pulled it out. The mustard-coloured string Link was using to plot distances between destinations unravelled and dangled helplessly.

“Don’t do that,” he said, seething.

Mom flicked the thumbtack onto his cluttered desk as if it

was a piece of lint. Then she started rummaging through his drawers as if she expected to find drugs. And before Link could stop her, she did. Just not the kind of drugs she was expecting.

“What are these?” Mom asked, holding the half-empty canister of sleeping pills she had plucked out of his sock draw. She began reading the label. “Sleeping pills? Since when do you take sleeping pills?”

Her shrill voice followed him out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

“Did you buy these over the counter or were they prescribed? Link, answer me!” She reached for his arm but he jerked it away. “Are you going to say something? Are you going to talk to me or do you just want me to guess what’s going on inside of that head of yours?”

“Robert,” Mom shouted desperately, as her son rushed down the last few steps two by two, “Robert, stop him.”

“What in the heck is going on?” Dad asked, appearing from the dining room wearing a tan dress shirt and a pair of slim-fitting denim jeans. Immediately, Link recognized he had trimmed his goatee and cut what little hair he had left. He had a fluoro orange

feather duster dangling from his right hand. Mom must have roped him into cleaning.

*As if I didn't feel guilty enough,* Link thought.

Dad scanned his son from head to toe, then turned to Mom and asked. "Why isn't he dressed?" He turned back to Link before she could respond. "Why aren't you dressed?"

"Because Link cancelled his interview," Mom said matter-of-factly.

"No," Dad mumbled, shaking his head. "No."

He kept saying no, as if by him refusing it made it less real. He continued to search his son's face, looking for the truth, but Link couldn't bear to meet his eyes. His gaze was fixed firmly on the front door. But he knew his father wouldn't let him leave without some sort of explanation.

"Is it true?" Dad finally asked, his voice dripping with disappointment.

"Yes," Link said, nodding solemnly. "I was—" He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I was supposed to tell you both earlier. I just . . . I don't know; I just forgot."

*"Just forgot?"* Dad repeated dubiously as he massaged his

jaw and crossed his arms. “Well then, what’s your reasoning? And just a heads-up: this better be good.”

“Yes, Link, enlighten us all with your rationale,” Mom said mockingly from the bottom of the stairs.

Mom’s snide little comment got to him. He turned to face her, his chest heaving like there was suddenly an oxygen shortage in the room.

“OK, Mom. There’s a man in a grey suit that keeps terrorizing me. And using my book—you know, the one Alex and I were working on: *The Book of Nocera*?” Link let out a maniacal chuckle he wasn’t too proud of. “Yeah, well using that as a blueprint he’s created a parallel universe I enter every, *freaking, single* time I fall asleep.”

“So Mom, to answer your question, I’d say my rationale might have something to do with me simultaneously trying to juggle two lives in two worlds. And upon realizing that I couldn’t physically and mentally accomplish either, knowing I’d have to minimize the baggage in one of those worlds, AKA *this one*,” he paused to draw a quick breath. “High school. College. Basketball. You see, I had a realization: Why should I spend my time preparing



for my future in one world when my future is clouded with uncertainty in the other?”

Mom and Dad were both regarding him in horror now. As if a demon had possessed their son and was babbling nonsensical sentences . . . But regardless, Link continued.

“The way I see it I have two options. Option number one—which I’m 99.9 percent sure will result in my death, by the way: I confront Kilydis.” Link let out another dark chuckle, deeper than the last one. He was beginning to scare himself. “And option number two: I don’t challenge him. Which will mean Alex and I will be stuck in Nocera forever, or at least until Kilydis takes over the land and butchers us both.”

A small shriek escaped Mom’s lips. She pressed both her hands to her mouth.

“But in saying that,” Link continued, “no matter what option, I couldn’t live without my little sister being here in the real world, where she’s supposed to be. Knowing I was the reason behind it all, that I had the power to save her, I couldn’t continue on like . . . .” He trailed off on the last words, suddenly finding it hard to speak. “So yeah . . . that’s my reasoning, Mom. ”

Link walked towards the front door. His Mom and Dad made no effort to stop him.

## 23. ALEX

“So, I’ve won, haven’t I?” Alex asked.

Phen’s elbows were resting on the oak table, his head propped up thoughtfully on both hands as he studied the board. His stormy grey eyes darted across the intricately carved wooden pieces, then a smug smile played on his lips. “Oh, my dear Taytora, you still have so much to learn.”

Phen plucked a piece with his slender fingers and then moved it diagonally three squares.

*Right into my trap, Alex thought. Sucker.*

Phen and Alex were in the deserted Great Hall playing a magical board game called The Burning Plains. It was a strategic warfare game which required the players to play commander, controlling four squadrons and leading them to victory against the opposing team's squadrons. The game’s name was based on a massive battle that had taken place between the Dagorians, Kilaydis and Queen Enrah’s race, over a hundred years ago.

Phen had beat Alex the last three games, but to her pleasure, they were becoming more and more evenly matched each time she

played. She didn't want to get ahead of herself, but she was pretty sure she had him beat this game. If she had planned her future moves correctly, that is.

No classes were being held at Baylor's, and there wouldn't be for a few months. It was the official day the fixture of the Golden Gauntlet would be announced. Which meant every student would see who they were versing in the first round and what their betting odds would be. Alex just prayed she and Link weren't pitted against one another—or any of her friends for that matter.

Alex moved one of her carved giants two spaces to her right, hoping she wasn't being too conspicuous in her efforts to bait Phen.

Little did he know Alex was the board games champion in her household. There wasn't a game she could be bested at. Link's girlfriend Nadine was constantly bringing around games every Sunday on family night in hopes of defeating her. But unfortunately for her, as Link was slam dunking at the tender age of twelve, Alex was monopolizing her fellow family members at the age nine.

*If only Winstell could have been there to see this,* she thought. He was always losing to Phen in The Burning Plains. But unfortunately, Link, Zudane' and him were training down in one of

the sectors. As there were no classes at Baylor's until the final match of the Golden Gauntlet, most of the students were training amongst themselves to keep their skills sharp.

Normally, Alex would've been down there training with them, but after her ride with Lioden the day before, she had acquired severe chafe marks on the insides of her legs that would make the most strong-stomached doctor squirm. So, she thought it best she relaxed and recovered with Phen, playing *The Burning Plains* to kill time.

Alex hadn't talked to Lioden much since the whole coming-on-too-strongly ordeal. The ride home from the waterfall was the worst. In between the awkward silences, he kept apologizing for the kiss, which meant Alex had to keep reassuring him it was OK.

Link was right after all. Lioden was just a character in a story she had written. A character that did not exist. Couldn't exist outside of this world. That night when Alex had gone to bed, she had made a long, thought out decision. If she and Link were dead serious about killing Kilydis, then it would have to be a long-term commitment. And she couldn't afford to have any distractions, no matter how

painfully good-looking they were. Alex knew she had to cut Lioden Thyme out of her life.

And as if her boy troubles weren't enough, Alex and Link were still no closer to finding out the identity of Xavier's serpent. It turned out Skemptra was just a loony after all. She had been expelled from Baylor's for trying to gnaw off a student's arm in swordplay class. Alex joked to Link that the rat meat mustn't have been enough to quell her appetite.

"A rather noble effort, but unfortunately for you, my squadron has you surrounded," Phen proclaimed. But as he went to remove one of Alex's pieces from the board, she slapped the back of his hand and clicked her teeth.

"Not so fast," she said, wagging a finger at him as if he were a toddler trying to reach for the cookie jar. "A rather noble effort, but my Ward is still in play, protecting my whole squadron." She couldn't help but smile as she pointed to one of her pieces. "And now, seeing as you've already attacked, I can use my giant to take out these two." She scooped up two of his pieces and placed them off the board.

"Now, have I won?" she asked with a wry grin.

The look on Phen's face was priceless. Alex had never seen someone's face turn that shade of pink before. It was even darker than when Hilsbry was wheezing trying to climb the flights of stairs.

"No . . ." Phenetrest said, barely audible. He cleared his throat and straightened up in his chair, trying to regain some composure. "No, because . . ." He scratched his forehead as his eyes shot from piece to piece, alarmed.

Alex had seen this look a thousand times on family night. Usually, it was followed by her screaming "Uno!" or "Yahtzee!"

But then Phen did something she hadn't foreseen. With his last two remaining pieces, he set his squadron in formation and pressed the attack from both sides, his Mhorokai taking the rear, his gold cloak the front. After he had finished his moves, he interlaced his fingers and smiled at her smugly.

"I'm afraid the battle is over," Phen said. "Don't look so shocked. It's a standard military tactic called the hammer and anvil."

Now Alex was the one who was at a loss for words. Phen had baited her. Lulled her into a false sense of security. And she had walked willingly into his trap. She couldn't even respond; instead, she was scanning the board hurriedly, trying to look for a way he had

cheated. But his moves seemed legit.

*Maybe he had swapped some pieces when I wasn't looking?*

she thought.

“Winstell doesn’t call me ‘Phenetrest the Puppeteer’ for any old reason,” Phen bragged as he stood up and hovered a hand above her head. “Now dance, puppet; dance!”

Just as Alex was about to elbow him in the ribs, Winstell had practically come skidding into the room, his pasty skin glistening with sweat.

“There you two are,” he panted. “The fixture for the Gauntlet is being unveiled. Hurry.” And then he was gone as fast as he had appeared.

Alex and Phen exchanged confused glances.

“Wasn’t there supposed to be a bell to signify the—”

She was cut short by the loud chiming of the academy’s bell.

Phen’s eyes sprung open in excitement. Sensing her opportunity, Alex messed up the board game, toppling over all the pieces with her hands.

“There. Now nobody wins,” she exclaimed as she sprinted for the door.



Phen was right on her heels.

\*\*\*\*

All the students and master mages of the academy had gathered in the main courtyard directly in between Baylor's two feet. Alex wriggled her way through the throng of her smelly peers, attempting to stand on her tippy toes every now and then to catch a glimpse of the giant slab of granite everyone was gawking at. But she was too far away and several feet too short. Her best bet was to sit on the shoulders of someone tall.

*Where is Link when I need him?*

"Tough luck," a boy she knew named Berador said as he patted her on the shoulder.

"Tough luck?" Alex questioned. "What do you mean tough luck?"

But he had disappeared with his group of friends before she could get an answer out of him. Minutes later, the crowd of students eventually thinned out until there were only around fifty of them. Alex managed to shoulder her way to the front of the horde,

squinting as she tried to find her name etched into the stone. There were approximately 300 students at Baylor's, which meant round one would consist of around 150 matches. Her eyes scoured the stone frantically, stopping when she read the name "Deonis."

A wave of relief flooded over Alex. Her brother was facing off against a petite little boy named Geradine who was in her Swordplay class and who had two left feet. Link should be able to exploit his bad footwork in a matter of seconds.

But she knew it wouldn't be wise to underestimate Geradine. Some students liked to hide their abilities in the presence of their peers, only letting them loose when the tournament began. Alex thought it was a smart tactic, seeing as every student was constantly analysing one another.

Her eyes continued to work their way down the wall of granite. She felt like she was about to throw up. *Please tell me I'm not facing Daedrox. Please, please, please.* She had almost peed her pants that day he was bullying Winstell in the corridors.

When Alex eventually found her name, her jaw not only dropped, it felt as if it had unhinged itself, hit the ground, and burrowed into the ground until it reached the planet's core.

Link, Zidane' and Winstell emerged through the crowd then. The pain on their faces said it all. Even her closest friends knew she was a goner. Link approached his sister as the other two stayed back, their eyes watching on apprehensively.

“You all right?” Link asked.

All Alex could do was nod.

*You'd think my bad luck would've run out after being cleaned up by a truck and being rendered comatose, she thought. Apparently not.*

Her round one opponent was Lioden Thyme.

She glanced painfully at the wall again. Lioden was paying two gold pieces to win. The lowest out of all the student's names engraved into the stone. She was paying thirty-six.

Link seemed to be able to read her mind because he said-  
“It's not that bad. Phenetrest is paying two hundred and four pieces, and Winstell is paying two hundred and forty-six.”

“I'm going to get beaten to a pulp,” she whimpered.

“No, you're not,” he said, not sounding the least bit convincing. “I tell you what. We're going to go to the library right now and find all the books we can on Teleporting. We'll find his

weakness; don't you worry."

"We'll never make it into Talox's squad now," Alex sulked. "Deonis and Taytora made it all the way to the finals; I'm going to get kicked out within the first round. If that happens, then we might get separated into different squadrons and—"

"Library," Link ordered. "Leave the thinking to me."

She shook her head. "The library can wait. I need to see him first."

"See who?"

"Lioden."

Her brother pinched the bridge of his nose. "May I ask why?"

"No, you may not," Alex said harshly. "Just meet me in the library."

"Is there something going on between the—"

"Just meet me in the library for goodness sakes!"

It took her a while to find the singer. Alex scoured the rest of the courtyard, Baylor's Belly, the lake and forest sectors. But the place she eventually found him in was the area surrounded by straw dummies. Lioden didn't so much as glance her way as she approached.

Alex's heart was racing, watching as his deft hands performed a Spell with ease. As Lioden finished the final link of the Chain, an arrow of air shot from his hand, leaving a gaping hole in the chest of a dummy thirty feet away. Her throat constricted.

*This kid is a jack-of-all-trades.*

“Seen the fixture by any chance?” Alex asked. She tried to coolly lean against a straw dummy, but it toppled over. She quickly moved away from it before it hit the ground with a thud.

Lioden performed the same Windwielding Spell, this time aiming for a different dummy. Its head flew off and bounced airlessly across the ground like a tumbleweed in an old Western movie. As Alex watched it roll, she couldn't help but to picture it as her own head.

“I did,” is all Lioden could say. He still hadn't glanced at her.

“And?” she asked, drawing out the word expectantly.

“And, I think it's best we don't talk to each other until after our match,” Lioden said.

His words were like a cold icicle to the heart.

“Lioden I—”

“I need to stay focused, Taytora,” he said, turning to Alex

and finally meeting her gaze. His eyes were dripping with sorrow. “And I can’t do that if I . . . Despite how I feel about you, I . . . .” He stopped and then seemed to get angry at himself. “Look, I won’t be going easy on you. I-I can’t afford to. I’ve disappointed Father enough already.”

