

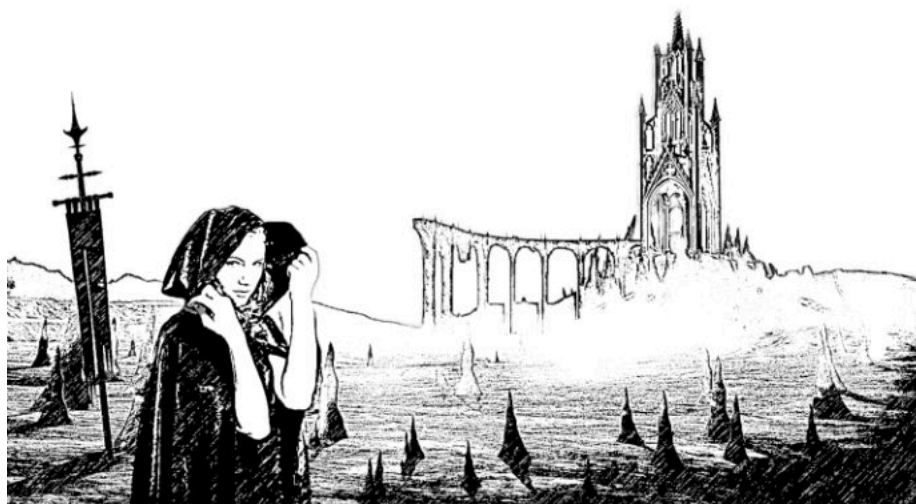
GUARDIAN'S LEGACY



Book Three of "The Last Princess of Latara"

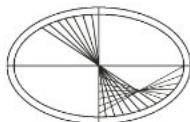
DARREN SIMON

GUARDIAN'S LEGACY



Book Three of "The Last Princess of Latara"

DARREN SIMON



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Guardian's Legacy

Darren Simon

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my loving wife and two sons whose support and kind words give me the strength to continue down the sometimes challenging, but always fun, path of being writer. I also dedicate this book to my late father, whose own ability as a storyteller continues to inspire me.

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CHAPTER 1

*A Time Long Past
The Kingdom of Latara*

PRINCESS THEODORA, EYES stinging from her hot tears, rode in silence atop her wind horse. She sat tall in the saddle, chin lifted high, but her heavy royal garb, buttoned tight around her neck, made breathing difficult. With each shallow breath, she fought the urge to rip away the purple cloak that enveloped her and ride away to the blue fields stretching beyond the Kingdom of Latara's gates.

But that wouldn't be proper during the funeral procession for her mother, Queen Tesarra, beloved Lady of the Castle and High Counselor of the Ten Unified Kingdoms.

The sun rose in the early emerald sky, its beams casting a pale light over Latara. Tens of thousands lined the cobblestone streets. Conjurers and non-magics alike held each other. Their cries echoed across the land. Their chants reached a deafening roar.

Theodora gritted her teeth. If only she could cover her ears. What right did these fools have to shed tears over her mother? All they did was take from her, looking to her to keep them safe during the tough times when wars brought suffering. They were the reason Theodora and her older sister, Assara, were raised by nannies and teachers. Tesarra had no time to be a mother.

Theodora threw a quick glance at her sister. Assara rode stoically atop her own wind horse, her face hidden by a purple cloak. Theodora shook her head. She'd begged her sister for a private ceremony, but Assara had refused. Her words repeated over and over in Theodora's mind.

Mother is not ours alone to mourn, sister. She belongs more to her people than to us. They deserve a chance to mourn her passing even more than we. That is how mother would want it.

Theodora squeezed the reins until her knuckles turned white. How could Assara know what their mother would want? Just because she was the oldest—or because, according to tradition, she would be queen? She was probably happy their mother was dead. Now Assara could take up the mantle as Queen of Latara.

She released a cold breath of air. *Don't give in to the anger. Not now. It's not right.* Yet hate filled her veins with fire, as if she was burning from the inside

out. Her cheeks flushed with heat. Beads of sweat dotted her brow. Her thoughts spun out of control, like a vengeful whirlwind screaming louder than her own internal voice. *Just focus on Mother and nothing else.* More tears slid down her eyes, like hot wax dripping from a lighted candle. She wiped the tears away with the back of her gloved hand and eyed her mother's casket just ahead.

Ornate and golden, it hovered above the street, kept aloft by the power of the elder conjurers who walked behind. They held their hands outstretched, palms up, in a sign of reverence and to maintain their invisible hold on the casket. A team of wind horses, covered in their own purple cloaks, slowly pulled the queen's final vessel through the kingdom. A rainbow of flowers circled Queen Tesarra, swirling in the air as if rustled by a gentle breeze, but the sky was calm. Magic caused their floral dance.

Theodora bit her lower lip to keep it from quivering. At least their mother looked at rest now.

She had suffered over the past year, and in her final weeks both breathing and eating had become nearly impossible. Theodora bit down harder on her lip, exalting in the piercing sting of torn flesh until she tasted the warm salt of her own blood. It had been too much for her to watch her mother fade painfully into the afterlife.

From childhood, she had always admired how her mother was such a commanding leader and her mother's role on the Council. Her mother never showed weakness, even as death loomed. A whimper slid uncontrollably from Theodora's lips. Her chest heaved. The screaming whirlwind in her mind cried louder.

"Sister, mind yourself," Assara whispered. "The daughters of the Queen must show strength."

Shut up, sister! Theodora's body trembled. She quieted herself, as her sister ordered, but the flames of rage inside licked mercilessly at her skin, causing her to squirm in the saddle.

Before day's end, her sister would be declared queen. Rolling her eyes, Theodora cursed under her breath. Because of some stupid ancient tradition, Assara was to lead their people and assume their mother's place on the Council.

Tradition didn't make it right.

Theodora rubbed her forehead. *Look at Assara. So proper, so noble, so weak. She is not fit to lead. I should be queen, and Assara knows it.*

She gazed back at the kings and queens of the Unified Kingdoms riding in formation. Their generals marched behind them with swords held high. Purple ribbons flowed from their swords' hilts to honor the Queen's family colors. *Bastards!* Theodora fought the urge to spit at the royals. They were hypocrites, all of them. Showing reverence to her mother as if they really cared. Each believed they should lead and, given the chance, they would have stabbed her mother

in the heart. Nevertheless, Queen Tesarra managed to keep a fragile peace while demanding their respect. Her death would lead to chaos. There would be a power struggle within the Council, and Assara lacked the strength to hold their mother's high place.

Theodora grimaced and turned her head forward. A show of force was the only answer. She allowed herself a slight smile at that thought.

The funeral procession continued its way to the Queen's final resting place. The sorrowful cries from the gathered crowds grew louder.

Fiery lines spread across the whites of Theodora's eyes, like cracks spreading along ice. She blinked repeatedly, but the searing worsened until her vision turned blood red, like always happened when her emotions got the best of her. *Not now! Not again!* She shook her head, but her eyes blazed hotter. *Control it!* She squeezed her eyelids shut and screamed in silence until the fire within subsided. Theodora slowly opened her eyes. The crimson shadow disbursed, and her vision returned to normal.

She took a few breaths to quiet her racing heart. Later, when she could escape to the solitude of the forest, she could unleash her anger, but not now.

Theodora and her sister led the procession up a hill covered by blue grass to the towering golden gates that led into the Garden of Tera-Ma. There, endless groves of trees with thick trunks and cascading leaves arching high above marked the burial sites of a thousand generations of Latarans.

Passing under the trees, the leaves chanted their own mourning song in honor of the Queen—a chorus of a million tiny voices that sang as one. Even the various species of flying beasts and land creatures lent their voices in song for the queen whose work had tried to unite all the beings that called this world, Janasara, home.

A swoosh in the skies above stole Theodora's attention. Glancing up, her jaw flew open at the site of the largest of the winged beasts—a dragon. Could it really be? She forced herself not to point toward the skies. The dragons were no enemy of the Unified Kingdoms, but they largely kept to themselves in a far-off land. Yet, a dragon soared overhead.

"Sister, the dragons have come to honor Mother," Assara uttered, her red lips parted in a wide smile, long brown hair flowing over her shoulders. "That is how loved she was."

Theodora kept her eyes on the winged beast, marveling at its ocean blue coloring, long powerful neck, and a wingspan that could hide the sun.

Soon everyone noticed. A collective gasp rang out from those who gathered inside the garden at the presence of such a massive and beautiful creature. Some fled while others stood in place shivering. Parents grabbed their children and held them against their bodies.

The dragon, too large to land in the garden, circled over the treetops. The beast seemed to take no interest in the fear it caused.

Forcing her gaze straight ahead, Theodora and her sister continued to lead the procession deeper into the garden to its highest point where the Great Tree, the largest of all the hardwoods and softwoods in the garden, stood. It rose nearly as high as the Castle of Latara itself. That was the resting place of every Lataran queen from the earliest recorded days of the kingdom.

A nearby tree, slightly smaller in size, stood as the burial place of the kings. Their father, King Lasenak, had been laid to rest there when she and Assara were children. He died in a war against the barbarian tribes in the North. Theodora barely remembered him and didn't miss him. She certainly never thought of him, and if she did, her heart didn't skip a beat. Nor did it ache with loss, like she now felt for her mother.

A sense of emptiness left her numb.

The funeral for Queen Tesarra continued until sunset. As was tradition, her body was placed under the Great Tree face down in a bed of large brown leaves and drying flower petals, all fallen naturally to the ground as part of their own life cycle. More leaves and petals were placed over her before the ground was magically sealed with earth and wild grass.

Theodora struggled with such an unceremonious burial, but such was the way of her people. On the journey to the afterlife, one should face the Mother World that nurtures life and should in all haste have their flesh, blood, and bone become one with Her.

She shuddered as magic sealed the earth over her mother.

"I will not leave this world as my mother did," she whispered so no one could hear. "These traditions will not hold sway over me."

Assara hushed her. "Refrain sister. You will be First Princess and rule at my side. Behave like it."

Theodora nodded. Her eyes burned again. The whirlwind inside of her started to spin out of control.



Theodora stormed into the throne room, a chamber in the shape of a half circle lighted by a brilliant crystal hovering below the arched ceiling. The funeral for her mother ended hours ago, but the pain in her heart pressed against her chest like a weight she couldn't lift. The midnight hour grew near when, in a quiet ceremony, Assara would be crowned Queen. A kingdom-wide celebration would follow in a month's time after a *proper* mourning period for Queen Tesarra. Theodora scoffed. Assara could never be the leader their mother was.

