

GUARDIAN'S NIGHTMARE

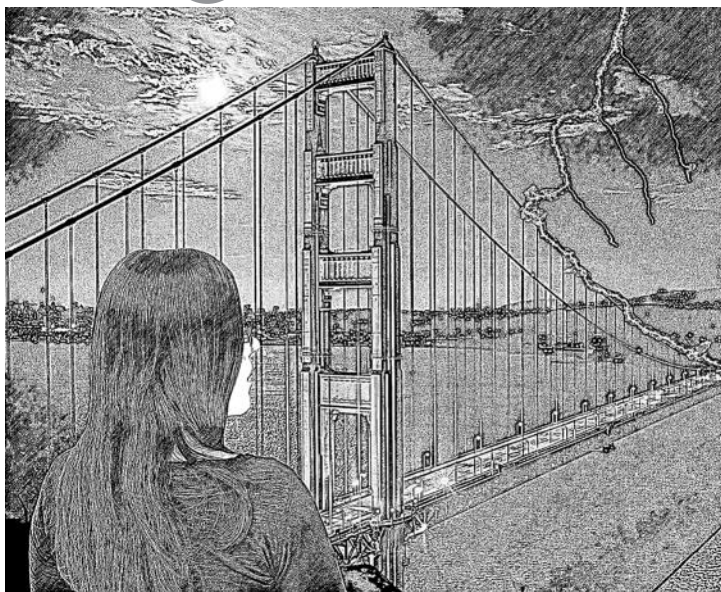


Book One of "The Last Princess of Latara"

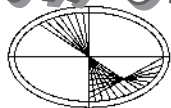
DARREN SIMON

Sample Edition
of
Guardian' s Nightmare

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Darren Simon



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Guardian's Nightmare

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my loving wife and two sons whose support and inspiration keep me motivated and to my parents who taught me to love reading and encouraged me to show my imagination through writing.

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Chapter 1

A Far Away World

The Guardian rode hard and fast, his wind-horse charging through the Valley of Columns where towering trees—their trunks spiraling toward the emerald sky—seemed to keep the heavens aloft. The wild grass underfoot glowed as twilight beckoned and the few lingering rays of gold touched the clouds.

At the Valley's edge, fires from the enemy camp cast an orange haze against the oncoming dusk. Beneath the dancing afterglow of the rising flames stood an army more than twice the size of his own.

Tugging on the reins, the Guardian ordered the steed to slow its airborne gallop. The mighty horse, which raced three feet above the ground, touched land, and slowed to a trot before stopping. The Guardian's two top generals, also atop wind-horses, were soon at his side.

"I must continue the rest of the way on my own," the Guardian declared.

"My lord, forgive me, but I cannot allow that." General Tribon's red beard blew in a gentle wind.

"I agree with Tribon." The younger General Ibala frowned. "This meeting is ill advised and allowing you to carry on by yourself is most dangerous."

The Guardian smiled and nodded first to Tribon, a giant man and one of the Guardian's oldest friends, and then to the young but wise Ibala. "Rest assured, I understand your concern and appreciate your loyalty. If I do not return, I need to know that the knights of the Ten Unified Kingdoms will have you to guide them. I am depending on you both."

"Yes, my lord," the generals lamented.

"Goodbye and ride well." The Guardian offered his hand in a final gesture. "Let the morning bring great fortune upon us all."

His generals' lowered eyes foretold the same doom he felt. Even the greatest warriors from the early days couldn't withstand such a massive gathering of evil. Despite that, they would fight hard and lead well should he not survive the night. Maybe with faith they would be victorious.

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With one last nod, the Guardian turned and clicked his horse with his boots to forge on alone. He rode until he neared the army of Horeng and halted just for a moment to take in its grand scale. It was an army tens of thousands strong. Torches burned blood red, pouring black smoke into the darkening skies. War banners covered the land.

The stench of rotting flesh filled the air. The Guardian covered his nose with a gloved hand. By now he was familiar with the foul odor emanating from this army of mindless half-man half-wolf beasts. Forged by sorceress Theodora to serve her dark will, the Horeng stunk of the death they caused throughout the Unified Kingdoms.

With a pat to his wind-horse's neck, his trusted companion slowly trotted forward until they crossed through the Horeng's front lines. A chorus of snarls and howls sounded in a chain reaction. The Guardian assumed it must be some form of communication through the lines informing all that he was there and that he was to be watched closely. Their yellow eyes bore down on him.

Two Horeng dressed in black armor and long snout-covering helmets rode from the shadows on horses draped in covering as dark as midnight. Without speaking, the two Horeng turned and rode deeper into the encampment along a trail of crackling torches. The Guardian understood that he was meant to follow.

He sensed archers nearby, their arrows aimed at him. He couldn't see them, but they were there. The archers' claws eerily scraped together as they held their bow strings taut.

Finally, his escorts reached Theodora's tent where two more Horeng stood guard. Growls rose from their throats. The Guardian gazed at them as he climbed from his steed then patted the animal on the neck one more time. He approached the two sentries with his right hand deceptively loose on the handle of his sword. From that position, he could destroy them before they had a chance to blink.

"Let him pass." The two guards stepped aside with snarls of frustration at the command from inside the tent. The Guardian tipped his head slightly to the two sentries then crossed through the entrance.

He entered a lavishly decorated chamber—not a makeshift shelter on the front line of a war. A floating collage of twisted golden, silver, and bronze crowns danced in a corner, forming a warped piece of art. They belonged to the fallen kings and queens he had failed to protect. They belonged to those who had been his friends.

A second floating display, the broken swords of generals struck down in battle, swirled in another corner. Dried blood covered some of the steel. The blades danced as if the spirits of those great leaders still wielded the weapons.

The furniture inside the tent—a table, bed and throne—was made from human bones. Skulls lined the base of the bed and held torches illuminating the tent at each corner.

Closing his eyes, he fought off the sickness building in his stomach. Was this real, or just an elaborate magic creation for his benefit? The Guardian steeled himself. “Theodora, show yourself.”

“I am right here.” Dressed in a dark robe with a cape trailing behind it, Theodora appeared next to the floating crowns. With the back of her right hand, she tenderly stroked one of them. “I saw you admiring my artwork. Do you like it? I find art so comforting in these times of war.”

The Guardian’s hands formed fists. *I should strike her down.* He knew such an action would not succeed. Theodora was much too powerful to fall that easily.

“Go ahead,” she challenged.

“What?”

“Unsheathe your sword and kill me. You know that is what you want to do.”

“That is not why I am here.” The Guardian stepped farther into the tent but kept a sword-blade’s distance from Theodora. His face burned red and his heart raced. *Remain calm. She wishes to bait you.*

“Well then, Michala, my dear brother-in-law, it is so very pleasing to see you again.” The words slithered across her lips as she smiled and bowed.

Michala did not respond immediately. He glared at her, studying her appearance. He had seen her before. Still, his wife’s younger sister appeared so different every time their paths crossed, as if she were aging years with each passing day. No one would ever guess she was Queen Assara’s younger sibling.

Thin hair hugged the contours of an ashen gray face, with eyes like dead orbs streaked by crimson lines. Once as beautiful as Assara, she had stopped being human and had become something else after turning to the dark arts.

“Theodora, what have you become? You gave up your soul out of jealousy for your sister’s crown. You had so much potential as a leader. You could have ruled at your sister’s side as First Princess of Latara.”

Theodora’s eyes glowed red. “You know I was the one fit to serve as queen, brother-in-law. I was the strong one. I was the wisest. I was born to lead. But because of some aging, misguided tradition, my sister was named

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queen simply for being born first. It was time for a change, and I have brought such change. And the world, my world, will be a better place for all.”

