

GUARDIAN'S RETURN



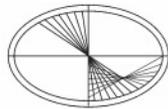
Book Two of "The Last Princess of Latara"

DARREN SIMON

GUARDIAN'S RETURN



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Darren Simon

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CHAPTER I

The Awakening

FROM HER THRONE room's observation deck, Empress Theodora lifted her black hood and grinned. Below lay the ruins of her dead sister's kingdom. "Latara has become such a glorious sight, sister," Theodora mused.

Decimated townships spread across a withered, cracked landscape where grasslands and trees once flourished. Factories belched columns of choking black smoke into a murky night sky. Theodora folded her arms over her chest as fire spewed from twisted, pointy towers built from the charred remains of schools and places of worship.

"Magnificent," she uttered. Inside these massive constructs, engines rumbled, fashioning steel into the weapons her Horeng army needed to dominate the lands. The entire world of Janasara was hers. Her grin faded.

"I am meant to rule worlds. I am to be a goddess," Theodora's voice echoed through the chamber. "Yet I am stranded here—marooned by an insolent child, my own great niece, who will suffer for what she has done to me."

Theodora's porcelain-white face reddened. Her thin lips curled back, revealing yellow teeth clenched together as she grasped a round, black object with the word *Frisbee* stamped on one side.

It was supposed to be her medallion—a magical force conceived from the darkest arts—able to grant endless power and immortality. Instead, that treacherous human girl used the thing to deceive Theodora into abandoning her siege on Earth.

"She used her magic to send me back here with this false medallion, and here I will remain imprisoned until—"

Crimson energy erupted from Theodora's palms, melting the black object until it formed a misshaped clump. Her body vibrating, skin scalding hot, she hurled the black mass from the observation deck.

"Never again will I be made a fool. Before long, that child will bring me what is rightfully mine." Theodora glided from the observation deck into the dimly lit chamber, her long robe trailing along the marbled floor. She passed over a heap of bent and broken crowns, crusted in the blood of the fallen kings and queens from the Unified Kingdoms. "Then, whether she is a guardian or not, she will die—just as my sister did so many years ago. When she falls, I will begin my conquest of worlds."

She slithered to her throne, forged from the bones of those defeated in battle, and placed her hands over the skull armrests. With a deep breath and the slightest movement of her right forefinger, the floor beyond the dais gave way. White smoke curled from the gaping hole in the floor where a glass sarcophagus rose and hovered in front of her.

“Oh, what a joyful moment.” Theodora placed a hand over her heart. “The birth of my daughter has come.”

The smoke drifted away. She circled the sarcophagus, her bone-like fingers caressing the glass. Tears fell from her ice-blue eyes. Inside an infant submerged in green liquid slept.

“Wake up. Wake up, little one,” Theodora’s voice cooed. Tilting her gaze toward the chamber’s ceiling, a chant formed in her throat and softly snaked its way from her mouth. Her words intensified, piercing the silence. A red glow encircled her hands and then swelled to engulf her body.

Theodora trembled. Her long hair faded from flowing golden locks to strands of ashen gray. Crevices formed under her eyes and around her mouth. Already gaunt cheeks receded even further into her skull. Still, she chanted in a booming voice. Her crimson magic spread through the throne room.

With a final shout that resonated through the kingdom, she stopped. The red glow vanished, and Theodora collapsed to the floor. Her heart raced and chest convulsed. Sweat dripped from her forehead. “So tired, but it was worth it to give my child life!”

She stood on wobbly legs. Her ears rang from the magical strain, but the clamor gave way to a new sound—a baby’s first cry.

“Yes!” Theodora embraced the sarcophagus, razor-like fingernails clawing the smooth surface.

The green liquid was gone. Her daughter’s fussing sobs bounced off the walls and grew into a wail. Little arms and legs thrashed wildly.

“Yes, my child, I hear your anger.” Theodora tapped on the lid. “I will unleash your rage on the world and on the one who still holds my immortality. You will help me destroy her.”

Her daughter’s brown eyes shot open. Shrieks gave way to a toothless smile. It didn’t last. A scream penetrated the glass. The child’s eyes bulged as her body contorted. Limbs stretched and hair formed on her bald head. Her face aged, shifting from infant to toddler. She panted, writhing inside the tomb, as the transformation added years from one heartbeat to the next. Her cheekbones nearly ripped through skin. Fingers grew in length. Eyes spread farther apart. The toddler became a young girl.

Theodora laughed. “Grow, my child. I am so very proud of you.”

Her daughter’s hair lengthened beyond bulging shoulders. Arms and legs gained muscle. Chin became more pronounced. Eyes showed increasing clarity.

The child moaned and twisted. She grabbed her head and kicked at the walls. One word erupted from deep inside her throat. "Mother!"

"I'm here, child," Theodora nodded. "Don't fight what is happening to you. It is...natural."

She stopped fighting the metamorphosis. With her eyes fixed on Theodora, she lay still as her body completed its journey. With one last shallow breath, the process ended. The cover to the sarcophagus opened.

"Rise, my daughter, for it is a new day for both of us." Theodora extended a bony hand.

A teenage girl with long brown hair and deep-set eyes emerged. When her feet touched the slick floor, her legs buckled. On her knees, she reached for Theodora. "Mother, I can't stand. I feel so weak, and I am so cold."

"In time you will gain strength." Theodora motioned for her daughter to rise.

"Mother, I cannot. Can you help me?"

"No."

"Mother?"

"You are a warrior, a general to rule at my side. You cannot show weakness. I will not allow it. Now rise and prove yourself worthy."

The girl closed her eyes. She tightened her hands into fists and swallowed a lung full of air.

"I am a warrior." She stood on her newly formed legs, her body trembling. Once at full height, she thrust out her chest and lifted her head. Lips parted in a slight grin, she declared, "Look at me, Mother. I'm doing it. I feel...alive."

"I know, daughter." Theodora removed her robe, approached her daughter, and placed the raven black garment over her shoulders.

"Mother, who am I?" The teen grasped her mother's hands.

"You are my child." Theodora stepped back, slipping from her grip.

"Do I have a name?" The young one tried to take a step but stumbled.

Theodora caught her. "In time you will earn your name."

"Why am I here?" She pushed away from Theodora and stood straight.

Theodora placed an arm around her daughter, guiding her to the observation deck. "You are here to help me right a terrible wrong and bring an enemy of our world to justice. Soon that enemy—a young girl not so different from you—will come to harm me. You must stop her. When I command it, you will make her suffer by killing the ones she loves. And when she begs for mercy, we shall make her suffer all the worse. I have endowed you with the heart of a warrior for this very purpose. Come, it is time for your training to begin."

The girl turned to Theodora, her eyes wide and bright. "I will kill anyone who tries to hurt you, Mother. I promise."

"I know you will."

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CHAPTER 2

Fire!

SEEMS PEACEFUL TONIGHT, bike.” Charlee stared down at the residential streets of San Francisco from the banana-shaped seat of her flying bike. Straight ahead, the Bay glimmered under a sparkling array of lights along the piers and wharfs. The Golden Gate Bridge, its massive frame jutting high into the night air, glowed in the distance.

If she never stepped foot on the Golden Gate again, that would be fine with her. Jumping from its columns high above the sea in a last-ditch bid to defeat the sorceress, Theodora, had been the scariest thing she’d ever done. If her mom hadn’t used magic to save her, she would have died in the icy waters. Probably smashed to bits. She shuddered at that thought.

A month had passed since they battled the sorceress, forcing her through a portal back to Janasara before she could conquer Earth. Since turning fourteen two weeks ago, Charlee and the bike started patrolling the city.

It was a way to use her newly discovered magic.

She breathed in the crisp spring air and tingled as she drew energy from a flock of seagulls passing below. Charlee’s pulse quickened. She breathed deeper. Senses heightened. This new ability to harness energy from living sources—plants, animals, people...even Earth itself—gave her great strength, superior hearing, and enhanced vision, but the powers never lasted. When they faded, she still needed her glasses, which right now were tucked in her pant pocket.

Her changeling protector soared above the city with its glimmering feathered wings extended from the white frame. The shape-shifting being from Janasara could take any form it chose, but the ’60s era Schwinn Stingray, with white-walled tires and upside-down u-shaped chrome backrest, seemed to stick.

She gripped the handlebars. An electrical current rose through her fingers, up her arms, and spread throughout her body. Muscles expanded. Her heart beat with the force of a sledgehammer pounding concrete. The bike—whose life force seemed limitless—multiplied her abilities like none other.

Charlee brushed away her wind-swept brown hair from her eyes and studied the bike’s giant eagle’s wings. What a sight they must be. So far she had avoided being photographed or filmed by some onlooker’s phone, but rumors spread on Facebook and Twitter of a mystery girl on a flying bike who helped those in need. They called the stranger—*her*—a hero.

After her birthday, her parents allowed her out a few nights a week for a couple of hours...but only with the bike. Her mom, a healer, kept a mental lock on Charlee during these excursions. Their connection felt like a ghostly finger constantly tapping her shoulder. *Be careful, honey. Be smart. I'll know if you need help.* Annoying and comforting at the same time.

Charlee tightened the knot on the black bandana over her eyes. Two slits had been cut into the cloth so she could see. Her dad's idea. Disguise herself. Protect her identity. The family's, too.

"Let's head to the Bay. Maybe we can get ourselves into something there," Charlee directed. "What do you say?"

She didn't expect her protector to answer. No matter what shape it took, the creature never spoke. That didn't matter. They were linked in a way that made words unnecessary, but she still spoke to the changeling anyway.

With one thrust of its wings, the bike dove toward the waterfront.

A light flickered to the right. Charlee glanced in that direction with her magnified vision. *Fire!* She shifted her weight to guide the bike toward the blaze. Orange flames, just beginning their wild dance, had begun to swallow a two-story house across the city near Russian Hill. A plume of smoke rose into the night. The stench of charred wood tickled her nose.

"Bike, go!"

Like a jet, the bike raced toward the burning house. Charlee leaned her face into the wind.

Black smoke billowed over the neighborhood. In the distance, sirens blared as the Fire Department chased down the blaze.

At the bike's velocity, she would arrive before the firefighters. How could she stop a fire? Could the bike transform into a giant water hose? Probably better to let the firefighters save the home. If there was anyone inside... anyone in danger... maybe, she could help.

"Daddy!"

With her enhanced hearing, Charlee pinpointed the child's cry long before she reached the scene.

The bike landed in front of the engulfed house. Crackling flames burst through the windows and licked at the roof. Neighbors already gathered a safe distance from the burning inferno. Some fought with fire extinguishers. A small crowd clustered around two crying children.

"My daddy's still in there," a little girl in her nightgown, face smudged, cried. She clutched a teddy bear as a woman stroked her ponytails. "He went in after my puppy. Why hasn't he come out?"

A few spectators tried to find a way into the house, but choking hot smoke blocked all the doorways and windows. There was no way in or out, except...

“Look! It’s the girl with the flying bike.”

“It’s true!”

“She’s real!”

As the crowd turned to Charlee, she focused on a broken window that might lead to an attic. A gray mist poured through. The flames had spared that corner of the house. So far.

“Bike, I need a lift.”

The bike responded. With outstretched wings, it gained altitude, fighting against the expanding barrier of heat.

Charlee closed her eyes, absorbing as much of the bike’s energy as possible. “I need all the power you can give me.”

Her soft arms and legs bulged with new muscles. Her heart beat like the thunder of a horse’s hooves pounding the dirt. Opening her eyes, she willed a new power—kind of like an invisible protective force field—to form around her. It would have to be enough to shield against the heat, smoke, and flames.

