

### **Cheesy Munches and an Instinctive Dagger**

Gabriel strode carelessly down the path that wound under overhanging rock beside the hollowed-out mountain sides, which the people of Crangul called home. He often ventured out alone, and his parents nonchalantly allowed this, as their city was a peaceful one. Right now, he was on his way to the store for more Cheesy Munches, the pinnacle of all cheese flavoured, orange powder covered snacks. A roar like thunder belched out into the air and cracks appeared up above, splitting stone. Dust trickled down, and small rocks plummeted, growing larger by the second. Gabriel paused. His eyes widened. Gabriel's jaw dropped and his palms started sweated madly; Armageddon had come!

Shaking out of his trance, Gabriel bolted back to his house where his parents were frantically packing bags. Not before long, they had made their way to the town square. According to Mayor Werdoomed, this would be the first, but not last, of numerous tremors to come, as predicted by the bygone fable. Gabriel remembered from his history lessons that 337 years ago, the ancient clan fled from an oasis of a jungle afar, fleeing two tigers. One was the vicious Tiger of Nyx, and the other, the Tiger of Terror that emitted a ghoulish orange glow. They were fierce guards to a sanctuary beyond his city, and ravaged anyone who dared stray into their path. "Guardians beyond a gushing river, Tigers deep in dense wilderness". The whole city knew this fable; a truth gained from an elderly man, on his death bed. His exact words evidently were "when the rumble starts, to reach salvation in the jungle, vanquish the Tiger of Nyx and take care of the glowing Terror."

After some long speeches that may have been meant to be rousing, but put everyone into further panic, Mayor Werdoomed called for eager volunteers to vanquish the Tigers. Unsurprisingly, there was a paucity of eager volunteers and the mayor went on with plan B, chance. She would pick the name of the "lucky" citizen, who would find the path into the jungle, and conquer the beasts of Nyx and Terror, out of her velvet top hat. The crowd held their breath. "Gabriel Evans!" She announced with a flourish, far too excited for the current mood. At first, Gabriel remained as he had been, terrified, but only mildly. Then he realized what she had said, and that he himself was Gabriel Evans. Gabriel trembled. He gulped. However, he bravely stepped forward, ready to accept his fate as the family honour was on the line and it wasn't really a choice.

With great courage and a stomach full of Cheesy Munches, Gabriel packed his duffel bag. Inside his left leather boot was a silver dagger with an ornate handle. It had belonged to his great-great-grandfather and was a weapon of immense value (and hopefully easy to use Gabriel thought). Sighing heavily, Gabriel said his goodbyes. Panting, he made the long trek to the jagged precipice of the mountain, moving further away from the warm comfort and joy of home and closer to the dreaded Tigers. With every step, Gabriel's stomach churned like a rough and wild sea. He probably should have eaten some protein. Gabriel stopped. His eyes blinked rapidly. He could see a path ahead.

Going down was not fun. However, with bent knees and many groans, Gabriel persisted. There was a short stretch of grass, which he certainly had not rolled down, nor did he gather four grass stains from. That would have been undignified. He approached the river. The river, if it could be called that, was like an angry ocean. It moved rapidly, nothing like the languid drizzles of the creeks in Crangul. By now, Gabriel had other worries.

Cheesy Munches to be precise. He had swiftly devoured all 30 packets, gobbled up his 12 emergency packs, and even exhausted his supply of emergency emergency packets. Gabriel's fingers were also a concerning shade of orange that would not wash off. Despite this, Gabriel still had one thing, his brain. He fashioned a raft-like contraption out of bark and grass, and engineered a sail of Cheesy Munches bags that billowed in the wind. He crossed that river.

Squinting ferociously, he traipsed on as the blinding sun filtered through a canopy of thick jungle up in the distance. As Gabriel approached, what he considered to be certain death, if not at least excruciating pain, the sun finally set, and he became shrouded in a cloak of darkness. And then with one mighty step, he entered the jungle. Now, Gabriel had to force his way deeper into the scrub. He really didn't want to. But, if the city just moved here, with the Tigers as "neighbours", the whole group was certain to perish. If they stayed, they would be crushed. Only Gabriel could fix this, defeat the Tigers, and ensure a safe life for his people. No pressure!

Peering out of ancient trees were eyes; glowing eyes, with centres of ice and fire staring deeply into nothingness. Nonetheless, Gabriel pushed on, though his dagger now lay in his sweaty right palm. Progressing further, the foliage grew dense, the flowers wilted, and slowly, colour was washed away, possessed by hues of black and khaki only.