“For all! You mean for you. Why, Theodora? Why did you have to destroy so many lives? You already had powerful magic. Why did you have to feed on all the other conjurers?” The Guardian sighed. “I regret my failure to protect all those men, women, and children—all those magical creatures. You took their lives and enslaved the non-magics, all for your own twisted hunger for power, and I couldn't stop you. What is sad, sister-in-law, is that you don't even know you're just a pawn—a vessel for the dark magic. It uses you more than you use it.”

Theodora clasped her hands and placed them against her chin. “Those who gave their spirits to me should be honored to have done so, for I am Empress. And soon your meek army shall fall for the last time. I have destroyed all of the Unified Kingdoms but my sister's—all but Latara. Tomorrow it shall fall as well. Then all non-magics will serve me, and I shall find all conjurers among your people and unify their magic within me.”

The Guardian took a deep breath. “Why is it you sent for me tonight?”

Theodora's eyes softened. “Michala, we could stop all this foolishness right now if you would just return what is rightfully mine. Return the medallion you have stolen from me and I will end my campaign. There will be no more death, no more destruction. There will be peace.”

“Theodora, I don't know what you're talking about. I have taken nothing from you.”

“Liar! I don't know how you managed it, but you found a way to steal my medallion and I want it back. Return it, and I will spare my sister's land. Refuse and you, my sister, your child and all who call Latara home will perish at daybreak.”

The Guardian approached Theodora and grasped her robe with both hands. “You cannot touch my child; not now, not ever. And as for this medallion you speak of, I do not possess it, so take your threats to someone who fears you. I do not.”

Theodora slapped him across the face. “You fool! Do you know what you have done?”

“Made you mortal,” Michala said. He released Theodora's robes.

“No, brother-in-law, you have passed a death sentence on your people and on your Queen, your wife, the woman you have vowed to protect. And do not think your child will escape me. I will search all eternity—I will never cease until the child of my sister dies.”

“That’s the point, sister-in-law. Without the medallion, you no longer have all eternity.”

Theodora shrieked. Her body shook as she paced, her fingers clawing at her face. Then she calmed. “With a simple wave of my hand I could end your life now!”

“Do as you will.”

“No, I will let you live so that you can see your army destroyed and see your precious Latara crumble.”

Her words pierced him, but he buried his feelings. Instead, the Guardian turned from Theodora in silence, left her tent, and then found his wind-horse outside. Without hesitation, he jumped onto his steed then called out, “Yaaa!”

The wind-horse sprinted through the Horeng camp, passing along the path outlined by the torches. When they reached the front line, the Guardian drew his sword then slashed at a wooden post that held aloft a war banner. He didn’t stop to see it fall. It was a meaningless gesture, but he smiled anyway as the Horeng howled their protests.

Bolting away from the enemy, the Guardian half expected Theodora’s monsters to pursue him, but glancing back the land behind him was still. Once far enough away, the Guardian called out, “Hold on, boy.” The horse slowed and then stopped.

The castle of Latara stood in the distance where he knew Queen Assara, his wife, watched for his return and kept vigil over her people from the castle’s observation deck. Three golden moons, the Tri-Queens of the Night, climbed high above the castle.

Tomorrow at sunrise the battle would begin. He was ready and would use his power as a Guardian to surprise Theodora and perhaps bring about a quick victory. He was, after all, a warrior. A warrior always had to have faith. But his meager forces were tired. They were brave and they would fight hard, but without help, they couldn’t do much more on the battlefield.

If only he had convinced the Dragon Lord to join in the war to stop Theodora. If only...

The Guardian brushed off that thought. At least she was weakened by the loss of the medallion. Theodora was right. He had taken it from her. Perhaps in the right hands it could be used to defeat the sorceress, but the medallion was pure evil. Contact with it twisted the mind, and since it could not be destroyed by conventional weapons or magic, he hid the medallion where she might never be able to reach it.

Images of his baby girl, Aneera, filled his mind from her sandy blonde

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hair to her light blue eyes. She was safe for now. He had used his abilities to open a gateway and send her to a new world, assigning his most trusted friend to protect the child. Still, Theodora's words were more than just a threat.

The sorceress would seek out his daughter in the hunt for her medallion and one day Theodora might discover a way to reach that world.

If she did, not only would Theodora possibly find the girl, but the medallion as well, for he had chosen to hide both in that world he had come to know as Earth.

Chapter 2

On Earth, Present Day

What I wouldn't give to be a superhero." Charlee gazed up from her favorite comic book. She liked reading about heroes—people who stood up for what was right and weren't afraid of anything or anybody, especially bullies like Tina Lomeli. Tina made life a nightmare for all middle-school aged boys and girls at Myron T. Applebee Middle School who didn't meet her stuck-up standards. Any girl who read comic books was sure to end up on Tina's nerd list.

Charlee set the comic book on her bed. Looking at the superhero posters covering the far wall, she recognized none of the qualities that made them so heroic in herself. No matter how badly she wanted to be like them, being thirteen years old and scared of pretty much everything tended to rule out any chances of becoming a hero.

She laughed at the rainbow shaped nightlight on her dresser as she nibbled on the ends of her hair. "What kind of hero still needs a nightlight after watching a scary movie or sulks when her family moves to San Francisco, leaving behind the farm town with all her friends? Heroes don't cry just because making friends at a new school isn't going well. Geez! Some superheroes crossed the universe to make their home on Earth. They never cried about it."

Charlee caught her image in the mirror on the closet door. "I can't be a hero. What comic book hero is chubby, has long stringy hair, a freckled face and green-framed glasses with thick, Coke-bottle lenses? None!" She swallowed a lungful of air and blew away a strand of brown hair from her cheek. "I'm not even the slightest bit cool."

The kids at school reminded her of this often—led by that creep, Tina. One day in particular, Tina, joined by a group of kids from the wealthier neighborhoods of San Francisco's Central District, cornered Charlee at her locker and unleashed a flurry of insults.

"Where you going, Chub...I mean Charlee?" Tina tossed her long auburn hair from her perfect complexion. A heavy layer of makeup covered her

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cheeks. Dark eyeliner accentuated icy blue eyes. They were cruel eyes, filled with venom.

"Just to lunch," Charlee answered, peering up at Tina, who stood a foot taller.

"Maybe you should skip a lunch or two." Tina sneered, gesturing toward Charlee's rounded stomach. Tina peered into Charlee's open locker. A comic book rested atop a math book. Tina grabbed it. "You read comic books? What a loser."

Charlee snatched the comic book and tried to sound tough. "Oh yeah, ever hear of Comic Con in San Diego? Are the tens of thousands who attend losers too? I don't think so."

"Whatever, nerd," Tina responded.

"Hey, why'd your parents name you Charlee?" asked Casey, a boy who served as Tina's main henchman.

"That's not her real name," said April, every bit the bully as Tina.

"Yeah, her real name is Charleya," quipped April's best friend, Ashley.

"And your last name is Smelton?" Casey asked. "Man, I'd hate to be you."

"Wait. Let's call her Smelly." April smiled, revealing ridiculously white teeth.

"Yeah! Smelly Smelton," chimed in Ashley, dressed in the same skirt, blouse, and pink heels as April.

"That's weak." Casey snorted with laughter. With that, the verbal assault ended. With one last glare down at Charlee, Tina joined the others, strolling away as if Charlee wasn't even there. As if she didn't matter.

A superhero wouldn't let them get away with their games. A superhero would stand up for herself. She spotted her plus-sized jeans lying on her bedroom floor. "Yeah, I'm definitely not a hero."

The familiar rumble of her dad's car interrupted Charlee's thoughts. The yellow Skylark, dubbed the "monster," noisily pulled up the driveway and into the garage. Her dad, Professor Smelton, climbed the steps into the main hallway that led to the kitchen of their two-story Victorian home.

"Charlee, will you come down here please? I've got a surprise for you, and I think you're going to like it."

She ignored him.

"Hurry down. I think this is just the ticket to lift your spirits."

Rolling her eyes, she opened the door to her room and slowly trudged downstairs.