Charlee peered through the window shards. Black smoke replaced the gray mist. A fiery breeze rippled against her cheeks. Sweat formed under her bandana. Were they too late? She still had to try. If that girl’s father was trapped inside, she had to find a way to save him. This was as good a place as any to make her entry.

Her mom’s thoughts replaced her own. *Stay out of there. It’s too dangerous. You don’t need to do this.*

“I have to, Mom.” Charlee leaned closer to the handlebars. “Now, bike—give me some breathing room!”

On her command, the bike gave one powerful flap of its wings. Like an unseen barrier, the blast of wind drove back the billowing plume past the jagged pieces of glass. As a pathway cleared, Charlee steadied herself on the bike’s seat. She trembled and hesitated for just a heartbeat and then jumped through the window into the attic.

She landed on her hands, rolled once and came to a stop on her knees. Her body crunched over pieces of glass, but her super strength kept the shards from puncturing skin. Smoke crept up through the wooden floor. The blaze screamed below, exalting in its destruction. The house seemed to cry out in agony as its timbers gave way against the onslaught.

Red flames peeked through cracks in the floor. Smoke slithered toward her. The energy field surrounding her served as a protective layer, shielding her from the growing inferno and provided a pocket of breathable air. Still, searing heat bathed her in sweat. Her clothes clung to her as if glued against her body.

Panting like a dog, she tried to convince herself to escape. “I have to get out of here. Too hot! Baking! Can’t do this.” She paused “No, get a grip. I have to find the little girl’s dad.”

Stepping over flames licking at her feet, she crossed the attic and found a stairway to the house's lower levels. Each stair creaked as if it would give way under her weight, but she pressed forward until she reached a door.

What would she face on the other side? What had she gotten herself into? Fighting bad guys was one thing, but a burning house was quite another. Would her powers hold up? Would the bike be there to save her if she got in real trouble? Right now that was looking like a real possibility.

"All right, Charlee. Enough talk. Now do something," she said out loud.

Heat from the door pushed against her like an invisible blockade. She grasped the doorknob but recoiled. "Ouch! Jeez, that's hot!" Her palm might have been scalded if not for the layer of protective energy that cocooned her.

"What now?" she asked out loud. "I have to get to that little girl's dad. Time's running out. For him. And for me."

Calling on her magically heightened strength, she kicked the door. It didn't budge, but the timber around the hinges cracked. She struck a second time. The door broke from the frame and fell forward.

A wall of fire rushed through the opening, engulfing Charlee. She dropped to one knee and shielded her eyes. The blinding flash muzzled her cries. Somehow, though, the layer of energy kept her alive—a glowing barrier between her flesh and the inferno. She could breathe, too, but the air had become thick. She could only manage short breaths.

"I have to move. Can't fail."

Peering through her fingers, a swirling vortex of oranges, yellows and reds prevented her from seeing beyond a few feet in any direction. Her mom's thoughts returned. *Get up! Run through it! Straight ahead!*

Her body trembled, and her heart pounded so fast it might burst from her chest. Her skin baked despite the protective shell. Blinking sweat from her eyes, she charged through the firestorm. *Don't stop... don't stop until you're through*, her mom urged.

Overhead, the house creaked in protest. *Oh no!* Burning timber plunged toward her. Diving out of the way, she broke through the flames. Behind her the fire roared. Ahead, the second-floor hallway lay darkened by charred mist.

Coughing, Charlee clutched her chest to quiet her wild heart and slow her breathing. Her legs wobbled and her head drooped. Hot tears formed. She couldn't help it. *I'm alive. Still have a chance. Must press on.* Standing tall, she lifted her head. *You're not going to beat me, fire.* "Sir, where are you?" she called to the little girl's dad. "Can you hear me? Sir..."

Charlee cocked her head to listen for a response. A faint cough echoed down the hallway, followed by a puppy's high-pitched bark.

Three doors lined the hallway. Charlee ran into the first room. Empty. Flames snaked through the ceiling. In the second, fire spread along the walls, but still no sign of life.

“Sir! Sir! Are you here?” Charlee shouted through the third door. No response. She wheezed. The air supply within the protective layer was leaking away.

“He has to be here.” Fire leaped through a vent near the ceiling, bathing the room in black smoke. Burning embers dropped onto the bed, igniting a pink bedspread and a gathering of dolls.

A man groaned from the far side of the bed beyond her view. *Yes!* She rushed to his side. He lay sprawled on the floor, a fallen piece of timber next to him. Blood seeped from a gash in his forehead.

The puppy darted from underneath the bed, yelping and jumping on Charlee.

“Move it! That little girl is not going to lose her daddy tonight...or her puppy, for that matter.” With her super-strength, she lifted the man onto her shoulders with one hand and grabbed the puppy with the other. Her legs shook under the strain. Would her powers hold up? What if they didn’t? They’d all burn to death. No, she couldn’t think like that. She couldn’t lose hope.

Stay calm, Charlee, her mom interrupted. *You can do it.*

Taking a step, her knees nearly buckled but she steadied herself. With a grunt, she lumbered through the doorway. “Have to get out of here.”

Her words were lost in the inferno. The blaze spread to the stairway. Down the stairs came the shouts of firefighters. They had to be trying to clear a way, but with the stairs engulfed, there was no way out. She also had no route back to the attic. Falling timber ignited the floor behind her.

The protective energy surrounding her flickered. A mad dash through the fire wouldn’t work without that layer.

“We’re in trouble.” Her shoulders sagged under the man’s weight. Sweat dripped from the bandana into her eyes, nearly blinding her. She tried to blink away the stinging sensation, but it didn’t help. “Mom, what do I do?”

Try drawing energy from the firefighters or people outside, her mom answered.

She concentrated, blood crashing around her head like waves, but for some reason she couldn’t focus her ability.

She still had one power to call upon.

I can open a gateway!

Charlee closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. *Concentrate.* Already weakened, her head pounded like someone banged together cymbals inches from her ears. *Focus.* She envisioned the neighborhood just beyond the burning house. As she did, a small blue orb of energy formed in front of her.

The ball grew.

When she opened her eyes, the gateway was large enough for her to enter. Would it lead where she wanted...to the safety of the street? Too hard to tell. Her gateways never worked quite right. "Anything would be better than here."

She had no time to hesitate. The fire crept toward them from behind. The roof rumbled. It could cave in any moment. Holding her breath, still clutching the man and the puppy, Charlee jumped into the portal as a wooden beam fell on the spot where she had been standing.

Charlee leaped out of the gateway and right into the open sky above the burning house. *Wrong! This is worse!*

"Bi—"

Before Charlee finished the word, her winged friend soared out of the night sky and swooped down to catch her. Just as it had been so many times before, the bike was there to save her.

Charlee wrapped her legs around the frame. Her heart did cartwheels inside her chest. The mysterious being always found a way to snatch her away from death. She would have thanked the bike, but at this point in their relationship it was unnecessary. The bike simply knew.

Once safely seated, with the man still slung over her shoulder and the puppy held tight against her chest, the bike flew to the ground and landed behind the fire trucks. Firefighters and ambulance crews pulled the man from Charlee's shoulder. She watched as they laid him on a stretcher and fixed a bag over his mouth to help him breathe. The man coughed. His fingers moved. She hoped these signs meant that he would be all right.

"We'll take good care of him," a young paramedic, her face covered in ash and sweat, said to Charlee. The paramedic smiled. "Are you all right? Do you need medical attention?"

"No," Charlee wheezed.

"So you're the one, huh?" The paramedic's eyes were blood-red from the smoke and heat but friendly.

Charlee wasn't sure what to say. She checked the bandana. It remained in place.

Just in time, the little girl in ponytails rushed up to her dad, followed by an even smaller boy.

"Daddy," she whimpered.

"He'll be all right, little one," the paramedic reassured. "We're taking him to the hospital. You and your brother can ride along with us."

The girl smiled.

"Wait," Charlee added. "I think this little guy belongs to you." She handed the little girl the puppy.

"Thank you." The girl, her doll tucked under an arm, nestled the puppy to her face.

As they were placed in an ambulance, the paramedic turned back to Charlee. “You know, I just heard from the Red Cross their father is all they have. Their mother died last year. It’s sad for one family to go through so much, but it could have been worse. You did a good thing. I just thought you should know.”

The paramedic then stepped forward. “I just can’t believe what—”
Charlee retreated. “Take care of that family.”

The woman extended a hand toward her then stopped and nodded. Climbing into the ambulance, she closed the doors and the vehicle sped away.

Charlee felt tears as she watched the ambulance race to the hospital with four special lives... a father, his two children, and their little puppy. Back at the house, firefighters gained ground. Black plumes became a chalky mist. The night air stunk of scorched wood as the charred remains of the house sizzled.

All eyes were on her. Those gathered pointed at her. They held out their smart phones to take a picture or video. Finally, some evidence of their city’s hero.

“Time for me to go.” When she reached for the bike, applause spread along the street. She paused and gazed at the crowd. No one had ever cheered for her. Ever. “Wow.”

The moment quickly faded. Behind the onlookers stood her parents. Her mom wiped away a tear. Her dad crossed his arms. His brow furrowed. Without approaching her, they climbed into their old Skylark and drove away. “Not. Good. I’m dead. They’ll never let me out of the house again.” Charlee climbed onto the bike. “Let’s go. We’re done here.”

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CHAPTER 3

A Teen Guardian's Daily Struggle

STANDING ON THE front porch of her family's home, Charlee reached for the doorknob but recoiled. Her parents would be on the other side waiting with one of their lectures about taking too many risks with her powers. Or they'd ground her for the next year.

"Well, let's get this over with." She pushed open the door.

Her mom, sandy blonde hair loose over her shoulders, greeted Charlee with a hug. "Oh, honey, what you did tonight is inspiring. You saved a life, and that is a worthy use of your abilities."

"What?" Suddenly aware how tired she was, Charlee collapsed into her mom's arms. "I thought you'd be mad."

"Concerned is all." Her dad placed one hand on her shoulder. The other rubbed his thin brown beard and then pushed up his round wire frame glasses. "But you were truly heroic, sweetheart. Yes, what you did was dangerous, but heroic."

Charlee studied her parents. This couldn't be them. They should be tearing into her right now. "I don't get it."

"We're just thankful you are all right." Her mom, blue eyes as comforting as always, ushered her to the couch and then stroked her hair. A familiar healing embrace, her mom's magic, surrounded Charlee. A pulsating chill washed over her like a cool breeze on a winter morning along the Bay, soothing her baked skin.

"So you're not going to ground me?" she asked.

Her dad lowered to one knee. He frowned at first, deep lines embedded in his forehead, but a grin quickly formed. He offered her a bottle of soda. "We'll save the grounding for tomorrow when the morning news has coverage of the fire and the hero who swooped in on a flying bike to save the day."

Charlee removed the bandana from her pocket. "At least they won't know it was me."

Her mom placed a hand on Charlee's cheek. "Your skin still feels so hot. A bit more healing magic is needed, and then you need your rest."

Charlee took a swig from the soda bottle. The icy fizz tickled her nose. "Can I finish my drink first?"

"Of course." Her mom nodded. "And Charlee, about that grounding—it will be coming. You are not to try anything that dangerous again. Understand?"

"I understand." That was a lie. Soon she would cross over to Janasara to face Theodora again and kill her. She hoped her mom couldn't hear her thoughts, otherwise all would be lost.