It should be me. She gripped the handle of the sword at her side tightly. With her free hand, she shoved her long blond ponytail off her shoulder. Her dry undecorated lips parted in a sneer. Her blue eyes still burned, but was it from sorrow or rage?

She stood in the chamber in silence surrounded by tapestries on the walls with emblems from all the lines of queens through the generations. The largest was Queen Tesarra's—purple with the emblem of two golden ropes spiraling together. Words stitched in glowing threads read 'Mona Ta-Pena, Mona Ta-Pena Loissaa, Mona Ta-Pena Loissaa Noema.' *Peace Intertwines Those Who Wish It.* Her mother had lived by those words.

They meant little to Theodora.

She crossed to marble steps in the center of the chamber leading up to the queen's throne. Queen Tesarra had rarely sat in the chair carved from silver with a backrest in the shape of a tree and armrests like sturdy branches. Theodora thought about ascending the steps but instead turned to the observation deck overlooking the kingdom.

Light from the three moons, the Three Queens of the Night, spilled into the chamber. Theodora stepped heavily into the pale illumination's embrace, stopping at the railing to peer over the darkened land.

Chanting still echoed across the kingdom as Tesarra's people mourned her passing. Soon they would chant Assara's name. *Fools.*

"Sister, I've been searching for you."

Theodora froze. Both hands tightened on the railing. Her pulse quickened, rushing blood to her head, bathing her face in heat.

She slowly turned to her older sister. "It seems you have found me, sister."

Assara strolled into the moonlight, her body hidden beneath a raven black robe. A hood covered her head, hiding her brown hair and chiseled features—but not her piercing eyes, two dark orbs surrounded by a sea of unyielding white.

Theodora rolled her eyes and approached her sister.

"Still our people cry for Mother." Assara joined Theodora on the deck. "They mourn for her, but they also fear what will happen now that the queen they loved so dearly has departed from them."

"It now falls upon you to settle their fears." Theodora folded her arms across her chest.

"I'll try." Assara faced Theodora and removed her hood. Shadows circled her eyes and wrinkles spread across her forehead. At 25, Assara was only five years older, but the lines etched into her face aged her beyond their five-year difference. Her long auburn hair sat stiffly in an up-due in preparation for the crown she'd wear. Her sun-licked bronzed skin had faded to an ashen gray, and her cheeks hung low. Weakness ebbed into her expression.

"I'm glad I have you to help me watch over our people and the Guardian Michala to help protect them." Assara placed her long, narrow hands on Theodora's shoulders.

Theodora backed away from her sister. Assara's touch burned her skin even through her cloak's thick cloth. She loved her sister. She really did. So why did the sight of Assara ignite a fire burning her from the inside out? "You'll marry Michala soon?"

Assara lowered her hands to her side. She eyed her sister in silence for an uncomfortable heartbeat before responding. "Yes, when it's proper, but not now." For the first time in days, Assara smiled, but it quickly disappeared.

"He will make a good king." Could Assara hear the slight mocking tone in her voice? Michala was a Guardian, part of a bloodline of conjurers whose powers made them the protectors of Latara and the Unified Kingdoms. But Michala was young and could barely summon his magic. What good was he then? Theodora gritted her teeth. Assara put far too much faith in him, and her love for him blinded her to the truth. A battle was coming, and only a show of force would protect their Crown.

"I'm glad to hear you say that sister." Assara inched closer to her. "I have felt some distance from you since my relationship with Michala began. I had thought you did not approve of him."

"He's a Guardian. Who better to stand at your side as you become queen?" Theodora retreated from the deck to the throne. "Soon, this chamber will be filled with those who will see you crowned. Latara will be yours to lead."

"Yes. I wish it could wait, but I know it must happen at midnight." Assara followed her sister to the base of the throne. She clasped her fingers together at her chest as if in prayer. "It's at least a comfort to have you with me. I know together and with Michala's guidance, we will serve our people and all the Unified Kingdoms well."

Theodora cleared her throat. Now was the time. Maybe she could get through to her sister and make her understand that only through a show of power could she govern not only Latara but the Council of the Unified Kingdoms. "You know there are those on the Council who will question your authority."

"I know." Assara raised an eyebrow.

Theodora raised her chin and began to pace. "They'll say you're too young, and they'll try to wrestle control from you."

"Likely."

"There may even be threats of war." Theodora stopped in front of her sister. Maybe, she finally understood. Each breath came quickly. Her heart beat faster.

"Your point, sister?" The wrinkles in Assara's brow deepened.

Theodora climbed the throne. "You know my point. We have talked of it

before. You must strengthen our army and dismiss the Council of the Unified Kingdoms. They are smaller kingdoms with feeble rulers. They could not stand against our forces. You could rule over all of them and assign your generals to serve as governors. I could lead the generals. This is the only way to prevent the infighting among the kingdoms that will soon occur. You know I'm right."

Assara ascended the throne. Her voice grew louder. "Sister, I know you mean well. In your own way, you want to keep the peace, but I will not break from Mother's form of government. I will not rule by force. It is not our way."

"But—"

"Remember who is queen and keep to your place, Theodora. Besides, there is a weakness in your argument. If we took arms against the other kingdoms, they would unite against us and have a large enough army to defeat us."

Theodora's body shook. She grabbed her sister by the shoulders. "Assara, you know that's not true. They'll turn on each other rather than band against Latara. You'll see. As soon as you take your seat on the Council, the truth of my words will sting." *Why can't she understand I'm right? How can she be such a fool?* "The Council will break up regardless of your actions. Chaos will reign unless you move first to dismiss the Council, claim the authority to rule over all the Unified Kingdoms, and then stamp out the opposition through a show of force."

"No!" Assara broke away from Theodora's grip. "Do you hear yourself, Theodora? You sound like an agent of the dark arts right now. You want us to return to the old ways. I will not have it."

"Then you are a fool." Theodora grabbed her sister by the arm.

"Sister, release me."

"No!" An explosion of thoughts flashed through her mind. Scorching heat spread through her limbs. *Why won't she listen? I must make her understand.* A red, pulsating glow rose from Theodora's fingertips.

"Theodora, what are you doing?" Assara screamed. "You're hurting me. Theodora. It burns."

"You must listen to me!" Theodora's eyes shifted from her sister's frightened eyes to her glowing fingers. Scorching heat flowed from her hand. It was as if she could control the fire raging inside her and use it as a weapon. But her sister wasn't the enemy. *I must stop, but not until she heeds me.*

Assara cried out, "Sister!" Lifting her free hand, she fired a blast of green energy from her palm that slammed into Theodora's chest.

Theodora flew off the marble steps onto the throne room's stone floor. She landed on her back with a thud. A yelp escaped her mouth. Smoke rose from her chest. Gasping, she struggled to move air in and out of her lungs. It was as if someone had just pummeled her with a mace. Her chest felt scorched, and the odor of charred cloth filled the chamber.

Assara was quickly by her side. "Theodora, I'm so sorry. What have I done? Please forgive me."

She placed a hand on Theodora's chest, and a different kind of energy flowed from Assara's palm. The soon-to-be-queen was using her healing powers. A soothing white glow spread across Theodora's chest.

Theodora pushed Assara's hand away and stood painfully. "Get away from me." Her eyes simmered. If she wanted, she could blast her sister with magic that was more than a match for weak Assara.

Theodora closed her eyes. She would not kill her sister today. "I should have been queen, Assara. I know what needs to be done. You'll see. They'll all see that I was right. The kingdoms will fall."

With that Theodora ran from the throne room.

She would leave Latara and never return until she had the power to usher in a new world order.

CHAPTER 2

In the Present
The Dungeon of Castle Latara

GUARDIAN, YOU MUST not die. There is more to be done.” Charlee stirred. The words tickled her ears, but darkness surrounded her. It was better that way. In the cocoon of unconsciousness, her parents watched over her. Cryton, the old man she had come to look upon as a grandfather and mentor, still lived and smiled as he prepared a pizza in his hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Her best friend, Sandra, laughed inside the cafeteria at Myron Applebee Junior High. Life was as it should be. Everyone was safe.

“Guardian, you must rise. You cannot succumb to the comfort of death.”

Leave me alone. A white mist enveloped those comfortable memories. The images morphed. Cryton lay dead on a battlefield, and a clone of Sandra dressed in black armor stood over him, bloody sword in hand, lips parted in a sneer.

“Granddaughter of Assara, I demand you open your eyes.”

Let me sleep. The medallion hovered within the fog, on one side the etching of a burning tree, on the other side the scrawling of a withered, scarred face—her face. *No!* She remembered the battle with Theodora for the medallion inside the Kingdom of Latara’s throne room. She had used its dark magic against the sorceress, but each time Charlee touched the medallion’s power, it twisted her.

Charlee stunned Theodora with a blast from the medallion. The witch crumbled to the floor like a rag doll. One more bolt from the medallion would stop the sorceress forever.

It wasn’t to be.

Before she could strike one last time, Charlee lost the medallion to Theodora. The sorceress quickly recovered her strength and pierced Charlee with a crimson ray that sucked out her guardian powers. Her insides ripped and snapped. Every bit of magic was torn from her body. Now, it was her turn to drop to the floor, her arms and legs like jelly. She lay there defeated until darkness took her.

The sorceress’ final words echoed through the murky fog around Charlee. “I thought you might like to look into the gateway and see your world for the last time. I thought you might like to bid me farewell as I step into your world and begin my quest to claim it as my own—or to destroy it.”

How long ago had it all happened? Time no longer had meaning. No matter. She had to stop Theodora from hurting the ones she loved.

"Guardian."

"What?" Charlee mumbled.

The mist around her drifted away. Her mind became conscious. She blinked her eyes and sniffed the air. It stunk like rotten eggs. Drops of water splashed around her. Steel clinked together.

"Where am I?" Her eyes opened. A fuzzy blur greeted her. She didn't expect an answer but got one.

"In the dungeon of Castle Latara."

Oh, yes. Charlee lifted her head from her chest. *I'm in a dungeon chained to a wall.* Theodora left her here to slowly die, and the sorceress' daughter, Assara—a clone of her friend Sandra named after Charlee's grandmother—was all too happy to let that happen.

"Who's there?" Charlee's throat burned. Her voice cracked. She licked her lips with a dry tongue. Her head dropped, but she fought to lift it again.

"You must stay alive. You cannot sleep now."

Charlee blinked and her vision cleared. She was alone in the dungeon's stale darkness. Her gut ached with emptiness from hunger—or maybe it was from a despair as heavy as the steel chains that tethered her to the cold, hard stone wall. "Who...are you?"

"Does the young Guardian not recognize my voice?"