"There you are, honey. Come on." Her dad grinned at the base of the stairs as he rubbed his well-trimmed black beard. His dark eyes beamed through round wire-framed glasses.

Charlee glanced at her mom, who offered a stern nod. Even her two-year-old sister, Megan, nestled in their mom's arms, offered a harsh expression as if to say, "*Deal with it, big sis.*"

"Follow me." Her dad dashed into the garage. Charlee slunk like a zombie after him, glaring at the man who had ripped her away from her old life to accept some San Francisco State teaching job.

Once in the garage, her dad loosened his tie, slipped to the rear of the Skylark and opened the trunk. He grunted and huffed while removing an object from inside. Charlee perked up and rubbed her hands. Maybe he had got her something really cool—a new computer—her own TV.

"Come see," her dad breathed heavily.

Cautious, Charlee slid around the side of the car until she reached the trunk then spied the gift. She blinked once, twice, three times at what must be the ugliest bike...ever.

"What do you think, Charlee? She's a beauty, right?" Her dad lifted up the rear garage door that led to the backyard, exposing the bike to the last bit of soft late afternoon sunshine. "Here, now you can see it in better light." He pushed the bike into the backyard.

Charlee stared glumly at the bike then at her dad and once more at the bike. "What is it?"

"Well, honey, I know you've been feeling a bit down, and since we ran over your other bike with the moving van you need a new one. I was hoping this might cheer you up." He rested his hands on her shoulders. "In case I haven't said it lately, Charlee, you mean the world to me."

Wow! Did he really think a lame bike was going to make everything all right? She turned to the bike. It had to be a reject from the Sixties. Rust and scratches covered the white-painted frame and chrome handlebars. The banana-shaped seat and white-walled tires aged it even more. To top it off, the bike had one of those upside-down U-shaped chrome backrests. She strolled once around the bike, studying it. It was truly the ugliest heap of scrap metal ever.

Maybe if it was a cool mountain bike or a beach cruiser, Charlee might consider riding it. But this...this was a used, old-fashioned, faded white junk heap that should have been put out of its misery a long time ago.

"I just couldn't help myself." Her dad smiled wide. "I was walking through the campus today as part of my afternoon exercise and there it was leaning up against a tree with a sign on the handlebars that said, 'Free Bike. Please Give It A Good Home.' I couldn't resist it."

He stopped to catch his breath, a childlike glee shining in his eyes. "It's

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like a bike I had when I was your age. You know the one. I have a picture of it in my den. Do you like it? I mean, I know it's not much to look at right now, but I thought we could spend some time fixing it up—just you and me. It will be fun.”

“I don't want it,” she said coldly then stormed from the garage back upstairs to her room. She slammed the door and rushed to the window. Her dad still stood in the backyard by the bike, his eyes downcast.

Charlee's jaw tightened. She had hurt him. Why shouldn't she? He hurt her by moving to San Francisco. Voices below caught her attention. Charlee's mom gently hugged her husband and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek.

Sliding her window open an inch, Charlee listened to the conversation below.

“I guess this was a mistake,” her dad sighed.

“No. Charlee is going through an adjustment right now.” Her mom placed a hand on his shoulder. “I'm sure she likes the bike. She's just not ready to show it yet.”

“I'm not talking about the bike. Maybe moving to the city was a mistake. What was I thinking, taking her away from all her friends? What kind of a father am I?”

A lousy one. Charlee shook her head in silent protest.

“Dear, you're the best. You want the best for us and you are a protector.” Her mom's eyes widened. “That's why you took the teaching position. That's why you brought us here. You're a loving father and you have always been the guardian of this family.”

Charlee raised an eyebrow. What did she mean, protector...guardian?

“I'm not so sure.” Her dad bowed his head.

“Well, I am. Now go inside and wash your hands for dinner.”

Her mom and dad held each other tight for a moment more. Then they walked hand in hand to the garage and back into the house. Soon, there was a hard knock at Charlee's door. Without waiting for an invitation, her mom swung open the door and marched inside, her expression angry. “What was that down there? Your father did a nice thing for you and you were just rude.”

“Sorry, Mom, but I don't want that stupid bike.” Charlee looked away from her mom. “Why'd he have to get it for me, anyway?”

“Look at me, Charlee Smelton.” Her mom brushed away long sandy blonde bangs from her forehead, revealing light blue eyes. Charlee wished she had her mom's eyes instead of the brown orbs that made her look more like her dad. “I am surprised at you. He brought it for you because he loves you very much.”

“But, Mom, you saw the bike. It’s a reject.”

“You know how your father loves classics. Just look at his car. You know he means well.” Her mom sighed. The frown lines in her face seemed deeper. “Right now, your father is downstairs feeling rejected. I don’t think it’s fair to make him feel that way.”

“But—”

“Honey, I know you’re having a rough time. But you are stronger than you think. Remember that.”

Charlee shrugged. She tried to convey a lot in that gesture. She hoped her mom understood.

“Tell you what. After dinner, let’s have a conversation—you, me and your father—about school. Let’s see if we can figure some things out together. Right now, put the bike in the garage, wash your hands, and set the table for dinner. And apologize to your father.” Her mom didn’t wait for a response. She turned and walked out of the room. Sulking, Charlee followed her to the stairs and lumbered down the steps into the garage and out to the backyard where the bike was waiting.

Beads of sweat formed on her forehead as she examined the two-wheeled white nightmare. “You’re the ugliest hunk of junk I’ve ever seen. Do you know how much trouble I’d be in if others saw me riding you? That will never happen. I just want to get that straight right now.”

She swiftly kicked at the right front tire but missed and tumbled to the ground. It wasn’t really that she missed...the tire just seemed to move out of the way. She sat on the hard cement, glaring at the bike.

Charlee laughed at herself and stood up to push the bike into the garage. When her hands touched the bars, energy shot through her body. It was like when she accidentally touched an exposed wire on an old lamp but worse. Her whole body tingled. She trembled uncontrollably and dropped to her knees.

“What the...?”

As the tingling faded, Charlee stood and ran her fingers through her hair, which crackled from static cling. Something was very wrong. She had to get away from the bike as quickly as possible. Charlee dashed into the garage, up the steps and into the house. She rushed by her mom, hoping to avoid any questions.

No such luck. “Charlee, did you put the bike in the garage?”

“Uh, not yet, Mom. Not yet.” She sprinted upstairs and back into her room, slamming the door shut. She went to the window and stared down at the bike. *Strange! Very strange!*



Chapter 3

Is It A Dream?

One minute, Charlee slept safely buried under the covers. The next minute, she stood alone on a narrow grassy path lined on either side by thick trees. Branches far above her head arched, forming a thick canopy and shrouding her in shadows. Streaks of sunlight dotted the ground, but not enough to ease the chill she felt climbing up her back.

A breeze whistled as it blew along the pathway and rustled her hair. Charlee dropped to her knees as the sensation of fingers grazing her shoulder came from behind. No one was there. She scanned the ceiling of tree branches high above as the breeze brushed against her cheek. Were the branches reaching for her? Were the trees on either side of the path closing on her? Cold compressed her chest and made breathing difficult, or maybe it was the panic dancing around her stomach that allowed her only shallow breaths.

“I have to get out of here.” She started walking gently down the path, which reminded her of the time she and her family toured an old gold mine on a vacation. She thought she could be brave and enter the dimly lit manmade cave, but once inside she cried until her parents returned her to the daylight. She didn’t like closed in spaces, but this felt worse.

A gray haze covered the path ahead like an impenetrable barrier. Charlee stopped as a paralyzing fear gripped her. She wasn’t alone. Any moment something would leap from the shadows to snatch her. Tears formed and slid down her cheeks. “Wait, this is just a dream. This isn’t real. Why should I be scared?” She sniffed back the tears. “This may be a dream,” she reminded herself, “but I’ve never had a dream feel this real before.”