A steady wind rolled through the sector, blowing a lock of Lioden’s hair in his eyes. He wiped it away with an impatient hand. “Did you come here for a reason?”

“I just wanted you to know that I won’t be holding back either,” Alex said as confidently as she could. “That I’m going to give you everything I’ve got.”

Lioden cleared his throat awkwardly, then wiped away the beads of sweat that were tracing a path through the grime down his face. And then he smiled. That glorious, radiant smile. “Thank you. That makes this a whole lot easier.”

And then his body crumbled into black ash again. Before Alex knew it, he was behind a straw dummy, ripping its head off. And then he had disappeared before the body had fallen. She watched in shock as he vanished and reappeared across the entire sector, punching holes and kicking dummies through the air. In five

seconds, he had wiped out more than ten of them. Alex tried to look as if she was unimpressed by his performance. But her bulging eyes and nervous sweats might have given it away.

“Can you promise me something?” Lioden asked when he reappeared before her, huffing and puffing. He didn’t wait for her to answer. “Promise me after this, things will go back to the way they were before. N-Not after the incident in the cave either.” He paused to catch his breath. “Although that was rather stupid of me—anyway, I’m getting off topic. Before the tournament, I meant to say. Can you promise me that everything will be fine between us afterward? No matter what happens?”

“Only if you can promise me one thing as well?” Alex asked.

“Anything.”

“That you won’t cry to your father after I beat you up.”

And then Lioden laughed for the first time. Not a chuckle either, not a giggle—a hearty, genuine laugh. That day he walked Alex to class he had warned her his laugh was worse than hers. But she had to hear it to believe it. And Alex wished she hadn’t heard it, because she still couldn’t believe it.

Lioden’s laugh sounded like an evil villain’s deep, manic

laughter. As if he had just masterminded a plot to enslave the whole human race and was now celebrating.

“Wow,” is all Alex could say when he had finished. “You, uh, you weren’t joking, were you?”

“Told you it was bad,” Lioden said, fighting off an embarrassed smile. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Taytora, I need to train. And then his body crumbled into the black ash and disappeared.

“I’d advise you to do so as well.” His voice spoke from behind her. He was close. So close Alex could feel his breath on the back of her neck.

“I don’t need training to defeat you, Lioden Thyme,” she said confidently, without turning to face him. “Unlike that family of straw dummies you just massacred, I fight back.”

But after a few seconds when Lioden hadn’t given her a witty reply, she turned to face him, only to find she was the only one in the sector. Her mind wandered.

*How can I defeat someone who makes lightning look like a baby taking their first steps? Link better have scrounged up something good in that library.*





## 24. ALEX

Her body had gone numb with nerves as she waited. She nibbled on her lip as the spectator's distant roars and cheers grew louder from above. Horns blared, and the pounding of their drums amplified, thumping in sync with her racing heartbeat. They were getting restless. It wouldn't be long before she was called forth. Before Alex would have to climb those steps to the arena and face the unpredictable, lightning fast Lioden Thyme.

“Come forth,” a man's coarse voice ordered. “Spread your arms wide. Quick now, girl, don't be afraid.”

The gold cloak had beady brown eyes and a bristling white handlebar moustache. Alex felt all he needed was a top hat and a cane, and he would have been a spitting image of Mr Monopoly. She must've had hysteria, because, despite her nervousness, she giggled at that thought.

Following the man with the ridiculous moustache's demands, Alex thrust both her arms outward. His palm beamed an iridescent white as he hovered it cautiously over her armour, his eyes scrunched in concentration. He was searching for something.

After several minutes, his luminous hand faded, and he began patting Alex down from her feet up. Her face must have given away her surprise because he said:

“Checking for any armour enchantments or concealed weapons. You carrying any banned blood I should know about?”

“Blood?”

“Yes, blood,” the man spat as if she had rocks inside of her head. “Gorlac, bhorgal, and dragon blood vials are banned in the arena. It’s for the spectator’s safety. Think the crowd wants to endure the unpleasant, head-splitting howls of a Squealer, do you?”

That’s when Alex clicked—the branch of magic called Shifting. Bloodshifters would often carry vials of the creature’s blood to later drink and morph into. *Nasty little freaks.*

“I’m not carrying any blood except my own, sir,” Alex said, laughing nervously.

The man’s lips didn’t so much as twitch.

Another gold cloak emerged from the opposite arched door then.

“Valencius,” Alex said, recognizing the guard that had Sherlock Holmed them outside of Iralda’s gates. His blond hair was

tied in a topknot and he was wearing a suit of burgundy leather armour with blood red borders.

“Taytora.” The eagle-eyed man lowered his head respectfully, one hand resting on the pommel of his sword.

“You know my name?” Alex asked, startled.

“I needed to, in order to place a bet on you.”

“You what?”

“I’m a man of my word. I said I would put coin on you if you made it to the Golden Gauntlet.” Valencius smirked. “And here you are.”

“You, sir, have a gambling problem that needs addressing.”

“That I do,” Valencius said, his smirk deepening. He ushered Alex through the next archway and into an armoury.

The wall to Alex’s left was covered from top to bottom with weapons. Longswords, short swords, rapiers, and greatswords—all of them as blunt and dull as her brother’s best friend Kenji.

“Pick one,” Valencius said. “Or two. Whatever your preference.”

Alex stood on her tippy toes and pulled some of the smallest swords she could find off the rack. She practiced with each of the m,

testing out their weight, balance, and their overall comfort. She ended up choosing one that closely resembled a katana, seeing as the light weighted weapon would better compliment the game plan she and Link had devised—and because she also thought samurais were kick-ass.

The drums above were beating faster now, the horns resonating through the room even though she had to be fifty feet below the arena. Alex wondered what the Gauntlet's architects had in store for her up there. It was their job to prepare each of the arenas before every single battle. Only the crowd knew what awaited her. She just hoped there was a body of water she could manipulate. Although Lioden was a natural Waterwielder, Alex felt he had nothing on her insane skills.

*If only Link could be here to keep me calm, she thought.*

He had fought in the match before hers. Alex still didn't know whether he had won or lost yet, seeing as she had been shunned underground for the better part of an hour. She figured he was either in the hands of the academy's Healers, or he was up in the crowd with not a scratch on him, nervously waiting for her to set foot in the arena.

Alex turned to face the armoury's right wall now. It was gleaming with shields. Bronze, wooden, steel-plated, it didn't matter. A shield wasn't part of her game plan. They were too clunky. The Wards Zudane' had been teaching her would be protection enough.

Finally, the wall farthest from her was covered in armour. Some sets were plated, some boiled, and almost all of it worn out and unappealing. Link had made a good choice in picking her snow-white set. Every piece of it had fit like a glove except for the two front airbags.

Alex had originally planned on picking a helmet from this rack for the extra protection, but Link had talked her out of it. Her brother thought she needed all the degrees of vision she could get when facing the sporadic Lioden and wearing a helmet would restrict her sight. It was one of those rare occasions where he was right.

“Ready?” Valencius asked.

Alex nodded.

“Then proceed up the stairs.” The drums quickened from above. Valencius raised his head at the noise. “Your audience awaits you.”

Alex climbed a step and then turned to face him. “You

shouldn't have put any coin on me, you know. Lioden is paying—”

“Taytora,” Valencius interrupted, “Worse odds have been overcome.”

“You actually think I have a chance of winning?”

“I was once a slave from Bomethorg being traded for coppers and pennies. An injured horse had more worth than me. And now . . .” Valencius glanced at his surroundings, a satisfied grin etched on his face, “I am here.”

“Worse odds have been overcome,” Alex whispered, trying to psyche herself up.

As she climbed the flight of gloomy stairs, she sliced at the air in front of her, trying her best to familiarize herself with the new weapon. The higher she climbed, the louder the sounds of the arena erupted. She hadn't even stepped out yet and she could hear the crowd shouting obscenities, whistling and clapping, howling like they were a pack of wolves on top of a mountain.

When she reached the top of the stairs, another gold cloak awaited her. Alex didn't even pay them any mind; her eyes were closed, head lowered, waiting for the loss she knew was imminent. She rubbed her sweaty palms on the outside of her thighs. Another

horn blared. Her body was buzzing with adrenaline. Suddenly she felt like bursting into tears. She knew this wasn't just a friendly match like it was for the other students. She was fighting for her survival. Fighting for a chance to open her eyes in the real world again.

Winning this match was critical if they wanted to be recruited into Talox's squadron. He had shaped Taytora and Deonis into warriors, teaching them advanced Spells only he knew, assisting them through major plot points in the story. Talox was so powerful he even managed to cut off Kilydis' arm. Kilydis regenerated it back, of course, but still, that didn't make the feat any less amazing for Alex.

If she lost against Lioden here, Talox would never see her true potential and would choose another student. And if that happened, the story's plot would be forever out of her and Link's reaches.

Alex steeled herself as the arena doors in front of her parted. The sunlight was what hit her first, blinding her like a car's high-beam on a pitch-black road. Shielding her eyes with a hand, she stepped into the arena, the crowd going into a frenzy as she emerged.



The smell was what hit her second: a mix of soil and wet bark. Alex didn't walk to the middle of the arena right away like all the combatants were supposed to. Instead, she did a complete 360, taking in every aspect of the landscape.

She was standing in a wide-open glade brimming with pine and oak trees. A sea of lush, knee-high grass covered the arena; boulders as big as medicine balls were dotted here and there, and directly in the centre of the green expanse was a swamp riddled with arrow-headed weeds and thick reeds. The biggest tree she had ever seen sprouted from the water, shooting into the sky and threatened to touch the clouds. Its branches stretched out and cast splotches of shade all over the arena.

She gazed up at the crowd in the tiers as she walked towards the giant tree. More than two hundred feet upwards were three tiers containing men, women, and children of all ages clutching betting parchments in their hands, leaning over the safety rails, screaming and spitting into the arena. There had to be over twenty thousand of them. And no doubt Lioden was the favourite of this match.

*There's no point putting their gold on a lost cause like me,*  
she thought.

Positioned all around the arena's three tiers were gold and silver cloaks, standing stoutly on guard. Alex figured they were there to protect the spectators from any wayward attacks from the combatants. She was sure a non-Gifted wouldn't want a stray fireball hurled at them in the stands.

She splashed through the ankle-deep water towards the adjudicator at the foot of the giant tree. He was wearing a long, milk-white robe, its tip soaked in the water. His stone-grey eyes tracked her as she came to a stop in front of him. He had a nose longer than Pinocchio's and wore a silk headband to keep his long silver hair out of his eyes.

Alex knew he'd be observing their battle closely. Winstell had told her it was his job to prevent any deaths and make sure injuries were kept to a minimum. If any of the combatants yielded, or proved unable to continue the fight, only he had the power to step in and call the match off.

She gave her sword a few more practice swings before she spotted Lioden appearing from the other side of the arena. If she thought the crowd was loud before, they went completely berserk this time. She couldn't even hear herself think as they hooted and

whooped at their clear favourite. *Two guesses who they have their gold on.*

Lioden trudged towards her with his head lowered. Alex was shocked to see he was wearing no armour, just a padded emerald green doublet, and a longsword in his right arm.

*Maybe he knows speed is his ultimate weapon, she pondered, so he made himself as light as possible; all the better to zip around the arena at light-speed?*

As Alex watched Lioden advance, she was glad to see that just like her, he looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but there. He couldn't even meet her gaze. *It will all be over soon*, she kept reminding herself, *win or lose it will all be over soon.*

When Lioden arrived, the adjudicator recited the Gauntlet's rules which Alex had heard over a thousand times no thanks to Winstell. She gazed up as the adjudicator talked. Right above Lioden loomed a bronze gong and an hourglass the size of a giant filled with pure white sand. Directly above that were nine withered men and women who she immediately recognized as The Nine. They were all seated in a row of polished wooden chairs with backrests that branched outwards like peacock tails. These nine legendary mages

ran the entire Order of Mist, and if the sand timer ran out and no victor was apparent, it was up to them to determine the outcome of the match.

After the adjudicator had finished his long-winded speech, Alex turned her back on Lioden and headed to the outskirts of the arena. The crowd quieted as she placed one hand on the coarse two-hundred-foot-long stone wall that surrounded the entire arena. As per tradition, both the combatants had to have a hand placed on the stone for the match to commence.

Everything happened at once then. The adjudicator raised both hands in the air. The gong reverberated through the arena. The crowd was out of their seats and roaring at the top of their lungs. The hourglass was turned by two mages. The sand trickled downwards. Alex's throat tightened. The match had commenced.

Gripping the smooth leather hilt of her sword firmly with two hands, Alex edged warily towards the swamp, her head darting from side to side. She knew Lioden was liable to pop out of thin air, so like she had practiced, she used her heightened senses to stay sharp and pick up any potential disturbances in the environment: a change in air current, the crunch of his boots atop the grass, even his

irresistible sage and rose petals scent wafting through the air. She had to be prepared.

Alex circled around the swamp as she approached, glancing around the giant tree to where Lioden was standing when the battle had commenced. She was shocked to see he hadn't moved. For some reason, Lioden was peering up at the crowd. *What's he playing at?*

Lioden didn't so much as glance at her. He stabbed his sword softly into the earth and then let it fall, hilt first.

"I yield" he shouted. Or at least Alex thought he did. She could barely hear him over the deafening screams.

"The match is over," the adjudicator's voice boomed through the arena as if he had a microphone. "Lioden has yielded. Taytora progresses to round two."

The crowd immediately fell silent, whispering and murmuring to one another in confusion. And then they erupted all at once, spitting, booing and throwing their losing betting parchments into the arena. Alex was too stunned to even react. All she could do was stare at Lioden helplessly. But he only gazed defiantly into the crowd. She followed his line of sight and found out why.

A man stood in a sectioned-off part of the stands, scowling at

Lioden; a man who could only have been Winstell and Lioden's father. He wore a silver doublet with patterned golden roses, had Lioden's sandy-coloured hair and chiselled features, but Winstell's round belly and almond-coloured eyes.

The Coinskeeper looked as if steam was about to blow out of his ears. He turned on his heels and stormed off and out of sight, a dozen of what Alex presumed to be his gambling agents and guards scurrying after him.

