

**LEGENDS OF
LOTUS ISLAND**
CITY OF WISHES

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CHAPTER 1

You would think that when you've transformed into a magical creature hundreds of times, it would start to feel ordinary.

But whenever I changed into my Guardian form, I got the same thrill as the very first time.

Our entire class of Novice Guardians was assembled on the lawn near the Lotus Court on Lotus Island. Master Dew, our defense teacher, stood on the grass in front of us in her Guardian form: an inky black jaicat with short golden horns.

"All right, Novices," she said with a swish of her tail. "Into your Guardian forms, please."

I waited for my friends to transform first. With a ripple of fur, Mikko became a huge field sloth with curving claws and a stout tail. Hetty transformed into an indigo hare with long, twitching ears. Sam turned into a gray wolfhund, and Salan swooped out his blue wybird wings. And my best friend, Cherry, became a big gillybear with cream-colored fur and webbed paws. Soon, our whole class had become a feathered, furred, magical group of Novice Guardians.

My turn. I bent down to touch the ground at my feet. Instantly my fingers and toes fused into hooves. I raised my head and stretched my long neck. I had become a roan: a large deer with ruby red antlers.

“Perfect, everyone,” said Master Dew. “Now, Plum, if you please.”

I nodded. When I first arrived at the Guardian Academy on Lotus Island, I had felt sure that I didn’t fit in, as though I wasn’t like any of the other kids. And it was true—I wasn’t like them.

Every Guardian had powers that fell into one of three categories: Hand Guardians were physically powerful, Breath Guardians had powers of the senses, and Heart Guardians had powers of healing.

As for me? I made up a category of one.

I couldn't do anything that the other Novices could do, but at least I did have one special talent.

My classmates held out their wings or paws or claws as I went down the line. One by one, they touched my hoof or my shoulder. We shut our eyes and I focused on our connection to each other. My antlers tingled, like they were charged with electricity. I felt energy pulse between us. When I was finished, I had made each Novice's power stronger than it had been before.

Salan, who healed the sick and injured, could heal them even faster. Sam's keen senses of smell and hearing grew even sharper. Hetty, who could sense danger, could detect any threat long before it arrived. And Mikko had even more endurance than before.

"Psst, Plum," Cherry whispered when it was her turn. "Make me *enormous*, okay? Like, as big as a house! Master Dew is going to have me spar with Mikko, and I want to win this time."

Whenever I boosted Cherry's powers, she became bigger, stronger, and more agile.

"I can't make you as big as a *house*," I whispered back. "That's impossible. Besides, that wouldn't be fair to Mikko."

Cherry muttered under her breath, "Fair, shmair."

I focused on the connection between us and took a deep breath. I had only been doing this “boosting” thing for a couple of months, but I was already much better at it than before. I learned how to do it during our field study with wise old Master Em on Bokati Island. At that time, it would make me so tired to boost the powers of just one Novice. But now I could work with all the students in our class without breaking a sweat.



“Excellent,” said Master Dew as soon as I had finished. “Now, find your sparring partners and spread out. Let’s get started.”

I was paired up with Bon, a boy from Bidibop Island whose Guardian form was a spring elk. He was a Breath

Guardian with the power to know if someone was telling the truth. I liked Bon. He was nice.

And today, I was going to beat him real bad.

Bon and I squared off in front of each other. We stomped our hooves. We each trotted backward about ten yards, then bowed. And then we rushed at each other, full speed.

I lowered my head just before impact. *Wham!* Our skulls smacked against each other. If I had been in my human form, I would have been knocked unconscious! But as a roan, I was hardheaded—in more ways than one.

I was determined to win this match. I widened my stance, locking my antlers into Bon's.

The last time I had sparred with him, I had to tap out. In fact, the best I had ever done against Bon was to end in a draw. But not today.

We grunted as we struggled and our antlers clacked against each other. I could feel myself gaining the advantage. I broke into a smile. Here it was—my moment. I just had to get my shoulder in the right position and I could wrench him off his feet with one strong twist.

I held my breath and twisted with all my might. But somehow in the last few minutes, I had let my stance get too narrow. My front legs were too close to each other, and my back leg wasn't touching the ground. I realized too late that I was off-balance.