"You sound like...Theodora." Her words formed as a raspy whisper. Hate ignited an imaginary flame deep in her chest. Her pulse quickened. She couldn't just lay here waiting to die. She had to stop Theodora. "But you can't be. She stole my...powers. Left me...to die."

"I am Theodora." There was remorse in the voice. *"I am the true Theodora. The one you found imprisoned in ice when you jumped through one of your gateways. Do you remember?"*

"I don't...know. Don't...care." Charlee scanned the darkness, but she was alone. "I just want you...dead."

"You will have your chance." Just above Charlee a light appeared. It started as a glowing bubble and then expanded. Light exploded through the tiny chamber. Charlee squeezed her eyes shut, but the brilliance seared through her eyelids.

"It burns," she cried.

"I am sorry, Guardian. Open your eyes and look now."

Charlee blinked rapidly until the pain eased. The blinding light dimmed to a warm yellow glow. Still, shadows danced in front of her. She blinked again and shook her head until focus returned.

"Theodora," Charlee mouthed. Blood surged to her head. Her body trembled.

Like a ghost, a younger version of the sorceress floated in the corner. Flowing golden hair encircled the apparition's face and gathered around her shoulders.

A long white dress, tied off at the waist with a silvery belt, hugged her body. Thin fingers interlocked at her chest. Theodora's head tilted to the side. The right side of her mouth lifted in a slight smile. Concern replaced hate in the sorceress' eyes.

"Do you remember me?" Theodora crossed to within a few feet of Charlee. Her form solidified but still gave off a warm light. Her words became more real—no longer spoken as if from some ethereal plane.

Charlee shook her head. Her mind was slipping. This couldn't be real. But what if it was? If only she could stand and fight. If only she could kill this witch. "Stay away...from...family. I'll...kill...you."

"It is not me who threatens your family, at least not the real me. It is a monstrous creation." Theodora reached for her with a slender arm. Charlee twisted her head away. "My mistakes have brought this on you, your family, and your world. I intend to right the wrongs I have caused, but I need you to free me."

"Get out...of...my head." Charlee tried to spit at the young form of Theodora but couldn't gather saliva. She wrestled against her chains. The rough steel around her wrists tore skin. She fought despite the radiating pain and warmth of her own blood dripping onto her fingers.

"You must survive, Guardian, and find me again." Theodora backed away. Her body pulsed like a heartbeat. "You must free me. Only together can we stop the Theodora you have come to know."

"More lies." Charlee thrashed against her chains. She would do anything to break them, to find a way to reach Theodora, but her limbs lacked the strength.

"You know I am right." Young Theodora spoke sternly. "You have felt the power of the medallion and know its darkness. You have looked into its ugly core, and so somewhere in your mind, the truth is locked away and hidden. The truth is embedded in your thoughts."

"Free me...then." Charlee's hands formed fists. Doing so hurt.

Theodora shook her head. "In my dormant state, I have no power to free you. Do not lose heart, for even now there are friends who come to rescue you."

Charlee's heart beat faster. "How do you...know...this?"

"I have seen them."

"Them?" *The Changeling—if he lived? The Dragon King? Who?*

A locking mechanism on the door clicked. Ghostly Theodora disappeared, and the light faded. The cold emptiness of the chamber again surrounded her, but the flame in her chest still burned. The heavy dungeon door swung open. Two Horengs dressed in black armor stepped inside, each grasping a crackling torch. A dancing orange light spread through the chamber, and the Horengs' wolf-like shadows bounced off the walls. Their yellow eyes shown through their helmets, and snarls rose from their snouts, curved upward and bearing long fangs. The Horengs parted as the clone of Charlee's best friend strolled into the chamber.

"Free...me!" Charlee mouthed, her words barely above a whisper.

"Silence." Assara slapped her across the cheek. Her head vibrated. Inside her mouth, she tasted the salty warmth of her own blood. Assara glared through loose strands of hair over her dark eyes. "It seems there are those who have come to rescue you, so for their effort I will kill you in front of them as a message that even the great Guardian will fall to my mother."

"Assara, no." Charlee spit blood from her mouth. How could she make the clone of her best friend understand Theodora was using her? "Think...for...y-ourself. You're...not...your mother."

Assara turned to her Horeng escorts. "Unchain her and bring her to the throne room." She then lumbered from the dungeon.

Charlee closed her eyes. *Can't let her hurt my protector...or anyone else. Must break free. But how, damnit!*

CHAPTER 3

The Changeling's Charge

THE DRAGON NOORRENNN lay dead, his broken body left for other creatures to feed on. Twisted bones tore through flesh. His tongue hung limply from a crushed jaw. Jagged teeth, drenched in the beast's own blood, ripped apart its snout. Thick crimson liquid pooled from its underside, like hot lava pouring down the side of a volcano. His charred remains cast a foul odor over the land. There was nothing worse than the stench of a dragon carcass.

The Changeling rested not far from the dragon. Beaten and battered, his form had dissipated to its basic essence—a glob of yellow energy, and his glow faded. He bested Theodora's dragon, but he would soon join the winged monster in death.

It was believed throughout Janasara that the mythical Changelings were immortal. He knew that wasn't true. His kind had a beginning and an end, and death was as real for them as any creature in this world.

Grunting in silence, he stretched his amoeba form to take a shape—any shape—but his body lacked strength to reform. He lay in the dirt like a puddle of water slowly dissolving into the dust. Soon, he would simply pop out of existence, becoming one with Janasara's life force.

No! He couldn't die—not yet.

The ruins of the Kingdom of Latara stood in the distance. Inside the kingdom's great castle, his charge—the young Guardian—was imprisoned. He watched over Charlee since her birth on that world called Earth. He swore to protect her from evil and any danger. He hadn't—not well enough.

Charlee had changed so much in such a short period. She had gone from a scared girl to a warrior as fierce as her grandfather, Michala. She had become a true leader. The beings of Janasara and the people of Earth still needed her.

I must reach her.

The Changeling focused one more time. His oozing limbs morphed into a winged unicorn but quickly distorted into a misshapen being, then liquefied again. Shapeless, he seeped over the ground. An icy chill flowed through him, and his glow dimmed even more. He became increasingly transparent. It would be so easy to give in to death.

No!

Summoning what little strength he had left, his glow pulsated brighter. He envisioned one of his Earthly forms. The one Charlee liked best—the bike! His globular form strained. *Stretch! Do it for the Guardian!* His body listened. Two tires formed, then a white frame, chrome-like handlebars, and a banana seat with a backrest. *Yes! Hold the form!* At first, he dared not move out of fear he would liquefy once again. This time the shift held. His energy burned brighter.

He would not die this day.

The Changeling willed one more transformation. A set of long, flowing, white wings spread from the frame. He stretched them to their full length. The air caressed the feathers, lifting the wings higher.

He turned toward the Kingdom of Latara, and with a thrust of his wings raced into the sky to save her.

CHAPTER 4

The Dragon Lord

DEEP INSIDE THE Dragon Lord's mountain, his son Kraannaann paced his father's chamber. His spiked tail pounded repeatedly against the stone floor, rattling the cavern. Rocks and dust fell from above, crashing around him. The boulder-sized red crystal suspended magically from the ceiling swung back and forth. Beams of sunlight piercing through the fissures in the mountainside bounced off the jewel and danced across jagged walls.

"Do you see it, Father?" Kraannaann spit fire. "Do you see the vision of the Guardian, chained, powerless, and suffering? She is alone and will not survive—and it's because she vowed to save me."

Kraannaann clutched the fresh scar across his chest. His heart beat stronger now that the section long ago cut out by the traitor Noorrennn had been reattached thanks to the Guardian. She risked everything to return the missing piece of his heart and save his life.

Each steady beat vibrated against his touch. His blood pumped faster through his veins than ever before, and he breathed deeper. More flames rose from his snout. His lips curled up, revealing his long fangs. Noorrennn had taken nearly everything from him, and for what—to serve the witch, Theodora?

Tears formed in Kraannaann's green eyes. His purple scales rippled along his back. His tail walloped the ground.

Noorrennn ripped out a section of his heart and killed his mother when she tried to stop him. Rather than seek vengeance and protect the world from Theodora, his once proud father, the Dragon Lord, had allowed her to rise to power. *Because of me! Because she swore that if he tried to prevent her conquests, she would plunge a knife through the portion of my heart she possessed and kill me. So, this is all my fault.*

Kraannaann roared. His father had not responded to his question. "Father, do you see her?"

"Yes, my son, I do." The Dragon Lord's muscles bristled. His yellow fangs ground together. He swung his massive tail around and placed it on his son's shoulder. "Calm your anger. We will go to her. She will be saved, just as she saved you. I make that promise to you. I have stood by long enough."

"When, Father, when will we go?" Kraannaann pushed his father's tail

away. He rose on his hind legs as high as he could, but he still was much shorter than his father.

"I have but one duty to perform first." The Dragon Lord retreated from his son. His green scales became black as the dead of night. "Gather our warriors. I trust you will have no trouble as they already look to you as the future leader of our kind."

"What shall I tell them?" Kraannaann's eyes widened, and his pulse quickened.

"That we prepare for war."

CHAPTER 5

The Alliances of Old Rise Again

PENAIYA WALKED AMONG her people, the remnants of the Kingdom of Latara, offering reassuring smiles and pats on shoulders. The emerald skies of day had long since given way to the darkened skies of twilight, but the three moons—the Queens of the Night—shed a golden light over their island refuge.

Her head was heavy as the events of the last few hours weighed on her. The young Guardian had kept her promise and delivered them to the Realm of the Dragons. She had magically transported many Latarans instantaneously through a portal. Penaiya had been among them.

She had been the first to step into the blue light generated by the Guardian. It had been like stepping through a doorway filled with blinding energy that stung the eyes. She shielded them with her fingers. When she removed her hands, she stood on the shores of an island at the base of a great mountain with a crest carved into dragon wings.

Others followed until more than half of her people huddled together as close to her as possible. Then the portal's blue light vanished. Many hadn't made it through. They were stuck back across the sea on a narrow patch of land between mountains and a shore where Empress Theodora's Horeng army surrounded them.

Those gathered around her wailed for lost friends and family members. She assured them another portal would soon open and more people would arrive, but the blue light did not return. Penaiya had wept then for her people, for the young Guardian, and for her daughter who lost faith and joined Theodora—and likely died by dragon fire.

She couldn't despair long. She couldn't let her people see her in a moment of weakness, so she had done what all leaders must—hid her emotions. Wiping her eyes, she forced a smile, wrapped her disheveled hair into a ponytail, and did her best to comfort everyone else.

Then came the shouts among her people.

"Look to the skies!" some shouted.