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Alex tugged the hood of her cloak down as she elbowed and wiggled her way through the throng of people. The air was thick with the stench of ale, dirt, sweat and urine. As she passed the disgruntled spectators, the outcome of the battle was still on everyone's lips. Not one conversation she eavesdropped on was a pleasant one, which was why she couldn't let any of them see her. She knew they would no doubt hold her responsible for losing their gold.

As soon as the match had finished, Alex had returned underground and changed out of her boiled armour. After she had

changed clothes, she took a flight of stairs to the first tier where she was greeted and congratulated by her brother and all her friends.

Phen was the only one missing from the welcoming party. He was having a power nap back at Baylor's before his fight commenced.

After Link had finished bear-hugging her, he told Alex he had breezed through his match almost effortlessly, until the end that was. He had gotten a little overconfident and charged at Geradine, to which his opponent replied by sending a vicious arc of his Spiritwielding energy at her brother. A deep gash had emerged down his forearm. It was nothing the Healers hadn't seen before, though.

Zudane' hadn't even used a single Spell in her match. She overwhelmed her opponent with her swift sword-skills and had him yielding within the first few seconds. Winstell, on the other hand, had to use every Spell in his arsenal to defeat his opponent. The sand timer had run out in the end, but luckily The Nine had named him the victor by a points decision.

Alex didn't stick around for chit-chat, though. As soon as she had found out the outcomes of everyone's matches, she had practically sprinted to the other side of the arena, hoping to find Lioden before he fled. She didn't just have a bone to pick with him;

she had the whole skeletal system.

It wasn't hard to find him; Alex just had to follow the commotion. Lioden was up in the first tier near the north entrance within a circle of iron-clad guards, each of them trying to ward off the hostile crowd as they tossed scrunched-up parchments and shoes in his direction.

“Where’s me gold, ya thief!” a lady shouted. “Give me back me gold.”

“The match was fixed,” another man screamed. “Fixed I tell ya; they planned this from the beginning.”

“There’s no honour in yielding!” a frail man snapped. “None whatsoever! Gutless!”

The guards stopped and stood watch outside of a windowless room as Lioden passed through. They shoved the crowd back, threatening them with force whenever need be. After what felt like an hour to Alex waiting behind the crowd, they disintegrated, most due to losing their voices, others hurriedly rushing off to place bets on the next match.

Her mind was reeling with hundreds of questions as she stood by. *What could Lioden have possibly gained from yielding? He was*



*the favourite to win the tournament, for goodness sakes.* Alex knew she should've been happy, seeing as how she now progressed through to the next round and the toughest competition had been knocked off. But the truth was she felt cheated. She wanted to deserve the victory, win it by her own merit, not have the match handed to her before they had even exchanged blows.

Alex could hear muffled shouting from inside the room. Lioden and another voice were yelling at one another. She could only make out bits and pieces. Was it his father?

“Did you hear them all just then?” The unfamiliar voice bellowed. “They think I planned this. That I made you forfeit so I could take their gold . . . Do you have any idea the position you have now put me in now? . . . Tarnished my reputation . . . How could you be so naïve? You are no son of mine, that’s for sure.”

“I told you I wanted no part in this,” Lioden screamed back. “Forcing me was going to get you nowhere.”

The rest of it could barely be made out. After the screaming match was over, Lioden’s father shoved the door open and stormed away, taking to a flight of stairs that lead up towards tier two. The guards outside the door sprung to attention, their metal ringing as

they joined the sides of the Coinskeeper and thwarted off the aggressive passers-by.

Lioden emerged from the room tentatively then. Alex was pleased to see that just like her, he had some common sense, and was wearing a loose-fitting hooded cloak. She had originally planned on throwing Lioden against the wall and letting loose, but after listening in on the scolding he had received, she simmered herself down. She knew a thing or two about fatherly scoldings.

When Lioden's turquoise eyes caught sight of Alex from underneath his hood, his body immediately turned rigid.

"Shall we go somewhere private?" he asked nervously.

She agreed. Lioden took her all the way up to tier three, went through a few deserted passages, then led her to a vast, varnished balcony overlooking the city instead of the arena. The area was practically deserted except for a few men and women wearing ribbons in their hair, embroidered doublets, and patterned tunics. They all reeked of wine, perfumes, and upperclassness. They didn't pay Alex or Lioden any notice as they ventured towards a mahogany table with hand-carved chairs.

Alex twisted in her chair and gazed out at Iralda. The radiant

sun was breaking upon the capital, every structure looking as small as Lego buildings, every nook and cranny of the city's streets on display. As there were no cameras readily available, Alex settled on taking a mental image of the jaw-dropping sight.

*If Lioden wasn't the Coinskeeper's son, she thought, I'd bet my bottom dollar he wouldn't have had access to this area.*

A gentle breeze tugged at both their cloaks as two serving girls dressed in plum-coloured silks approached her and Lioden with a platter overflowing with food and drinks. Lioden dismissed them politely, even though Alex was craving a cold goblet of water to give her dry mouth some moisture. She turned to Lioden and glared at him, prompting him to begin.

"Where should I begin?" Lioden asked, wiping a lock of hair out of his eyes. But the persistent winds kept blowing it back.

"Oh, I don't know," Alex said, scowling at him, "preferably the part where you forfeited the match?"

Lioden pursed his lips and glanced at Iralda in thought; he then turned to her suddenly. "Did you ever wonder why I was in the Sleeping Willow that night you passed through Vardis?"

Alex shook her head, sensing a story coming on. It hadn't

even crossed her mind as to why someone as renowned and wealthy as the Coinskeeper's son would be dwelling in an inn outside of Iralda.

“I was on the run,” he said.

“From who?”

“My father and his men,” Lioden explained, looking longingly at the capital again. “I was planning on getting as far south as I could, to the Kingdom of Meadows. To dine with the Mhorokai, study their music and culture, their way of life. They say, among other things, that the Mhorokai are the best musicians.” He chuckled, the dimple on his left cheek showing. “But kind of unfair when they have four arms, don't you think?”

“If you were on the run then why did you come to the academy?” Alex asked, trying to get him back on topic.

Lioden stirred in his chair uncomfortably. “I was enrolled at Baylor's before I met you. But the truth is it was a future forced upon me by my father. Why would I want to join the Order of Mist? Partake in a war that has butchered thousands of innocent lives? And all over what? Kilyadis and Queen Enrah having a family dispute?”

Lioden paused and took a composing breath. “I tried

everything to get myself kicked out of the academy. Using magic outside of class; not studying or partaking in the lessons. But seeing as my father is the Coinskeeper, and has webs all over Baylor's, that made it impossible for me to sabotage my place in the academy. So, seeing as I couldn't get myself thrown out, I did the next best thing: I ran."

Lioden pursed his lips together, opening his mouth then shutting it. Like he was too nervous to say what he was thinking. "When I saw you at Vardis, I—" He let out a deep sigh, then bit his bottom lip. "This is what I struggled telling you that day in the cave. If I haven't already scared you away, this will sure do the trick."

"Tell me, Lioden," Alex said, trying to sound empathetic. But the truth was she was dreading what he was about to say.

"At the Sleeping Willow, I overheard your brother talking about the Golden Gauntlet. So, I assumed you would be, uh . . . ."

Her eyebrows furrowed as she came to the realization. "You followed me to Baylor's?"

"Not followed in the true sense," Lioden said, chuckling nervously. "I more or less just happened to be at the same academy you had intentions of joining."

Alex's stalker radar was going berserk at that moment.

"Why?" she asked. "Why follow a random girl back to the academy you had just run away from?"

"I can't say."

"I deserve answers."

Lioden's face relented. "Because when I inevitably age and possess a face as leathery as Master Nenwir's, I don't want to look back at that moment with regret. I believe life is one big, harmonious song, and if we don't open our ears and truly experience every melody, every chord, every lyric, we are just cheating ourselves."

"You didn't answer my question," she pointed out, trying to look unimpressed but not quite pulling it off.

"I didn't?" Lioden asked.

"You didn't."

"You were a note I couldn't bear to let slip away," Lioden said without a moment's pause.

Lioden's confession, as cheesy as it was, had drawn the air out of her lungs, making it difficult for her to speak. "B-But didn't you think my brother and I were lovers?"

"Call me crazy," Lioden said as he bit his bottom lip, "but I

had a feeling you two weren't destined for each other. I had never witnessed two 'lovers' fight as much as you and your brother did."

Alex folded her arms as she gave Lioden daggers. He could try, but no amount of smooth words could simmer her down.

"So why did you yield?" she asked, trying to get to the crux of the matter.

"I could say I yielded as the ultimate act of defiance against my father," Lioden said, lifting his eyes from the table to find her. "But then I'd be lying. Because my real reasoning was I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I harmed you."

"Why, because I'm a girl?" she blurted.

Lioden looked genuinely taken back. "No, of course not. Because I . . . ." He paused and scratched the tip of his nose. "Because I have feelings for you, Taytora."

Alex's throat constricted at his words. Admittedly, she had known this moment would come. Sure, she was new to the whole "flirting" thing, but she wasn't oblivious to it entirely. She had seen enough rom-coms in her time to learn a thing or two. And she knew she and Lioden had definitely been flirting since the very first day in Vardis. But even if she had predicted this moment would come, she

was nowhere near prepared for it.

Alex was glad the hood of her cloak concealed most of the shock on her face. She needed to get off this topic ASAP. She was supposed to be cutting this boy out of her life, not making him fall for her. But then again, Alex was still a bit lost how exactly she made him fall for her.

She wasn't tall or slender like the girls she had seen swoon over him; her hair wasn't silky and her skin wasn't flawless. Either this guy was one of those rare unicorns that could see past a girl's looks and actually fall for her personality, or someone had dared him to court her. Alex hoped it was the former.

As Alex dwelt on everything Lioden had said, a realization suddenly struck her, making her hairs bristle.

“So, you made me train every waking second of the day, in preparation for a fight that would never happen?”

“Not exactly,” Lioden answered, smiling at her with that lone dimple. “You could say that, in a way, I was preparing you for your round-two opponent.”

“Or,” she snapped, “you could say that you were manipulating me.”



“What do you—”

“You could have told me about your little plan, Lioden.”

“Well, to be fair, we weren’t exactly on speaking terms,”

Lioden said. “And if I did tell you, could you honestly say you would have trained as hard?”

As much as Alex hated to admit it, Lioden did have a point. The last week of training had been so strenuous she had barely eaten or slept in preparation for their match. Muscles had emerged on her body she didn’t even know she possessed.

“I hate you,” she said playfully. “You know that?”

“Oh, I’m well aware,” Lioden said, flashing his teeth. “Now, how about we drink some win—Some iced tea,” he quickly corrected. “In celebration of your marvellous victory.”

“You call that marvellous?”

“Well, you did defeat the favourite in record time,” Lioden said as he beckoned a serving girl to their table. “A spectator said so, right before he hurled a chicken carcass at my head.”

## 25. LINCOLN

Link rolled to the side, narrowly missing one of the Velekai's barbed tails as it came spearing down into the mud beside him.

Leaping to his feet, he wiped the specks of dirt from his face and darted back ward from his attacker. The creature's four eyes—cloudy as a blind man's—tracked him as he circled around it warily.

The Velekai was covered in a golden shell that shone like polished armour; the perfect camouflage for them as they were native to the Saadarok Desert. Behind its ghastly pincers were several rows of sharp, uneven teeth. The kind of teeth that looked like they could grind glass into powder. And then there were its tails. It had five of them, each one extendable and retractable like Inspector Gadget's limbs, each one as thick as a fire hose and tipped with a spear-headed barb.

Link was in the second round of the tournament, and he was fighting Athuros the Shapeshifter. He had also just missed his one and only opportunity. There had been a small window in which he could have attacked, but no sooner had the gong sounded, Athuros had distracted him with a weak Windwielding Spell. By the time

Link had projected his Ward and deflected the attack, Athuros had already whipped out a vile brimming with Velekai's blood. He had chugged the whole thing before Link could stop him. In a matter of seconds, Athuros had gone from an introverted, harmless child, to a sleekly armoured, nightmare inducing abomination.

As Link had advanced pigheadedly, one of the Velekai's—Athuros'—spear-headed tails surged straight through a gap in his plated armour and burrowed its way into his left shoulder. The pain blistered through his body in waves, and he could still feel the hot blood sticking to his woollen undergarments. But Link had known that however unbearable the injury was, as long as he survived the match in one piece, the Healers could repair the damage. He was just thankful the wound hadn't caused him to wake up from his sleep. But then again, that might have had something to do with the nitrous oxide he had sucked in before going to bed in the real world.

Link had bought a box of whipped-cream chargers online which were filled with the gas. The chargers were supposed to be used as an agent in a cream dispenser, but Link had other intentions for them. Before every one of his matches in the Gauntlet, he had

been strategically timing his sleep cycles in the real world and using the laughing gas as an anaesthetic. That way he could sleep through any of the injuries he obtained. The last thing he needed was to be woken up mid-battle, and then struggle to get back to sleep. The anxiety of not knowing whether you were about to die or not would be enough to keep anybody awake.

The midday sun glared down on the arena, a giant blazing fireball levitating in the pale blue sky. They were fighting in a field of knee-high grass with dunes of sand scattered here and there. To Link's right was a steep cliff that closely resembled a giant tooth, and to his left was dense vegetation and unnatural, thick vines that climbed up the wall of the arena like anacondas trying to escape a deep pit.

The Velekai, Athuros, circled Link, skittering through the long blades of grass, pincers clicking together in excitement. His four tails waved menacingly above his body, razor-sharp barbs glistening in the sunlight.

Although Link hadn't planned on the match lasting this long, he had prepared for almost every possible twist and turn this battle could produce. Winstell had given him a heads-up about Athuros'

sole transformation that day they met him in the Great Hall, so Link had flicked through the Bestiary of Nocera and learned all he could about the Velekai before the match.

The creature had one chink in his armour, and he planned to exploit it. He just needed to keep himself alive in the meantime.

Link repositioned his open-fronted helm as the Velekai scurried after him, the long grass parting before it like the Red Sea, its countless pairs of stubby legs moving hastily. The crowd gasped as four of the creatures five extendable tails shot after him. Link rolled his shoulder to avoid the first tail, sidestepped to avoid the second, ducked to avoid the third, but the fourth smashed him square in the chest.