Charlee gazed at her mom. Tall with chiseled features, her mom was a strong, loving woman who gave up her career as a librarian to raise her daughters. She put family before everything else. A parent always there with a warm embrace whose soothing words provided clarity to a teenager's mixed-up world. When she offered advice, it centered on telling the truth.

Yet up until a month ago, she had kept a life-changing secret from Charlee.

Her mom's life began on a world called Janasara, the child of Queen Assara and the Guardian Michala, heir to the Crown of Latara. Powerful magic conjurer. Niece to the sorceress Theodora, who killed Assara—her own sister—in her quest to rule that world. Charlee's mom survived because her father, Michala, sent her through a portal to Earth, then sacrificed himself to keep her hidden from Theodora. Her mom planned to journey back through a portal, which she wanted Charlee to open, to stop Theodora and free Janasara from the sorceress' evil reign.

Charlee had other plans. She was the one who blew it, who let Theodora live. She, not her mom, had to stop the sorceress.

"Sweetheart, what are you thinking about?" Her dad once again lifted his glasses father up his long nose.

"Oh, nothing." She swallowed another mouthful of soda. "I guess I'm just really tired. Mom, can that healing session wait? I just want to go to bed. You know, school tomorrow. I should really get some sleep."

Her mom kissed her on the head. "Sure, I'll check on you first thing in the morning."

Hugging them both, she staggered up the stairs to her room. Without undressing, she plopped onto her bed. Sleep overtook her until her cell phone, sitting atop her dresser, buzzed. She reached for it. A text message from Sandra. "Check out this posting on Facebook, hero."

Charlee blinked away drowsiness. "I'm not going to like this."

She clicked on the attachment Sandra sent. A grainy video of the house fire streamed across her phone's screen. In the image, a girl on a winged bike jumps into the second story. A little while later, the girl magically appears above the house with a man and an animal in her arms, and the bike flies up to catch them before they all fall into the blaze.

"Well, we didn't have to wait for the morning news." She dropped the phone onto the bed and slid under the covers. Sleep came quickly.

Myron Applebee Middle School didn't feel the same anymore.

Once a frightened newcomer to the school, Charlee now walked the campus with her head held high. Maybe because of her newfound powers. Maybe because she now had friends.

Something else bothered her, though. Did she even belong here?

Who was she? A guardian, like her grandfather, Michala? A clumsy, goofy, middle-school kid? Or a princess?

The questions hung over her like a storm cloud. She wrestled with competing desires—did she want to be a normal fourteen-year-old girl, or did she want to realize her role as the last guardian of a distant world?

"Charlee." Sandra, her best friend, appeared from the crowd of students. "You're all the rage on the Internet. I mean, the masked-girl is...not you. I guess Channel 12 News ran some of the video, too."

"Don't remind me." Charlee raked her fingers through her long hair and adjusted her green glasses. "My parents weren't happy this morning about all the coverage. They were cool last night. Said I did a good thing. This morning, well, the bike and I won't be flying anytime soon."

"You had to do it." Sandra smiled wide. Lifting a purple band from her denim jacket, she wrapped her brown hair into a ponytail.

"How are you doing, Sandra?" Charlee decided to risk the question.

"What do you mean?" Her friend grasped the quarter-sized golden cross, her grandmother's, hanging from a thin chain around her neck.

Charlee shrugged. "I just mean...you know...Theodora kidnapped you before I could stop her."

"It's fine." Sandra's gaze shifted to her feet. "I told you before, I'm over it."

"I know. I just want you—"

"Drop it, okay." Sandra's smile faded for a moment. She took a deep breath, kissed the cross, and her grin returned. "I know you're concerned about me. My parents, too. I'm fine, really."

Charlee nodded. "I'm glad you're okay."

She knew Sandra wasn't really. She would never, ever forgive herself for letting her friend be hurt by Theodora. *The witch took her and placed her under a spell just to mess with me. How could I have let that happen?*

The two of them walked through the school hallway side by side until they reached Sandra's locker. Charlee tried not to gaze at the scar under Sandra's right eye where she was struck by Theodora. She wanted to say how sorry she was for allowing that to happen. Sorry for making the mistake of opening a portal that allowed the sorceress into this world. Hopefully, one day they'd be able to share their feelings about the kidnapping and their fight with Theodora, which took place not that long ago. For now, it was still too fresh... too painful.

Charlee knew what it felt like not to share feelings. She kept most of her thoughts bottled up until they became a weight on her chest. It hurt so bad sometimes she wanted to scream.

Sandra reached into her locker and retrieved a pre-calculus book. They were among a handful of students in the advanced math class. "One of these days you're going to have to let me join you on your nightly missions to help the people of this city." Sandra shut her locker. "You don't realize it yet, but you need me."

Charlee tugged at her sweater, which felt snug against her slightly rounded stomach. "I don't doubt it, but can we talk about it after school? This is not the place to talk hero stuff. The walls have ears."

"I'm serious, Charlee." Sandra touched her golden cross pendant again.

"I know, but—"

The morning bell rang. Students shuffled off to their classes.

Charlee, lifting the straps of her backpack higher on her shoulders, retreated a few steps. "See you at lunch."

"All right, but we're not done with this conversation. See ya." Sandra turned and walked away.

Charlee sighed. Whenever she was with Sandra, the little hairs on the back of her neck rose. Why? The witch couldn't hurt Sandra again, could she? Whatever danger might come, Charlee would always protect her friend.

She often thought about letting Sandra fly with her on the bike one night, but it couldn't happen. It would be great to have Sandra by her side, but that would place her in harm's way. If Sandra's dad found out, there'd be hell to pay. If he had it his way, he'd probably prefer they not be friends anymore.

Walking into her morning history class, Charlee plopped down into her seat three rows from the front. Reaching into her backpack for a notebook and pencil, she readied for the day's lesson. She yawned and stretched her arms.

Mr. Velez strolled into the room, placed a briefcase on his desk, and immediately launched into his lecture.

Charlee's eyes flickered. Her head drooped. *Don't fall asleep.* She breathed deeply. Sat up straight. Forced her eyelids open. She wrote every word Mr. Velez said, but when she peered at the writing, the words blurred. The pencil slipped from her fingers.

"Miss Smelton, am I boring you?" Mr. Velez stood over her.

Charlee nearly jumped out of her seat. "N...no sir." Her heart raced. A cold sweat covered her brow. Her stomach felt like she'd just been kicked in the gut. "Sorry, Mr. Velez."

Giggles spread across the classroom. Mr. Velez cleared his throat and the class hushed. "Miss Smelton, I'll do my best to hold your interest, but if you feel the need to sleep, be my guest and use the hallway outside."

Charlee lowered her head and slouched in her seat. Her cheeks burned. “No, sir. I’m fine.”

Mr. Velez raised an eyebrow and then continued with his lecture.

A drop of sweat dripped from Charlee’s hair onto her desk. She wiped her forehead with her sleeve. A few faint giggles lingered from behind. She wanted to tell them to shut up, but she’d just get in more trouble. Besides, she’s a guardian. What did it matter if students laughed at her? If Charlee chose, she could wake up by drawing the energy from every student in the class. Take too much, and they might be the ones falling asleep.

“Yeah, why not do that?” she whispered. “Let’s see them squirm as Mr. Velez yells at them.” Charlee bit her lip. *Whoa, where had that thought come from? A guardian didn’t use their power to hurt others. Just to help.* “Get a grip, Charlee.”

Thirty minutes later the bell signaled the end of class. “Miss Smelton, may I see you for a moment?” Mr. Velez leaned against his desk.

Charlee waited as the other students piled from the classroom. A couple of the girls, friends of Tina Lomeli, self-designated leader of the popular crowd, pointed at her and laughed.

When everyone was gone, she dragged her feet along the scuffed linoleum floor, stopping in front of his desk. “Mr. Velez, I need to get to my next class.”

“You’ll make it.” He folded his arms. “Miss Smelton, I have to ask... what’s gotten into you this last month? You’re one of my star pupils, but lately you’ve been falling asleep in class. You’ve turned in assignments late. Your last test was not your usual quality work. Is everything all right?”

Rocking back and forth on her feet, she rubbed her forehead before answering. “I’m okay. I guess I just have a lot on my mind. I’ll do better.”

Mr. Velez slid around his desk and sat in his chair. “You have a great ability, young lady. However, now’s not the time to let your studies suffer. I will be watching and if things don’t improve, I may contact your parents.”

“No... please!” Charlee placed her hands on his desk. If he called her parents, they’d know she’s slipping up in school. They had already conditioned use of her powers on keeping up her grades. Who knows what they would do if they found out the truth. Then again, what did it matter? She’d be on her way to Janasara soon.

“Just stay focused.” Mr. Velez stood. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Charlee nodded and then left the classroom. She avoided run-ins with her other teachers through the rest of the morning, even though her grades in most classes had dropped. At least she stayed awake.

Finally, the lunch bell rang

Charlee made her way through the hallways of Myron Applebee to meet Sandra in the cafeteria. She scanned her fellow students as they walked by. She wondered how many had seen the video of the masked girl on the bike.

No one would suspect Charlee was the hero. Most students ignored her. Just another uncool kid. Invisible. Though she walked with her head high, most students didn't bother to make eye contact.

A few of Tina Lomeli's cronies spotted her in the hallway. They never knew when to quit. Tina made life so miserable for her when she first moved to Myron Applebee. She first pretended to be Charlee's friends but soon started flinging fat jokes. It took Sandra to make her stop. Even now, Tina and her friends tried to bully her, but it no longer mattered. They couldn't hurt her, but that didn't stop them from hurling insults as she passed by.

"Smelton's such a loser." Patty, Tina's closest friend, a girl with a perfect tan complexion and long auburn hair, held her finger and thumb in the shape of an "L."

"Maybe you should skip a lunch or two, fatty," declared Tim, a jock who spent most of his time in remedial classes.

Charlee brushed off the comments, but her hands formed into fists. She should slug them. Shut them up for good. *No, those jerks don't matter anymore*, she reminded herself. Besides, she couldn't draw attention to herself. Better to remain quiet.

She finally reached the cafeteria. Sandra sat at their usual table. However, she wasn't alone. Dean Polinar and Amy Shinn sat beside her. New friends in their little group. Dean was a thin, short Hawaiian kid who could run like the wind. He already ran marathons with his super-athletic dad. Amy's family recently moved from Korea. Charlee smiled. Though she had been in this country just a short time, Amy was already mastering the English language. Her hard work had made her one of the best students in all her classes.

Amy nodded to Charlee while rhythmically drumming on the table with her fingers. She was an excellent drummer—so good she had earned the lead spot among the percussion instruments on the school marching band.

In a world of school cliques, Charlee wondered if her friends were drawn together by the fact that they were all immigrants to Myron Applebee in one way or another. Amy was the only one from another country, but Dean's family came a long way from the Hawaiian Islands. Even Sandra spent five years in Mexico while her dad took part in a law enforcement exchange program. Then there was Charlee. She had only come from a rural county outside San Francisco, but she still felt different. Perhaps because part of her family came from an entirely different dimension.

Charlee stopped in the lunch line. She grabbed a cold hamburger, soggy French fries and a warm apple juice before joining her friends. Though glad to see Dean and Amy, there was no way she could have any real conversation with Sandra in front of them.

"What's up, guys?" Charlee slipped onto the bench next to Amy. She gave Sandra an awkward smile.

“Charlee, I heard Mr. Velez caught you sleeping. He hates that.” Amy continued to drum on the table. “How bad did he yell at you?”

Charlee laughed softly. “Not too bad.”

Sandra huffed. “Velez is a bore. I sleep in his class all the time.”