She eyed her gloomy surroundings one more time. The trees that lined the path blocked any view of what might lie beyond the green cavern. The little light trickling through the trees created shadowy dancing apparitions. While it was only the silhouette of the trees, she still trembled. Charlee quieted her breathing and stood still, listening for any peculiar noises. Sloshing water

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signaled a creek or lake nearby—but where? The gurgling bounced off the trees and surrounded her.

Something didn't feel right. "I don't want to be here."

Instinctively, she tried to adjust her glasses, but the thick spectacles were missing. *Strange*. A scratchy brown cloth shirt two sizes too big, with no buttons or collar, replaced the Superman T-shirt she had worn to bed.

"What's going on?" Heavy brown pants made of the same material as the shirt covered her legs instead of pajama bottoms. "Yes, I must be dreaming." On her feet, brown boots rose to her knees and around her waist wrapped tightly in some kind of animal skin hung a sword from a thick black belt.

Charlee gazed at the sword's handle. It was a simple T-shaped handle made of tarnished, aging metal, maybe silver.

A whisper plucked her attention. The sound grew until hundreds, maybe thousands, of faint murmurs echoed around her like a great wind rustling the leaves. But the breeze had disappeared and the leaves were still. Charlee covered her ears. "Please, stop!"

Giggling followed the whispers. Charlee spun around. Tiny unseen creatures—too many to count—seemed to laugh. "Who is that? Show yourself. Stop laughing. Please!"

"It is We." The words were deafening as a multitude of voices spoke at once. Charlee stiffened. "Who said that?"

"Did We not just answer you?"

"Where are you?"

"We is right above you. Is that not obvious?"

Charlee peered at a low-hanging branch just over her head. The voices were loudest there. Standing on tiptoes, she slowly pulled it down to eye level.

A deep purple shade bathed each star-shaped leaf. They pulsed and generated warmth, as if they had a heartbeat. Charlee reached for one and slid her fingers over it. The leaf shivered and she quickly recoiled. "Weird! It feels like skin." She studied it closer. Its color shifted with each *heartbeat* from lavender to dark purple. They seemed alive.

"Please be careful in how you handle We."

"This can't be happening." Charlee released her grip on the branch and backed away.

"What do you mean?" the voices asked.

"Am I talking to a leaf?"

"No, you are talking to We. You are talking to all the leaves of the Our."

"What is the Our?" Charlee listened to her own words. She no longer

spoke English. The words fashioned into a strange language—their language consisting of high-pitched vowel sounds strung together without any evident structure...yet they had meaning. How was she doing this?

“The Our is our tree,” the voices explained. “That should be obvious to an intelligent being.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve never spoken to leaves before. Can you tell me where I am?”

“You are home.”

“I don’t understand. What—”

Before she finished, a leaf broke free from the branch she had held and slowly floated to the ground.

“Oh, no! I’m sorry. If I hadn’t tugged at the branch—”

“Do not grieve. When the lifecycle of one of We ends, We nourish Her. Then We will always be reborn for another cycle.”

What a dream this is. Charlee started to speak again, but stopped when her breath formed a mist. A deeper chill settled over the tree-lined path. She wrapped her arms around her body. “I have to go now, We.” She searched for a way home, perhaps a doorway. Nothing. Then a new sound drifted along the path. Singing! While sweet, the voice, perhaps a woman’s, seemed sad and lonely. Hypnotized by the melody, Charlee momentarily ignored the cold, but the chattering of her teeth reminded her of the path’s icy embrace. She rubbed her arms but continued to listen. “We, do you hear that singing?”

The leaf creatures did not respond.

Why?

Carefully, Charlee snuck along the pathway in the direction where the singing seemed the loudest. With one hand resting on the sword’s handle, she broke into a sprint all the while peering for any openings in the trees. There! Panting, she slid to a stop when she came upon a side path, a tunnel cut into the trees illuminated by light that spilled in, possibly from the other end of this new trail.

As her breaths slowed, Charlee inched forward, hands out in front to push away low-hanging branches. She moved as quietly as possible over the leaves strewn across the trail. Every time she crushed a leaf, she stopped and silently cursed herself fearing she hurt the leaf creatures, whatever they were. Each step Charlee took brought her closer to a light source that shed warmth and broke through the murky forest.

With each step, the light intensified—almost painfully—and she had to shield her eyes. “Please be sunlight,” she mouthed. “I’m tired of these shadows.” A few steps farther and Charlee reached a clearing in the trees. Sunlight

bathed her, chasing away the chill but the little hairs on her neck still stood at attention.

Blinking and rubbing her eyes, a creek came into focus flowing from the base of a small, lime-green hillock. The water glimmered and changed shades under the sunlight. It looked like the grape, orange and strawberry sodas Charlee liked so much. The creek defied gravity, flowing up and down the small hill as if pumps moved the water in both directions.

The singing continued. But where was the woman? Charlee shaded her eyes and surveyed the water. "Come on, where are you? Oh, there you are!" Downstream—or maybe upstream—the woman floated in the creek. Charlee crouched to remain hidden but didn't dare step back into the tunnel of greenery. She rubbed her eyes again. The woman was more like a ghost than flesh and blood. Draped in a flowing white dress, she drifted on her back in the water. Golden hair gleamed in the sunlight.

A rustling of leaves from the darkened path behind Charlee jolted her. She froze. *Remember, this is just a dream. Don't be scared.* She turned toward the sound and the silhouette of a man—a huge man—a giant man, faced her.

"Ahhh!" Charlee stumbled. She squeezed her eyes closed. "Please, giant, don't be there," she mumbled. "Please, I just want to be home, back in my bed."

But when she opened her eyes, the dream remained. She lay on the ground, and the huge figure knelt over her. Charlee studied the man. A cloak obscured his face, but a bushy beard, like a lion's mane, protruded from the cloak's hood. With each breath, the giant huffed like a bull ready to attack.

Charlee cleared her throat. "Uh...hi. I'm Charlee. Pl...please don't kill me. I'm just a kid."

"Quiet," the giant man commanded in a hushed, threatening voice. He rose to his full height, turned away, and then lumbered toward the woman in the creek.

He was going to kill the woman. She couldn't let that happen. But what could she do against a giant? She could think of only one course of action.

"Look out!" Charlee shouted.

§ § §

"Sweetheart, wake up." The soothing voice flowed through darkness, carried from a distance by the wind.

Charlee opened her eyes and blinked several times. Her heart hammered in her chest and she took fast, shallow breaths. She awoke, seeing her mom sitting beside her on the bed. "Mom?"

"You were having a bad dream."

"A dream! But it was so real." Charlee's heartbeat slowed.

Gently, her mom slid damp strands of hair off her forehead, blowing cool breaths of air over Charlee's skin. "That must have been some dream. You're covered in sweat. Well, whatever it was, you're safe now. Your father and I are in the next room."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Get some sleep now. We'll talk about your dream in the morning."

"Mom?"

"Yes."

"Why did he have to get me that stupid bike? If I ride it, everyone will make fun of me."

"Honey, you know your father means well. You've been sad since the move and he just wants to help."

"If he cared he wouldn't have made me leave my friends." Her mom sighed. Charlee knew why.

Her mom was at a loss for words because it had all been said. *Charlee, your father loves you. He's trying to make a good life for his family. He wasn't trying to hurt you by moving to the city. In time, this place will become home.* No matter how many times her mom uttered those words, Charlee still didn't believe them.

"I'm not going to ride that bike," Charlee blurted. "He can just forget that."

"Maybe you should give it a chance."

"Never."

Her mom moved to the bedroom door. "We'd both better get some sleep now. Tomorrow we will talk more." She left, closing the door behind her.