"Dragons!" others cried.

Penaiya arched her neck toward the Three Queens, which hovered high to the west. The dragons were visible against the brilliant moons, their wings

glimmering in the night's twinkling embrace. There must have been dozens, and they raced toward the island and toward her people.

Screams rose among them. The massive creatures had stayed away when the Ten Unified Kingdoms needed them most. They hid in their realm as Theodora conquered the kingdoms and killed so many.

Penaiya gritted her teeth. She hadn't wanted to come here. She wanted nothing to do with the beasts, but the Guardian thought it best. So, what now? Had the dragons come to feed on them? Would their flames extinguish what remained of the people of Latar? Had the Guardian led them to death?

Then the unexpected occurred.

One by one, the dragons landed on the shore, and from their backs slid all those who had not escaped in the portal. Ten, twenty, forty—the numbers of Latarans grew as each dragon gently touched land. Cheers and praise for the dragons echoed across the shoreline. Penaiya had stared in silence. A single tear fell from her cheek.

That had been hours ago.

The dragons had flown away as quickly as they arrived, soaring east toward other groupings of islands. None delivered the Guardian. What had become of her? The young warrior Aryean, whose feelings for the Guardian had left him in despair when she wasn't delivered to the island, had said she still lived when the dragons rescued them. He told of how he watched a dragon grasp her in its talons and fly her away, believing they'd be reunited, but it wasn't to be. Had she died, sacrificing herself? She was so young, so brave, and she'd given everything to save people in a world that wasn't her own.

As the deeper hours of night unfolded, a chill covered the island.

More than once from the mountain, a terrifying roar shook the island. Fear and uncertainty replaced the joy of being reunited with loved ones. She put her people to work, sending them into a nearby forest to gather wood for fires and to find food.

Some fires already blazed along the shore, crackling wildly. The flames offered warmth from the night's chill. Exotic fruits found in forest trees were being rationed in small portions. Though far from enough to keep away the pains of hunger, it was something.

Penaiya walked up to one fire pit encircled by twenty of her people. "May I join you?" They quickly made space for her. "How about a song?" Penaiya knelt in the sand.

Before anyone answered, she started to hum an old Lataran lullaby mothers and fathers would sing to their children—a comforting tune that everyone would know. Soon other voices joined from the other fires. The humming turned to words, and their song became louder than the waves crashing on the shore, until...

A mighty wind slammed into her people, knocking many down and extinguishing most of the blazes.

The island trembled, and Penaiya tumbled into the sand. She didn't need to gaze up to know a dragon was close. But would the beast be friend or foe? Her people were defenseless. If the creature attacked, she could do nothing to save them. Needle pricks of panic spread between her shoulder blades. Spitting sand from her mouth, she slowly stood.

Gasps and whimpers from her people affirmed her fears. A very large dragon had landed. The Latarans gathered behind her, huddling close together. Many pointed, whispering the word *dragon* over and over. The dragons had saved them, but why? Were the beasts going to feed on them? No, that didn't make sense. They would have struck hours ago if they hungered.

Penaiya straightened her hair.

The winged beast towered above her a stone's throw away. Even under the cover of darkness, there was no mistaking the Dragon Lord. She'd never seen him but heard tales of his majesty—a titan even among his own kind. The stories didn't do him justice. Penaiya fought the urge to run. A spiked head rested atop a long muscular neck. Eyes as orange as the sun glared at her. She forced herself not to look away. Wings tucked against him, covering his body like a silk royal robe. Moonlight reflected off an armor of green scales atop his back. Sword-length fangs protruded from his snout.

Penaiya crossed her arms to keep from shaking. "You are the Dragon Lord?"

The dragon nodded a massive head. Black smoke rose from cavernous nostrils. "I am Sheorriaaaaan." His words were spoken in Lengoron, so Penaiya would understand. With unexpected grace, he lowered his head to her until just a few feet away. Penaiya held her ground, but a bead of cold sweat dropped from her brow. "You have come to the Realm of the Dragons."

"I am Penaiya." Lifting her chin, she stepped closer to the dragon's snout. "You speak our language well."

The Dragon Lord tilted his head. "Dragons are very adept at learning languages. You lead these people?"

"I do...for now, until the rightful Queen of Latara returns. I thank you for providing us a safe shore from the Horeng."

"Do not thank me, Lady Penaiya," the Dragon Lord retorted. "Though it be distasteful and cowardly, I would have let you die at the hands of the Horeng. You are here now because of my son, who showed greater courage than I ever could. And the only reason I let you remain here now is because of the bravery of your Guardian."

"Where is she?" Penaiya blurted. "She lives?"

The Dragon Lord lifted his head and nodded. His scales clinked with each

movement. His eyes blinked once. "She does for now, but she is locked away in Theodora's dungeon and grows weaker with each passing moment. I fear she will not survive long without help."

Penaiya cleared her throat. "What concern is the Guardian to the dragons? Your kind turned their backs once on the greatest of the Guardians and on the people within the Unified Kingdoms. Your silence enabled Theodora—"

A roar from the Dragon Lord pierced the night. Penaiya did not flinch.

"The past is the past...I had my reasons." The Dragon Lord inched closer to Penaiya. The heat of his breath surrounded her. Her eyes watered from the stench of hot sulfur. "Your young Guardian and my son have reminded me what true courage is. She is in danger because she acted to save my son. It is time for me to return the favor."

"What are you saying?" Penaiya moved around the dragon's snout and stared into his right eye.

"Tonight, the dragons bring war to the House of Theodora, a war that is long overdue." The Dragon Lord bared his fangs. "Your people have been through much this day, but I come here to ask if you might stand with the dragons the way we should have stood with you long ago."

Penaiya's heart leaped. She wanted to cry out *yes*, but she could not speak for her people. She stepped back and turned to them. They were hungry, exhausted, lost, and afraid. There were too few to be of much value in a war against an enemy tens of thousands strong.

She addressed them. "Have you heard the words of the Dragon Lord?"

"Yes," many shouted.

Penaiya sighed. "What say you?"

Silence greeted her at first until Aryean, his face covered in his own dried blood, unsheathed his sword and raised it over his head.

"For the Guardian." His voice cracked as he spoke, and a tear slid down his cheek. Penaiya nodded to him. There was no denying their connection.

Another warrior, a young woman, stood up. "For the Guardian."

Another voice rang out, "For Latara."

"For all the Unified Kingdoms," Penaiya reminded them.

Cheers followed.

Penaiya turned back to the Dragon Lord. "You have your answer."

"Good." The Dragon Lord's lips curled up in a grin. "We shall fight as one. Come and let us prepare. There shall be food for your people, and armor, bows, and blades. When in the end we stand victorious, history will tell of how the Unified Kingdoms and the Realm of Dragons fought together as in days long since passed and bridged the way to a new time of peace in all Janasara."

CHAPTER 6

On Earth

CHARLEE'S MOM STARED at her husband. Their eyes shifted from each other back to their youngest daughter, Charlee's two-year-old sister, Megan. The little one sat in her highchair, giggling, a bubble gum-sized blue ball of light dancing between the palms of her hands. It radiated a glow that illuminated Megan's porcelain skin despite the gloom of a foggy San Francisco morning.

Charlee's mom, Tira Smelton, placed a hand over her own mouth, muffling a gasp. Was it possible? Had Megan manifested a gateway, just like her big sister?

Tira's husband, Joseph Smelton, adjusted the wire-framed glasses on his bearded face. He bent down to his youngest daughter. "What do you have there, baby girl?"

Megan giggled some more. Her blond hair danced across her face. She smiled ear to ear, her crystal blue eyes locked on the tiny energy ball floating between her hands. "Charlee...home."

Tira Smelton nodded to her daughter. She had no idea what Megan meant by that. How could a two-year-old fathom just how profound her words were? That little ball hovering playfully between her tiny fingers could be a way across the dimensional divide that kept them from reaching Charlee.

Her husband stroked Megan's hair. "You don't think she knows the way to Janasara, do you?"

Tira blinked her tired eyes and shook her head. "How could she? She's so young. But look at her, Joseph, she's generating a gateway. There's no way she should have that kind of power—not at her age."

Joseph wrapped his arms around his daughter and lifted her from the chair. He held her close to his chest. "Maybe it shouldn't be possible, but she's doing it."

Minutes ago, Tira and her husband were lost. Their eldest daughter, Charlee, had used her Guardian powers to open a gateway to Janasara for herself, her old mentor, Cryton, and a Changeling sworn to protect her. Her husband tried to stop her, but he'd failed. Charlee was stubborn, *just like me*.

Charlee crossed the dimensional divide to stop Theodora without Tira or her husband. She felt responsible for the people of Janasara suffering after trapping Theodora back in that world to keep her from conquering Earth.

Charlee had paid a terrible price, and her parents had to get to her. Megan might provide them that chance.

Joseph rocked his daughter in his arms. "Somehow, she's creating a gateway. There's got to be some way to reach Charlee now."

Tira shook her head. Frown lines, mostly hidden by her brown hair, formed along her forehead. "Joseph, it's just a bit of magic. It's not a true gateway. She's not strong enough yet. Besides, even if it was a gateway, she can't control it. She wouldn't know how to reach Janasara. A Guardian must be able to visualize their destination."

"We have to try!" Joseph's chin quivered under his beard. "There must be a way. Can't you use your magic to amplify Megan's?"

She clasped her hands and held them under her chin. Was there a way? No, her husband just didn't understand magic. How could a man from Earth? For all his support, for all the love he showed her, despite her being a transplant from another world, another dimension, he could never truly understand. "It doesn't work that way. I'm not a Guardian. And even if I could do something, how do we know it wouldn't hurt Megan?"

"Because your magic could never harm our daughter." Joseph Smelton placed his hand gently on his wife's shoulder.

Tira swung back to her husband. Her husband was right. They had to try, and there simply was no other way. Megan was offering them a gift, one Tira had to accept. "I don't know if it's possible, but I'll try to feed some of my magic to Megan, and if she's able to manifest a gateway large enough to transport me, I'll try to guide her thoughts to Janasara. But, if I sense she's in distress even the slightest, I'll stop it."

Joseph grasped his wife's hand. "You're not going there alone. If our little girl here succeeds, we're all going. I won't have our family separated again—ever!"

CHAPTER 7

The Break of Day

CHARLEE'S FEET DRAGGED limply across the stone floor of a dimly lit hallway. A stench filled the air. It could be the stink of the two Horeng henchmen who roughly held her by the arms—or maybe it was her. She probably didn't smell like a flower after being chained to a dungeon wall, but it didn't matter. Assara, the confused clone of her best friend, Sandra, would kill her soon anyway.