The force of the tail strike caused him to stumble backward and nearly twist his ankle in a sloping bunker of sand behind him. But other than the attack putting him off balance and a tiny dent in his chest plate, Link was left unscathed. Although the plate armour limited his movement dramatically, it protected his vital organs, for which he was extremely thankful. They weren't called vital organs for any old reason.

Link tossed his weapon carelessly to the side. For what he

was planning, he wouldn't need a sword. When his blade had thumped into the sand, the crowd gasped as one, murmuring to one another as if they were discussing his reasoning.

Not wanting to wait for the Velekai to bombard him with another flurry of tails, Link steeled himself and charged straight at it, flicking up grains of sand behind him with each stride. As he ran, he called upon the Eternal Source and let it seep into him as if the energy had been injected directly into his veins.

The invigorating power pulsed through him, increasing his speed, attuning his senses, making time steady as if everything was a scene from a movie playing and someone had clicked the slow-motion button. Athuros skittered forwards through the grass to meet Link, but as his pincers attempted to sink into his opponent's flesh, Link rolled harmlessly underneath them, pressing his back to the earth.

He was directly below the Velekai's exposed abdomen, the only part of its body that wasn't armoured. Knowing he only had a few seconds to capitalize, Link performed the necessary Chain, delved deeper into the Source, and then shot both arms up. A jet of sizzling fire ignited from his palms and broke upon Athuros' belly.

Link held the Spell for as long as possible, straining, parting his Gates and drawing as much as the mystical energy as his body would allow. When he couldn't keep the inferno going any longer, his arms dropped down in exhaustion.

He rolled on his side as he watched the Velekai click and hiss as it scurried away, its pincers snapping together in anger. The spectators were out of their seats, their overjoyed cheers thundering through the arena as they watched on.

The rows of the creature's stubby legs buckled; its screeches of agony barely audible over the ecstatic crowd. The Velekai slowly shrank, shrivelling into a patch of sand like a dying arachnid. Right before Link, Athuros' body distorted and twisted. His four eyes turned into two, his pincers into arms and legs, his gold shell flaking away to reveal pale skin. When the transformation was complete, nothing was left but a naked and whimpering boy with his knees tucked to his chest.

Link's armour clamoured as he got to his feet and ran.

Athuros' eyes sprang open upon his approach. Link took off his helmet and knelt by the boy's side. Athuros flinched and scurried backward.

“I yield, I yield!” the boy shouted, his hands outstretched defencelessly in front of him. “No more! No more!”

Even though Athuros’ body was covered with a layer of sand and sweat, it wasn’t difficult to see the red burn marks all over his belly and chest. The wounds were already beginning to boil. But as horrid as the injury was, Link couldn’t seem to look away.

He was on the verge of telling Athuros he meant him no harm, but before he could, a squadron of six Healers shouldered their way past him. They were all wearing silver robes with a regal blue handprint embroidered onto the backs. They placed him gently on a white-clothed stretcher and took him out of the arena. The crowd showed no sympathy for the child; they screamed and shouted as if Link had just shot the game-winning three-pointer in double overtime.

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Wisps of pink, luminescent energy rose from the Healer’s hand. She hovered it an inch away from Link’s injured shoulder as she closed her eyes in concentration. She had curly eyelashes, messy



mocha-coloured hair that stopped at her ears, and a pair of lively blue eyes that could brighten up anyone's day. Anyone's day but Link's, that was. Now the adrenaline had subsided, the throbbing pain in his shoulder was making it unbearable for him to even think.

The Healers' chamber was dank and depressing, positioned directly underneath the arena and filled with whimpering and gloomy students. In the middle of the room, twin hearths blazed away, lighting the narrow chambers with a dim, orange glare. The Healers' silver robes rippled through the air as they hurriedly moved from bed to bed, working their mysterious magic on the newly admitted, or checking up on the long-term patients who had suffered severe injuries.

Flesh wounds were relatively easy to heal, but anything beyond that (like broken bones, for instance) required a combination of time and complex alchemies. Some of the wretched elixirs and potions the Healers had brought near Link had caused him to gag on the smell alone. But even worse than the foul-smelling liquids the Healers had conjured up was the maddening presence of a man that could make even the sanest person turn ballistic: Xavier.

He was lurking by Link's bedside with a wry grin etched onto

his face, sprinkling dry comments about his injury whenever he saw fit. Link had been giving him the silent treatment since he had first appeared in the chamber with a puff of swirling black smoke.

Link dared not to interrupt his Healer for fear she'd break her focus. So, he just sat awkwardly as she literally worked her magic. An ear-deafening wail came from the far end of the chamber. He glanced over to find four Healers working in tandem on a boy. A whole lot of broken bones, Link gathered.

*Looks like I got off easy,* he thought.

In the bed, directly beside the howling boy, was Athuros. Two pairs of luminescent hands hovered over his belly and chest, trying to mend the burned and boiled skin. Tears streamed down his cheeks, his face contorted in pain.

Link kept trying to remind himself that what he had done, he had done for his sister's sake. That none of this was real, just an intricate and elaborate world Xavier had constructed from his and Alex's story and drawings. That he had done what was needed for him to advance to the next round and inch closer to defeating Kilaydis. But as he watched Athuros squirm and writhe in pain, Link was having a hard time convincing himself.

After several minutes of nervous waiting, he peered down at his shoulder, only to find it was still as bloody and gory as it had been when they had first admitted him. The girl with the lively blue eyes had turned away from Link and was focusing her attention on another injured combatant.

Just as Link was about to ask the Healer if she knew what she was doing, or if today was her first day, a tingling sensation coursed throughout his body like a pleasant sugar rush. That feeling didn't last long, though. A pain like no other ensued. As if someone had just poured vinegar into his wound followed by a squeeze of lemon juice and a pinch of salt.

Link's body recoiled and writhed in agony as the pain washed over him. He attempted to clutch his injury, but the Healer grabbed him firmly by the wrist and stopped him. She was smiling at him, almost as if she was amused at his thrashing about.

"Look," she whispered, glancing down at the injury.

Link followed her gaze and found that all was left of his wound was a pool of dried blood. Like the injury never existed. After nearly a month at Baylor's, you'd think magic would have lost its wow-factor by then. But he found that every new Spell he had

learned or seen proved to be as mind-boggling as the first.

The Healer turned her back on Link and focused on the next student before he had a chance to say thank you.

Xavier was smiling to himself, a cigarette dangling out of his mouth like E. T.'s glowing finger. "Pain is definitely not a good look on you."

"Neither is grey on you," Link shot back, not being able to help himself.

Xavier looked down at his suit, blew a plume of smoke into the air, and then flashed a twisted smile. "Contrary to popular belief, the world isn't all black and white, Hunter."

Before Link could retort, Alex had come rushing into the Healing chamber and straight to his bedside. Her face was red and flushed, sweat dripping down her forehead as if she had run across the arena to see him. At first, Link thought she was going to congratulate him on his victory, but immediately he could tell something else was on her mind. She was chewing her bottom lip, her eyes dancing around the room in a panic. Link's heartbeat quickened.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice strangely coarse.

“Right before your fight with Athuros . . .” Alex trailed off, looked up at the ceiling, and then took a deep breath. “Daedrox fought before you.” Her eyes met his then, and he was shocked to find they were misty, filled with fear.

“He’s the serpent, Link. You were right all along. I should’ve known. We should have focused our att—”

“What? How do you know?” Link asked, sitting up in his bed. “How can you be so sure?”

The student with the broken bones let out another howl of agony, the sound echoing through the chamber. *Could you suck it up, just for a few minutes?*

“Because when he stepped out into the sandy arena, he was . . .” Alex said, her bottom lip trembling, “He was wearing a full suit of armour.”

“And?” he said, confused as to what a full suit of armour had in relation to a serpent.

“His full helm was fashioned into the head of a cobra, Link.”

*There’s my answer.*

“And that’s not all,” Alex said, her voice breaking. “As soon as the match started he performed this advanced Spell.” She made a

wavy motion with her hand. “Stones, grass and grains of dirt rose from the ground and formed into a giant serpent—”

Alex was interrupted by a distressed roar from the boy with the four Healers surrounding him. Link knew it was awful, but he wanted nothing more than to muffle his mouth with a pillow at that point.

“Formed a giant serpent,” Alex continued. “It wrapped itself around Daedrox’s opponent and constricted, L-L-Like he was a mouse it was trying to suffocate,” She pointed at the student who was writhing on his bed in agony, the source of all the noise. “H-He was the mouse. I should have listened to you at the river, Link. Daedrox is the serpent!”

Alex’s words weighed Link down as if gravity had just multiplied itself tenfold. He glanced over at the twin hearths, expecting them to have sizzled out. The chamber felt as if it had suddenly dropped to minus thirty degrees.

Link tried to look on the bright side: At least now they had a fair hunch of who the serpent was. Now they could focus on devising a plan to defeat him. *That’s if there is one.* Daedrox was near unbeatable in their Earthwielding class, and in Advanced Swordplay,

there weren't many that could stand toe-to-toe with him without looking like a bruised apple afterward. But as certain that Daedrox was the serpent as Link was, he needed a definitive answer from a certain somebody to quell his suspicions.

He rounded on Xavier. "Rather coincidental you just happened to pop up right before Alex came in, don't you think?"

Xavier tipped his fedora hat up slightly and then scratched the top of his head. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about, kid."

"Is he your character?" he snapped. "Is Daedrox the serpent?"

Link spared a glance over at Alex who was waiting patiently, her lips pursed together. She knew the deal by then. Whenever Link spoke to Xavier, she stayed silent; when he had disappeared he'd relay what had been said to him.

"Hunter, my boy," Xavier said, inspecting his fingernails, cigarette still dangling from his mouth. "You had your chance. But I'm afraid things have already gotten bleak."

"What do you mean?" he asked, piping up.

"That boy over there," Xavier said as he took a puff and inclined his head to the student with the broken bones, "you're

looking into Alex's future. Winstell fights Daedrox next in round three. Never gambled a day in my life, but even I know a lopsided match when I see one. Your sister, Shannon, or whatever the unisex suit-wreckers name is, fights a student that has somehow weaselled his way through to the third round by sheer luck. If I had any money—" He emptied his pants pockets which were full of lint and strands of hair. "Which I don't, I'd be putting it on that little pocket rocket sister of yours to win. Which means . . . " Xavier blew cigarette smoke steadily out of his nose like a dragon, then cast Link a sidelong glance. "Your sister will be facing off against my character very, very soon. And I can guarantee you he won't be taking the match lightly."

Link's gaze found Alex's unsuspecting eyes at that moment. He pictured relaying the news to her, her crumbling into pieces, sobbing hysterically. She didn't deserve this. She had gone through enough trauma than to have to face Xavier's monstrosity Daedrox.

"Change it," he told Xavier. "Change it. Make Daedrox lose to Winstell."

"Tut-tut," Xavier said. "Changing someone's destiny isn't so straightforward, Hunter, my boy."



“*Change it,*” he repeated. “I know you can. Hell, make me verse Daedrox if you want.”

“I can’t,” Xavier said, shaking his head like a stubborn child. “It’s already set in stone . . . like literally; the match fixture is already set in the stone. Didn’t you see it?”

“You created a character for goodness sakes, and you can control the weather whenever you damn well feel like it. Not to mention you created this entire world. So, don’t—”

“I never get why people say that.”

“Huh?”

“Not to mention—” Xavier said. “But then they go ahead and contradict themselves by saying the thing they weren’t supposed to.”

“Don’t pretend like this is out of your capabilities,” Link said, disregarding his attempt at changing the subject. “All I’m asking you is that you let me verse him. *Please.*”

Link added the last word on futilely. He didn’t care if he was begging. The thought of his little sister going up against someone that had to be over three times her body weight made him shudder. Better him than her.

“Admittedly, I had toyed with the idea of having you verse

him, kid,” Xavier said, “but then my brilliant mind conjured up something better. I said to myself, I said, ‘Xavier, imagine how heart-wrenching it would be for Hunter watching his own little sister get terrorized by a two hundred and ninety-five pound Sasquatch-looking assassin. All the while knowing full well he could do nothing but watch on, completely powerless.’”

Xavier looked at Daedrox’s latest victim from across the chamber. The Healers were now trying to pour a bowl of thick, green broth down his throat.

“I just hope your sister is as fast a mouse as Speedy Gonzales for her bones’ sake, that is. Or else—” Xavier took the cigarette from his lips and snapped it in half, making a cracking sound as he did.

## 26. ALEX

Originally, Alex had thought hospitals were her least favourite place in the world. That was, until she had set foot in a Healer's chamber. There were no curtains to separate the patients and give them privacy—in fact, privacy was practically non-existent. The bedridden students would relieve themselves in a chamber pot without so much as batting an eyelid. And no air circulation meant the room was dank with the smell of warm sweat, blood, and worst of all—excreted body fluids.

Alex was sprawled out in an uncomfortable wooden chair to the right of him, Zudane' slumped in a chair to his left. Dark circles were underneath Zudane's eyes from lack of sleep, her usually tight braids loose and frizzy. Alex wondered if that's how exhausted she looked as well.

He was squirming in sheer agony again, his fingers feebly gripping the woollen sheet beneath him as his body convulsed with the waves of pain.

"It's OK, Winstell," Alex whispered, wiping away a strand of curly hair that was stuck to his forehead, "just hang in there, buddy."

Thick bandaging covered him from head to toe, splints of wood tied to his right forearm and left leg to align his broken bones as they healed. Zudane' had told Alex the Healers had removed a fist-sized organ from Winstell's lower ribcage—she was in the middle of training when that had happened. The organ must have been his spleen. Alex assumed Daedrox ruptured it when his serpent constricted around Winstell.

As she watched Winstell shake uncontrollably, Alex wondered if this was how Link felt when he was by her bedside, watching over her in the real world: powerless. Winstell turned his head to face Alex, his almond eyes looking straight at hers, but he was so delirious with pain he didn't seem to recognize her.

“Failure,” Winstell mumbled under his breath. “I'm useless.”