“Says the straight ‘A’ girl who can’t stop asking questions in history.” Dean poked Sandra.

“Don’t you have to go run somewhere far away?” Sandra frowned at Dean.

Amy laughed so hard milk almost came out of her nose. Despite herself, Charlee laughed, too.

Dean was a little hurt. “You know what—”

He never had the chance to finish. Another voice—an all-too-familiar one—cut him off.

“This is great, Smelton. You’re building quite the loser gang, aren’t you?”

Charlee sighed. It was Tina. Her long blond hair flowed perfectly over her shoulders, covering a bit of her designer blouse. A wide, wicked grin crossed her face, revealing brilliantly white teeth. Her eyes were ice. Four girls dressed similar to Tina stood to her right. That was a bit of a victory for Charlee. Tina no longer came over to the nerd table by herself. She brought friends—a lot of friends.

“Tina—” Sandra began.

“Oh, here we go, Smelton.” Tina bent down to Charlee. “It looks like your little friend is going to have to defend you, like always. You know what, Smelton? It’s time I prove to everyone what a loser you are. I think you’re afraid to fight me. What’s it going to take? What if I take this milk and pour it over your drummer girl’s head?”

Tina snatched the milk carton in Amy’s hand and held it over her. Charlee bounded out of her seat and knocked the milk out of Tina’s hand. It went flying and spilled onto the floor.

“Enough, Tina.” Charlee moved close to Tina, their faces just inches apart. “You’re not going to do anything to bother my friends.”

“Yeah?” Tina spit back. “Do something about it.”

Charlee’s body tensed. She wanted to fight Tina—she had wanted it ever since Tina first began her campaign of intimidation. Now, though, a fight would be a mistake. She took a deep breath. Slowly releasing the air, her anger eased. Muscles relaxed.

Her next move hushed the cafeteria.

Charlee delivered a punch—a fake punch—to her own stomach. Then she feigned a punch to her face and one more to her stomach. With each punch, she pretended to fall back. The students in the cafeteria—all of them waiting for the fight they hoped to see—laughed. At first the laughter was soft and uneasy, but it grew stronger.

"Ahh! Uhh! Ouch! You got me, Tina," Charlee moaned, pretending to be hurt. "You win this round."

Tina gazed around the cafeteria. There would be no fight today—not with everyone laughing.

"Jeez, Smelton! You are a doofus." With a flick of her hair, she and her friends disappeared through the cafeteria doors.

"Cool," said Sandra.

The single word was the best response Charlee could have hoped for. She stood tall.

Then Amy spoke up. "Uh, Charlee, you owe me a milk."

CHAPTER 4

The Healing Powers

ON CHARLEE'S WAY home from school, a white dove brushed against her hair as it flew by and came to rest on a tree branch towering above. From that perch, the winged creature scanned the neighborhood of two-story Victorian homes packed tightly together before fluttering down to Charlee's shoulder.

She couldn't help but chuckle at her protector.

"You don't have to follow me everywhere, you know. It's perfectly safe here." She waved off the changeling. The tiny bird hovered overhead, then soared to the top of a light pole. As a dove, the changeling kept watch over her. At night, in a tree outside her window. During the day, on classroom windowsills.

"I don't know what's worse...having my mom in my head all the time or this overprotective creature tailing me everywhere I go." She gazed at the tiny bird. "I can take care of myself. I do have some magic of my own."

Was this how her life would be from now on? Never a moment of privacy. Always watched. Charlee sighed. If this is what it meant to be a guardian, maybe life would be better if she'd never learned the truth. Thanks to Theodora, she never had a choice. The sorceress invaded her mind, forcing this new life on her.

Rounding a corner, she reached her house. Still in dove form, the changeling circled high above before disappearing from view. She'd probably find the magical being in the shape of the old Schwinn Stingray two-wheeler in the backyard. That's how the changeling first appeared to her. In that form, they fought Theodora side by side.

Maybe it was good to have a protector.

"Thanks for being there, bike," Charlee muttered as she opened the front door and walked inside.

Her mom sat in the living room, rocking her little sister, Megan. Late afternoon sunlight spilled in through the front window, circling them in a beam that set her mom's long sandy hair aglow. Specks of gold shimmered through each flowing lock.

Megan's crystal blue eyes sparkled. Her porcelain cheeks reflected the light. A mop of blond curls blazed brightly in the sun's rays.

"Charlee, I'm glad you're home." Her mom motioned for Charlee to sit. "It's time for our session."

"Mom, can't it wait? Enough already, I'm fine."

"In here...now." Her mom placed Megan on the floor among a gathering of books. Though only two, Megan could sit on her own and scan through picture books. Sometimes she seemed to read them, but that was impossible.

"Mom—"

"Now." Her mom stood and arched an eyebrow.

Charlee threw up her arms. "I really don't need this."

"Yes, you do. Though your body has healed from your encounter with Theodora, a few wounds remain I think my magic can help. Not to mention the harm you did to yourself last night in the fire. Now sit down on the couch."

Charlee rolled her eyes but did as she was told. It was true she still had lingering injuries from her battle with the sorceress. A scar on her shoulder. A tiny burn mark on her back. A scratch in her side that ached from time to time, though that could be a phantom sensation. Her mom's healing magic helped, but maybe some magical wounds would never fully heal. She could accept a scar or two.

On the couch, her mom began to chant in the Lengoron language—the language of Latara, one of the Ten Unified Kingdoms of Janasara.

Listening to her mom's soft chanting, a protective, comforting warmth embraced Charlee. Her mom might be annoying, but how many teens can say their mom is an *alien* from a world across a dimensional divide and a powerful magic conjurer?

Before the battle against Theodora, her mom never revealed her true identity. Maybe if she had Theodora never would have made it across a portal to Earth in the first place. Charlee shook her head. The past was the past. Her parents made a choice. Maybe the wrong one, but they had their reasons. To shelter her and Megan. Then, there was that little prophecy of the Last Guardian having to discover the truth of their identity and powers without help. *Whatever.*

Her mom's voice broke through the healing cocoon—cutting off Charlee's thoughts. "I think we're getting close to the end of the treatment, Charlee. Your internal organs are functioning properly, and, with one more session, I can knock out those scars."

"Like I said, Mom, I'm fine."

Charlee rubbed her scarred shoulder. Indeed, new skin—soft and smooth—replaced the rough red flesh. Maybe she wouldn't have to live with scars after all.

She embraced her mom. "Thank you."

Her mom kissed her on the cheek. "Don't thank me. It's my fault you were hurt. I should have done more to keep you safe. I should have told you the truth instead of letting some ancient scroll guide my actions. The Last Guardian would awaken in a time of need but only if allowed to discover the power alone. Just stupid. I was foolish, and for that I'm sorry. Now, since you're healed, the time is near—"

“For what?” Charlee broke from the hug. She knew the answer but didn’t like it.

Her mom bent down and picked up Megan. “I’ve been waiting until I felt you were completely healthy. Now that you are, the time nears for you to open a gateway so that I can return to Janasara and free it from Theodora.”

Charlee shook her head. “Mom, we need to talk about this.”

Footsteps creaked over the stairway.

“Yes, we do need to talk.” Her dad, the history professor, reached the bottom of the stairs. His tie hung loosely from the collared shirt hidden under a tan sweater vest. He’d probably been grading papers upstairs, judging by his red eyes.

He took a seat on the sofa adjacent to the couch. Charlee covered the grin she couldn’t suppress. Her dad was a good man. Unlike mom, he belonged in this dimension...on Earth. They’d met and fallen in love. Long before they married, she revealed her true identity to him.

Her dad removed a pipe from his slacks’ pocket. He turned it over slowly in his hand as if studying it from one angle, then another. “You know our plans, Charlee. As a guardian, you are the only one who can open a portal. While I’m not in favor of anyone crossing over, your mother’s mind is set.”

Charlee’s grin faded. She stood and paced the room. “It should be me, not you. I’m the guardian, right? Maybe the last one. Let me go.”

Her mom grabbed her hand. “We need you to remain here to take care of Megan. Cryton can’t do it alone. Yes, he raised me here, but at his age it’s too much to ask him to care for her alone. He needs your help. Your sister needs you.”

Charlee pulled away. “She needs you, too...both of you.”

Her dad cleared his throat. “We all need each other, and we should all stay together, but that world is no place for Megan. Quite honestly, it’s no place for you either, Charlee. You’ve only begun to understand your magic. You might have tricked Theodora here, but over there she’s stronger. If anyone is going, it will be your mother and I. Hopefully, when it’s all over, we’ll be reunited as a family.”

“But we have the medallion.” Charlee pointed toward the basement where the dark creation lay inside a safe.

“Yes, and I will use it against Theodora.” Her mom rocked Megan in her lap.

“No, the medallion should be mine.” Charlee’s body tensed. *No one should touch the medallion but her. It belonged to her. Wait, where had that thought come from?* She cringed, remembering her vision. Her face, scarred and twisted, etched into the dark object.

“What did you just say?” her dad asked.

Falling into the couch, she hesitated before answering. “I’m just saying I should use the medallion against Theodora.”

“No, Charlee.” Her mom’s brow furrowed.

Tapping the carpeted floor with her foot, Charlee scratched her head. She had to come up with something. Anything to change their minds. "I have another idea. Maybe Cryton can take care of Megan with the help of the bike. That way, the three of us can stop Theodora together."

That made sense. After all, Cryton and the changeling both crossed through the portal with Charlee's mom when she was an infant. He raised her like a father, while the shape shifter watched over her.

Her mom stood. "This issue is settled, Charlee. I know you want revenge. I know you feel responsible. You have fought bravely and are becoming stronger every day, but this is my fight now as it always should have been. Soon, you will open that portal for me. Unfortunately, I cannot talk your father into staying behind, so he will accompany me."

Her dad jumped up from the sofa and then placed his arm around his wife. "Your mother and I began this adventure together, and we will finish it together. We know we're leaving Megan in good hands. Now let's say we forget about this for the moment and start thinking about dinner."

"I have some homework to do." Charlee stepped toward the stairs. "I'll be up in my room."

"All right, baby. Later, if you wish, we can talk more," her mom offered.

Charlee watched her parents stroll into the kitchen. When they disappeared, she slunk to the basement. Switching on the light, which cast an eerie yellow glow throughout the subsurface room, she tiptoed to the safe kept in a corner.

She shivered as an icy chill blanketed her, stealing her breath. Was the basement really freezing, or was she scared?

"What am I doing? I need to stay away from this, but I can't. I need to see it. I need to know."

She knelt by the safe, an iron black box the size of a suitcase. Her dad hid the combination, but Charlee found the numbers on a folded napkin inside his wallet. She had to touch the medallion. Hold it close to her chest. Her parents had no right to keep her away.

Turning the dial one tick at a time, the lock finally popped. She shouldn't do this. It wasn't too late. She could lock it again and run back upstairs.

Over the past month, she had learned from Cryton that to wield this medallion was to fall into insanity and evil. Sure, it had the power to grant its user immortality—but there was a price. The user gave up their soul.

Sometimes at night, Charlee dreamt of the black, light-swallowing medallion. Her face—warped, twisted, evil—was etched on one side of the object. Was she destined to become like Theodora?

Holding her breath, she slowly opened the door of the safe.

"Charlee, what are you doing?"

Her dad's voice stung like a slap against the cheek. Her stomach churned, and her heart pounded wildly. All the blood seemed to drain away from her body. She froze.

Charlee glanced at the ground, anything to avoid her dad's glare. "I...uh... thought...you were in the kitchen."