From some distance in front, a buzzing noise echoed. Gabriel's ears perked, and his dagger unsheathed, twitched in his hand. Out of the trees sprang a tiger, bathed in a strange orange light, more intense than the sun. The monster hovered mid-air, which surprised Gabriel; after all, even giant glowing orange tigers should obey gravity? However, when the beast spoke, it was neither angry nor malicious, but rather friendly and welcoming. "Wh-who are you, an-and what d-d-do you want?" Gabriel stuttered. It responded after a series of loud, abrasive buzzes, stating that its identity depended on whether Gabriel was a friend or foe. Not knowing how to proceed, Gabriel simply recounted his quest to ensure his village could live in peace and described the quakes affecting his home. After a short but meaningful conversation, Gabriel was thoroughly shocked. It appeared that there was only one evil guard, the Tiger of Nyx, not two. The glowing, buzzing orange tiger even expressed fear and dislike for the Tiger of Nyx. "We shall reveal our true form, Friend," it buzzed in a hushed tone. Gabriel paused, "We?" As if to answer him, a blinding flash shook Gabriel, and the tiger disintegrated, leaving only a sparkle of fireflies behind, shimmering in a cloud of now warm, pastel orange. It was never a tiger.

Gabriel's heart continued to palpitate, and his dagger remained hand-held. But now, with new friends and a calmed tum (the fireflies were expert nectar makers), he felt less doomed. The new cavalcade ventured deeper into the darkness. Eventually the fireflies swarmed forward then hastily retreated. They had found the Tiger of Nyx.

The Tiger of Nyx, nonchalantly acted bored as Gabriel approached and it began reciting poetry. "Tiger, Tiger burning bright, in the forest of the night." Boldly, Gabriel pointed out that the tiger was not burning bright, only to be retorted by the tiger's banter of, "I may not have many lumens like your pesky friends, but what I lack, I make up for in strength." And with that declaration, he growled ferociously and leapt forth.

Gabriel's heart lurched, and a bowling ball of throat was in his mouth. His breathing quickened. His knees knocked. In a rash, unthought-through, and altogether stupid but brave-looking move, Gabriel yelled like a Texan cowboy and ran forward, dagger out. Then, he tripped on his cargo pants that had unrolled. Hilarious. Not only did the knife skitter away, but the old yellow underpants he wore were exposed. In his defense, they were his comfiest pair. Determined to stay strong, Gabriel crawled on the ground grasping for his knife. It slid into his hand, almost like magnetic attraction. Gabriel stayed on the ground and cheered on the fireflies, who had taken up the fight: "Give me an F, give me an I..." and so on until he gained a glare from all, that would have killed the flowers around if they were not already dead. Just as the fireflies began to win, the Tiger of Nyx began to shoot out balls of flaming saliva onto them. Gabriel was torn. Should he help them and risk death, or stay conveniently out of the way in the scrub and allow them to die? After a few seconds of frantic contemplation, he rolled up his pants, again employed the Texan yell, and began to slash madly. His expertise was in the negative, but somehow effective. Maybe the dagger knew what it was doing, because Gabriel certainly did not. The sparkle regrouped and charged. Fireballs erupted. Gabriel slashed on instinct. This went on for a while, and Gabriel wondered how his heart could still be beating so fast and whether his knees would ever stop shaking. Though his breathing was hoarse and his stomach empty, Gabriel plunging the blade into the Tiger of Nyx again and again until its bare bones lay uncovered on the scarlet ground. Blood had oozed out at an alarming rate, and its exposed flesh was rapidly being gnawed away by hungry ants.

Finally, Gabriel stilled. When calm, he and the fireflies went back home. The trek was easier now, probably because his people's lives did not entirely depend on him anymore. He made it to the mountain just as the sun rose. Climbing back, he did the only thing he could do to busy his mind; wonder what was for breakfast? As he entered the town square, a deafening cheer erupted. The celebrations lasted hours, even days, and breakfast, more like 3 consecutive feasts, was an all-you-can-eat Cheesy Munches buffet. The next week, the inhabitants were gone, and light no longer filled the city. The tremors had grown more frequent as predicted, and Gabriel and the city citizens trekked into the jungle. There were ferns, flowers and trees that seemed as tall as the mountain. A new world. A new home.

Gabriel strode carelessly down the sandy jungle path that wound between trees, huts, and even the large boats on the clear blue calm river that the people of Crangabriel called home. He often ventured out alone, and his parents always allowed this, as their city, Crangabriel, was a peaceful one. One where fireflies lit the night sky a beautiful shade of orange, the exact same shade as the powder at the bottom of a Cheesy Munches packet.