As they neared the massive arched doorway to the throne room, the double doors opened on their own. Beyond was the chamber where Charlee had battled Theodora only to lose the medallion, the one weapon that could destroy the witch. Charlee shuddered. The agony of the moment Theodora used the medallion to steal her magic was still fresh. Her body was still hollow, as if her soul had been ripped away.

"Leave us," a voice commanded.

The two beasts threw Charlee farther into the room. She slammed against the floor and rolled onto her side. A yelp slid from her lips. She lay there like a worm unable to do little else but slide her legs closer to her chest. Pain radiated from stiff muscles, weakened by confinement in heavy chains.

"You have arrived just in time."

Charlee took a deep breath. She had to stand and face the clone. If she were going to die, it wouldn't happen while lying on a floor like some frightened child. With a loud grunt, she lifted herself, but her wobbly arms failed.

Assara's gleeful laugh filled the chamber. "Oh, how weak the Guardian has become. What joy to watch you struggle. If only there were time, I could delight in your weakness all day."

"Shut up!" Charlee uttered through parched lips, her words not much more than a gritty whisper. Pounding the floor with a fist, she tried again. Shaky arms underneath her, she pushed against the floor. *Come...on, damn...you!* Gasping out shallow breaths through clenched teeth, she painfully climbed to her knees.

Assara's laughter stopped.

Every muscle screamed and pain sensors flashed like tiny explosions throughout her body. Charlee reached her feet but quickly caved, slumping again to her knees. Okay, if this was the best she could do, so be it.

Chest heaving from the effort, she gazed ahead. The throne, a chair made entirely of the bones of Theodora's conquered enemies, stood before her. Leg bones held up the chair, arm bones served as armrests, and skulls lined the base for the seat. A collage of bones, skulls, rib cages, hands, and feet covered the back of the chair and rose high in an arching display of death.

Assara sat, legs crossed, at the throne.

"If you want...to kill me, just get it...over with," Charlee mumbled. "I'm tired of this...tired of you."

Assara frowned. Dampened by sweat, her brown wispy hair clung to the hard edges of her face. "You will die as a new day begins, but not just yet. I thought you might like to see the show that is about to begin."

Charlee forced a deep breath. "What do...you...mean?" A million thoughts raced through her mind. This monster had taken so much from her already. But there were so many others she could hurt.

"Come, let me show you." Theodora's clone creation, dressed in the same black armor she wore when they first battled on a mountaintop, climbed down marble steps to Charlee. Clamping a gloved hand around Charlee's neck, she forced her to stand.

"You do wreak, don't you," Assara teased. "Too bad you'll not have time to bathe before you die."

"Yeah, too...bad." Charlee lacked strength to struggle against Assara's grip. If only she had a little magic hidden away, untouched by Theodora's medallion. But there was nothing left but a void in her gut.

The clone dragged her across the throne room to the balcony overlooking the Kingdom of Latara. A raven black sky covered the land, but a hint of light shown in the east as daybreak neared.

"What do you see?" Assara's brown eyes focused on the dark horizon toward jagged mountain peaks, shadowy and desolate, that marked the kingdom's southern border. A confident defiance laced Assara's voice, but the tiniest of cracks in her words revealed something else. Was it fear?

The ruins of Latara stretched beneath the castle. The fires of Theodora's factories burned through the night, coughing up columns of glowing black smoke. A low moan echoed from within those evil constructs, maybe from the machinery or maybe from those who once lived peacefully in the kingdom but now slaved under wretched conditions. Charlee bit her lip. She had failed them.

"Stop this...Assara." Charlee straightened and pushed away from Theodora's daughter. She would have collapsed but caught herself on the railing. Quivering arms barely held her up. "It's not too late...to change."

Assara grabbed Charlee by the hair and yanked her close. Her hot breath brushed against Charlee's ear. "You have not answered my question, Guardian.

What do you see?" Charlee swatted at Assara's hand to try to free herself, but the clone forced Charlee to her knees.

"Answer!" Assara shouted. Her voice bounced off the chamber walls.

Charlee pulled herself up and glanced over the kingdom. Dread sucked all the blood from her head. Blinking uncontrollably, she peered over the railing and followed a trail of uprooted trees and gutted, abandoned homes to Lata's protective outer walls. Beyond the walls, like an endless ocean barely visible through a morning mist, thousands of the Horeng army had gathered. They stood as an impenetrable barrier to the kingdom—but why?

"You see them, don't you?" Assara wrapped an arm around Charlee's neck.

"Yes."

"A rescue attempt, Guardian."

"What?" Charlee grabbed Assara's arm.

"It seems you have inspired that cowardice Dragon Lord to rise up against Mother's armies." Assara's voice vibrated with anticipation of a war.

Bleak clouds crowned the sentinel ranges off to the east, but golden streams singled the peaks. The early sun fought against the dark shroud over the land to announce its presence. A few beams barely cracked through the gloom—enough to glint against something big atop the closest peak. Charlee strained for a better look. The dawn of a new day revealed the outlines of a dragon's wings.

"The Dragon Lord." Charlee couldn't contain her excitement—or her fear. Her knuckles turned white as her hands tightened around the railing. Her knees shook underneath her torn animal-hide pants—the same ones Cryton had gifted to her.

As if he could hear her muffled words from such great distance, the great dragon roared, and fire rose from his snout to greet the morning.

"Yes, he has come for you." Assara rubbed her chin and glared at Charlee. Her lower lip quivered slightly. "It seems you saved his only son."

Charlee's eyes shifted from the Dragon Lord to Assara. The clone feared the dragon despite her best efforts to hide her fear, but her face remained hard even as she stared into the vengeful hate of a dragon. What did Assara have planned? What trap would she unleash on the Dragon Lord? Charlee had to warn him. She had to make him stay away.

"Does it bring you joy to see the beast?" Assara's lips parted in a twisted grin. "Do you think you'll be saved now?"

Charlee shook her head. There was a mysterious power in Assara's words. It made Charlee shudder. The clone was too confident. "Assara, why am I here? You could have left me in the dungeon."

"Yes, I could have, but that wouldn't be as much fun." Assara gripped the sword at her side. Amusement now stirred in the playful tone of her voice. Her

eyes bulged. "I thought you would like to see just how prepared Mother is for an attack by the dragons. When they are defeated, they will see me drive a sword through their Guardian. I thought this moment deserved a public death."

"Wait, let me talk to the Dragon Lord. I'll send him away." Each word burned, but she had to stop Assara. Her, pain, thirst, hunger, and fear no longer mattered. She couldn't let the Dragon Lord be hurt.

Charlee took a wobbly step toward Assara, but the clone whipped out her sword and pointed the blade at Charlee's neck. "Stay back. You will die in time. Try to enjoy what's to come."

"No!"

"Yes!" Assara kept the blade tip close to Charlee's chest. "You brought this on yourself by hurting Mother. You never should have tried to take what was hers."

"I didn't take anything." Charlee gripped the steel with one hand. Assara tugged it free, slicing across Charlee's palm. She cringed but didn't cry out. Blood oozed down her wrist. "Theodora used me to reach my world, and she tried to hurt a lot of people, including my best friend." Charlee squeezed her hand, more blood dripping between her fingers. She gasped against the sting but kept talking. "Assara, she used me like she's using you now. Think about it. Why'd she leave you here? Why didn't she take her only daughter with her? She doesn't care what happens to you. She got what she wants, and she left you behind."

Assara studied the crimson liquid coating her blade. A quiet rage turned her bronze skin red. "Stop it!" she finally shouted. "You're trying to twist me against Mother, but she warned me of your tricks."

Charlee lumbered to Assara. "You know I'm right."

The back of Assara's gloved hand slammed into Charlee's cheek. Her head jerked backward, rattling her brain as if shocked by a sudden burst of electricity. Her vision blurred. She fell to the ground, clutching her face.

Spitting blood from her mouth, Charlee clutched her head until the spinning stopped. "Hitting me just proves you know I'm right." Slowly rising, she tried to ignore the radiating ache spreading from one side of her face to the other.

Assara raised her sword as if to bring it crashing down toward Charlee, but the roar of the Dragon Lord stopped her.

"The war with the dragons begins." The clone swung back to the balcony.

Charlee glanced beyond Assara. Streaks of emerald stretched like tentacles across the sky, pushing away the remains of the night. An orange sun peaked from behind the mountains.

The Dragon Lord launched into the sky with one mighty thrust of his wings.

I must make him stop! Charlee wrung her hands and closed her eyes. Those

with magic abilities could speak telepathically. Maybe he could still sense her, hear her thoughts, even if she had lost her powers. The dragons were creatures of the purest magic. None was stronger than the Dragon Lord.

Hear me, damn it! Please, hear me! Sheorrriaaaaan! she shouted with her mind, *Stay away from here. You're flying into a trap. You can't help me. Just turn back.*

§ § §

The Dragon Lord heard the Guardian's warning. He snorted, shook his massive head, and soared faster toward the castle.

Thousands of the Empresses' Horeng army stretched across the desolate plain outside the kingdom's walls. They might be wolves, but to the Dragon Lord they were prey he'd slaughter in one fiery breath. Nevertheless, he was no fool. The Horeng were a diversion from whatever weapon she planned to unleash.

Theodora no longer had her own dragon. The Changeling had seen to that. The burned corpse of the traitorous Noorrennn lay rotting in a nearby field.

The witch had something else planned. His orange eyes shimmered. He bared his fangs. Fire rose up his throat. The green scales on his back clamped down tightly against his body in anticipation. Too many years had passed since he'd felt the exhilaration of battle. He'd take the bait.

"Guardian, if you can hear my words, have no fear. I know danger lies ahead. Do not underestimate the cunning of the dragons. Rest assured, you will be saved, and order will be restored."

His jaws parted. A stream of fire poured out.

§ § §

Rest assured, you will be saved, and order will be restored.

The Dragon Lord's words flashed through Charlee's mind as clear as if she stood beside the great beast. He heard her plea but hadn't listened. She couldn't stop him. This war was about to begin, and she couldn't do anything to prevent it.

Charlee pounded the railing. *Turn back! Please!* She got no response. Just the Dragon Lord's resolute thoughts overshadowing the numbing sense of fear radiating throughout her body. She peered over the side of the castle to the courtyard hundreds of feet below. A fall that would kill her. Yes! If she were dead, he'd have to turn back.

She started to climb, but a Horeng claw grasped her shoulder.

"You don't get to die that easily." Assara flashed a smile. Her eyes gleamed with amusement. All signs of fear vanished from her smooth face. Charlee's eyes shifted from the clone to the Dragon Lord.