"Charlee, I asked what are you doing in that safe?"

"Nothing."

"Charlee."

"I...I just wanted to know the medallion was safe."

Standing over her shoulder, her dad bent down and then closed the door with a thud. Charlee gasped as the safe's locking mechanism engaged with a click as loud to her as crashing thunder on a stormy night.

Her dad placed an arm around her. "Sweetheart, I know what you're feeling. I know you want to face Theodora, but you've done your part. It's now up to me and your mother."

"But you're not even from there, Dad. Why...why do you want to go?"

"Because of the pain Theodora has caused this family. Because of all she has taken from your mother. Because she almost took you from us." He motioned for her to follow him. "Look, Charlee, I know I have no magic, as you and your mother do, but I am a warrior inside. I'll use my strength to protect your mother."

"And what should I do?"

"You need to use your powers to keep your sister safe."

"Dad..." Charlee lowered her head. She wanted to tell him so much more but couldn't. The visions. Her compulsion to hold the medallion. A sense of failure so great it pressed against her chest like a chunk of concrete she could never lift away. How could she tell him that sometimes when silence filled the house she heard Theodora calling to her?

She couldn't tell her dad...or her mom, for that matter...anything. They might think she was losing her mind from the stress of her battle with Theodora. Maybe she was.

"Charlee, it's cold down here." Her dad led her up the stairs. "Let's forget what lies ahead and just enjoy this time together."

She glanced into her dad's hazel eyes. "Okay, but first I really do have some homework to finish."

"Well, you have an hour before dinner." Her dad opened the basement door and nudged her into the living room.

"Thanks for the talk, Dad. It helped." Charlee lied. Better to make him think he had changed her mind, but he hadn't. She would cross through the portal on her own. Her mom said it herself. She was healed. The time had come. First, though, a little sword practice with Cryton.

Charlee bolted upstairs. When she reached her bedroom, she opened her window and signaled for the bike.

The white dove on a nearby tree branch immediately changed into the bike, its wings outstretched to stay aloft. Charlee climbed from her window onto the changeling. She felt the being's energy flow through her.

It felt good.

"Bike, to Cryton's," Charlee directed.

The changeling responded with a mighty flap of its wings.

CHAPTER 5

The Lesson

CHARLEE TIGHTENED HER grip on the long steel blade. Both hands grasped the sword, lifting it high as if a baseball player about to swing. Her arms shook from the strain; sweat rolled down her cheeks. She could have absorbed extra strength from her bike parked nearby, but that was not the point of the exercise.

Cryton rubbed one side of his long white mustache between his thumb and forefinger. The few patches of gray hair on the sides of his bald head fluttered under the air flowing from a ceiling fan just above him. He expertly twirled a blade in his other hand. “To wield a sword, you cannot depend on magic. You have to build your natural strength, and that means learning to control the steel without magic.”

He circled her inside his pizza shop, closed early for Charlee’s training session. Grease-stained drapes over the windows hid them from view. The day’s last sunlight streamed in underneath the curtains. The strong aroma of garlic, cheese, and marinara sauce baking filled her nostrils.

Charlee’s stomach gumbled. One small slice couldn’t hurt. “Cryton, can we take a break? You promised me a cheese pizza. My arms are really sore, and I have to get home soon. My mom—”

“Knows you’re here.” Cryton studied his own sword, his gray eyes partially hidden under bushy eyebrows. “She called to alert me you were on your way.”

“I should have known.”

“She said it was all right for you to stay here a while.” He lowered his weapon. “That you needed to blow off a little steam, so I figured we’d work a little harder this evening. Thought maybe afterwards, we’d talk a bit. Your mom is worried about you. I am, too.”

Charlee wiped sweat from her forehead. “You don’t have to worry about me. Let’s just finish this training stuff so I can eat.”

Cryton pointed his blade at her. “Okay, Guardian. Attack me, but focus on your balance. Don’t give up too much of yourself. You must understand that attack and defense are no different from each other. One cannot exist without the other, or you will surely die.”

Taking a deep breath, Charlee swung her steel. She trusted in the teachings of this aging warrior from Janasara who had become her mentor—and more.

Feeling the weight of the blade in her hands, she lunged forward to cut the old man in half.

As part of Cryton's disguise on Earth, he went by the name Mr. Levenstein, a pizza shop owner who walked with a limp. As a sword-wielding knight, he easily parried Charlee's attack with a sidestep. Agile for his age, he grasped his sword in dough-crusting hands and blocked her strike, their weapons colliding with a clink that could have been heard outside.

Charlee spun, slashing her blade at Cryton's left side. Again, her teacher gracefully dodged the move. The white apron tied around his waist flowed with him. He countered, driving the razor sharp tip toward her torso. The move came more swiftly than she had anticipated, but she leapt back and blocked with a downward slice.

One maneuver after another, Cryton forced her into an awkward defense. *Can't keep up. Too fast.* Her hands throbbed. What little muscle she had in her rubbery arms melted away. With labored breaths, she tried to keep up with him.

Must...control...breathing. Willing her lungs to suck in air, she tried one last defensive stance, but Cryton swept his sword down. She brought her blade up to block, but her strength failed.

When their steel clashed, her legs caved. She dropped to the floor, her weapon falling to the side. Cryton stood over her, holding the tip inches from her neck.

The lesson lasted only minutes. Charlee's heart sank.

Cryton lowered the sword and dabbed his forehead with his stained apron. "Good," he said. "You lasted four or five moves this time. You're getting better."

Charlee rose to her feet and wiped the sweat from her face. While moments ago she enjoyed the garlicky smell inside Cryton's restaurant, right now it made her nauseous. A slice of pizza no longer sounded good.

"What do you mean, I'm getting better? I suck. I'm supposed to be a guardian...a warrior...and I can't handle a sword. It's been a month, and I'm not getting any better."

Cryton lifted her sword and held it close to his face. He'd given it to her as a gift. With his apron, he wiped the silver T-shaped handle and cleaned the slightly tarnished steel before handing it back.

"On the contrary. You're getting much better. Swordplay takes years to learn and decades to master. You expect too much of yourself."

"I have to do better." She dragged her sword across the tile floor until she slumped into a booth.

"Why?" Cryton sat beside her. "Why do you have to do better?"

"Because I'm the last of the guardians."

"Oh, I see." He rubbed his bald head.

In many ways, he was still a stranger to her. He'd only come into her life

when she tried to ditch the bike—an ugly gift from her dad—in his alley before the craziness with Theodora began. Before she knew the bike was special.

“You know, Charlee, when your grandfather Michala entrusted his daughter to me and ordered me through the portal with her to this world, I didn’t know what to think. My duty was to fight at his side, not become a nursemaid to an infant girl. He and Assara knew they would not survive Theodora’s conquest, and they wanted their daughter to be safe by sending her to Earth. Leaving my friend to face death was the hardest thing I’d ever done, and I knew it meant the rest of my life would be spent caring for their daughter.”

Charlee tapped the table with her fingers. “I’ve heard this before, Cryton.”

“Now wait a moment. I want you to understand something.” He grasped her hand. “I did my best to raise your mother, with the changeling’s help, of course. I taught her the ways of our people and made sure she knew the sacrifice her parents had made. She vowed to someday return to Janasara, but she did not inherit her father’s guardian powers as you have. Still, I knew she carried a longing to return to the kingdom she’d really never known. I proudly watched her grow into a young woman, become a wife and then a mother, but her desire never faded.”

She placed her free hand on top of his. “I know how she feels, but—”

“When you were born,” Cryton continued. “I chose to watch your family from afar. Figured I could protect you better from the shadows, but I was always near. Even though you’ve only known me a short time, I’ve known you your whole life. Watched you grow up. In many ways, I see you as my own granddaughter. I knew one day you might face a dangerous destiny. Never could I have imagined what a strong girl you would become and what courage you would show in facing that destiny.”

Charlee wanted to say he had become a grandfather to her but didn’t. Her cheeks felt hot and her stomach tied up in knots. Where was this conversation headed? “What’s your point?” She slid her hands away and then leaned back in the booth.

Cryton frowned. Maybe she’d hurt the warrior by not letting him know how she felt about him. Either way, he quickly recovered. “Listen, there is no doubt that you have begun your journey bravely. Your battle with Theodora shall be recorded in the annals of our people. And yes, it is likely that you have more battles to come. I have no doubt that you will face them bravely, as well.”

“Yeah...but...”

“Now, let an old man finish. You asked for my point. Here it is. The fact is, you are still just a kid, and you deserve to be a kid a bit longer. You seem to think you have to rush to face your destiny. You seem to think you have to be a hero. That’s why you’re out flying around on that changeling when you should be focusing on your education.”

Charlee felt a twinge of anger. "But you don't understand, Cryton. I feel her every day."

"Who?"

Charlee stepped away from the booth and paced the floor. Should she tell him? Might as well. She'd already said too much. "Theodora. I can't sleep most nights because I can feel her rage. It's as though when she entered my dreams and tricked me into opening the gateway here, a part of her remained in my head."

Cryton stood and placed a hand on her shoulder. "In all the talks we've had, you've never mentioned this."

"She wants her medallion, and she wants to destroy me." Charlee raked her fingers through her damp hair. "I can feel her lashing out at her world in some kind of twisted revenge. I don't know what it is, but I have this feeling of pain and death. It's worse when I sleep."

Cryton was quiet for a heartbeat. "I take it you haven't shared this with your parents."

"No." She paced some more.

"Why?"

"I don't know. Because they'd think me crazy. They wouldn't let me ever leave the house."

"And you have decided you have to face Theodora now?"

Charlee hesitated. "Yes."

Cryton thought for a while. "One thing I want you to remember is that you come from a strong family. Your family is your source of strength. No matter what choices you make, always remember that."

"Cryton, I can't let them risk their lives."

He removed the apron and lifted his sword. "Then grab that weapon. We both have more training to do."

"What?"

"I've been thinking that it's time I returned home, anyway."

"Cryton, no."

"Oh, yes!" He unleashed a bellowing laugh and thrust his sword at her. In reply, Charlee raised her own and blocked the blow. As night fell, the clang of their swords filled the tiny restaurant.

CHAPTER 6

The Voice of the Empress

GUARDIAN, CAN YOU feel my presence? I know that you can. Yet you proceed with this charade of ignoring me. Why?

Theodora's icy voice, barely a whisper, cut through Charlee's subconscious mind. Most nights she avoided sleep as long as possible to maintain a mental block against her great aunt. Tonight, she caved to the darkness—allowing the *Empress* dangerously close to invading her thoughts. Theodora called to her through the shadowy layer of dreams like a murky fog rolling in off the Bay.

The sorceress' bony fingers probed inside her head like tiny spiders crawling through her brain. Though it may have been a phantom sensation, nails as sharp as daggers carved away at her thoughts like a searing laser until Charlee had no more defenses.

Charlee's eyes shot open. Her head pounded as if an unseen force squeezed her temples. She screamed, rolling out of the bed onto the carpeted floor. "Leave me along, witch!"

The shutters over her window flew open. The glass shattered, crashing to the floor. Ferocious winds whipped her hair and mashed school papers against the walls. "None of this is real. Just a dream. I'm still asleep. Stop it, Theodora."

A swirling vortex of thunderclouds and lightning formed around her, swallowing the floor, sucking everything in. She jumped onto the bed, grasping the headboard. "Mom, help me!" How could she? This wasn't really happening. "Wake up, Charlee!" she urged herself.

"Come to me, Guardian." Theodora's voice rose above the howling squall.