Charlee sat up in bed. In the glow of her nightlight, everything seemed safe. No one from the dream had followed her. *Of course I'm safe. It was just a dream.*



Chapter 4

Oh, Great...School

In the cafeteria of Myron Applebee, Charlee meandered through the lunch line and purchased a dry hamburger, cold fries, and a warm apple juice. Then she walked over to the same table—the same seat—she ate at every day all alone. Other social outcasts sat at the table, but even they kept their distance.

Charlee knew why. In Myron Applebee's pristine halls, Tina reigned as queen. If she targeted a student for her brand of bullying, others who had already faced similar humiliation stayed away. They feared being drawn back into the line of fire.

On this particular day, no one sat at the table. Charlee ate lunch completely alone until...“Hey, you mind if I sit here?”

Charlee glanced up to see Sandra Flores standing by the table, one hand holding a small paper bag, the other hand tucked into a pocket of her faded jeans. Long chestnut hair flowed around her face. When she smiled, Charlee noticed the braces on her teeth.

“Uh, no.” Charlee slid over.

“Great. I wasn't sure if maybe you had this ‘I'm-a-tough-girl-loner-so-back-off’ thing working for you.” Sandra sat and placed the crumpled bag on the table. She dove in and pulled out a foil-wrapped sandwich, banana, and a soda. Charlee fumbled with her own food.

Charlee knew Sandra from math class. Sandra was better at algebra than most students and wasn't afraid to argue with the teacher over an equation. She questioned the teacher at least once a class and didn't care when students rolled their eyes in frustration. If someone sighed, Sandra stared them down with her penetrating brown eyes. With a toss of her hair, she would then return to the teacher and continue with the challenge. *Why can't I be like that? Why is this tough girl sitting next to me?*

“Hey, why don't you take a picture? It lasts longer.”

Guardian's Nightmare

"What?" Charlee roused herself.

"You're staring at me. You know that's not polite."

Charlee looked away. "Sorry."

"Ah, I'm just kidding. You're Charlee, right?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Interesting name."

"It's really Charleya but I never liked that so somehow Charlee just stuck."

"Cool name either way," Sandra said. "You're kind of new here."

"This is my first year. We have math together." Charlee analyzed Sandra's smile. It seemed genuine. *Still*, Charlee thought, *she must be here to have a little fun at my expense*. Maybe Tina set it up as some trick.

"I'm Sandra. Good to meet you, Charlee."

"Uh, yeah. I mean, same here."

Silence followed. Her mouth drying, Charlee searched for something else to say. Sandra must have noticed. "Hey, if you want to be alone or something, just say the word, and I'll hit the road. That's cool. Sometimes I just want to be by myself, too."

"Uh, no," Charlee responded softly. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be so lame or anything. It's just that no one ever asks to eat with me."

"I know the feeling." Sandra bit into her banana. "That's why I thought I'd come over here. You always eat alone and, well, I don't exactly have a bunch of friends crowding around me either. I was thinking maybe we could be friends."

Charlee narrowed her eyes. "Okay, look, if this is some kind of joke, just get on with it."

"What?" Sandra cocked an eyebrow.

"Didn't Tina send you here to make fun of me?"

Sandra choked on a piece of banana and spit it out. "Are you kidding me? You think I'm with that snotty witch? No way, and I'm hurt you'd even think that." She rose from the table.

Charlee regrouped. "No...wait...I'm sorry. It's just that...you're the first person to really talk to me. I would like to be friends."

Sandra sat back down and a smile returned. "Great then." She held a hand out to Charlee. "Like I said, nice to meet you, Charlee."

They shook hands. "Can I ask you just one question?" Charlee asked.

"Yeah."

"Why have you waited until now to talk to me?"

Sandra touched a gold necklace around her neck. A cross was hidden beneath her white T-shirt embroidered with *Peace* in pink letters. "I guess I

just woke up today and decided it was time to make a friend. I've kind of flown solo for a long time."

Charlee nodded, her eyes focused on the pendant peeking out from Sandra's shirt. It was simple and faded—not like those shiny, curvy shaped crosses or flowery ones in department stores. It seemed right for Sandra. "That's a nice necklace."

Sandra held up the pendant and rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger. "My grandmother gave it to me. It was hers. She died last year. You know, it's strange but when I wear it, I kind of feel like she's watching over me...protecting me, like a guardian angel."

"I'm sorry she died."

"You say 'sorry' a lot."

"I'm sorr...er...I mean, yeah."

"I would have liked to introduce you to my grandmother." Sandra's smile grew. "She was a lot of fun—really cool, you know. My parents say I'm like her. I hope they're right."

Charlee returned the smile. "I've only known you a few minutes, but you're one of the two coolest people at this table."

"There's no one else...oh, funny." Sandra laughed. Charlee chuckled as well until an unwanted voice brought the moment to a quick end.

"Hey girls, looks like you got yourselves a geeky party going on here."

Charlee closed her eyes and sighed. *Tina!*

"Fatty Smelton has a friend." Tina leaned in and placed her hands on the table. Three golden bracelets clinked together around one of her thin, well-tanned wrists and a gold watch encircled the other. Her right hand cradled an iPhone. "And of course it would be a loser like Sandra Flores. Who else would be your friend?"

Charlee clenched her fists, but it was Sandra who spoke first. "Tina, get over yourself. Why don't you take that little designer outfit and slither away. No one here cares what you have to say."

Tina stood motionless. Her tan skin blushed, her forehead turned fiery red. An eye twitched and her chin trembled. Moments passed before her skin returned to normal, and Tina forced a laugh that sounded like a chicken's cackle. "I get it now. Fatty Smelton has a girly bodyguard. Oh, this is so perfect. Well, I'll leave you two alone now." Walking away, she chuckled and made the gesture of an *L*, the signal for *Losers*. Charlee's gut hurt worse than if Tina had thrown a punch. Sandra was so brave! Why couldn't she be like that?

Guardian's Nightmare

"Did you see that? Stand up to a bully and they'll back down." Cheer filled Sandra's voice. Charlee didn't answer, didn't even make eye contact with Sandra. She got up from the table, straightened her glasses and grabbed her backpack. "I...I have to go."

"What? Why?"

"I have to study. Maybe I'll see you around." Charlee slung the backpack over her shoulder then sped off, head bowed. Sandra was just doing what came naturally to her. Charlee knew that. But any shred of coolness she might have had in anyone's eyes was now completely gone because Sandra was the one who shut down Tina. Sandra was not a loser, and she shouldn't be hanging around with one.

Charlee sulked through the rest of the day.

When the final bell signaled the end of school, she walked down the hall, shoulders slouched, head still low.

"Hey! Anyone ever tell you it's not polite to leave a friend alone like that?" Sandra's words echoed down the hall. "Why'd you run off?" She approached with a warm smile that hadn't faded from lunch.

"I'm sorry," Charlee mumbled. "I guess I felt like a geek. I mean, you stood up to Tina, when I was the one she went after. It was me she was trying to hurt. And I don't need a bodyguard."

Sandra grinned. "I know. Listen, next time I won't get in the way. Tina just gets me so mad, and there are so many of us who can't stand her. I don't know why we don't all band together to put the queen and all those other snobs in their place."

"Maybe that day is coming." Charlee lifted her backpack higher up on her shoulder. "In the meantime, if you ever see me getting my butt kicked, feel free to get in the way."

"Deal," Sandra agreed. "Now let's go grab some burgers at M's Diner. It's just four blocks away."

Sandra took hold of Charlee's arm and led her out the front gate of the school. "There's this awesome video game there that I want you to see."

"Great." Charlee stumbled along after Sandra. They raced out the gate until Charlee saw something across the street. A wave of terror, the kind caused by teenage embarrassment, flooded her body.

Chapter 5

An Unexpected Visit

Charlee removed her glasses and put them on again, checking the lenses. *It* shouldn't be there—but *it* was. Across the street on the sidewalk next to Mrs. Newman, the old crossing guard, stood the ugly two-wheeler her dad had brought home last night. Its front reflector stared at her.