Bon got his weight under him and twisted *me*.

Bam! I slammed, shoulder first, onto the ground, the rest of my body flipping over until I was flat on my back. I quickly transformed into my human form and whacked my hand on the ground.

“Tap!” I said weakly.

Bon transformed too and helped me to my feet. “I’m sorry, Plum! Are you okay?”

I rubbed my shoulder. “It’s okay, Bon, I’m fine.” Nothing was really hurt—except my self-esteem.

“All right, Novices,” Master Dew called out as the rest of the class finished sparring. “That’s it for today! Great job, everyone, and we’ll resume your lessons in the New Year. Don’t forget to practice your drills over the break!”

She came over to me and put her hand on my back. “You’re all right, Plum?”

“Yes, but I was so close to winning!” I sighed. “I really wanted to beat Bon just once.”

“That was your problem,” said Master Dew. “I was watching you. You wanted to win so badly that you forgot all your foundations and you lost your balance. You were holding your breath and not paying attention to your opponent.”

“I guess you’re right,” I grumbled.

She patted my shoulder. “Don’t be hard on yourself. We’ll work on all that after New Year’s.”

I bowed to her and caught up with Cherry and Hetty, who were skipping back toward our dorm room.

“Don’t be sad, Plum,” said Cherry. “I lost my match to Mikko too. It happens.”

“Yes, how can you be sad when we are officially on break?” said Hetty. “New Year’s holiday! I am so excited!”

I linked arms with them. “Okay, you’re right. I’m over it, and I’m officially excited too!”

“New Year’s is my favorite,” said Cherry. “The parties, the fireworks! And the food! I am going to stuff my face with so many lantern dumplings, I’m going to literally transform into a dumpling.”

“Finally our first holiday break since we got here,” said Hetty. “My mom and big sister are taking me shopping right away! How about you, Plum? What’s your favorite New Year’s tradition?”

“Well, it’s just me, Grandma, and Grandpa on our Little Island. Grandma makes pumpkin-coconut soup. Grandpa plays a song on his guitar and our velvet goat, Tansy, dances around. And then we watch the twile-flies zip in and out of the lantern trees.”

“And make a wish?” said Hetty.

I smiled. “Oh, of course, making a wish at New Year’s is the best part.”

I reached up to my collar and squeezed the shell pendant that hung on a string around my neck. When I was a baby, my mother had made it and whispered her wish for me into the shell. I was certain that she had wished for me to become a Guardian. If I continued to do well for the rest of the year on Lotus Island, I would graduate from the Guardian Academy and her wish would come true.

“It’s so funny to think that this time last year, I had no idea that I’d be here on Lotus Island with all of you,” I said. “Last New Year, I think I wished for a wheelbarrow.”

We all laughed.

“I can’t believe you two are going to Sam’s house for New Year’s,” said Hetty. “I’m super jealous! But also super glad because it means I’ll get to see you.”

Cherry and I were the only Novices not going home for the holidays. The boat tickets would be very expensive for us. But Sam’s mother, Lady Ubon, had invited us to spend the New Year with them at their manor house on Nakhon Island. Our closest friends, Hetty, Salan, and Mikko lived there too, so we’d get to see them all over the break.

“I am so curious about what Sam’s house looks like,” said

Hetty, holding the door to our dorm building open. “It must be a castle.”

Cherry skipped up the stairs to our room. She was excited as usual, but I was nervous. I had no idea what to expect at Sam’s house, but I was certain that I didn’t have the proper clothes for the trip. I picked up my shoes from their spot near our bedroom door. They were now a full two sizes too small. My heels stuck out the back.

“Luckily Grandma sent me some money to get new shoes on Nakhon Island,” I said.

“Oh, there are so many shops there,” said Hetty. “You’ll be able to find whatever you need—and about a thousand things you didn’t know you wanted until you saw them.”

Cherry waved a paper in front of me. “Don’t forget your permission form. Master Sunback has to sign it and you have to give it to the boat driver so he knows to let you off in Nakhon Harbor.”

I gasped. “Cherry, what would I do without you!” I grabbed the unsigned paper from my bag and rushed out the door to find Master Sunback.

“You know how to repay me, right?” Cherry called after me. “Next time, big as a *house!*”