A Healer with a crooked nose and matted silvery hair approached Winstell. She was carrying a clay bowl of mushy green liquid in both hands. He turned his head away reluctantly from the sight of the bowl, like a child being forced to eat his vegetables.

They had been giving him the elixir three times a day to speed up the recovery of his broken bones. Luckily Alex wasn't the one injured, because if the stomach-turning smell was anywhere near

as bad as the taste, she would dry heave as soon as the concoction touched her lips. The liquid looked like a bowl of thick, spoiled milk someone had poured a bottle of green dye into and smelt like Link's basketball jersey after an intense game—Link was always gagging the family out on the car ride home from the basketball arena.

Winstell tried to swipe the bowl away with his good hand, but the Healer was too quick for him, pulling it out of his reach.

“Now, now, Winstell,” she croaked, “stop with that foolishness.”

Alex restrained him by the wrist as she pressed the bowl to his lips. Winstell finally relented, parting his teeth to take a few gulps then scrunching his face in disgust.

“Thataboy,” the Healer said with a hearty smile. “Now, you rest up.”

“I have no choice, do I?” Winstell groaned.

Even though he would now be entering a stupor, Winstell still had his wits about him. He was exactly right. The green gloppy elixir worked like an anaesthetic, blunting the pain almost entirely, but at the same time, it would be mending his bones quicker than any doctor could've dreamed.

It was fascinating for Alex watching the Healers go about their business. Obviously, they didn't have the theoretical know-how nurses and doctors had back in the real world, but they made up for it by having a deep understanding of the human anatomy only the Eternal Source could grant them. As their hands hovered over their patient's bodies, they were practically walking CT scans, x-rays, MRI machines, and heart rate monitors. All a hospital's machinery, gadgets and gizmos combined into one.

"Sorry, Father," Winstell grumbled, "I know I should have . . . I'm sorry." The elixir was notorious for bringing about unfiltered thoughts.

As Alex watched Winstell's eyelids closing reluctantly, her mind dwelt back to the gruesome match. It was as if Daedrox was possessed. No sooner had the gong sounded, Daedrox had performed an elaborate Chain, beckoning a serpent compiled of mud, stones and reeds to arise from the swamp they were fighting in.

Winstell had futilely tried to cast a Ward as he backtracked. The serpent, as thick as sewer pipes, slithered its way across the arena, coiling around him and then tightening its body with one sickening crunch. If it wasn't for Winstell's Ward shielding the brunt

of the impact, Alex knew he wouldn't have survived.

But the thing that infuriated her the most was Daedrox didn't stop. He knew he had Winstell beat, but he showed no mercy, refusing to call off his serpent. Daedrox had stood there stoutly, one arm outstretched with his fist clenched, a devious smile covering his face, willing his serpent to inflict more pain. Daedrox was every bit as maniacal as Xavier.

*Like monster like creator, she thought.*

The adjudicator had intervened then, hitting Daedrox with a weak Spiritwielding Spell to break his concentration. The serpent had lost its form then, a mass of reeds, stones, and mud falling into the swamp with a splash. Winstell had teetered, and then had fallen face first into the marsh, unconscious.

As Alex watched on, she was so fuelled by rage she was tempted to jump from the tier and into the arena. But seeing as the tiers were two hundred feet high and the landing would more than certainly kill her, she avoided the temptation.

Besides, she would be versing the colossus in the next round. She just needed to be patient. It was funny: From the day she had laid eyes on Daedrox when he had walked into Baylor's Belly, he

had evoked a fear like no other in her. His whole demeanour had frightened her. His placid face, short-kept mohawk. Those fiery, amber eyes of his that felt like he had Superman's heat ray ability when he met your gaze.

But now when Alex thought of him, all that had vanished. Her fear had been clouded by anger, and she was driven like never before. Driven to crush him, squash him like he did to Winstell. Inflict so much pain on him he wouldn't be able to eat solid food for months.

All throughout elementary, middle and high school, Alex had suffered at the hands of bullies. Due to her pale skin, for as long as she could remember her nickname had always been "the ghost." Whenever she'd try talk to a student, most would pretend like they couldn't hear or see her. Some would spin around and ask, "Did you feel that? Is someone there?" Some days she felt like there was no escape from the torment. Like her mere existence was an inconvenience to the world. Those days were always the worst.

But now she had the power to fight back. A chance to avenge Winstell. And she knew she couldn't let that opportunity go to waste. Especially seeing as she was part responsible for his condition.



She and Zudane' had tried to tell him he stood a chance. They had helped Winstell through his training, taught him how to expand his Wards and bolstered his defensive Earthwielding techniques. They had even taught him a few basic offensive Spells to try and catch Daedrox off guard. They were responsible for giving Winstell false hope.

*He should have done a Lioden and yielded as soon as the match had commenced,* she thought.

“You all right?” Zudane' asked.

Alex hadn't even realized her fingers had gone white gripping the armrests of her chair. She couldn't help it. Whenever she thought of Daedrox, she was filled with a bubbling anger like no other.

“I'm fine,” she lied. “I just . . . I don't know; I just wish I had told him to yield.”

“You and I both,” Zudane' said as she held Winstell's hand, tracing circles in his palm with her thumb. “He was doing so well with his training, I just . . . .” She exhaled, her remorseful eyes finding Alex's. “He wasn't ready. We should have known that.”

Link and Phen entered the chamber in a ruckus then, earning

scorching looks from most of the Healers. They both approached the foot of Winstell's bed. Link had been devising up strategies to defeat Daedrox as soon as round four's fixture had been announced, which meant he had barely had time to see Winstell. Besides, they were never close friends. Link was always trying to distance himself from the other students. Never wanting to get too involved with people who were just "characters in a book"—as he so eloquently put it.

But as for Phen, he didn't have an excuse for not seeing Winstell. Was he too afraid to witness him in this state? Alex figured some people reacted differently in dire situations. Her mom was a complete clinger. When Alex had her appendix removed, her mom had taken a full month off work to care for her daughter. Maybe Phen was just scared and was trying to distance himself from the situation? Still, Alex found it odd.

Phen and Winstell had practically merged into Siamese twins those past few months. They were in all of each other's basic classes, spent most their Sundays together, and played *The Burning Plains* until their fingers had calluses from moving the wooden pieces. It should have bothered Alex more that they were spending a lot of time with each other, especially considering Winstell was her first

friend at the academy. But Alex had always been a good sharer, and the truth was, she and Zudane' were starting to become close friends also.

Alex had been moved into Zudane's Advanced Swordplay class a month before the tournament started, which meant they spent a lot more time with one another. But Alex suspected it was their intense Sunday training sessions that was bringing them closer together—when she wasn't spending them with Lioden.

Zudane' challenged Alex in ways no master mage could, teaching her Spells way beyond her skill level, shouting at her like a boot camp instructor when she felt like giving up. And Alex liked to think she did the same for Zudane'—except the yelling part. Her voice couldn't go higher than a whisper without straining her vocal chords.

Link rested a hand on Alex's shoulder as he glanced at Winstell painfully. Phen, on the other hand, couldn't even look at his close friend. He was twiddling his thumbs, his grey eyes trained on the ceiling as if he thought if Winstell were out of sight, then he'd be out of mind.

“Mereen is ready,” Link whispered.

Alex nodded slowly and stood up, leaning over and wiping a sheen of sweat from Winstell's forehead with the sleeve of her tunic.

“Are you coming?” she asked Zudane’.

Zudane’ was still absentmindedly tracing figures in Winstell’s palm with her thumb. She raised her head and smiled sympathetically at the three of them.

“I think I’m going to stay here a while, if that’s all right with you lot?”

“Of course it’s all right,” Alex answered.

Link and Phen were already walking towards the door.

“Fellow grasshopper,” Zudane’ said as Alex was about to walk away. “I want you to pulverize Daedrox. Make him wish he never set foot at Baylor’s.” She looked up at her then, her eyes hopeful and expectant. “Can you do that for me?”

“I was already planning on it,” Alex said with a wry smile.

But as she followed Link and Phen through the door and up a staircase that led to the arena’s outer perimeter, Alex couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed by the expectations of her fellow students. Everyone wanted her to take out the red-haired Bigfoot. Partly because he was a, if not *the*, favourite to win the tournament, but

mostly because they didn't want to be the next victim of his strangling serpent.

The pressure was so crippling Alex was even beginning to question herself. Sure, she wanted to pin a picture of Daedrox's face to a dartboard and hurl away. But did she have a genuine chance of defeating him? He hadn't made it this far through the tournament by sheer luck. He had hospitalized every one of his opponents, and he was Xavier's serpent, for crying out loud!

On the other hand, Alex's first opponent, Lioden, had yielded in the first match, and her second- and third-round opponents' fighting styles were as predictable as the ending of a Rocky movie—Link had made her watch the whole series.

Daedrox was no pushover. He was the biggest kid in the schoolyard, towering over his fellow students as if he had taken their growth spurts instead of their lunch money. Alex had seen him spar a few times in her Advanced Swordplay classes. He had terrible footwork, stances, and was as slow as a giant. But he had a long reach, and when he landed a blow on his opponent, the whole class knew about it; the entire chamber would usually echo with a sickening crack, and the student he was sparring would need medical

attention.

As Alex ghosted Link and Phen through the arena's underground corridors, she couldn't help but think the students had put their faith in the wrong person.

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The sun's rays filtered through the open windows in Nenwir's swordplay chamber, streaking the grey-stoned floor in a fiery crimson glow. Alex was covered feet to shoulders in her snow-white armour. Her head was occupied by an oversized, uncomfortable, open-fronted helm that kept jiggling whenever she moved.

Mereen, the half-giant, was standing in front of her, wearing a full suit of silver plate armour she had worn the day she and Link had met. A gigantic, polished wooden sword that looked more like a tree trunk was gripped in both her hands. She was crouched low in a combat stance, waiting for Alex to make the first move.

The half-giant was almost a spitting image of Daedrox in the arena, except she made him look like her little brother, and unlike him, Mereen had her left arm covered in armour. For some reason,

Daedrox had been wearing a suit of armour into battle with the left sleeve missing, exposing his bare arm. None of them had the slightest clue as to why yet.

Although this wasn't a round in the Golden Gauntlet, Alex still had a small crowd watching on. Link, Lioden, and Phenetrest were standing to her left, analysing the battle. To the right of Alex was a wall of blunted weapons and wooden practice swords.

During the tournament, most students were restricted to training in the sectors as no classes were being held. But Lioden had gotten them access into Nenwir's chamber, away from the prying eyes of the students, masters and gambling agent's spies. The five of them were formulating a plan to take down Daedrox. And they needed as much secrecy as they could get.

They had been trying to replicate the battle against the assassin as best they could. Link figured even though Mereen was more than a head taller than Daedrox, she would still share the same cumbersome movements he had and possess his tremendous power—he was right about that. Alex had been a split second late with one of her counterattacks, and Mereen had caught her with a vicious backhanded swing that took her feet from underneath her.

Alex had practically performed a side flip in mid-air before she had hit the stone with a thud. After Mereen had apologized and asked if Alex was OK over a million times, they had finally resumed their duel.

Alex felt it was nice of Mereen to have helped them out, especially considering she had just finished a gruelling twelve-hour shift guarding the entrance of Baylor's. Her help wouldn't go unrewarded, though. Alex and Link had ventured into the inner city the day before and had bought a dozen of her favourite pumpkin cakes. And on top of that, if all went to plan, Mereen would get to witness Alex kicking Daedrox's butt. Apparently, Mereen had a personal vendetta against him. Daedrox was always calling her a "freak" and "mixed breed" whenever he came in or out of Baylor's main entrance. Hearing that made Alex want to crush Xavier's character even more.

Alex feinted an attack from the left, then again from the right. The half-giant retaliated with a telegraphed side strike. Alex rolled effortlessly underneath the wooden sword, rose to her feet like a gymnast, then jabbed her own sword into Mereen's belly. But as Alex retreated, Mereen had swung wildly again, nipping her on the



shoulder and causing her to fall flat on her back.

Alex thumped the stone floor with a clenched fist. Mereen's reach was too long. By the time Alex got inside and did any damage, there was no way she could get out of range without being damaged herself.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Mereen exclaimed. "I was too caught up in the moment." She knelt on one knee by Alex's side, a mountain of gleaming silver.

"It's OK," Alex said, brushing herself off as she got to her feet. "It was my fault. I need to be faster. Time my attacks better."

Alex rotated her right shoulder clockwise, hoping it was still attached to its socket. She tried to act tough, but the pain was searing through her arm like wildfire.

Lioden was by her side, his eyebrows furrowed in concern. "Damage report?"

"Nothing I can't handle," Alex said. "Hey, do you think you could teach me how to Teleport in, I don't know, less than a week?"

"Sure," Lioden said with a crooked smile, "and after that, I'll teach you how to seize minds, just like Kilaydis."

"Oh, how very thoughtful of you," she said, pretending to

look surprised.

Alex glanced over at her brother. He had his arms folded, giving her and Lioden his protective-older-brother disapproving eyes.

“Move your feet,” Link shouted. “You’re too stagnant. Moving targets are harder to hit!”

“Oh, really? You don’t say?” Alex yelled back. “In case you haven’t noticed, Brainiac, this tactic isn’t going to work. My strikes aren’t going to do Daedrox any damage. They’ll be li-li-like mosquito bites to an elephant.”

Something she said must have ticked Link off because he began storming towards her. “That’s because you’re not supposed to be inflicting any damage on the elephant.”

She and Lioden frowned at one another, then at Link.

“Why not?” Lioden asked harshly. “Clad yourself in my armour. If he were to have done this to your sister, surely you would want to exact your revenge as much as I?” He stopped suddenly, almost as if he was embarrassed by his outburst. “Winstell and I might not always see eye to eye,” Lioden continued faintly, “but he is still my brother, Deonis.”

Link didn't even pay Lioden any notice; his eyes had never left Alex's. "Because you're going to win by—"

"A vote," Phen finished as he marched over. "Brilliant idea, might I say, Deonis." He patted Link on the shoulder admirably. "If the sand timer runs out, The Nine will judge the victor by each of them voting. Your brother doesn't want you to inflict pain on Daedrox; he wants you to control the match, and be the more active combatant. By landing more blows on your opponent, outclassing them and making them look clumsy, your victory should be secured."