"Hey, you all right?" Sandra asked.

"Oh...uh...yeah."

"No, really, what's the matter? You just went pale as a ghost."

"N...nothing," Charlee frowned at the bike. "Really, everything's fine."

Sandra whirled her head in the bike's direction. "Are you looking at that bike? Hey, I think it's cool, too. Do you think it's Newman's? I mean, do you think she can even ride a bike? Charlee, you still with me? Earth to Charlee!"

"It's not her bike," Charlee confessed. "It's mine."

"What, really? Well, let's go get it before someone grabs it. You know, you really shouldn't leave cool stuff like that out in the city. It could be stolen." Sandra darted across the street, dodging traffic and ignoring Newman's whistle to stop.

"Sandra, wait!" Charlee followed, hoping no one was watching. Then something Sandra said clicked. *In the city...it could be stolen.* Yes. In the city, anything could be stolen.

"Where'd you get such a retro bike? I mean, this is way cool." Sandra stood over the bike studying each scratch like some archaeologist who had just made a great find. "It's like something from...I don't know...from when our parents were kids. Maybe even before."

"My dad gave it to me."

Sandra raised an eyebrow. "This is great. I wish I had my bike with me. Then we could ride together. Wait, I have an idea. I'll sit on the handlebars, and you can give me a ride to M's."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

Guardian's Nightmare

"Sure it is. Hop on and let's go."

Staring at the bike, Charlee hesitated. With a few shallow breaths, her muscles tense, she touched the handlebars. Even before she swung a leg over the frame, the same painful shock she felt the night before made her topple to the cement. She yelped when she landed on the sidewalk, much to the delight of the kids making their way home.

Even Sandra couldn't keep herself from giggling. "What was that?"

Charlee dusted herself off and stood. A numbing, tingly sensation rose from her hands and spread throughout her body. "I...uh...I slipped." She tried to hide the embarrassment but her face felt warm. One thing was for sure. She wasn't about to get on the bike again—not ever. "Maybe we should just walk the bike to M's," Charlee suggested.

"Maybe you're right." A broad smile crossed Sandra's face. "Hey, can I push it?" she asked.

"Uhhhh...well, I think—" Charlee never finished. Sandra grasped the handlebars. Wincing, Charlee expected Sandra to be thrown to the ground by the bike's strange power, but nothing happened. Sandra, untouched by any dose of mysterious energy, walked off toward M's. *What?* Charlee didn't understand. Was she imagining things? Why did she get shocked when she touched the bike?

"Strange," she muttered. "It's just strange."

"You coming?" Sandra called. Charlee ran to catch up with Sandra. Together they walked the four blocks to M's and laughed as they devoured hamburgers, drank orange sodas, and played video games. Charlee's cell phone interrupted them once.

"Charlee, where are you?" her mom asked.

"Sorry, Mom. I forgot to call. I'm with a friend at a place near school called M's. We're playing video games."

Her mom's voice eased. "Oh, a friend. I'm happy for you. All right, well, don't be too late."

Charlee sighed. "I know, Mom. Have to go."

Her mom quickly said, "Love you."

"Love you, too," Charlee whispered in response before placing the phone back in her pocket.

"Your mom checking up on you, huh," Sandra teased.

"Yeah."

"Mine too. I just got a text." The two laughed.

By four o'clock, after playing a few more video games, it was time to part ways. "Charlee, I had fun. Thanks for hanging out." Sandra rose from the table.

"I had fun, too." Charlee took a last gulp of soda before throwing the cup in the trash. "Thanks...for everything."

"What do you mean?"

"Uh...nothing." Charlee silently cursed herself. Those last words sounded a bit too pathetic. She quickly changed subject. "If you want, we can eat lunch together again tomorrow."

"I'd like that." Sandra nodded. "Maybe we can even get in a fight with Tina. We could kick her butt." They laughed some more as they left M's. With a wave, Sandra turned and started home.

Charlee waited until Sandra disappeared around the corner. Turning to the bike, she said, "I don't care if Sandra thinks you're cool. I know the truth. How am I going to get rid of you?" She walked around the bike, thinking as hard as she could. Then she remembered what Sandra had said. *Of Course!* She would leave the bike in an alley somewhere among the nearby neighborhood businesses. Someone would take it, and she would be rid of the bike forever.

The plan was simple. Stash the bike then wander around for an hour. Before going home, mess up her clothes, hair, and muddy her face. Finally, head home and tell Mom and Dad some older kids had jumped her in an alley and taken the bike. Fool-proof.

If her dad felt bad enough, he might even get her a decent bike. But how to get the bike downtown—she didn't dare touch it. *My socks!* She wore ankle-high socks. Charlee removed them and wrapped the socks around her hands. With hands protected, she reached for the handlebars. *Don't hurt me. Don't hurt me. Don't hurt me.*

Charlee stretched out her fingers and grabbed the handlebars, waiting for the stunning sensation to strike. It never came. Other than the strangeness of wearing socks on her hands, everything felt normal. The time had come to implement the plan. She didn't bother riding the bike. She walked it the four blocks to an intersection lined with brick businesses and alleys. Her pace was quick, eyes determined.

When she got to one business, Danny's Pizza & Deli, Charlee felt strangely drawn to it. She stopped at the door-front window, compelled to peek into the deli. Inside, several customers ate while an old man labored behind a counter. Grease covered his apron. She couldn't be sure, but at one point, he seemed to glance her way as he twisted the end of a long, white mustache between his thumb and forefinger.

Charlee shook herself away from the window. What was she doing? *Focus.* She had a mission. She snuck past the pizza-deli shop to an alley

beside the business. It would do just fine. Besides, she was tired of walking the bike. The alley had three trash bins, each one overflowing with old bread and pizza boxes. She could hide the bike behind them. If anyone found it, that wouldn't be a problem. No one would know the bike's owner. No one would care. She would leave the bike, walk around for a while, and then head home to shed fake tears over the loss of such a wonderful gift.

Stashing the two-wheeler behind the trash bin farthest from the alley's entrance, she then slipped down the block. After crossing a few intersections, Charlee stopped and rested against a brick wall. No one seemed to be following her. The plan had worked...so far.

For the next hour she wandered around, checking out the window displays at a toy store and purchased a few chocolate balls from a candy shop. At 5:30, her cell rang. It was her mom. She hit the ignore button. *Good.* Her mom was worried. It was time to go home.

The sky dimmed and Charlee began her walk home. At a park just a few blocks away she messed herself up by rolling around in the dirt and grass. She rubbed oil splashes from the street against her arms and clothing to add to the lie. Charlee thought about breaking her glasses but decided against it. No need to go that far. By now she must look like someone who could have been mugged.

A block away from home, Charlee wrestled with how to make herself cry. She finally grabbed a nose hair and pulled. OUCH! Immediately, tears formed. All that remained was to walk inside the house and wait for her mom's relieved hug. Prepared with fake sobs and manufactured tears, Charlee climbed the steps of the front porch and reached for the door. Her mom threw the door open first.

Charlee acted quickly. She grabbed hold of her mom and sobbed, "Mom—"

"Charleya, we have a guest." Her mom spoke with some annoyance—*and used my formal name*—not the expected reaction. Charlee peeked into the house. An unfamiliar, elderly man in a brown sweater sat on the sofa in the family room. He had a wrinkled face with a large white mustache that hid his mouth and he was bald except for a bit of gray hair on the sides of his head. Wait a second, she recognized him.

"Charlee, I'd like you to meet Mr. Daniel Levenstein," her mom said.

"Uh, call me Danny." Mr. Levenstein's body creaked as he lifted himself to shake hands.

"Charlee, Mr. Levenstein owns Danny's Pizza & Deli." Her mom folded her arms. "It seems that your bike ended up in the alley next to his store.

Fortunately, your name and address were on the bike, so he drove it all the way here. Wasn't that nice of him?"

