

TWO-TIME NEWBERY HONOR RECIPIENT

CHRISTINA SOONTORNVAT

LEGENDS OF LOTUS ISLAND

THE GUARDIAN TEST



ILLUSTRATED BY KEVIN HONG

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For Elwyn and Aven—this story
started with you

CHAPTER

1



Worms always think they know everything. “Come on, friends, not there by the squash. You want to be over here by these chai-melons, trust me.” I scooped the worms out of the dark, fluffy soil and set them down near the chai-melon vine. “There. Now make that dirt good and soft, because I want to eat some big, fat melons this summer.”

I stood up and walked around our garden. The eggplant and crisp-cumbers were doing great this year. And of course our chili plants and snake beans were growing wild, as always. But my main concern was our fruit trees. This year I was determined that we would have *everything*: jackfruit, mangoes, tea fruit, rose apples, even stinky durian.

I heard a rustling in the mango leaves. “Oh, sorry to wake you,” I whispered to the family of fox bats that hung upside down, sleeping. “Now, don’t forget what we agreed. You get the mangos up top and leave the low stuff for us, okay?”

The mama fox bat yawned and shut her eyes again. A couple of years ago they nibbled bites out of every mango on our tree. But now that I’d convinced Grandpa to take down the nets, they only took the fruit that was too high for us to reach.

In a couple of weeks it would all start getting ripe. I could practically taste the feast in my mouth. The only fruit we could never seem to grow was—

“Plum!”

I turned around to see Grandma shuffling down the hill toward me. “Over here in the orchard, Grandma!”

“Plum,” she huffed, “come on up to the house, dear.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Of course it is!” she said, but I saw the corner of her mouth twitch. She always did that when she wasn’t telling me the whole story.

I wondered what was going on, but I knew better than to pester her.

I let her lean on my shoulder as we walked slowly back up the hill to our house. The cool evening breeze felt so good

after a long, sweaty day working in the garden. As always, we paused in the one spot where we could see the entire island. Our little wooden house and barn stood at the top of the hill. The garden and orchard were down below, near the freshwater spring. On the other side, Grandpa's rice fields sloped down to the coconut grove. And all around, the blue ocean sparkled.

The sun was starting to set. The fox bats were waking up, and the swallows were already swooping overhead. I imagined them calling out to us: *Day is done! Day is done! Time for night!*



“Good night!” I called up to them. “Don’t forget our deal about the mangoes!”

Out on the water, I spotted the little blue postal boat zipping back toward Big Crab Island. My stomach did a flip. We almost never got mail. I glanced at Grandma for some hint as to what was going on, but her face was like a stone.

Before we got to the house, Grandma patted my hand. “Oh, and tomorrow, remind me that I need your help with the wheelbarrow. The chai-melon bed is full of rocks, and we’ve got to move them so the worms can get in.”

I looked back at the garden and shook my head. Those worms were never going to let me hear the end of this.

CHAPTER

2



When we got inside, Grandpa was bouncing around the kitchen. “Plum, come! Sit down!” Our little velvet goat, Tansy, was hopping about, almost as energetic as he was.

He pulled out a chair for me and poured himself a cup of tea, sloshing it onto the table.

Tansy clip-clopped over and put her soft head in my lap. “Grandpa, what’s going on? Why are you so excited?”

Grandma sighed and went to the stove to stir the soup. Her face looked like she’d sucked on a bitter lemon.

Grandpa patted my knee. “Plum, you know how we’ve talked about you spending more time around other people?”

“Yes,” I said, still confused. “Is this about that summer camp on Big Crab Island?”

Grandma clanged her spoon against the pot. “Just tell her already.”

Grandpa reached inside his jacket pocket and brought out an envelope. “Read it for yourself, my dear.”

Dear Miss Plum,

I have the pleasure of inviting you to the Guardian Academy on Lotus Island. For centuries, the Guardians have fulfilled their ancient duty to protect and nurture life in the Santipap Islands. Every ten years, a new class of Novice Guardians is selected to train with our Masters. Your application identified you as a strong candidate to join the next Novice class. Please arrive on the full moon to begin the first phase of your training.

Sincerely,

Master Sunback

My mind tumbled around in a confused mess.

Tansy started nibbling the paper. “Stop that!” I jerked it

out of her mouth. "Grandpa, this must be a mistake. I didn't apply to the Guardian Academy."

He grinned. "I applied for you."

I sat straight up. "What! And you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't think you'd get in!" He cleared his throat. "What I mean is . . . I didn't want you to get your hopes up in case it didn't work out."

"But I . . . I can't be a Guardian. Those people are *magical*. They travel all over the islands doing . . . I don't know, magical stuff!"

Grandpa waved his fingers at me. "They all started off as regular kids."

"They transform into spectacular creatures," I said. "Like hywolves and zorahawks and—"

"Gillybears," offered Grandma.

I threw my hands up. "And gillybears! Can you imagine me as a gigantic white bear diving into the waves? It's ridiculous!"

"That's what the Academy is for—to learn." Grandpa leaned over to take my hand. "Plum, your Grandma and I have been talking about this for some time. You are such a special girl, and that is becoming clearer the older you get. You have such a way with plants and animals. You talked to those fox bats, and now we finally get to our enjoy our mangoes."

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not like they *actually* understood me.”

“Well, you can’t spend your whole life here, being a farmer on this little island. You are meant to do great things. I know it!”

I looked at Grandma, but she had turned her back to me.

So they had been talking about me in secret? It would have been nice if they had let me in on this decision. I folded my hands in my lap. “Thank you, Grandpa, but I don’t want to go,” I said quietly.

“Plum, don’t be silly. Think of the opportunity—”

“I’m not going!” I stood up. “Grandpa, if I’m gone, who will take care of the garden? Who’ll take care of Tansy? Who will—”

Take care of you? I thought.

Grandma set the soup pot down on the table with a loud clatter. “Dinner’s ready.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. How could they expect me to eat when they had just turned my whole world upside down?

“I’m not hungry!” I yelled. I bolted out the door and into the night.

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