"Leave me alone!" Charlee's bed plunged into the vortex.

She fell into darkness as if falling into a black hole. Farther and farther, she plummeted into the void, thrashing her arms and legs wildly. Theodora's cackling laughter surrounded her. When would this chasm end? When would she awaken from this nightmare?

"Bike, I need—"

Charlee crashed onto a rocky surface hidden by a murky fog. The wind knocked out of her, she rolled onto her back, grasping her chest, forcing her lungs to breathe in the dank air. *I have to be calm. This isn't real. Can't be real.* Shallow breaths gave way to deeper ones. Her heart, at first thudding loudly, quieted.

She slowly stood, her vision limited to a few feet in every direction by a thick gray mist. Above, a ceiling of shadows hid any route back to her bedroom, not that there would be any way to climb out of this pit.

Theodora's laughter, a constant annoyance, subsided, but the sorceress' icy breath brushed against her neck. A chill spread between Charlee's shoulders. *This may not be real, but stay alert. She's going to mess with your head.*

Theodora's disembodied words returned. "Young Guardian, I see your thoughts. You think you have become strong enough to keep me from penetrating your subconscious, but I am always with you. Since our first encounter, a part of me remains within you."

"I know you're always there, Theodora." Fists clenched, Charlee inched her way forward, trying to pierce the blackness. She fought back tears with no intention of letting the witch see her cry. Yet having her thoughts invaded sapped her strength. The scared girl she thought long gone returned. Charlee shivered. "Please let me wake up," she whispered. "Bike, if you can hear me, slap me, shock me... anything to free my mind."

"Are you frightened, child?" Theodora's voice carried a touch of amusement.

"No." Charlee lied. "Theodora, what do you want? We have nothing to talk about."

"Don't we?"

As if someone flipped a switch, daylight swept away the darkness. Under a gray sky, she stood on a familiar cobblestone path facing the Castle of Latara. She'd seen it in earlier dreams. Stone steps led to the massive archway. Cathedral-like towers rose on either side. The entire structure was cast in glowing white marble despite the gloom overhead. Built into the side of a mountain, a waterfall flowed from the cliffs vanishing into the courtyard, strangely without a sound. No thunderous flow of a river. No crash of water against rocks. Nothing.

Lightning exploded in the distance. Charlee flinched, turning her attention to the skies. When she gazed back at the castle, a crimson liquid streamed down the steps and pooled around her feet.

"Turn around and see what has befallen the people of Latara because of your foolishness."

Charlee did as she was told. Bodies lay bent and twisted along the pathway. Some were charred as if roasted alive, while others were torn in half. Closest to her, a woman sprawled on the walkway embraced a toddler, probably no older than Megan. Most of the skin had been torn from the woman's back, revealing muscle and bone. Charlee gritted her teeth. It had to be the Horeng, those awful wolf creatures. How terrified the woman must have been in her final moment. How about the baby? What kind of a monster could slice through a child?

Gasping, Charlee dropped to one knee. "If this is real, I'll make you pay."

She forced herself up and lumbered through the smattering of bodies. The

dead stretched to the outer walls of the kingdom. The stench of death, putrid and thick, washed over her.

“What did you do, witch?” she shouted. Her blood, scalding hot, pulsed though her like a wave rushing to shore. Was this a vision, a glimpse into the devastation the sorceress caused upon her return to Janasara, or was this the distant past? Or something else entirely? Real or nightmare, Theodora had to die. Now! This couldn’t go on. “Show yourself and let’s end this.”

“Child, as you have pointed out, this is but a dream.” Theodora manifested along the path a stone’s throw away. Young. Flowing blond hair. White dress. Golden crown. Just like the first time she came to Charlee in a dream.

“Killer!” Charlee charged her, throwing wild punches. Each blow passed through Theodora as if she were a ghost.

“We cannot do battle in this dream realm, Guardian.” Theodora smiled wide. “If you wish to kill me, you must come to me through a portal. I humbly await your arrival in this world of your ancestors.”

“Maybe I’ll just leave you in Janasara, Theodora—stranded without your medallion.” Huffing, Charlee stepped away from the sorceress. That was a lie. Charlee couldn’t leave this world unprotected. No, she would cross a portal. The day was coming...soon.

Theodora circled her. “Oh, I don’t think you’ll hide from me on Earth. Not when I have taken so many lives to avenge myself for your act of treachery—for keeping me from my immortality. If you do not come, more will die.”

Charlee cringed. If only she’d killed her before. “You’re right. I’m coming for you. I’ll beat you with your own medallion.”

Theodora knelt to the body of a young girl who lay face down just off the walkway. The sorceress stroked the girl’s hair. “Pitty. Unlike you, she was such a pretty young creature. Do you think in her dying breath she called out to a guardian when none was here to save her? How does that make you feel?”

Charlee wiped away a tear. The girl was probably the same age she and Sandra were. The memory of Sandra under Theodora’s spell flashed through her mind. Eyes gray and dead. Like a zombie. Charlee failed her friend and now this girl, too. How many more people would suffer? “You’re going to pay for this.”

“Our reunion shall be most joyous.” Theodora released the dead girl’s hair and hovered an arm’s length away from Charlee. “After all, we are family. Keeping me from my medallion all this time has been oh, so rude of you. But then I know you desire it as much as I. Its darkness fills your heart. You feel it, don’t you?”

“All I know is you’re going down.” Charlee’s thoughts returned to the vision of her face on the medallion.

Theodora crossed her arms. “Silly girl, your warped sense of good and evil will soon change. Come to me and perhaps we will share in the medallion’s glorious

power. Come to me and you will see mine is the just path. You will understand, then, why the death of these weak creatures means nothing. Join with me and the conquest of dimensions will be within our grasp. I will be a goddess and you... my immortal servant."

Charlee turned away from the sorceress. "Don't listen to her," she uttered to herself. "You're nothing like her." The image of the medallion lingered in her mind. Her warped face chiseled in the black stone glared back at her. That wasn't her. She wouldn't let it happen.

"You just wait, aunty. I kicked your butt before, and I'm going to finish the job." Charlee spun around but Theodora vanished. The bodies faded away and the Latara landscape gave way to the black void. Her subconscious mind reestablished its blockade. She slipped back into an uneasy sleep.

Somewhere in that shadowy realm between being awake and asleep, Charlee remained aware of her dream encounter with her great-aunt.

She awoke back in her bedroom. Her eyes slowly fluttered open, and she gazed in each direction. Night time lingered outside. A soft orange haze from the back porch light filtered through her curtains. Everything remained in its proper place from her bed to the unbroken windows.

Charlee released a lungful of air and sat up in bed, covers pulled up to her chest. A new thought formed. "Theodora may know I'm coming, but she doesn't know everything. She thinks she killed the changeling back on Alcatraz, but she's wrong. Together, we can end her. If I have to, I'll use the medallion. If I start to change...to turn...I'll do what I have to."

She would even take her own life if necessary, though that declaration kept her awake the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 7

It Must Be Now

CHARLEE HUSTLED TO school, her head shrouded under a hood. The changeling—in dove form—clung to her shoulder. Last night's dream, if she could call it that, played over and over in her mind. The blood... bodies... Theodora's words. What was she supposed to feel? Sad? Angry? Scared? All three?

Storm clouds above cast the morning in murkiness. Thunder rumbled in a rage, and lightning shouted its hate. Or was it her thirst for vengeance that set the heavens ablaze?

"Bike, we have to go now—tonight." Charlee extended her forefinger to the changeling. The dove hopped onto it, and she lifted the bird close to her face. "My parents may think they're ready to go, but I can't let them do it. It's my responsibility." First, she had to say her goodbyes, especially to Sandra.

She reached Myron Applebee Middle School, and waved away her shape-shifting protector. It didn't take long to spot Sandra. Her friend leaned against a Sycamore tree just inside the front gate with a book close to her face. Other students filed past her engaged in their own conversations.

"Hey, you." Charlee removed her hood and forced a smile.

"Hi, Charlee. You want to hit the mall this weekend, I mean if you can take time away from your hero thing." Sandra nudged her. "Just kidding about that last part, but let's do it—let's do some girly stuff at the mall."

"I...I can't."

"What...why?" Sandra's pursed lips revealed her disapproval.

"There's something I have to do. In fact, that's the only reason I didn't skip school today. I wanted to talk to you." Charlee fidgeted with her backpack straps. Should she tell Sandra the truth? No, she didn't need to know. Or worry. "You may not see me in school for a...few days. But when I get back, we can go to the mall for sure."

Sandra dropped her book. "You're going after the witch, aren't you?"

Stepping back, Charlee's gaze shifted to the crowd of students milling close by. Sandra said that a little too loud. How could she know that? *Because she knows you too well, stupid.*

Charlee placed a finger to her lips. "Not so loud."

Her friend cringed. "Sorry...but I'm right. Don't lie to me, Charlee." This time, Sandra whispered.

Twisting her hair, Charlee strolled around the tree. No point in trying to lie. "Yes, it's true."

Sandra grabbed Charlee's arm. "Stay here. You don't need to go."

"Yeah, I do."

"Why? You did what you were supposed to do. You saved us all. Isn't that enough?" Sandra raised her voice again.

"Shhhh." Charlee tapped a foot and adjusted her glasses. She spoke in a soft voice. "I have to do this. It's...like...my responsibility. Theodora hurt you and many others. She is doing worse to those in *her own world*. And it's my fault." She flashed back to the dead woman and her child and all the other bodies from her dream. Charlee punched the tree, but without super strength her knuckles cracked. Her hand throbbled. Hopefully no one noticed. "It's my fault she hurt you," she muttered.

Silence fell between them until the morning bell signaled the start of classes.

"Listen, it's going to be all right," Charlee offered.

"I hope so." Sandra wiped away a tear and walked away.

Charlee thought about running to thank her for being such a good friend, a best friend. Sandra was the first to give her a chance at Myron Applebee. She made school fun. In the end, those thoughts went unspoken. Sandra knew it anyway.

When Sandra rounded a corner, Charlee snuck out of the school grounds. She needed to prepare.

§ § §

Charlee checked her phone. 10 a.m. By now, Dad would be at the university, probably in the middle of some boring lecture. Mom would be with Megan at the library. Rising from the bench in the park a block from her house, Charlee slid the hood over her head and crept toward her home.

The dove flew one tree to the next, following her.

Once inside her house, abandoned and dark for the moment, she slunk to the basement door. The medallion waited for her below. Did she really want to do this? Once she stole it from the safe, there'd be no going back. If she was going to face Theodora, she'd have to use that strange disc against her great aunt and then destroy it.

Easier said than done.

According to Cryton, the medallion could only be destroyed if thrown back into a magical fire from the tree from which it was forged, but the *bush* blazed in

a labyrinth enchanted by the dark arts. No one knew how or when the hidden lair shifted. Of course, that was all lore.

If the time came, would she be willing to destroy the medallion? “I have to. I can’t keep it for myself.” But she wanted it. Charlee shook away that thought. Already, the mysterious object infected her. Separation from it made her ill as if a fever burned across her forehead. “No, I’m still in control.”

Charlee opened the door and crossed the threshold into the basement. With heavy steps, she trudged down the steps and slithered to the safe. Like the day before, she turned the combination until the bolt unlatched.

Fear of the face she might see in the medallion caused her hands to recoil. Sweat formed across her brow. Her heart thumped so loud it echoed up to her ears. “There’s still time to turn back. No, there’s no choice at this point. I have to take it. I must possess it.” Cautiously, she opened the door of the safe and found herself staring at nothing.

“What?” Charlee nearly screamed.