Sheorrriaaaaan dove at the Horeng, his wings whipping against the air with a thunderous crack, like gale forces slamming into a tall ship's sails. The dark army's archers launched an attack on the great beast. Their arrowheads whizzed through the air, swarming toward the dragon's underbelly.

A blast of fire from the Dragon Lord's snout proved enough of a defense. From Charlee's vantage point, not a single arrow found its target. She tried to shake free from the Horeng gripping her shoulder. A deep guttural growl rose from the guard. He dug his claws into her skin, cutting through flesh. She cried out, dropping to one knee but quickly stood. She had to keep her eyes on the battle—had to figure out Assara's trap before it was too late.

More fire shot from the Dragon Lord's snout, ravaging lines of Theodora's army. The Horeng howled wildly and broke their formations to flee the great dragon. The crackle of orange flames charring their bodies echoed throughout the land. Black smoke climbed from the fallen wolves, many rolling in the fields until the sizzle of their burning flesh silenced their cries. Others pounded against the outer walls until the dragon's breath engulfed them in a fiery dance of death.

Assara laughed.

"What's so funny?" Charlee pulled herself along the railing toward Assara. Her stomach clenched as if she'd been punched. Assara's cackle was too much like Theodora's—evil, twisted, and confident even as her army fell. "Your Horeng won't last long against the Dragon Lord."

"No matter." Assara retreated from the balcony, her eyes fixed on Charlee and her mouth curved up in a sneer. She back stepped to the center of the chamber, and then gracefully climbed onto the throne.

"Mother knew that someday the dragons would rise against her, so she used her magic and the power of the medallion to prepare a surprise." Assara pressed down on the right armrest, and the throne began to rotate toward the balcony.

Charlee placed trembling hands to her mouth. What deadly force was Assara about to unleash on the Dragon Lord? *Sheorrriaaaaan, stop now! Get to safety!*

Two controllers, like old video game joysticks, rose from the skulls at the end of both armrests. A crystalline object the size of a bathroom mirror, translucent with a white glow, slid from an opening in the floor and hovered in front of Assara.

"Come and see," Assara beckoned with a wave of her hand.

The Horeng gripped Charlee's shoulders and squeezed as if to crush her bones. Air painfully rushed from her lungs. She gasped, but pain didn't matter. Her focus locked on Assara. The clone wore a stone expression, but her eyes were alight with joy. *Damn her! Have...to...stop...her!*

Snarling, the Horeng lifted Charlee until her feet dangled inches above the floor, then stomped to the throne. The wolfen beast dropped her against the cold marble steps beneath Assara.

Charlee's legs collapsed. She caught herself with her arms and slowly lifted her face toward the crystal hovering before the throne. The gem was like a TV screen, and it was playing an image of the battle scene outside the castle. The Dragon Lord continued his assault on the Horeng army, burning the creatures alive. The flames crackled and danced. The Horeng and the Valley burned, leaving a blackened scar along the hillsides.

"What is this, Assara? Tell me!" Charlee's words limped from her throat.

"Mother calls it the dragon killer." Assara raised her chin and glared down at Charlee. "Watch how it works."

"No!" Charlee's limbs trembled. Hate gave her strength. *Have...to...save... Dragon...Lord!* She started to crawl up the steps, but Horeng guards grabbed her around the torso and dragged her away. She screamed, fighting wildly to escape. Her fingernails scraped against the floor. "Assara, don't...do this!"

The clone ignored her pleas.

"I see you, dragon scum." Clutching the joysticks in her gloved hands, Assara unleashed hell on the Dragon Lord.

CHAPTER 8

Hell Unleashed

AN EXPLOSION FROM somewhere deep in the belly of Castle Latara shook the throne room. The floor beneath Charlee shuddered in protest. A gush of hot air blasted through cracks in walls. What was happening? The two Horeng guards holding her lost their balance and released their grip. She awkwardly reached her feet and lumbered to the balcony just in time to see a red beam the size of a spotlight fire from a tower overhead.

The death ray angled toward Sheorrriaaaaan.

Charlee's jaw dropped, and her heart all but stopped. She couldn't draw a breath but forced out a scream to warn the Dragon Lord. But it was too late. He never had a chance to maneuver out of the way. He probably never saw the beam until it was on him.

The ray cut a gash through his armored chest, tore through his body, and ripped a hole in his back as the red energy zipped beyond his body higher into the sky. His green blood and flesh sprayed into the sky. The Dragon Lord roared in pain and plummeted toward the earth.

"No!" Charlee's eyes fixed on Sheorrriaaaaan.

The Dragon Lord's wings flailed uselessly. Smoke rose from his wound, creating a black smoldering trail. His body slammed into the ground with a rattling thud. Charlee cringed, looking away. As the dust and dirt settled around the great dragon, she peered back to see if he moved—if there were any signs of life.

Nothing. The Dragon Lord was still.

She spun to Assara. "What have you done?"

Laughter drifted from the throne. "What I must to defend Mother's rule."

Charlee shook a fist at the clone. "You're going to die for what you've done."

"Maybe." Assara casually leaned back against the throne. "But I'll make sure you die first."

"Then come and kill me." Charlee stepped toward Assara, but two Horeng guards were on her, wrapping their claws around her arms. She wrestled, thrashing her body in every direction, but they wouldn't let go.

"Do not release her again." Assara started to climb from the throne.

The sky beyond the balcony exploded in a swirl of oranges, reds, and yellows. The castle trembled and swayed back and forth. This time it wasn't the weapon.

What the... Charlee glanced up. Dragons soared overhead, spitting a barrage of flames at the laser tower. Blocks of stone crumbled to the ground, and an entire section gave way. The tower collapsed in a thunderous rumble.

Theodora's dragon killer was destroyed before it could kill anyone else. Charlee's mind locked on one thought. The Dragon Lord sacrificed himself to expose whatever weapon Assara had to stop the dragons. Once the weapon fired, the dragons pinpointed their attack. Now there was nothing to stop them.

Spurred by the dragons, a new strength coursed through her muscles. Adrenaline took over. She broke free from the Horeng and stood on legs that no longer shook. "You're done, Assara."

"Hardly." Theodora's daughter still spoke with an air of confidence. Cheeks flushed, eyes resolute, she raised her sword. "You think Mother would so easily fall to those foul beasts. Watch again." Assara turned her sword over so that the handle pointed up, revealing a crimson gem in the base.

What now! Charlee rushed at the clone. "Assara, what are you doing?"

"Stupid, Guardian. Mother turned the entire castle into a weapon. Watch the dragons die as Mother's power is unleashed." Assara's voice was cold and exact. She pressed the gem.

Red beams sliced wildly across the gray morning sky. The dragons did their best to race away, but one by one they were caught in the deadly blitz. Their green blood splashed against the clouds. One dragon was hit in the neck, its head nearly severed. Another's wings were sliced off. A third lost a leg. They hurtled to the ground, slamming into the earth. The crash of their bodies striking the land was too much for Charlee. She covered her ears, but it did little to block out the dragons' pained cries as the Horeng jumped on them, delivering death blows with their heavy axes and massive swords.

Charlee gazed away from the carnage. All this death was because of her. Why couldn't the Dragon Lord listen to her? Why didn't he just stay away? Why hadn't she killed Theodora with the medallion when she had the chance? She unleashed her own blood-curdling cry. It was met by more of Assara's laughter.

"I told you from the start you were weak, Guardian," The clone flipped her sword in the air and caught it so that the blade pointed at Charlee's chest. "Now, as you have witnessed the defeat of the dragons, let those beasts that remain watch their Guardian die."

"Damn, you!" Charlee sprang at Assara.

The two Horeng guards grabbed her. They dug their claws into her shoulders and slammed her against the floor. She twisted and squirmed, but this time her unexpected burst of strength failed her. With their hind legs, they stepped on her back, mashing her against the icy stone. She struggled for a breath. *Get up... Guardian. Do...something. Can't end...this way!*

Assara skipped gleefully to the edge of the balcony. Her gaze shifted from the death below to Charlee. "Bring her to me."

The Horeng dragged Charlee back to the clone, forcefully lifting her as if they meant to tear her arms from her sockets. With a deep breath, she swallowed a scream.

Death filled the Valley below. Fires raged, lifting columns of choking black smoke to the somber heavens. A handful of dragons lay dead, their heads roughly sliced from their bodies by the few Horeng not decimated by the flames. Their deaths were on her. She'd never forgive herself. Then again, she'd join them soon in the eternal realm, if there was such a place.

Charlee shook her head. "What have you done, Assara?"

The clone slid within inches of Charlee, a grin twisting her lips. "Made Mother proud."

"You fool!" Charlee's cheeks burned red hot. Though her throat ached, she spoke as if delivering her last words. "You don't matter anymore than the Horeng to Theodora. She doesn't care. She abandoned you here. You—"

"Shut your mouth." Assara's eyes grew wide and savage. She raised a gloved hand to strike Charlee.

A bird's gentle song stopped her.

CHAPTER 9

Hope Arrives

A GLOWING WHITE dove flew into the throne room from the balcony and circled overhead. Charlee dropped to her knees. It was just like the winged creature that watched over her all her life. The dove's high-pitched song filled the chamber. Dare she hope? Could it be the Changeling? Her body tingled as if she'd been jolted with electricity.

The little dove fluttered above Assara, then attacked. Wings spread wide, the slender bird screeched, pecking at the clone's cheeks and pulling her hair.

It is the Changeling! Charlee climbed to her feet.

Assara cursed. "What trickery is this?" Theodora's daughter, lips pursed, swatted at the dove first with her free hand and then with the sword. The tiny creature easily evaded each strike.

This was Charlee's chance. *Move...now!* She launched herself at the clone.

"Enough," Assara screamed. She pointed the tip of her blade at Charlee's chest, stopping the Guardian. A backhand from the clone smashed into the dove. The winged one careened into a wall, slamming into it, then dropped to the floor.

"Damn you!" Charlee pushed Assara's blade away with limbs strengthened by rage. "You'll pay for that!"

Assara lifted her sword high. "Death comes for you—"

The dove sang out, launching itself into the air. The bird raced to Charlee's side, transforming as it flew. Its body creaked and hummed like a live wire. The Changeling morphed into a glob of yellow glowing energy, then into the form Charlee knew best—the white-framed bike—the one she had tried to ditch in an alley back home before she understood their destinies were linked.

"Bike!" Charlee blurted. Her protector was here to give her a fighting chance. Warmth spread across her cheeks. She wasn't alone anymore.

Assara gripped her sword with two hands. Her mouth set in a grim line. "What form of being is this? No matter. I'll kill the both of you."

