

**LEGENDS OF
LOTUS ISLAND**
INTO THE SHADOW MIST

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Scholastic Press / New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-75917-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27
Printed in Italy 183

First edition, July 2023
Book design by Cassy Price



CHAPTER

1

Cherry elbowed me in the ribs and pointed up into the branches of the pomelo trees. “I told you. They’re finally ripe!”

When your name is Plum and your best friend is a girl named Cherry, I guess it’s only natural that you’d spend a lot of your time thinking about fruit.

My mouth watered when I saw the plump pomelos swinging on their stems. I know what waited inside the thick rinds: juicy jewels of sweetness. It was still early morning and we hadn’t eaten breakfast yet. “Wow, I can’t believe the other Novices haven’t found these,” I said.

“They’re all ours,” murmured Cherry. “I mean, of course we’ll share what we bring back.”

“Oh, of course,” I said with a grin. “*After* we stuff our faces.”

Cherry rubbed her hands together and licked her lips. “Now, let’s get picking!” With a wink, she began her transformation.

Fluffy cream-colored fur burst out all over her arms and legs, and her hands widened into paws. Her face elongated into a bear snout with a wet black nose. And she grew big, big, and bigger still.

As soon as she was fully transformed, I threw my arms around her belly and hugged her.

“Hey,” said Cherry. “That’s too tight!”

I smooshed my face into her fur. “I can’t help it! When you’re a gillybear, you’re just so fluffy and huggable!”

“Okay, okay,” said Cherry, pushing me away. “A gillybear is a ferocious fighter, not some squishy toy, you know. Besides, this fur is way too hot for hugs today. We’ve got to get these pomelos before I sweat to death!”

She rose up on her back legs and reached for the branches. The lowest pomelos hung too high for her to reach, even when she hopped.

I placed my hand on the smooth tree trunk. “Dear Auntie Pomelo, could you please make it just a teensy bit easier for us to reach your fruit?”

The pomelo tree's leaves rustled. It sounded a little bit like laughter, if trees could laugh. And then I swore those branches lifted *up* and farther away.

Cherry put her paws on her hips and gave me an annoyed look.

"Hey, it's not my fault pomelo trees have a mocking sense of humor!" I said.

"Will you at least transform and help me out here?"

I sighed. "Fine."

I took a deep breath and reached my hands down to the ground. This motion always helped me transform into my Guardian form. My arms and legs stretched long and my neck stretched tall as I became a roan: a deerlike creature with ruby-red antlers.

"Great, now give me a boost," said Cherry.

I crouched low so Cherry could put a foot on my back and boost herself up. She leaned her paw on the top of my head for balance.

"A little higher," said Cherry. "Almost there . . . hey, watch those pokey antlers!"

"Oof, are you done yet?" I grunted. I wiggled and squirmed underneath Cherry, trying to hold still. How had I let her talk me into this again?

At that moment, I looked up and saw a fuzzy inchworm

dangling from a strand of silk that hung down from the branches. The plump little worm squirmed and wiggled in the air. I smiled to myself, thinking I must look a lot like that.

And then I thought about how Cherry and I were connected just like that inchworm was connected to its tree. If she needed me—even if it meant looking like a silly, squirming larva—I'd be there for her.

Suddenly I had a strange zinging feeling that ran from the tips of my antlers through my whole body. I felt a tug on my heart as if Cherry and I really *were* connected by an invisible thread. I shut my eyes, and I could actually imagine a strand of silk running from me to her.



“There we go, Plum!” said Cherry. “I can reach them!”

Cherry stepped off of me. I could still feel the tingling in my antlers. I looked at Cherry and gasped.

She reached up into the high branches easily without even standing on her tiptoes. I shook my head and looked again. Could it be?

She was four feet taller than she had been a moment ago.

“Aw yeah, pomelos galore!” Cherry was not only taller but stronger too. She plucked a massive pomelo from its thick stem as easily as if it were a grape.

“Cherry, you’re . . . you’re enormous!”

“Course I am,” she said as she plucked fruit after fruit.

“No, I mean you’re—”

But then the tingling in my antlers faded away, and I saw Cherry shrink and shrink until she was back to her usual gillybear size. By then she had gathered a dozen of the precious fruits.

I blinked and shook my head again. Was I seeing things?

Cherry didn’t seem to have noticed anything out of the ordinary.

“Do you feel okay?” she asked. “You have a weird look on your face.”

“I just saw you grow . . . big.”

“Hey, getting big is part of my Guardian power.” She

flexed her bear muscles. “Size, strength, and agility. Don’t forget the agility part. Very important in wrestling. Speaking of . . .” She transformed back into her human form. “We should get going. I plan to beat Mikko in wrestling today, and I need to warm up.”

I nodded and transformed back into my human form too.

With our arms full of pomelos, we bowed to the tree.

“Thank you, Auntie Pomelo,” I said.

“Yeah, thanks for nothing,” muttered Cherry.

At that moment, a big fat pomelo dropped from the branch and thumped right onto her head, making her drop all her fruit to the ground.

I chuckled as I helped Cherry pick them up. “I told you, pomelo trees have a sense of humor. You kind of asked for that.”

The pomelo leaves rustled their laughter as we made our way out of the grove and down the hill.

The sun had risen higher over the horizon, and the whole of Lotus Island stretched out before us. The sheer gray cliffs cast shadows over the classroom buildings of the Guardian Academy. I could see the big kitchen garden and, down near the sea, the wide Lotus Court with its three circular ponds full of fragrant flowers.

The low gong of a bell rang out across the valley.

Cherry and I looked at each other, then bolted down the hill. For all of us Novices, there were two unspoken rules at the Guardian Academy:

Expect the unexpected.

And do not show up to class late.