The medallion wasn’t there. The safe was empty. She reached inside and felt all around as if her eyes might be playing a trick on her. Nothing. Blood rushed from her face. She slumped into a sitting position, glaring into the empty safe.

“How could this be? Who could have taken it? Could Theodora already have it?”

“Cryton has the medallion.” Her dad’s voice was laced with anger.

Charlee jumped to her feet. He was supposed to be at work. How could he know she’d be here...today? A stabbing pain exploded through her chest like her heart burst into a million pieces.

Her dad stood at the base of the steps, his hands hidden inside his tweed jacket. He frowned, and deep ridges lined his forehead. “Why are you—”

“Why’d he take it?” she blurted, clutching her chest. “It’s mine.”

“What was that?” He stepped toward her.

Charlee paused. “Uh, I mean...uh...I don’t know. Dad, just tell me when he took it? Why?”

“Shortly after you left for school this morning, Cryton came to ask for the medallion.” Her dad stopped inches away from her. “He told us what you were planning—not that we needed him to tell us. Your mother and I knew you had no intention of opening a portal for us. Teenagers think their parents will fall for anything. I guess you think the same even with a mother who’s strong in magic.”

“Dad, no.” Charlee shook her head. She had to get that medallion back. Somehow. How could Cryton betray her like this? Could she trust him anymore? Could she trust anyone? Even the changeling? Or was that magical beast in on it, too?

“Charlee, we’ve been gentle with you up to this point,” her dad continued. “Didn’t want to scare you away from us. Your mother and I wanted you to flex your powers a bit. Learn from Cryton. We hoped you might see things our way.

But I see that's impossible now, so the medallion will remain with Cryton until such time as you open a portal for us."

"Then I'll get it back?" She spit out angrily.

"No, Charlee." Her mom stormed into the basement, Megan in her arms. Her hair was done up in a ponytail, making her high cheek bones even more pronounced. "We will take the medallion and destroy it."

Charlee lowered her head into her hands. "What are you guys even doing home right now? How'd you know I'd be here?"

"I can sense you, remember," her mom answered.

"And we got a call from the school," her dad added.

Charlee lifted her head and bit a fingernail. "Stupid school." She sighed deeply before speaking again. "This is dumb, Mom. I'm the guardian. I should use the medallion to stop Theodora. If I wanted to, I could open a portal to Janasara right now. You couldn't stop me."

"You want to bet?" Her dad crossed his arms. "We're still your parents."

Her mom glided father into the room. "Charlee, did you ever think that maybe Earth needs you more? Maybe you can use your powers to help this world when you are older and truly ready?"

Charlee shrugged. "Maybe."

Maybe she would return to Earth and become a real hero, but for now the people of Janasara needed their guardian. How could her parents not understand that? "Mom, you said it yourself. I'm supposed to be the future queen or something. Shouldn't the queen fight for her people? Isn't that my duty?"

"I've thought a great deal about that." Her mom handed Megan to her dad. "You don't have to be queen. You don't even have to be a guardian. You can choose to be Charlee and just explore who Charlee wants to be in this world. For now, I am still the rightful queen, and I will guide our people to a better future until one day when it is safe for a new queen to take my place."

Charlee shook her head. "I don't know. It's all so confusing. What am I supposed to do?"

Her mom placed a hand on her shoulder. "Open a gateway for us, so that we may stop Theodora. Stay here and help Cryton to protect your sister. Care for Megan in our absence. Do your best to be a normal teenager. I know that won't be easy anymore, but try. Go to school. Make a life for yourself. You have so much ahead of you. When you are more mature then use your power to help this world."

Under her breath, Charlee cursed. Normal teenager? School? Make a life? Was her mom joking? None of that was possible now. She had a destiny. To be a guardian. To stop Theodora. Her parents couldn't stop her. They should know her life could never be the same. Not now. Not ever.

"Fine, whatever, Mom." Charlee threw up her arms. "You want me to open

a portal for you, I'll do it. I'll stay here and watch over Megan. When she's old enough I'll tell her why you left her. Maybe she'll understand."

"When things are safe, I'll call to you through your thoughts to open a portal so that we can return to you and Megan." Her mom's eyes reddened. "I promise."

"Sure." Charlee marched past her parents, clomping up the basement stairs to the living room. From there, she sulked into the kitchen where she grabbed a bottle of soda from the refrigerator and took a long drink. Had the angry teen bit worked? Would they believe she'd given in to their demands? It didn't matter. The time to talk had ended.

After swallowing the first gulp, her lips parted in a grin. "Well played, Cryton. I should have known you'd pull something like this. Did the bike help? Doesn't matter. I'll see you soon."

The old man hadn't taken the medallion to hold it for her parents. He wanted to stop her from facing Theodora without him. If Cryton had the medallion, she would have no choice but to cross over with him.

"All right, Cryton. It's you and me. You, me, and the bike."

GUARDIAN'S RETURN

CHAPTER 8

The Time Nears

AS HER FAMILY slept, Charlee tiptoed through the dark house, the sword at her side in a leather scabbard. She would need the weapon, even if she still wasn't very good with it. *Hope I'm better with it than I think I am.*

She crept to her sister's room and gently pushed open the door. A nightlight bathed Megan in a soft orange haze. The clock on the nightstand blazed 12:01 a.m. in a glowing digital display. Her sister breathed rhythmically in bed, her pink lips parted in a smile.

"Looks like a happy dream. Good," Charlee whispered.

Kneeling by Megan's bed, she blinked away a tear. Would she ever see her sister again? Megan would never understand why her big *sis* suddenly disappeared, but someday she'd learn the truth and maybe be proud of her older sister.

She leaned over and kissed Megan gently on her forehead. "I'm sorry, Megan," she uttered. "I know it sucks for me to leave like this, but I don't have a choice. I'll be back. At least, I'll try to come back to you. I love you, little sis." Charlee removed her cell phone from her jeans' pocket and placed it on the bed beside Megan. A photo displayed on the phone of the two of them together at the beach. "I won't need the phone where I'm going, so you keep it. Maybe it will remind you of me." She also removed her glasses and left them on the nightstand. *Probably won't need these either thanks to the changeling.*

"Take care of them till I come back." Wiping away more tears, she snuck from her sister's room and down the stairs to the kitchen. She could still turn back. Do what her parents wanted her to do. Stay behind. Let them face Theodora. No, it had to be her. She couldn't be scared. Couldn't worry about what Mom and Dad thought. She was a guardian. The time had come to finish her fight with Theodora.

Charlee retrieved a soda from the refrigerator. She let the bubbles tickle her nose before she gulped down half the bottle. Who knows when she might get another chance to savor a carbonated sweet delight?

"Probably don't have too many convenience stores on Janasara."

With a deep breath, she marched through the kitchen door into the backyard where the changeling—in bike form—waited for her.

"It's time."

Charlee glanced up to the second floor. "Sorry, guys." She climbed onto the banana-shaped seat, placed her purple sweatshirt hood over her head and silently

urged the bike to take flight. Just as quietly, the changeling spread its wings and obeyed. "Mom...Dad, forgive me. Keep Megan safe. Sandra, too."

They flew into the night. The sky was a patchwork of clouds and twinkling stars. Below, neighborhood streets basked in the quiet of calm nocturnal hours. Cool air brushed against her cheeks and blew off the hood as they raced toward Cryton. What would the air feel like across the dimensional divide? What would she find there when they crossed over? Would the death in her dreams become a reality? Charlee shivered. The answers would come soon enough.

She brushed away strands of brown hair from her eyes. *Maybe we can make one more stop before we leave.*

"Bike, I know this is stupid, but can we do one fly-over at Sandra's?" She sensed the bike didn't approve. The changeling's response came slow, but her winged protector eventually changed course. "I promise I'm not going to wake her up. I just...I just want to say bye one more time."

The bike shot forward toward their new destination. In no time, they soared over Sandra's home, circling the house once, twice, then a third time. Charlee wrestled with the idea of flying over to Sandra's window and waking her to say a proper good-bye. "No, that's stupid. What would I say? Sandra would urge me to stay. I'd vow to return." It was better if no more words passed between them... for now.

"Thanks for being my friend," Charlee spoke in a hushed voice. She lowered her head close to the handlebars. *I hope Sandra knows she's my best friend.*

"All right, bike. That's enough." Her eyes lingered on Sandra's darkened window. "Let's go."

"You'd better come home."

The words carried through the night air, detectable with Charlee's superior hearing, a power bestowed through contact with the bike.

"I'll try." A smile breached her lips. Sandra saw her. In the solitude of the night, they had that one final moment...at least. A comforting warmth radiated to each of her limbs. "I will come back."

Gripping the handlebars, Charlee and the bike jetted toward Cryton's loft above the pizza shop.

The bike landed in the alley behind the shop. Charlee wasn't sure if Cryton would be expecting her, but the old man had little choice but to get ready to make his way with Charlee through the gateway. She wanted to go by herself, but now that wasn't possible thanks to the clever old man. By taking the medalion before she could cross over on her own, Cryton made it impossible for her to leave without him. The old dude has a bone to pick with the witch, too.

Jumping from the bike, she crept to the back door of his restaurant. A white

mist floated around her from the early morning San Francisco chill. Shadows danced off the concrete walls. An unseen cat meowed somewhere close.

At the door, Charlee stopped and placed her ear to the thick wood. Silence greeted her. No sound of movement inside the restaurant, at least nothing she could detect even with super hearing. "Guess I'll just knock. Cryton's a light sleeper. He'll hear," Charlee said to the bike. She raised her knuckle to strike the door.

"Why don't you try the doorknob?"

Charlee flinched, retreating to the bike. The muffled voice on the other side of the door stole her breath. She clutched her chest to slow her fast-beating heart. "What the heck?"

"Come on in," Cryton beckoned. "It's open."

"I should have known he'd be waiting for me." Taking a deep breath, she put a hand on the knob and cracked it open just enough to peek inside. Cryton stood a few feet beyond with his arms crossed over his chest. He frowned at her.

He wore his familiar white slacks and white button-down shirt covered by a grease-strained apron. One side of his shirt was untucked. His long white mustache bristled.

She smiled—for an instant. "Cryton, you're—"

"Not alone, Charlee," he interrupted.

Her dad rose from a black vinyl booth and stood next to the old man on the pizza shop's checkered linoleum floor. Lips pursed, he removed his glasses with one hand and motioned her farther inside with the other.

"Dad!" Charlee threw open the door and stepped into the doorway. Her legs nearly buckled. Seeing Cryton awake was bad enough. Facing her dad... well, she was busted. *Oh no! What am I supposed to do now?* She lowered her head into her hands. How could she have let this happen?

"Fancy meeting you here, Charlee." With slow deliberate strides, her dad walked around Cryton.

"How did—?"

"I knew you would sneak out tonight and head here. Besides, you know your mom uses her magic to watch over you. We agreed I'd come alone to talk some sense into you since you and her seem to be bumping heads right now. I have to admit, I didn't think I could get here before you." Her dad, his voice stern, wrapped an arm around her shoulders and ushered her into the pizza shop to a booth, then motioned her to sit.

Charlee rolled her eyes. She had to think of something, couldn't let him change her plans. She scanned the restaurant. *Where would Cryton hide the medallion?* She had to find it...now. Take it. Get out of here with the bike.

"Dad, come on." Her hands balled into fists on the table.

"No, Charlee. This is our—"

Cryton cleared this throat loudly. "Look, you two. Why don't we discuss this over a few slices of pizza and some soda? I'll go warm the pizza up." The old man rose from the booth and strode to the kitchen.