Link smirked at Phen, satisfied someone was on the same wavelength as him for once.

Alex scowled at them both. "Grow a backbone why don't you! This guy just crushed Winstell—your best friend, Phen—into a million pieces and you think I'm going to stand around and jab him with a blunted sword until the timer runs out?"

Link clenched his teeth and then exhaled forcefully through his nose.

"Don't huff and puff at me," she snapped. "If you think I'm going to hold back on this guy after what he did to Win—"

“This guy is an assassin,” Link said, his eyes blazing. “He is no pushover. He has been trained to kill, and kill quickly. If you go in there, hot headed . . . .” Link paused and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter how you beat him, just as long as you beat him. Just listen to me. *Please.*”

“No,” she said. “*No*, I refuse to go easy on him.”

“Alex,” Link said calmly, the use of her real name immediately catching her attention. “We need to get as far in the tournament as we can. This isn’t up for debate.”

“Well, the last I checked, you weren’t the one fighting him,” she shot back.

“You need to let go of your emotions, Taytora,” Phen cut in boldly. “I want revenge on Daedrox as much as you do, but I also don’t want to see you turn out like Winstell.” Phen glanced at her, his stormy eyes filled with affection. “None of us do.”

Alex looked over at Lioden, hoping he’d chime in and give her some backup, but judging by his distant eyes, it looked as if Link and Phen’s argument was winning him over. She pulled him to the side, hoping with Phen and Link out of earshot he’d give her his honest opinion on their strategy.

“They are right, I’m afraid,” Lioden whispered. “Your safety is paramount. It was hard enough for me to watch Winstell . . . .” He stopped and rubbed his misty eyes as if he was reliving the memory again. “As much as I want Daedrox to suffer, I just don’t want to see that happen to you. I couldn’t bear to.”

Alex bit her lip angrily as she glared over at Link and Phen.

“Fine, winning by a vote it is,” she called out. *Damn majorities.*

“Good, because I think I can add onto Deonis’ plan,” Phen said as he approached Nenwir's rack of weapons, fumbling as he plucked a quarterstaff from it. He tried to twirl the long stick around his fingers, but the weapon ended up cracking his jaw and clunking to the ground.

They all burst into laughter. Even Mereen was trying to politely stifle her giggles. Phen was more awkward than Alex was in the real world.

*Stevie Wonder would have better hand-eye coordination than him,* Alex thought.

“And what’s your plan, Phen?” Lioden asked. “For Taytora to make a fool of herself causing Daedrox to squirm on the ground in

laughter, leaving him vulnerable?”

Surprisingly, Link was the only one who chuckled at Lioden’s joke. He tried to pass the laughing off as a cough, but Alex had heard him loud and clear.

“Rather amusing, Lioden,” Phen said as he massaged his jaw painfully. “But last I checked the fixture, you had been eliminated in the first round. I am in the fourth.” He practically bobbed his head like a bobble toy as he gloated.

“What is the expression?” Lioden asked, rubbing his chin and pretending to look thoughtful. “That Isiah can only smile down on you for so long before Hailsi begins to frown?”

“The Deities have no hold on me,” Phen said, a sassy hand on his hips. “I make my own luck.”

It still amazed Alex how Phen had made it so far in the tournament. Lioden was right; Isiah was smiling down on him. His first-round opponent had lost his footing and concussed his head against a rock, and as if that wasn’t lucky enough, his second-round opponent had failed to execute the Chain of a Fire Spell correctly and ended up charring half his face. His third-round opponent was more of a challenge, though. Phen had to utilize the Ward training Zudane’

had taught him and the swordplay knowledge Link had passed on. He ended up getting over the line by a majority vote from The Nine.

But Lioden was right. Hailsi was about to frown down on Phen. Because in the fourth round he was up against his close friend, Zudane'. She had made it through her three rounds without using a single Spell, besting her opponents solely with her insane sword skills. Zudane' and Daedrox were paying an equal two gold pieces to win. Phen was now paying seventy-seven.

As Phen and Lioden exchanged witty banter like a volley of arrows, Alex thought back to how Phen had beaten her and Winstell in every single game of The Burning Plains, as much as she hated to admit it. The Puppetmaster—or so he coined the title—was a genius at analysing his opponents and exploiting their weaknesses. So if he had devised a plan, Alex knew it would be stupid of her to not hear him out.

“What’s your plan, Phen?” she spoke over the top of them as they continued to bicker. “I’m all ears.”

“*All ears?*” Lioden repeated. “How can you be all ears?”

“Another Orban expression, I gather,” Phen said, shaking his head. “Don’t try to make any sense out of it, Lioden. Their sayings

could baffle even the brightest of scholars. Taytora once asked me to ‘spill the beans’. And there were no such beans in the Great Hall that day to spill.”

And just like that the two of them had gone from arguing with each other to ganging up on her.

“Speak,” Alex said, rubbing her forehead frustratingly.

Phen scooped up the quarterstaff from the ground, stepped forwards, and then thrust his arm in Alex’s direction. Even though he was five yards away, the tip of the weapon had almost reached her. “Forget the sword, I say, and adopt the spear.”

“Ingenious,” Mereen whispered. She then turned to Alex, her moss-coloured eyes filled with awe. “The scrawny boy is onto something. The Perulians have used the spear and shield for centuries. Although untested, their army lines are said to be as impervious as Iralda’s city walls. The spear will provide extra reach while simultaneously keeping you out of harm’s way.”

“Ah, so you have read General Odra’s book on advanced warfare, I gather?” Phen said. His father was a scribe; so like Alex, he had read his fair share of books.

Mereen shook her head stiffly. “Can’t read. My mother



fought in the wars. Taught me everything about the different Kingdoms and their tactics in warfare.”

“Well, your mother was quite an admirable lady,” Phen turned to Alex. “Mereen’s right. I want you to become a Perulian, Taytora.”

Alex had to admit; Phen didn’t just think outside the box, he thought outside of every geometric shape possible.

“Fine. Spear it is,” she said reluctantly.

Even Link seemed surprised by Phen’s plan. His face didn’t give anything away, of course; it was like a carved statue. But Alex knew when her brother didn’t object to an idea, it usually meant he approved of it.

“Ever used one?” Phen asked, glancing down at the quarterstaff in his hands.

“No,” Alex answered truthfully.

“Well, you’re about to learn,” Phen answered. He threw the quarterstaff in the air, intending to pass it to her, but the weapon soared over Alex’s head and clanked dully behind her. Phen cleared his throat awkwardly. “Uh, I should learn as well.”

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If Alex thought the show up was big when she had versed Lioden, that crowd was like a Little League game crowd compared to this. The gold cloaks had been doubled, and as she peered up, there wasn't a single seat empty in the three tiers. Horns and drums were booming from above, giving her the feeling she was at a marching band competition instead of a gladiatorial one-on-one tournament.

As Alex stood across from the long-nosed adjudicator, bouncing on her heels, her body felt numb, like she wasn't in this place and time. Like she was in a third-person perspective, watching someone else about to face off against the armoured gorilla that was Daedrox.

Alex had originally thought she'd be so terrified the Mages would have to force her out onto the Arena. But for some reason, as she waited for Daedrox to emerge from his gates, she was unnaturally calm. That was what was scaring her the most.

*Stupid body. Why aren't you shaking? Do you not understand the severity of the situation we are in?*

As the horns sounded and the drums thumped dauntingly

from above, Alex soaked in her surroundings. This arena was like nothing she had seen before in the previous matches. It was like the architects had summoned their inner Picasso and had gone all abstract.

She was standing in a giant sand pit. A thick trail of fist-sized rocks formed a massive swirl throughout the arena like the lines of a snail shell. In between the gaps of the stones were pillars as tall as Foragoon himself. Her chest heaved. The architects had practically handed Daedrox the victory when they had designed this arena.

Everywhere she looked she saw chunks of earth he could manipulate. There wasn't a drop of water in sight. If she wanted it, she'd have to draw it from the moisture in the air. At least she could manipulate the wind, though. The best thing about Windwielding was there was never a shortage of air around.

Alex twirled the blunted spear above her head and then behind her back, trying to loosen up her nerves as she waited. These past few weeks the wooden weapon had become like another limb. Some nights she'd even shamefully fallen asleep with it, almost as if it were a teddy. But no amount of spear-twirling could undo the knots in her stomach. How could she relax when she knew she was

versing Xavier's serpent? This assassin had been tailor-made by Xavier to take out the Gauntlet single-handedly. Was she kidding herself to think she'd be anything more than a stepping stone for this brute?

She didn't have to look up to know Daedrox had entered the arena. The whole crowd had flared up, their deafening roars giving her goose bumps from head to toe. At least one thing was for certain: Daedrox wouldn't be forfeiting, which meant she wouldn't have to deal with any hostile crowds.

Daedrox strutted into the arena, the tip of his blunted greatsword leaving a line in the sand as he dragged it. Alex had to be weary of that weapon. The blade was dull, yes, but it was heavy steel, and the force behind Daedrox's swings could crack bones.

The closer the assassin approached Alex, the more the crowd seemed to go into a frenzy. Daedrox was wearing a suit of gilded plate armour, once again, with the left sleeve missing. The armour had intricate, weaved carvings from head to toe, and the helm was fashioned into the shape of a hissing cobra's head. Where the serpent's eyes would have been, a pair of red rubies twinkled in the midday sun. Halfway down the snake's neck, in the middle of its

widened hood, Daedrox's amber eyes were searing through a slit in the helm—rubies of his own.

The adjudicator cast Daedrox a scornful look upon his foot-thumping approach, which led Alex to believe he despised the big brute as much as she did. After the referee had finished giving a speech on the rules lasting equally as long as his nose, Daedrox pointed his sword at her and grunted.

“It's your turn to be butchered, little piggy.”

“Your name sounds like an outdated brand of cold-and-flu tablet,” she retorted.

Daedrox didn't quite know how to respond.

Alex turned and walked towards the wall of the arena, smiling at her joke. Reaching out for the stone behind her with a gloved hand, she matched Daedrox's cold hard glare from across the arena—or at least, tried to. The staring match didn't last longer than a minute before the gong had sounded. The spectators exploded. The hourglass was flipped. The match was underway.

Alex felt like running full blast at Xavier's character with her spear raised, yelling “For Winstell!” But she had to remind herself not to let her emotions get the best of her. *Brains not brawn, Alex.*

She dug her blunted spear tip-first into the sand, waiting patiently for Daedrox to cast his monstrosity just like they had prepared for. Sure enough, he began performing a full-bodied Chain of movements. The ground shook and rumbled beneath her boots. A giant serpent comprised of sand and stones rose from the earth threateningly. The corner of Alex's lips curled into a smile.

The crowd went silent as the oversized snake darted for her, weaving through the sand with intent. To the serpent, Alex was a mouse that had just been dropped into its enclosure. It was hard, but as the serpent, its body as thick as a tree trunk, honed in on her, she disregarded it completely, and instead focused her attention on Daedrox.

Alex drew upon the Eternal Source, letting the energy empower her and flow through her veins like ice water. She thrust her palm forwards and sent a spiralling sphere of compacted air at Daedrox. It deviated through the air like a pitcher's curveball, circling around the serpent mid-flight and racing towards the assassin. Right as the snake lunged for Alex, her Windwielding attack hit its mark.

The compacted ball of air struck Daedrox in the sternum,

breaking his concentration and sending him reeling backward. As soon as her attack had hit, Daedrox's serpent lost its form and dropped away into swirls of dust and loose debris. Alex shielded her face as a few of the wayward stones pelted against her armour.

The audience was stunned. As the thick cloud of dust settled and they saw she was unharmed, a scattered clapping began, gradually turning into a thundering chorus of applause. Alex gathered they hadn't expected her to be standing after Daedrox's go-to Spell.

Plagiarism aside, she and Link had borrowed the idea from the adjudicator the day he had saved Winstell from Daedrox. All the referee had done was divert the assassin's attention, break his concentration for a split second, and the assassin's pet snake had crumbled away to nothing.

Daedrox slowly climbed to his feet, the middle of his chest plate crumpled inwards from Alex's Windwielding Spell. He leaned back and let out an animistic, deep-chested roar, then moved his arms in a bizarre pattern, performing a Chain she had never seen before. A shadow moving to the right caught her attention, and when she looked up, Alex found the owner of that shadow. A pillar to her

right had begun to topple, slowing falling towards her like a chopped-down tree.

Alex had all the time in the world to get out of the way of the crumbling column of stone. But all the time in the world counts for nothing when your feet are planted to the ground.

Peering down, she found two hands made entirely of sand gripping her ankles, holding her down firmly. Panic took over, and Alex desperately tried to kick her feet free as the pillar made its descent, but the hands were like bear traps.

She spared a glance over at Daedrox. He was crouched down, both his hands submerged wrist-deep into the sand. But the thing was he was over fifty yards away. Fair to say this Spell was nothing like any Alex had ever seen before. Telekinesis to topple the pillar while simultaneously holding her feet in place with Earthwielding. *And I thought he was dim-witted?*

Improvising, Alex leaned backward with all her strength and what little body weight she possessed. The hands holding her ankles broke away as her butt hit the sand. She scrambled backward frantically. The pillar came thumping down between her outstretched legs.



Alex had been an atheist for as long as she could remember, but at that point in time, she thanked the deity Isiah she was still alive. But just like Lioden had said, Isiah can only smile down on you for so long before Hailsi frowns. As she attempted to stand up, Daedrox was upon her, slashing at her with powerful, two-handed sword strikes.

Alex was on the back-foot, almost tripping over herself trying to retreat and stay out of this madman's range. Daedrox's blade narrowly whistled past her as she ducked and weaved, trying to regain her footing. Eventually, as the battle wore on, the more his strikes lost their potency. Daedrox's movements became sluggish. Predictable. Borderline desperate. And the more he gassed himself out, the more Alex's confidence grew.

If she were in a comic, a light bulb would have lit up atop her head. Link was right. Daedrox was an assassin; he was programmed to kill quickly. All his life he had been prepared for a sprint, whereas Alex had been preparing for a marathon.

Each time an opening presented itself, she lunged forward and poked Daedrox with her spear, then retreated before he had even realized she'd hit him. On and on it went. Jab and retreat. Jab and

retreat. Whoever said don't poke the bear had obviously never tried it before. Alex was having the time of her life.