"I...don't...think...so." Charlee reached for the bike's handlebars. If she could touch the Changeling, its energy would flow through her and give her strength. Maybe her magic would return. She reached for her protector.

Assara grasped her arm. "You will not be saved!" The clone yanked her away from the Changeling.

Charlee tried to jerk free, but Theodora's daughter was too strong. Assara dragged her across the throne room, sword pressed against her neck. The blade sliced into her skin. She cringed and stopped struggling. Droplets of blood fell from her neck onto the stone floor. Each splash echoed in her ears.

The Changeling rolled toward them.

"Any closer and she dies." Assara yanked Charlee's head back and dug the blade deeper, tearing through more skin. Charlee screamed. More blood oozed from her flesh. A fiery pain radiated from her throat. Once across the chamber, Assara released her grip on Charlee. The Guardian slumped to her knees, wheezing, grasping her neck.

"Now see how alone you are, Guardian." Assara twisted her sword's handle. A shimmering green barrier rose from the floor, separating the throne room in two, with the Changeling on one side and she and Charlee on the other. "No one can save you. It is just you and me."

The Changeling rushed at the barrier, crashing against it repeatedly, but it couldn't breach the glowing wall.

Assara snorted, strolling toward the barrier, sword resting on her shoulder. "You arrived just in time, strange creature. You can watch your Guardian die for her crimes against Mother."

"Not...today...Assara." An infusion of adrenaline shook Charlee's body. Hands coated in her own blood, she planted them against the floor and climbed to her feet. With what little strength remained in her limbs, she threw herself at Assara, tackling her to the ground. Assara's sword flew from her hand, clanging against the stone. A shriek escaped the clone's lips.

Charlee's legs thrashed wildly against the floor as she locked her arms around Assara. Fury heated her chest. She rolled over and over, grappling to hang on to the clone, but her limbs quickly weakened. Each breath could barely rise from a crusted throat. Assara easily broke away and stumbled to her sword.

"Fool." Assara gripped the blade and swung around, aiming it at Charlee's heart. The clone's chest heaved. "I grow tired of you. Time for this to end. Time for everyone to see their Guardian die."

Assara, cheeks flushed and scratched from the dove's attack, grasped Charlee by the wrist and tugged her to the balcony. The Changeling reformed into a unicorn, kicking the green barrier with its hind legs. The barrier would not cave.

"Bike!" Charlee reached a shaky hand toward her protector. Assara laughed, dragging her along the cold, hard floor. The unicorn neighed furiously, his glowing yellow eyes bulging. He rammed the barrier one more time but still couldn't break through.

Once on the balcony, the clone hefted Charlee to her feet as easy as lifting a doll. The clone shoved the tip of her blade against the small of the Guardian's

back with just enough force to prick Charlee's flesh. An icy chill radiated from where the razor-sharp point pierced her skin. Her legs wanted to crumble, but if she fell the blade would cut deeper. *Don't fall. Don't give up.*

"Does it hurt, Guardian?"

Charlee forced a smile. "You can never hurt me."

Assara twisted the blade against Charlee's back, ripping more skin. Charlee suppressed a cry. Shock waves of pain raced through her body. Assara leaned in closer. "Now it is time for you to d—"

Two Horeng burst into the throne room and bolted the chamber door behind them. One of them spoke, its voice a guttural mix of barks and growls. Charlee somehow understood the language. "General, army of Latara broke through castle. Dragons more attack. We not hold out longer much. We dying. Too many. What we do?"

Assara lowered the blade. "What army of Latara? I saw only the dragons in the Valley, and they were destroyed by the castle's defenses. The rest fled like cowards."

The wolf gasped. Its brown fur bristled, fangs showing through a black helmet. "No. More dragons come. Bring Latara people on backs. They kill us."

Charlee blinked through the pain. Again, a flame of hope sparked inside. She turned toward Assara.

The clone's chin quivered, and she lowered her head. When she gazed up again, her bronze skin turned ashen gray, but a sneer returned. "Recall a couple of our legions to the castle. That should be enough to stop a weak group of Latara warriors."

"They reach throne room before we stop them," the second Horeng soldier warned in a high-pitched howl. The beast wore no mask. A black patch covered one eye. Its chest rose and fell rapidly underneath dark armor.

Assara whipped Charlee around to face her. The clone's hot breath brushed against her cheeks. "Excellent. This chamber can withstand any assault, and when they arrive, they will find their Guardian dead. That should be enough to break their spirit."

"And what be of the dragons?" the first Horeng asked. The wolf's pointy ears, sticking out from its helmet, twitched. "They kill us with dirty fire breath."

Charlee gazed over the balcony. Assara did the same. The dragons gathered again and were tearing through the Horeng. One dragon, smaller in stature than the others, led the way. *The Dragon Lord's son!* She dug her fingers into the balcony. Her cheeks trembled, and her eyes widened.

"They will die like their brethren as the magic of this castle cuts them down one by one." Assara pointed to the one-eyed Horeng. "You, sit at the throne and fire on the dragons with all of this castle's power."

"Assara, you can't win." Charlee grabbed her arm. "Stop this."

"I will quiet you once and for all," Assara lifted her sword.

Charlee reached for the clone's sword hand. Assara threw a swift kick to her chest, knocking Charlee backward. Air rushed from her lungs, and her back and head struck the stone floor. She tried to force air in and out as the back of her skull rattled. Her head spinning, she would have been sick if her stomach had food or drink.

She blinked away dizziness enough to speak through weak breaths. "You think...killing me...will stop this...war. It...won't."

Assara stood over her, the tip of her sword quivering. Assara's brown eyebrows scrunched together. The sneer was gone from her lips. "That may be true, but you will not be around to see it." Assara pressed a boot down on Charlee's chest. "Die, Guard—"

Pained howls and yelps came from outside the throne room doors. Steel crashed against steel. The doors shook and creaked. Were bodies smashing against them in a desperate battle?

Assara's focus shifted to the doors.

"Hold positions...hold your—" a Horeng barked from outside the throne room. Its words ended in a grunt and a gurgle—then, silence.

A drop of sweat fell from the clone's forehead. The Horeng inside the chamber looked to her for a command. They stood frozen, their yellow eyes shifting from her to the door. Their fur bristled and noses twitched. Vicious growls slid from their snouts. The beasts lifted battle-axes to their chests.

Assara pointed her sword at the Horeng. "Fortify the—"

Something heavy crashed against the doors. They shuddered but held. A second crash followed, and then a third. The doors cracked and splintered.

"They're coming, Assara," Charlee whispered.

Assara shook a fist at her. "Do you think I am not prepared? Mother has foreseen such a challenge to her rule." Reaching for the handle of her sword, Assara twisted it. A new wall of green energy rose from the floor in front of the doors.

Outside, a fourth thud against the doors buckled them. With a crunch, they splintered into jagged pieces. Lataran warriors, led by Penaiya, wielding a bloodied sword, poured through the doorway. Charlee gasped. Penaiya, the true leader of the Latarans, lived and had come to save her.

But the barrier separated them.

Penaiya, her long hair flowing wildly over her shoulders, struck the glowing wall with her sword. "Remove this barrier at once. You are defeated, seed of Theodora."

Assara laughed. "Hardly. Watch and see how your Guardian dies because of your actions this day."

“Child, you have lost.” Penaiya sheathed the sword. Her words softened. “Throw down your weapon and release her. This need not go any further.”

Charlee slid along the floor away from Assara, who inched the blade closer to Charlee’s heart. “Look how your Guardian slithers away like the snake she is. She will pay for all your crimes against Mother.” Gripping the sword with both hands, she raised it high. “Now, this ends.”

CHAPTER 10

The Queen

THE UNICORN DELIVERED one more kick of its hind legs against the barrier separating him from Charlee. Cracks formed like a spider web, then spread to the green wall blocking Penaiya and the Lataran warriors as if the barriers were connected by Theodora's magic. The sound of shattering glass echoed through the chamber.

Assara's sword hand shook. "Die, Guardian!" She swung her blade at Charlee's head.

"Not...today." Charlee brought her arms up, her hands grabbing Assara's. She grunted, tapping into her last bit of strength to save her own life. Her arm's shook and muscles burned. Assara pressed with all her body weight, driving the blade closer to Charlee's face.

"It's still just you and me, Guardian." Assara said through gritted teeth. "You can't last. You will lose."

Charlee bit her lip. She had to dig deeper and find the strength, but the sword inched closer and closer.

Crash. Swish. Thud. Assara screamed, an arrow piercing her shoulder. Her sword dropped from her hands as she rolled on her side, twisting in pain.

Charlee slowly turned her head toward the barrier, which blinked out of existence. There stood Penaiya, a massive bow in her hand. Charlee allowed herself a weak smile. Slowly, painfully, she lifted herself from the floor. Her body trembled, and she could only manage shallow breaths through her dried, cracked lips, but she stood. Her head was heavy, her shoulders rounded and legs ready to crumble, but she limped toward her rescuers. They'd given her a chance to stop Theodora, and one more chance was all she needed.

Penaiya lowered her weapon and raced toward Charlee. The Changeling did the same.

"Not yet, Guardian!" Assara gasped. Charlee turned back to the clone. Assara reached her feet and wildly swung her sword as if to cut Charlee in half.

A blue beam cut through the chamber, striking Assara in the chest. She flew back, slamming against the throne. A moan escaped her lips as smoke rose from her chest plate.

What the? Charlee glanced around. Where had that magical attack come

from? Penaiya stared back through the chamber's open doors. So did the unicorn. So did every other Lataran.

A figure hidden underneath a black robe and hood crossed through the doorway. Silence spread through the chamber. The mysterious being seemed to float more than walk, drifting toward Charlee. Everyone backed away, save for Penaiya and the unicorn, who stood in the being's path.

Charlee didn't dare blink or give in to the sleep that beckoned to her. She had to see who this being was and know who wielded the magic that produced a blue beam. She'd only seen that magical color once before, and it was from...

"Show yourself, stranger." Penaiya pointed her sword at the dark figure. "You will not harm the Guardian."

"I am not here to hurt her." The stranger removed the hood. "I'm here—"

"Mom!" Charlee shouted. Tears she couldn't control slid from her eyes. Could it be? But how? Charlee stood tall and squared her shoulders. The sight of her mother filled her with new strength.

"Yes, baby." Charlee's mom smiled in the same comforting way she always did. Her blue eyes had the same loving sparkle. Her sandy blond hair framed her soft cheeks before unfurling over her shoulders.

Penaiya didn't lower her sword. She shook her head but didn't utter a word.