"Yeah." Charlee knew trouble waited, but right now her thoughts focused on how much she despised Mr. Levenstein. And who had put her name and address on the bike? Dad! She twisted a long strand of hair in a tight knot.

"Well, young lady, I'm just glad I was able to find your bike before someone else did." Mr. Levenstein's hazel eyes were round and friendly. "Next time, you must be more careful."

"Yes, sir." She avoided his stare.

"Mr. Levenstein, I'd like to pay you for your time." Her mom reached for her purse.

"Oh no, thank you. I'm just glad I could help."

"What about some coffee, then?"

"Thank you, but I must be getting back to my store. I left my baker in charge and he's bound to burn the place down." He started for the front door, walking with a limp and shoulders hunched.

Charlee watched him then looked down at the carpet. What had she done to this poor man? When she glanced up again, Mr. Levenstein stood beside her. "You should never give up something as valuable as this bike of yours," the old man whispered. "You may find that it is a truly wondrous gift."

Charlee stepped back. How did he know the bike was a gift? What did he mean, wondrous?

"Your mother was telling me that your father brought the bike home for you just yesterday." Offering a final smile, the old man went out the door. On the porch, he stopped one more time and winked at Charlee's mom. The moment didn't last long, but they nodded to each other. That was strange. Did her mom know him?

"Come down to my store some time," Mr. Levenstein offered. "I'll give you a free slice of pizza, or maybe a nice corned beef on rye. Maybe I can tell you stories about the old country."

"Thank you, sir," Charlee said. As much as she wanted to hate him for bringing the bike back, she couldn't. Mr. Levenstein was nice and did a good deed. The fact he spoiled her plans was beside the point. How could he know?

I'm a big fat jerk. She watched the man move down the steps of the porch and limp toward a blue van with "Danny's Pizza & Deli" painted in red letters on the passenger door. When the old man drove away, Charlee turned to her mom.

Guardian's Nightmare

"You have a lot of explaining to do," her mom scolded. "It's a good thing your father's department called a meeting tonight. He would have been so hurt by this."

"Mom—"

"Your bike is on the side of the house. Please put it in the garage."

Charlee nodded.

Her mom then softened. "Charlee, I know you're going through changes, I mean what with the move and the new school. Just remember, if you find yourself facing challenges, you may feel alone, but you're not. You'll never be alone, no matter what. Remember that. Always remember that." Charlee's mom hugged her tightly then released the embrace, keeping one hand on her shoulder "If you ever need to talk, I'm here for you. Would you like to talk now?"

"No. It's late, and I have homework. Maybe tomorrow." Charlee stomped off toward the bike. There, under a hazy purple evening sky stood the two-wheeled enemy. She circled it and realized the inescapable truth. She was stuck with this mysterious reject bike.

Chapter 6

The Dream Returns

Charlee dreamt again. She had gone to sleep around nine o'clock as punishment for ditching the bike. Now, like the dream from last night, she wore the scratchy brown clothing instead of pajamas. The same sword hung at her waist. New to the ensemble was a long, wooden bow resting over one shoulder and a satchel containing a dozen arrows strapped to her back.

"This is just too weird." Though she wore the same clothing, she no longer stood on a pathway lined by trees under a canopy of branches that hid the sunlight.

Charlee was atop a mountain overlooking a valley where fields of blue grass stretched across the landscape. Massive trees with corkscrew shaped trunks spiraled toward a cloudless emerald sky. The trees dwarfed the red woods of Yosemite National Park where her family had once driven their car through a cutout tree trunk.

Across the valley was a colossal structure that snaked over the land for miles. Charlee strained for a better look.

"I think it's a wall," she uttered out loud. Staring at it, she was reminded of The Great Wall of China. Charlee stood on her tiptoes, which gave her a better view. Beyond the wall was a sprawling city nestled against the mountain range. A castle built into a mountainside cast a wide shadow over the land.

"What am—" Over her shoulder, creatures broke out in a song of mixed warbles and hoots. Charlee peered up and spied winged songsters soaring by. They were much larger than any birds she had ever seen. Like smaller versions of a giraffe, they had long, spotted necks, snouts, and four legs—two of which ended in bird-like claws rather than hooves. Their rainbow-colored wings extended maybe a car's length on either side.

"Amazing, aren't they?"

Charlee whirled around to face one of the winged giraffes. Its body her height, but the head rose several feet above her.

Guardian's Nightmare

"Don't be afraid," the creature urged. "You will receive no harm—at least not from me. I am Saur."

The creature spoke an inhuman language, just as the leaves had in the earlier dream, but this was different. A series of screeches and caws formed words. She somehow understood the meaning of each distinctive sound and managed to respond. "I...I am Charlee," she screeched.

"It is my pleasure to meet you, Charlee." The creature, Saur, gracefully bowed its long neck.

Off in the distance, beyond the flying herd, water gently flowed. She remembered the creek and the woman floating in the water. Memories of the giant hooded man invaded her thoughts. This wasn't the same place as the earlier dream, and that couldn't be the same body of water, or could it? Still, this mountain and the valley below felt shrouded in a desperate winter frost despite the sun's warmth. *It's still just a dream*, she reminded herself. *Nothing to really fear*. Yet, fear swept over her like an ocean wave.

"You seem distracted. Are you all right, child?" Saur asked.

She wasn't. She wanted to get back home...or wake up. "Saur, where am I? What is this place?"

"It is your home," Saur answered.

"I...I don't understand."

"You will."

"Do all things in this forest speak?" Charlee asked.

"That is an odd question. All beings have a language, if you are willing to listen." The winged creature tilted its head and blinked green eyes, which seemed wise but tired.

"This dream...whatever it is...feels so real." Charlee listened as the leaves from nearby trees whispered, but she couldn't quite make out their conversation. "Why do I keep coming here?"

"It was once a place of great joy." Saur spread his wings.

"What do you—"

A familiar haunting song returned. Could it be the woman she had seen before? Charlee tried to find where the song was coming from but when she turned back to Saur, the creature had taken flight and hovered overhead. "Wait! Don't leave," Charlee begged, still in Saur's language.

"I cannot say more. I must be going. Soar with caution." The creature rose into the sky and disappeared with the others of his kind.

Again Charlee listened for the melody and shuddered. If the woman

was nearby, the giant man might be as well. "I don't want to face him again. But if this is really a dream, why fear the giant?"

She stumbled forward toward the sound of sloshing water. Before, she had dreamt of a creek by a tree-lined path. Now, she moved toward a body of water atop a mountain. Was it because in the real world she had to go to the bathroom? That thought made her laugh and eased her nerves... momentarily.

With each step the song grew louder. As Charlee listened, she realized something. Though sung in an unfamiliar language, she understood the words—just as she understood the leaf creatures and Saur.

Oh sweet water, wash away the pain that would sweep me away, for I cannot bear the loss of loved ones whom evil from me would tear and bring to me a hero who will stand for good and with the power only a hero can command deliver me to safe lands.

"So much pain," Charlee said. "She sounds sad, like she really does need help."

Pushing on, she reached a gathering of trees with low-hanging branches covered with the pulsating star-shaped leaves. As she pressed forward through the foliage, the leaves whispered what felt like a warning. Charlee froze. The giant might be close. She placed her hand on the sword at her side and listened. Nothing. Peering over her shoulder revealed no signs of danger.

"Come on, don't stop now. Be brave," she told herself.

The song grew louder and Charlee dashed ahead, ducking branches and jumping over brush. When she reached a clearing she lowered to her knees and kept hidden behind the trees. Below her, a hillside dropped toward a narrow waterway with banks about a stone's throw apart. The woman was at the water's edge, sitting atop a boulder surrounded by tall grass. Long glowing hair covered the woman's shoulders and tumbled down her back. Sunlight gleamed off something atop her head. "A crown! She must be some princess or maybe a queen."