She couldn't help but to smirk as she danced nimbly around Daedrox. If she stuck to Link and Phen's plan, her hit and run strategy would ensure her victory. She was outsmarting and outmanoeuvring the big brute. And if The Nine couldn't see that then they were all visually impaired.

But just as Alex thought she had the fight in the bag, she found out the reason why the serpent had kept his left arm exposed.

Daedrox threw his sword away, whipped out a scarlet vial from a compartment in his belt and drained the liquid in one gulp. He smiled at her crookedly as the blood trickled down his chin.

Alex knew it was foolish, but a part of her was hoping the vial he had just drunk was a refresher, something to quench his thirst. Cranberry juice, Gatorade, red cordial even.

But her wishful hopes shattered into a million pieces when Daedrox's beefy arm sprouted auburn-coloured fur. As if his arm wasn't big enough already, it swelled, doubling in size, his fingernails forming into glistening scythes. Daedrox didn't just have a trick up his sleeve—his trick was his whole arm.

As Alex watched on in horror, she felt as if she had just swallowed a tennis ball. *Partial Shifting*. Not everyone was as skilled as Athuros and could transform themselves into fully-formed beasts. Some were only able to shift an arm or a leg. *And why, oh why, did Daedrox have to be one of them?*

“Time to slice you up,” Xavier’s creation roared as he clinked his scythe-like fingernails together.

Daedrox stepped forwards and swiped at her with his oversized paw. His fingernails sung over her head as she ducked underneath the attack. She was so focused on watching his deadly paw that she hadn’t even seen his other fist. Daedrox had used his opposite, gauntleted hand to uppercut her in the stomach.

The air left Alex’s lungs as quick as a pair of popped balloons, but that was just the beginning. As she was falling, Daedrox had lashed out at her with the other arm, his claws slicing straight through her vambrace and into the skin of her forearm.

Even though her body was cranked full of adrenaline, the pain that pulsed from her forearm woke her up better than any steaming cup of Joe could have. She didn’t know which attack had hurt more: the slash to the forearm or the uppercut to the stomach.

But as she lay on the ground trying to decide, she looked up to find Daedrox was a mere silhouette in the sun, his swollen paw raised menacingly, arm about to crash down on her and slash her into ribbons.

Thankfully, after all her Spiritwielding training with Zudane', casting her lime-green Ward was as habitual to Alex as blinking. Daedrox's paw came down harmlessly upon her luminous barrier of energy. As his arm recoiled back, she used the time to scurry backward and get to her feet.

Daedrox tried to close the distance between them, but as he did, Alex snapped her arm forward and hit him with her spear. He backhanded the weapon away, splintering the wood into pieces with his claws.

*There goes the winning by a vote strategy,* she thought dismally.

As Alex backed away, clutching her bloodied forearm, her mind drifted to Winstell. To how he had gagged for air when Daedrox had him by the throat, the look of fear in those almond eyes when he saw the assassin's serpent advancing, his delirious state when he had been in the Healer's Chamber. Each memory she

relived was like throwing dry oak into a small flame. And soon, a raging inferno had ignited inside of her.

She pushed open her Gate farther than she had ever before, commanding the Source to come forth through the opening. The familiar white-hot energy reached for her willingly, its tendrils like a nest of snakes constricting around her limbs, caressing her skin, invigorating her, giving her purpose. Willing her to move. To act.

Her eyes jolted open, everything so clear and sharp it was like she was peering through a pair of binoculars: Her scarlet blood dripping from Daedrox's claws, an eagle doing passes overhead, even an army of ants working in unison to drag a small scorpion across the sand. Her senses had never been this acute. But then again, she had never called forth this much of the Source before.

The Master Mages had always advised against channelling too much. After all, the body was merely a vessel in which the mystical energy flowed through. And a vessel could only contain so much before it sank. But as Alex believed an assassin was trying to hack her into a million pieces with his razor-sharp claws, the occasion called for it.

As Daedrox rushed forwards, her hands moved on their own,

sending a bolt of lime-green energy she had learned from one of Taytora's scrolls at his unarmoured arm. Daedrox's deep howl of pain was satisfying, but she didn't stop there.

Alex advanced, hurling spheres of wind at him, whipping him with bodies of water, knocking his helm off with a concentrated gust of wind—every offensive Spell she had in her arsenal, she threw at the man-child. Daedrox's arm eventually reverted to normal as he cowered away from her flurry of attacks.

Alex was thankful Daedrox's helm had fallen off because she could now see his face: the complete and utter fear in his eyes, the trembling of his lips as she sent Spell after Spell at him, denting and crumpling his once flawless armour. She had no remorse for this bully. None whatsoever.

Then the fatigue hit her all at once. Using a Chain of Spells in such quick succession had finally caught up with her body, sucking all the energy out of her. Alex's knees shook as she tried to keep herself upright; her body laboriously heaving, vision splintered.

But as depleted as Alex was, she was nowhere near finished with her opponent. She willed herself forward. As Daedrox was on his back, trying to wriggle away from her, she leaped on top of him

and sat on his chest, smashing his face continuously with both fists. The roaring of the crowd and the fact Alex was so blinded by rage, meant she had barely registered when Daedrox had spluttered those two words:

“I yield!”

Thinking she must’ve misheard him, Alex continued to pummel away at Daedrox’s head. *He couldn’t have yielded. He’s too stubborn and prideful to give up.* It took the adjudicator ripping her off Xavier’s character and raising her arm in the air for it to finally sink in.

“By way of yield, Taytora is the victor,” the adjudicator declared, his voice echoing through the arena. “She moves on to round five.”

Alex’s chest was bubbling with excitement, so overwhelmed by emotions she could barely form a rational thought. Had she really just defeated Xavier’s character? It seemed so absurd. She didn’t think she’d make it out of this match intact, let alone coming away with the victory. She kept replaying what the adjudicator had said, trying to make sense of his words. None of it felt real.

The silver-haired adjudicator let go of her hand. Alex slowly

spun around, chest heaving, soaking in the atmosphere. There were no scrunched-up betting tickets or objects being thrown at her from the tiers. No saliva or obscenities being spat out. Alex couldn't fathom it. For some reason the crowd was ecstatic.

“Why are they cheering?” she whispered through the side of her mouth to the adjudicator. “No one would have put their gold on me, would they?”

The adjudicator smiled fondly. “Because, my dear girl, you just gave them all a fight they'll never forget.”



## 27. LINCOLN

There was a momentary hush in the tiers as the spectators waited for the next two combatants to come out. Man, woman, boy, and girl whispered amongst themselves, craning their necks to see if something had happened since they last looked. The smell of fresh fruits, tender meats and delicate pastries wafted through the air as the stadium's vendors walked up and down the stairs with their wicker baskets, yelling out their prices.

The midday sun was directly above the siblings, warming their necks as they sat in the highest tier: Tier 3. Link was positioned in the second seat from the staircase, Alex in the seat to his right, nervously chewing on her bottom lip. He hoped his sister had her proverbial notepad at the ready, considering she would be fighting the victor of the battle they were about to watch.

Link had to tuck his legs in as a girl with sun-kissed skin squeezed her way past. She was barefoot, had golden eyes, and her hair was in knots all the way down her back. The girl thrust out her arm at Alex and then turned her palm up, uncovering a translucent gemstone the size of a golf ball.

“I-If you would be so kind, ma’am,” the girl stuttered, inching the clear gemstone closer to Alex.

Alex looked just as confused as Link was. She took the stone out of the girl's palm hesitantly. “Err, a gift for me?”

The girl shook her head shyly, glancing down at her toes as she wriggled them. “No, ma’am, it’s a Spiritgem. I want you to infuse it. I-If that’s not too much to ask,” she quickly added on. “It doesn’t take much; it’s only small.”

That’s when Link clicked. These were the rare gems he had heard stories about.

Alex examined the stone in her hands, rolling it around her palm then holding it close to her eyes, squinting. “And how exactly do I light it?”

“Open your Gate,” Link said, “It’s like their version of a temporary autograph.”

The girl nodded her head in agreeance, although Link was certain she had no idea what an “autograph” meant. He had seen Zudane’ infuse one of these stones with her magenta-coloured Mark. She had told him the stone would stay lit for several weeks until the light eventually dimmed. Some of the wealthier would encase the

gems in lanterns and use them as an alternative source of light. But how this barefooted girl with ripped and tattered clothing had acquired one of these rare Spiritgems, Link had no clue.

Alex gasped when her glowing lime-green energy swirled into the stone, lighting it like a coloured lightbulb. She was mesmerized, seeming almost reluctant to give it back to the girl.

The girl gently took it from Alex's palm, her eyes wide, reflecting the bright green glow. She wrapped the Spiritgem cautiously with a layer of torn cloth and held it close to her chest, smiling broadly.

"Just so you know, Daedrox deserved every bit of that beating," the girl spluttered before she ran away. Her friends, who had waited by the stairs, chased after her in a mad rush.

"Wow, talk about being humbled," Alex said. "That was so weird."

"Get used to the fame," Link said, casting her a sidelong glance. "You're practically a celebrity now after defeating Daedrox."

"Oh, stop it," Alex said irritably.

"Stop what?"

"I know you're just mocking me."

“Mocking you?” he said, taken back. “Alex, I’m honestly so proud of you. You defeated the serpent. *The serpent*. You went up against the one character we’d been agonizing over these past few months, and you made him look like a big seven-foot baby.”

Alex had barely acknowledged he’d spoken. Instead, she chewed her nails as she tilted in her chair to glimpse at the arena. You’d think after wiping out Xavier’s character she would have been on cloud nine—even Link had been getting a good night’s sleep lately. But Alex’s face was as sour as fermented cheese.

“What’s wrong, little sis?” he asked, nudging her thigh with a knee. “Confide in your older brother.”

Alex took a deep breath and then swivelled her head to face him. “OK, yes, I defeated Xavier’s character. But how can I breathe a deep sigh of relief when I know I’m versing Zidane’ in the next round?”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Link said smirking, “Phen could win this match for all you know.”

“Stop trying to lighten the mood,” she said, rolling her eyes skyward.

“Only if you stop trying to dim it.”

Alex poked her tongue at him and then resumed looking nervously out at the arena.

“I honestly feel sick to my stomach thinking about it,” she whimpered. “I’d rather verse Daedrox again than Zudane’; that’s how terrified of her I am.”

Link scoffed at that. Even the thought of Daedrox’s sinister face was enough to keep him up at night.

“Don’t laugh,” Alex said, glaring at him. “You’ve sparred with Zudane’; you of all people know what she’s capable of, Link.”

He had to agree with her there. To say Zudane’ was a difficult match up would be an understatement. She was fierce, had impeccable technique, and she was notorious for analysing her opponents mid-fight and then breaking them down piece by piece.

“Everyone has their weaknesses, Alex,” he said.

Finding Zudane’s was just proving to be rather difficult. She had bested her last three opponents without using a single Spell so Link couldn’t analyse much from those battles. Alex did know a few of her Spiritwielding Spells from their training sessions together, which would prove useful when they faced off. But that being said, Zudane’ knew a handful of Alex’s Waterwielding Spells as well.

Alex's best bet was to use her Windwielding against Zudane' and to flaunt her lightning-fast speed. But even then, it would be nowhere near an easy battle. Zudane' wasn't the type to yield. She had a determination in her green, cat-like eyes that couldn't be extinguished.

Link thought once they defeated Xavier's character it would be smooth sailing. But it turned out they still had some choppy waters to navigate through. There were still some highly skilled students vying for the coveted Golden Gauntlet. In fact, he was versing one the next round.

The four-armed Mhorokai called Talkoon had been an underdog so far in every match. As the golden-skinned species were native to the Kingdom of Meadows, their kind was scarce and often discriminated against in Iralda, or in any of the Kingdom of Mist cities for that matter. Link had watched Talkoon's last battle closely. The Mhorokai was no pushover. His four arms enabled him to wield four long swords at once with impeccable speed and coordination.

One thing was for certain, Link would have to get as much information from Winstell about Talkoon as he could. Winstell was finally getting back to his normal self. Although his bones hadn't

fully healed yet, he was making a miraculous recovery. Link just wished he could have seen Alex lay the smack-down on Daedrox. When he had relayed the fight to him in the Healer's Chamber, Winstell had practically smiled like the Cheshire cat from *Alice in Wonderland*.

The audience suddenly shot out of their chairs as if their seats were hot plates, yelling at the top of their lungs. Link and Alex had no choice but to stand up as well, either that or to watch the back of the people's heads in front of them. As Link rose, he heard a man curse from behind him.

*Blame my Dad for the tall genes, buddy,* Link thought.

Link looked down into the arena, which was a wide-open glade with two lakes intercepting in the middle, and realized what all the commotion was about. The favourite, Zudane', had just stepped out.

She was wearing her hair in a single braid draped over her right shoulder, a blunted longsword casually resting on her left. As always, she was dressed in a short robe of canary yellow, tied at the waist by a leather belt. The only armour she wore were two boiled leather vambraces on her forearms, and two plated pauldrons on her

shoulders that closely resembled dragon scales. The fierce look in her cat-green eyes, and the confident strut in her step meant nothing but business as she approached the adjudicator in the centre of the arena.

“I just hope Phen comes to his senses and yields before he gets hurt,” Alex said with her fingers stuffed in her mouth.

“You don’t want him to yield,” Link pointed out.

“And why the heck wouldn’t I?” Alex snarled. “It’s either that or Zudane’ gives him a one-way ticket to the Healer’s chamber.”

“We want Phen to last longer than a few minutes,” he answered, craning his neck in the direction of the opposite gate where Phen was supposed to be stepping out. “We need to try and find any weaknesses in Zudane’s game.”

“Zudane’s game?” Alex hissed. “This isn’t basketball, Link. Besides, Zudane’ has no weaknesses.”

Before he could answer her, Link was silenced by the crowd laughing hysterically. It didn’t take him long to find out why. Phenetrest had finally emerged from his gates, wearing a full-bodied suit of silver plate armour—that wasn’t what they were laughing at, though. It was the fact he could barely walk. He was dragging his



feet laboriously through the lush grass, his hands out in front of him to maintain his balance.