The unicorn didn't budge, either. He sniffed the air, the white feathers of his wings bristling and his ears twitching. He leaned his unicorn head forward and sniffed the stranger again. His tail rapidly swished back and forth. He allowed his head to rest on the woman's shoulder.

Any doubt Charlee had about whether this was real or not vanished. The Changeling knew Tira Smelton as well as anyone. He'd been sent to Earth to watch over her from the time she was baby.

Charlee stumbled forward. "Mom!"

Penaiya lowered her sword and stepped out of the way. Tira Smelton lunged forward, catching her daughter in her arms.

"I'm here, Charlee." She held her daughter tighter than she ever had before. The warmth of her mom's embrace surrounded Charlee, soothing her. Her body tingled. It was her mom's magic touch already starting to heal her.

"How, Mom?" Charlee rested her head on her mom's chest and listened to the comforting rhythm of her heart.

"Your sister, Charlee." Tira ran her fingers through her daughter's hair. "She's just like you."

From afar came another voice—a man's voice—her father's. "Hey, don't forget about us."

Charlee lifted her head. "Dad?" Her heart thudded wildly. Joseph Smelton walked through the chamber's doorway, Megan giggling in his arms. His same

wire-framed glasses clung to his face. His slightly graying beard was long, as if it hadn't been trimmed for weeks. Megan's blond locks were longer, too. Her usually chubby face was thinner, as if her baby face appearance had begun the transformation into a little girl.

"Thank God, you're alive." Joseph crossed to his eldest daughter, joining in a hug that included the entire family. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again, little girl."

"I'm sorry, Dad." Charlee fought the urge to sob. She glanced from her mom to her dad. His eyes were red with tears. "I blew it. I let Theodora win. She's got my powers, and the medallion. I thought she was going to kill—"

"Stop, Charlee." Her dad gently touched her cheek. "You're a hero, Guardian. You saved us all. We'll stop Theodora. I promise you—together. But right now, we're reunited again, and that's all that matters." He kissed her forehead. She marveled at how he looked like a Lataran warrior in brown animal skin pants and a drawstring shirt that hugged his thin, lanky frame. It was so different from the tweed jacket he wore as a history professor back home.

"Such a touching moment." Assara crawled toward her sword. "But it doesn't change the fact that the Guardian dies today. You all will die. You'll see. Mother knows all. She will return and destroy you."

"No, child," Charlee's mom broke from the embrace with her daughter and strolled toward the clone.

Charlee, supported by her father's strong arms, shook her head. "Stay away from her, Mom."

Her mom didn't listen. She stopped by Assara's side. Assara tried to grab her sword, but Charlee's mom kicked it away.

"Mother, return to me now and show these treasonous pigs your power," Assara screamed. "Strike them down. Or give me the strength to strike them down to glorify you."

"Child, the being you think is your mother will not return to you." Charlee's mom spoke in the Lengoron language. "She's left you alone. This fight is over. There's no need for more blood to be shed."

Assara, the arrow still embedded in her shoulder, grimaced. "Who are you? What magic has brought you here?"

"My mother," Charlee answered. "She is the rightful Queen of Latara."

Charlee's mom extended a hand to Assara. "Stand down, child, and let me speak with you of peace."

Assara shook her head. "You dare call me a child. I am my mother's greatest general. I rule this world. I do not need my mother to return. I will kill you all."

"Young one, look around you." Charlee's mom pointed throughout the chamber to the Lataran warriors, to the Changeling, and to the dead Horeng.

"A cunning warrior recognizes when they are defeated, so that they might fight another day. I beg of you to stand down. No more harm will come to you. None of this is your fault. You have been misled by Theodora, just like so many before you." Tira Smelton spoke to Assara like a mother talking to her daughter. "If you allow me, I can help you to see the truth."

Charlee frowned. What was her mom saying? How could she treat Assara like a victim? "Mom—" Charlee began to ask.

Tira Smelton stopped her daughter. "Everyone deserves a chance at redemption, especially if they had the kind of start I fear this child has had."

"I do not need redemption. I need to kill you all." Assara scrambled to her feet. Charlee's mom raised her hands. An unseen magical force swept Assara's legs out from underneath her, and she crashed to the floor.

Charlee glared at her mom. "Kill her."

Her mom frowned in a motherly way. A few wrinkles shown on either side of her mouth. "No, we will try to save this poor creature."

"She killed...Cryton." Charlee's hands tightened into fists. She tried to break from her dad's embrace, but he held her tight. Her mom stood in silence. Her eyes reddened and her body trembled. Charlee cursed herself for blurting out Cryton's death. The old man had raised her mother. He was the closest thing to a father for her on Earth.

More tears slid down her mom's cheek. "We will do no harm to her; otherwise, we are as bad as Theodora. We will consider this child's fate later. Right now, sleep, child." She waved her hands over Assara's face. The clone's eyes immediately closed. She didn't move but air still passed through her lungs. Her chest gently rose and fell.

Turning back to her daughter, Tira scooped her back into her arms. "Oh, my poor daughter. I'm so sorry, so very sorry. I thought they'd killed you. I thought I'd never see you again."

Charlee's father and Megan once again joined in the hug. All cried without uttering another word until Megan giggled. Then they separated, though her mom still held her in a warming magical embrace. The tingling sensation coursed through Charlee's body. Blood rushed to her head, pushing away the desire for sleep. Her weary, broken body pulsed with new energy.

Her mom lifted a pouch from her robe. A knowing smile crossed her face. Her eyes were bright. "Charlee, drink a little of this. Just a few sips will help."

She placed the pouch to Charlee's mouth and tilted it until a cool liquid slid past Charlee's dried, cracked lips. A sweet fluid awakened her senses. She tasted orange, raspberry, apple, and watermelon all at the same time. *So...good. More...please...more.* With a strengthened arm, she tried to snatch the pouch away from her mother. She wanted to gulp it all.

Her mom shook her head. "No, just a little at a time. You haven't drunk anything in a while. Too much at once could do you damage. Besides, this is a special elixir. It will help with your healing, but you cannot have too much."

Charlee licked her lips. She grabbed her mom with one arm and motioned for her dad and Megan to again join in a hug.

"Tell me how?" Charlee rocked in her parents' arms. "How could Megan create a gateway? How could she find me?"

Her mom touched Megan's nose, and the little one squirmed. "Charlee, it shouldn't be possible for one so young to display the power of a Guardian, especially a child that is half human, like you. She must be very powerful." Tira's eyes shifted between her daughters. She drew a long breath.

"Somehow, she created the tiniest gateway," her mom continued, "and I used my magic to strengthen hers, to see if together we could generate a gateway that we could travel through."

She paused, taking both Megan's hand and Charlee's in her own. "I then mind-melded with her to show her the pathway to Janasara. I wasn't sure if you'd still be here, but we had to try. I can't believe it, but it worked, Charlee. Her gateway got us to the edge of the Kingdom. Once we arrived, I felt you right away. I knew where you were, and that you were in pain. We saw the battle, but I didn't think we'd reach you in time. Then, a young dragon found us. He brought us here, Charlee."

Charlee thought of the Dragon Lord's son. It had been him her mom was describing. She just knew it.

Her mom peered at Penaiya. "But your friends here...they'd already saved you. I am so grateful."

Charlee's mind raced. They'd all risked so much to save her. She stared at her sister. "Megan, you're my hero. Thank you."

Her mom slowly stood. She faced the Changeling and Penaiya. "I am Tira, daughter of Queen Assara. I was sent away long ago to save my life, and I am sorry I have not been here to stop your suffering. But now, I ask for your forgiveness, and I ask for a chance to meet our people, though I know I have no right."

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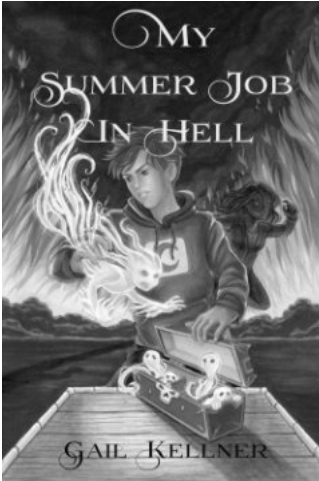


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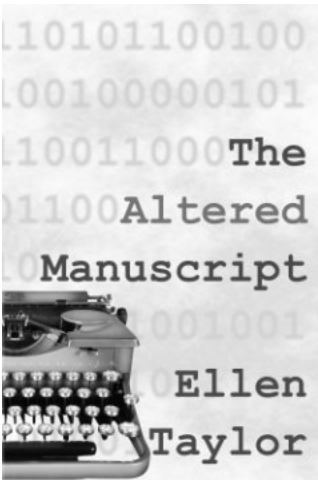
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The Altered Manuscript

Ellen Taylor

The accidental discovery of the narration device completely changed entertainment and proved too dangerous to use without strict laws in place. Junior understood the reason behind these laws, which is why Bree does not know she's a character in a story. When a rogue narrator hacks into the system and begins creating chaos in Junior's story, does Junior continue to follow the laws to keep herself safe, or does she risk it all to protect the characters she loves?

Mr. Flores shook his head as his lips pursed. "A dragon that speaks English. Not something you see every day." He stepped closer to the beast, his hand still clutching the gun. "Listen, you overgrown lizard, I'm under no spell. And if you want to survive the night, you'll come with me."

Charlee placed a hand on Kraannaann's snout. "We can trust him. We have to trust him."

The dragon huffed and licked his sharp teeth. He inched his head closer to Mr. Flores. "If you lie, you'll be my first kill."

Sandra's dad scratched his chin. He eyed Charlee. "When this is over, you and I will have to have a talk about setting some boundaries. First off, no more witches or monsters—and definitely no dragons in my city."

Fourteen-year-old Charlee Smelton is a Guardian, a path forced upon her by fate. She's come to accept this fact after fighting to save Earth, the world she thought was her home, and the magical world of Janasara, the true home of her bloodline.

But the fight is not over.

Once more, Charlee must stand against not only her great aunt, the sorceress Theodora, but also an ancient evil—the Brotherhood—seeking to be reborn and to conquer worlds. If she is to save the universe, she'll have to put her faith in the last person across the dimensional divide she would have turned to for help—a person who knows the truth about the cursed medallion that calls to Charlee.

A war is coming, and her very soul is on the line.



About the Author: Darren Simon is a former longtime newspaper journalist who now works in government affairs on California water issues and teaches college English. *Guardian's Legacy* is the third book in *The Last Princess of Latara* series. The first book is *Guardian's Nightmare*, while the second book is *Guardian's Return*. Darren also has a young adult pirate book, *The Dangerous Legacy*.



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