Charlee's dad followed Cryton with his eyes and then returned his gaze to his daughter. "Charlee, I know how you feel."

"How do you know?" She fought the urge to pound on the table.

"Because I want to strike Theodora down as much as you do... maybe more." His nostrils flared. The veins in the side of his receding hairline bulged. "That woman has caused our family so much pain. It's enough, and it needs to end. But running off on your own to Janasara to face her... well, it can't end well. Your mother and I must deal with her. Believe me, we are ready."

"Dad, I won't be alone," Charlee's voice cracked. How could she make him understand? She was leaving tonight, and he couldn't stop her. Not because she wanted to disobey him. Couldn't he understand she was doing this for her family? To protect them. "Cryton and the bike... they'll both be there."

"Pizza's up!" Cryton sang out. He emerged from the kitchen and walked up to the booth carrying a tray loaded with three steaming slices of cheese pizza and three orange sodas. "Listen, folks, it's late. Let's eat a little something and relax. Then you two will go home and get some sleep. In the morning, we'll all have a fresh perspective on this."

Her dad took a deep breath and nodded. "Well, the pizza does look good. I don't think a slice could hurt. And Cryton's right. Maybe the morning will be a better time to discuss this."

Charlee sat back in her chair, ripping a napkin into pieces. Were these two men serious? What more could she say? Did Cryton really think pizza could make everything all right? She threw up her hands as they bit into their pizzas and took long swallows of orange soda.

"Come on, Charlee," her dad urged. "Let it go. Have a slice...of... pizz..."

Before he could finish, his eyes narrowed. His head slumped and landed on the table with a thud. Her father laid there, eyes closed.

Charlee leaped from the table, hands covering her mouth. "Dad? What happened to him?" Had Theodora somehow attacked him from across the divide? "No, it can't be. She couldn't." The blood pumping through her veins turned to ice. She reached for her sword.

"Relax." Cryton chuckled softly. "Just a little concoction I put in your father's drink." He laughed harder. "I may not be a magic conjurer, but a good warrior always knows how to use the elements when he needs to take out an enemy."

Her blood thawing, Charlee slumped back into the booth next to her dad and leaned in close, forehead to forehead. He breathed softly. This isn't what she wanted. "What am I doing?"

Pushing away from the booth, she grabbed Cryton by the arm. “Dad’s not the enemy!”

The old man patted her hand. “Don’t worry. He’ll be fine. He may have a slight headache when he wakes up, but otherwise he’ll be uninjured. Now we have the chance to do what you came here to do.” Cryton moved off to the back room. He returned with a pillow, which he handed to her.

Carefully, she lifted her dad’s head and placed the pillow underneath him. “Sorry, Dad. I’m sorry for everything. I know you’ll be mad, but try to forgive me.” Charlee never expected the old man to drug her dad. There must have been another choice, right? Maybe not. They reached a stalemate. Still, this seemed wrong.

She tried to ignore her thoughts. “You have the medallion?”

He nodded.

“Uh, can you give it to me and let me go on my own...with the bike?”

“I can’t do that.” Cryton clasped his fingers together underneath his chin. “You’re stuck with me.”

“I’m super strong right now, you know.” She strolled to the lunch counter and pressed both hands against the porcelain surface. “I could smash up this place until I found it.”

Cryton nodded. “You could, but you still wouldn’t find it.”

She kicked the ground. “Oh come on. Can’t you see I just don’t want anyone else getting hurt because of me? Just let me go on my own.”

He crossed over and wrapped her in an embrace. “I know, Charlee, but I’m a warrior who has faced more battles than you will ever know. You need me, and I need to do this, so we will go together.”

Charlee lingered in the hug for a heartbeat and then pushed away. “Then I guess it’s time to go.”

Cryton started toward the kitchen. “All right then. I have some supplies gathered. I’ll get them.”

When he was out of sight, Charlee bent and kissed her dad on the forehead. “Sorry, Dad. I really am.”

For a long time, she’d been so angry at him for moving the family to the city until she discovered he did it for her safety to keep her hidden in suburbia should Theodora ever find a way to Earth. And even though he wasn’t from Janasara, her father trained in swordplay to protect his wife, the rightful Queen of Latara, and his children should they ever be in danger.

He was a good—

“*Charlee, stay put. Don’t do this.*” Her mom’s voice blared like an alarm deep within her mind.

“She knows and is coming to stop me. Cryton, you better hurry. Mom’s coming!”

GUARDIAN'S RETURN

CHAPTER 9

The Gateway Opens

CRYTON BURST THROUGH the kitchen's swinging door. In place of his grease-stained apron, he wore a brown tunic made of leather or maybe some kind of animal hide—like something early explorers might wear, and cinched by a brown belt around his waist. Long sleeves woven together with lace covered his arms. Pants, made of the same material as the shirt, clung loosely to his aged cracked boots.

He held a carved wooden staff. In this getup, he seemed ready to hike a mountain trail rather than journey through a portal to do battle with a sorceress.

The one sign he readied for a fight was a sword handle peeking out from a scabbard hung over his shoulder. A tan pouch hung from his other shoulder just large enough to hold...the medallion.

It was there. She could feel it calling to her. She needed to touch it. Charlee extended a hand toward the pouch but recoiled. "Control yourself."

Cryton placed a hand over the pouch. "You'll get the medallion back when we cross together."

Stomping her feet, she paced the restaurant. "You're so difficult, old man. We don't have time to argue. Mom knows. She's coming."

"Then stop arguing and let's be on our way." He slid a finger over a button in the center of his staff. Blades, the size of daggers, rose from either end. "You do not need to worry about this gray fox." He pressed the button again and the blades slid back inside the staff.

Charlee reached for the weapon. "How did you make that?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he placed the weapon on the lunch counter and then retrieved a box. "This is for you." He handed it to her. "Go ahead and change. We need to blend in when we arrive in Janasara. Look like outcasts, not warriors."

Out of the box Charlee pulled a beige tunic and pants just like Cryton wore.

"I stitched it myself." He turned away from her. "Now go on and change."

Charlee slipped into the girl's bathroom to change. Lighter than expected, the material fit her well—even better than most pairs of jeans and blouses. A bit baggy, the shirt hid her rounded stomach. A pair of gray boots, cracked like Cryton's, rose up to her knees.

Once dressed, she emerged from the bathroom and fastened her sword to her waist with a thick black belt.

"One final step." Cryton winked at her and then lifted a hood over her head. "There. You look humble enough."

"Thank you." She meant that. Having him along for this journey would be comforting. Yet, could she keep him safe? Not that he needed protection. But what if something happened to him? What would I do without him?

Cryton placed a hand on her shoulder. "You're welcome. Now, let's get that bike of yours and open the gateway before your mom kills both of us."

Charlee started to follow him toward the doorway that led to the alley but stopped and glanced at her dad. Would she see him again? Her sister...mom? She loved them all so much. That's why she had to go. To protect them.

"I'll bring you back to him, Charlee. You will come home." Cryton uttered over her shoulder. "Now open that portal for us."

"I'm ready," she declared, but was she really? Had she really thought this through? What happened to that scared fourteen-year-old girl? What if the old Charlee returned? The one frightened of almost everything. *No, that girl wouldn't come back. I'm a guardian.* Maybe this was always her destiny. "Let's do this."

Cryton extended his hand to Charlee. She grasped it, and they marched into the alley. A ring of soft light spread around them from a lamp over the doorway.

"You know, I can't be sure the portal I open will even get us to Janasara." Still holding Cryton's hand, she gripped the bike's handlebar with her other. "We could end up on the moon or something."

Cryton grinned. "Get on with it, Guardian. It will be good to get home. I've missed it."

Swallowing a load of saliva, she closed her eyes. "Think of Janasara," she whispered to herself. "I've been there before, even if only in my dreams. Forests of trees with talking leaves. Streams that defy gravity. The castle built into a mountain. Emerald skies. I've seen them all. Get us there."

In a pulsating frenzy, blood rushed to her head. Sparks erupted in her brain as if she touched a live wire. Her arms and legs tensed. *Focus, Charlee.* "Open... a doorway...to Janasara."

"You're doing it," Cryton blurted.

Charlee blinked her eyes open. Before her, the gateway grew into a spinning blue vortex filled with images of Janasara. Corkscrew shaped trees reaching to the skies. Water spouts rising in massive columns over an endless sea. An island mountaintop carved into the shape of a dragon. What was she seeing? None of these sites appeared in her dreams before. Never mind. This had to be Janasara. Just had to be.

"It's time." Charlee shouted over the howling wind swirling around them, flinging old newspapers and trash in every direction.

As the portal enveloped her, the urge to retreat tugged at her like invisible

fingers latched onto the back of her tunic. What was she doing? She was just some kid. I'm going to blow it. Let everyone down.

As if Cryton could hear her thoughts, the old man tightened his grip on her hand. His touch helped. Knowing the bike was there too helped. They would defeat Theodora together.

Behind her, the portal shrunk as the doorway to Earth began to close. Ahead, the gateway stretched into a long glimmering hallway with reflections of Janasara spinning in a dizzying array.

"Don't do this!" Her mom's voice boomed from the disappearing alley.

Charlee glanced back. For a heartbeat, her mom stood just beyond the portal, Megan in her arms. Her mom reached out to her and then she was gone. The doorway shut.

Earth and her mom vanished.

"Mom... sorry."

Cryton leaned toward her ear. "You'll see her again."

"I hope you're—"

A blast of lightning inside the portal forced Charlee to close her eyes. Then, for a long pause, there was no sound save the whistling of a slight breeze.

Then came the screams.

GUARDIAN'S RETURN

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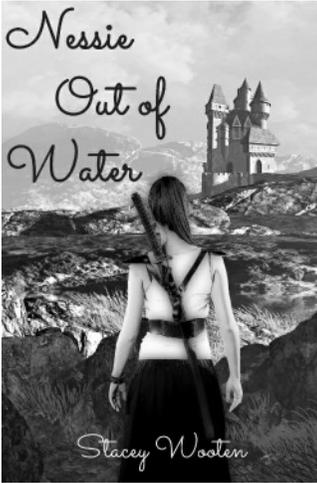
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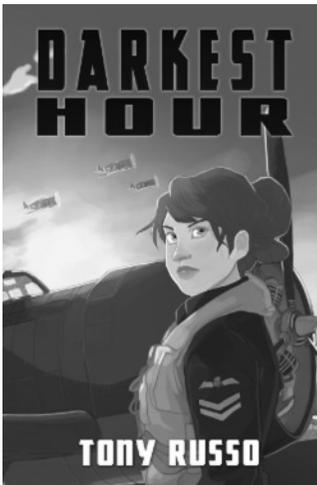
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But the terrible dreams won't stop.

Theodora lives, and if Charlee's dreams of death and fields of spilled blood are true, her great aunt has avenged herself on that world across the dimensional divide.

Charlee knows what she must do. The fight is not over. She must travel across the gateway to the home of her ancestors and face Theodora one more time. But doing so may cost Charlee more than her life. The same medallion her great aunt desires so much—a medallion Charlee possesses—could make her just as evil as her great aunt.

Can Charlee stave off the twisted tendrils of the medallion long enough to defeat Theodora—for good—or will evil consume her? Can she even survive so far from home? Her only hope may rest in the Lord of the Dragons, but that beast turned his back on her grandfather long ago...



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 Return* is the second book in *The Last Princess of Latara* series. The first book is *Guardian's Nightmare*. Darren also has a young adult pirate book, *The Dangerous Legacy*.



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