“What’s he playing at?” Alex said, standing on her tippy toes as she frowned.

“Maybe he thinks the denser his armour, the less he will feel Zudane’s sword strikes,” Link said, shrugging. “Kind of smart if you ask me.”

“No, not that,” Alex said, shaking her head. “Phen doesn’t have a sword.”

She was right. Link hadn’t realized upon first glance, but Phen was weaponless. *How bizarre.*

Phen floundered towards the centre of the arena, like a toddler trying to walk for the first time. Zudane’ raised her eyebrows sceptically upon his approach. Even the adjudicator seemed caught off guard. Phenetrest’s suit of armour had to weigh close to one hundred pounds. Did he even weigh that much himself?

“Well, at least we know Phen won’t be yielding anytime soon,” Link said. “Zudane’s going to have to break through the armour with her Spiritwielding attacks if she wants him to yield.”

“Phen has a plan,” Alex mumbled.

“What?”

“Phenetrest always has a plan.”

“You’re saying you think he can beat her?” he asked bemusedly.

“No,” Alex chuckled, “of course not. Zidane’ will flatten him like a pancake . . . but he won’t go down without a fight. He’s a strategist, just like you.”

It took Phen a few painstaking minutes before he had finally made it to the other side of the arena and rested a hand on the wall. The match hadn’t even started, and Link doubted he had any energy left after hauling all that weight.

What Phen had done next, though, no one in the whole arena could have possibly foreseen. As the gong reverberated through the arena, he reached into two pouches hanging off his belt and plucked out two teal-coloured shards in each hand. The crowd was dead silent—until the rips opened, that was.

Screams of panic filled the tiers as two tears in the air emerged on either side of Phen. The pair of swirling portals was big enough to admit giants, and all that could be seen through them was thick clouds of soot-grey fog. A hush fell over the crowd as they

watched on nervously, waiting to see what came out from the mysterious rips in the air.

Seconds passed before two ironclad soldiers the size of Mereen jumped out of the tears simultaneously. The ground shook with a muffled thud upon their landing. Some spectators ran full pelt for the stairs, others cowered and squirmed in their chairs.

At first glance, the creatures looked almost identical. They were both wearing a full-bodied suit of rusted plate armour, covered with patches of moss and ivy. They both shared a pair of ominous bright green eyes shining from their gloomy visors. And they both had the same predatorial gait, like a pair of wolves stalking a deer. That deer being Zudane’.

The only thing that separated the two iron-clad monstrosities was the weapons they were wielding. One carried a sinuous greatsword twice the length of its body. The other, a rectangular shield the size of a ping pong table.

Link turned to face Alex. Judging by her dropped jaw she had boarded the same train of thought as he had. Phen was a Summoner.

“He can’t . . .” Alex sputtered. “You don’t think he’s a Sum—”

“No,” Link said, shaking his head curtly, “he can’t be. There’s no way—”

He was cut short by one of Phen’s soldiers dashing towards Zudane’ with its shoulder cocked back forebodingly. The crowd shrieked as one. Zudane’ scrambled backward as the oversized sword came at her in a vicious arc. The audience sighed in relief as the blade hit nothing but air.

Link’s mind was hula-hooping with questions as he watched on. How could Phen be a Summoner? He was too young. Summoning was one of the hardest branches of magic to learn. It was even up there with Kilydis’ Mind Seizing in its degree of difficulty. Gold cloaks could only dream of this skill, so how was it an acne-covered teenager could be skilled enough to bring not one, but two inuagi through from the Spiritrealm?

Kilydis’ brother Rhygma was the first to create the portal to the parallel plane of reality that coexisted alongside the Mortalrealm. After years of deep meditation, he managed to form the first rip to what the Nocerans called the Spiritrealm. Rhygma walked straight through it without hesitation—or so the stories went.

The Spiritrealm was filled with a species called the inuagi:

Monstrous, supernatural entities, possessing powers far beyond the standard gold cloak. Rhygma had taught the art of opening portals to the realm to only a select few of his Enchanters. Together, they marched into the Spiritrealm and captured fragments of the inuagi's souls that dwelt there. The fragmented souls were placed in shards that acted as a homing beacon. All Phen had to do was whip out his shards, open his Gates and delve into the Eternal Source, and the inuagi could channel his power to create a portal from the Spiritrealm to the Mortalrealm.

The inuagi wielding the sword pressed the attack again, closing in on Zudane', backing her against the arena wall with flurries of cuts and slashes. To Zudane's credit, she danced, tumbled, and leaped away from every one of the inuagi's strikes. It was like witnessing a game of whack-a-mole. But how long could she keep it up? The inuagi didn't seem to be tiring; each cut was as swift and precise as the next. Zudane', on the other hand, was slowing down, her feet becoming heavier, her breathing more laborious.

Link glanced over at Phen. His visor was raised, and a faint smile played on his lips. He had deceived them all, kept this talent of his close to his chest, only revealing it at the last moment. But why?

If he was that powerful why only reveal it three-quarters of a way through the Golden Gauntlet?

As Link watched the battle unfold before him, he noticed the second inuagi hadn't moved since it had emerged from the rip. The entity stood stoutly in front of Phen, its rectangular shield dug into the ground, almost as if it were guarding him. Had Phen positioned them like this intentionally? Skilled Summoners could communicate telepathically between their inuagi, directing them amid battle.

Alex's fingernails dug into Link's arm as the inuagi's sword came crashing down at Zudane' from above. She sidestepped nimbly as the blade descended, slicing a portion of her yellow robe before it split the earth beneath her feet. If Zudane' hadn't moved in time, that blade would have hacked her in two. Judging by its glistening edge, Link knew it was definitely not blunted.

"Isn't Summoning banned?" Alex shrieked, her fingernails digging deeper into his bicep. "How come the adjudicator hasn't called the match off? Disqualified him?"

Before Link could answer her, someone else had responded: Xavier.

"Because Summoning is legit, Lindsay. In fact, there's not

even a mention of it in the Gauntlet's rule books. See for yourself.”

Link looked to his left. Xavier was sprawled out in the empty chair, his legs crossed with an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips.

“Then again that might be because the branch of magic is as hard to find as an honest man in Congress.”

“What are you doing here?” Link asked, his voice thick with disdain.

But the crowd's shouts of excitement drew his attention away from Xavier. Zudane' had somehow made it past the inuagi with the greatsword and was now streaming towards Phen and the shielded inuagi. She performed a Chain as she ran and then hurled a sphere of her magenta energy at the left side of Phen. As the shielded inuagi stepped to the side and blocked Zudane's attack, Zudane' closed in on Phen's right. That's when Link realized her first Spell was a decoy, drawing the inuagi's attention. Her real focus had been on Phen the whole time.

Zudane' came at Phen from the right side, her sword flashing, cracking his armour with a barrage of attacks. He staggered backward, casting a smoke-coloured Ward as he retreated. Zudane's assault didn't last long. The shielded inuagi had leaped in front of

her, driving her backward with his shield. As Zudane' was retreating, her focus on the shielded inuagi, the inuagi with the greatsword had come from behind.

Zudane' barely had time to react to the whistling sword coming her way, but somehow, she did. She spun and rolled her shoulder. The sword missed her narrowly, slicing off a chunk of her braid as a memento.

Link was sure Alex's fingernails had drawn blood as she squeezed his arm anxiously with each slash of the inuagi's sword.

"Zudane's good," Xavier said, nodding in approval. "All her limbs are still intact, which is rather surprising. What do you reckon they'll do with her remains, though? Dog food? Fertilizer even?"

Xavier's presence was disturbing Link. Not his presence in general—he was used to that by now—but the timing of it.

"Why are you here?" Link asked again, his eyes never leaving the arena. Zudane' was still trying to find a way past the sword-wielding inuagi.

"I'm here for the same reason everyone else is," Xavier said coolly. "I want to see some blood spilled."

"What's the real reason?" he pressed. "You haven't popped



up since Alex defeated Daedrox. Too humiliated to show your face, is that it?”

Xavier took the unlit cigarette from his lips and twirled it around his fingers. “Why, oh why, do you always have to question my ulterior motives?” He leaned forwards, scanning the tiers in search of something. “Hey, do you think they sell hot dogs here? Nachos, even?” He licked his lips. “Yeah, I could really go for some nachos right now.”

Link scowled at him.

“Oh, fine,” Xavier said, throwing up his hands. “You got me. I’m here to watch my character kick ass.”

“Your character?” Link snapped automatically. “What do you mean *your character*?”

Xavier lit his cigarette and took a long puff. He exhaled through the side of his mouth. “Do you want me to spell it out for you? I-apostrophe-M H-E-R-E T-O W-A-T-C-H—”

“But Daedrox was—*is* your character,” Link corrected. “Alex defeated him.”

Xavier made an abrupt sound like an incorrect game-show buzzer. “Wrong.”

“What do you mean ‘wrong?’” he snarled. “You said—”

“I said Alex will be facing my character soon enough. And she will be, right after my boy Phenetrest mops Zudane’ up.” Xavier chuckled darkly to himself. “Wait, did I say mops? I meant butchers. Yeah, butchers sounds more accurate to what’s about to happen. Going to be very messy, though—like murder-scene messy. So maybe the Healers will need mops afterward? Who knows? Let’s wait and see.” He pretended to chew his nails. “I’m so nervous.”

Alex jerked Link by the arm. “What’s he saying? Is he saying Daedrox wasn’t the serpent? He can’t do that; he can’t—” she stopped mid-sentence.

Zudane’ had rolled between the open legs of the sworded inuagi and was now advancing towards Phen yet again. Instead of casting a decoy Spell this time, she slowed to a jog, and then performed a tranquil, free-flowing Chain that looked oddly familiar. *Waterwielding.*

The water in the two rivers closest to Phen pulled and pushed. Then as Zudane’ raised both hands, two giant waves arose from both rivers, with crests like capital C’s. They cast shadows on Phen and his shielded inuagi as they homed in.

The crests broke upon the two, smashing them with the power of a herd of galloping horses. Link let out a little squeak of excitement. But as the waters washed around them, he noticed Phen had taken cover behind his protector. His shielded inuagi had dug its shield into the earth and braced itself. Zudane's Spell had been nothing but a light breeze.

"H-How is Phen the serpent?" Link spluttered. "Did you just make that riddle to throw us off?"

"How dare you," Xavier said, gasping. "I admit I did sprinkle some red herrings here and there: Alex's hissing roomie, that big buffoon Daedrox. I even painted a serpent on Lioden's viol, but your stupid sister was so lovestruck she didn't even catch on." He cleared his throat and straightened his tie. "But to answer your question: no, my riddle was a legitimate riddle. I'm not that much of a monster, Hunter. I play by the rules—from time to time," he added on.

Zudane' tumbled away from the inuagi with the curved greatsword, her skin glistening with sweat. The sand timer was still half full. She had to yield; either that or she would be hacked into pieces. Phen's offensive inuagi showed no signs of slowing. In fact, he seemed to be growing impatient by Zudane's constant evasions.

But who could blame her? A one hundred and fifty-pound girl with a blunted sword versus a giant that had to weigh over a ton with a sharpened one?

Zudane' danced away from the sworded inuagi, managing to create some distance between them. She strung together a Chain and then raised an arm. A giant magenta disc emerged out of thin air. Zudane' stepped forwards. The powerful disc of pent-up Spirit sped off after Phen and his shielded inuagi. But the attack was slightly off target. The focused Spell struck the entity's upper shield, sawing the top third of it off cleanly.

Then everything happened at once: a sequence of surreal events that made Link's chest shudder. The sworded inuagi had caught up with Zudane.' The entity feinted an attack. Once. Twice. Zudane' was out of rhythm. She had rolled to the right, expecting the blade to pass overhead horizontally, but as she rose, she found the sinister sword was coming down vertically.

The cruel blade came down on Zudane's outstretched arm and found her elbow. Metal met flesh. The strike cleaved her arm in two. Scarlet splattered uncontrollably from the wound, like a bottle of champagne being popped. Zudane' dropped to her knees, futilely

clutching what remained of her blood-splurging arm.

Alex shot up and sprinted towards the tier's rails. Link's body blistered with panic as he watched on. This couldn't be happening. The scene was all too grotesque. All too surreal.

But the inuagi was far from finished. As Zudane' writhed on the grass in a pool of her blood, her canary yellow robe stained, the sworded entity was loading up for its next attack.

The adjudicator lunged in front of her, casting a sky-blue Ward as the blade came down. Metal rang. The sword bounced off the shield. Gold cloaks jumped down from the tiers, using Windwielding to slow their descent as they landed. They advanced on Phen and his shielded inuagi, hitting him with flurries of Spells, trying to break his concentration. Eventually, as the Spells hit their mark, the two inuagi were banished back to the Spiritrealm, withering away into wisps of teal-coloured smoke.

By then, most of the crowd had either run to the rails to get a better look or had fled to the stairs. Link looked over at Xavier, his mouth half open.

Xavier regarded him with a knowing smile, cigarette dangling from his lips. "I should explain; should I not?" he said,

nudging the brim of his fedora hat upward. “You see, Phenetrest’s dad is a high lord, quite a wealthy one at that, but not as rich as Winstell and Lioden’s. Phen’s dad placed a tremendous bet on his son when he was paying two hundred and four gold coins to win the tournament. If Phenetrest wins—which he will—Winstell’s father will be bankrupt.” Xavier waved a hand. “Say bye-bye to the gambling business.”

Xavier picked some lint off his shoulder and flicked it at Link. “I hate to be the one to tell you this—who am I kidding? I’m relishing this—but Phenetrest slithered his way into your group of friends like the slithery serpent he is. He picked Winstell’s brain about each of the opponents he was facing, learned how to project Wards from Zudane’s; you even taught him how to swordfight, didn’t you, Hunter? He manipulated all of you to get through the first few rounds without drawing attention. Despicable, I know.”

“And now, the moment you’ve been waiting for,” Xavier said, clearing his throat. “The name Phenetrest was an anagram for “the serpent.” *If unmasking Xavier’s character is all you seek, unravel the serpent before things get bleak.*” He smirked at Link with a mischievous twinkle in those ice-cold eyes. “A 3.7 GPA and

you couldn't figure that one out? Parents' money well spent.”

Xavier extinguished his cigarette on the seat next to him.