"You there among the trees—who's there?" the woman unexpectedly asked without turning away from the water. "I will be most frightened if you do not speak up."

Charlee crouched. *What a doofus.* Lost in thought, she had strayed from the cover of the greenery. *Now what? Introduce yourself?*

"Please show yourself." The woman stood and scanned the trees.

With a long sigh, Charlee rose and started down the hillside until a tug on her shirt stopped her. *Oh no, the giant!* Her face went cold, like when the

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blood rushed from her head on a roller coaster that flipped her upside down last year at the fair.

"Please don't hurt me?" she pleaded.

No response followed. Heart racing, breaths shallow, she turned to face her captor. Instead, her shirt had snagged on a tree branch. Strange though, it felt like the tree branch had reached out to ensnare her. It wouldn't let go. Struggling to break free, a thousand little leaf voices whispered at once: *Turn back!*

Their advice had to be about the giant man, but since she didn't see him she ignored their advice. Nevertheless, she would remain vigilant. Faced flushed with embarrassment, Charlee continued down the hillside toward the woman.

"Well, there you are!" The young woman, maybe in her twenties, glided through a thicket of brush and moved nimbly up to greet Charlee. She wore a white dress with a golden belt wrapped around her waist and the crown, simple but elegant, showed through her long blonde hair like a tiara. "You are the one who has been watching me."

"Yes... I mean no. I wasn't spying." Charlee peered up at the woman, who stood a couple of feet taller. The woman spoke the same language as in the song. Charlee understood the words as if having learned them long ago but forgotten. The language had a name—Lengoron. How did she know that?

Charlee's gaze focused on the woman's striking features—her flawless pale skin, high cheekbones and large lips—features that would have made her popular with bully Tina Lomeli. The woman was like a fairy—more than human. Her crystal eyes stood out the most. Just like Charlee's little sister.

"Who might you be? And why were you watching me?" The woman seemed to chant as she spoke. Each word flowed from her tongue as if spoken in a melody.

"Uh..." Charlee backed away.

"You carry the weapons of a knight, and though I have seen young women serve as knights, I have never seen one as young as you. What crown do you serve?"

Charlee pondered, but her mind went blank. "Huh?"

"Are you from afar?"

"Yes, from a land far away—far, far, far away."

"Woman, get away from the girl!" The gruff command came from the clearing up the hill. There stood the giant man, draped in his black cloak.

The woman moved in close, gripping Charlee's arm. "Protect me, young knight!" Her touch burned, like an ice cube left on the skin too long. Charlee shuddered but otherwise ignored the pain. It was just a dream.

“Woman, get away from the girl. Now!” the giant man again commanded.

He threw off the hood, revealing a scarred face, chiseled and leathery. The eyes, deep-set black orbs, were stained with blood. His red beard tinted with gray ended in a jagged point at his chest.

“Please, young knight,” the woman whispered. “It is your duty to protect me.”

“You are not going to harm her.” Charlee’s knees trembled but she reached for her sword to unsheathe it. The blade was heavy and even though she held it with two hands, the sword drooped.

“Young fool!” Clearly, the giant was not impressed. He strode forward on tree-trunk-sized legs.

“You...you’ll have to fight me,” Charlee threatened. “I mean it.”

“So be it.” The giant man raised his sword.



Chapter 7

A Girl and Her Bike

A hhhh!" Charlee tumbled out of bed onto the floor. Once the fogginess and confusion of the dream cleared, she unfroze one body part at a time and then stood. Breathing more calmly, she realized she still wore the superman T-shirt and pajama bottoms. Actually, they never really disappeared because, again, it was a dream. Charlee peeked at the clock on the nightstand.

Midnight.

Parched, she decided to dare the long walk through the quiet house for a soda. Charlee loved soft drinks. Something about the fizzle and spray was comforting. Reaching for her glasses atop the nightstand, she placed them on her face and slipped into a pair of open-toe sandals. Pushing hair from her face, she tiptoed to the door across her plush carpet, which was comforting, too. It felt real and right now *real* mattered. Once at the door, she opened it and peered into the hallway. The house was dark but no signs of trouble appeared.

You can do it. She urged herself forward even as she shivered against the sensation of a thousand pins and needles. *It was just a dream,* she reminded herself one more time. *You're in your own house. Don't be a scared baby.* She ventured down the hallway, stopping at the top of the stairs just long enough to release a breath of air and didn't stop again until reaching the kitchen.

There, Charlee flipped on the light and threw open the refrigerator. A gallon of milk strategically hid the soda. Skipping a glass, Charlee took a swig from the bottle and enjoyed a mouthful of the sweet, fizzy nectar. She lifted the bottle again for another drink, but something knocked the bottle away. Soda splashed across the floor. Heart pounding in her chest like a drum, Charlee stepped away from the fallen soda until the same force ensnared her in a grip as if invisible hands grasped her arms. *What now? This can't be real! I'm losing my mind!*

Just like popular ghost movies where people are unexpectedly tossed about like rag dolls, the force, or spirit, or whatever it was, lifted Charlee and carried her from the kitchen.

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"No, help me!" she tried to scream, but something muzzled the words. She reached for the countertop and strained to hold on but couldn't. *Leave me alone!*

Whatever it was propelled Charlee toward the garage. Her eyes bulged as the door swung open on its own. *Mom...help me!* Charlee floated through the doorway, down the steps to the garage, which, unlike the rest of the house, blazed in a blinding white light.

Covering her eyes, Charlee screamed silently—her voice still muzzled as if her mouth had been gagged. *Let me go!* The unseen force responded, lowering her to the ground and releasing its grip. Charlee was free. She could run but she didn't. Something inside her compelled her to stay. Dropping her hands from her eyes as the light faded to a gentle glow, Charlee scanned the garage for the light source. She found it quickly. In the corner awash in a white radiance was the bike.

"I should have known," she stuttered as she swallowed a load of saliva and forced her legs to be still. Charlee hated the old two-wheeler from the moment she laid eyes on it. She tried without success to be rid of it. Now, as she eyed the bike, its frame pulsating with white energy, she understood. No matter how much she might hate the bike, it was like no other cruiser, dirt bike, mountain bike, or ten-speed she could buy in a store. This bike was special and it wanted something. She just wasn't sure what.

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I anxiously looked around, my heart palpating, just in time to see an alligator slink into the green algae covered water that was on either side of us. I swallowed hard, and my heart raced even faster. Alligators were a different type of predator—the one thing I was afraid of. Now I was on my own personal swamp tour. What if my kidnappers left me in the middle of a swamp with five of them creeping up on me? I've had that nightmare before and—oh no, if my dreams really are a sign of the future—I couldn't breathe now.

Adriana couldn't decide what was worse—that Hurricane Katrina was heading for New Orleans, or that she might not survive her kidnapping to see its potential effects. She had trusted Hayden, even fallen for him, and now he and his brother Luke were taking her deeper and deeper into the Bayou. Why had two of her classmates, the mysterious Boudreaux brothers, kidnapped her? Why had Adriana's dreams started predicting the future? Most importantly, would she make it out of the Bayou alive...

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Charlee Smelton is an average thirteen-year-old girl struggling to adapt after her family moves to San Francisco. She thinks her biggest obstacle is facing the bullies who brand her a nerd and a dweeb. She's wrong. Her life is about to change—for the worse.

First, she receives a gift of the ugliest, most old fashioned bike she has ever seen. Try as she might to ditch it in the city, she just can't seem to escape that very mysterious two-wheeler. Then come the visions of a world across a dimensional divide, a princess in fear for her life and a dark knight pursuing her. Are they just dreams or something more?

For Charlee, everything she ever thought she knew about herself soon crumbles as she starts down a path to discover her true self, and she will need that hunk-of-junk bike more than she could ever imagine. Without it, she might not be able to find the hero in herself—the hero she must become to save her friends, family, her city—the world—from an evil only she can defeat. An evil she allows into this world.



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



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