



R. A. MEENAN

**GOLDEN  
GUARDIAN**

THE ZYEARTH CHRONICLES

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## **Dedications**

To my as-of-this-moment unborn son, John. May you always know that I will always support you in your ambitions and goals. I love you, son.

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# **The Zyearth Chronicles**

## **Golden Guardian**

From the Color Collection

By R. A. Meenan

Starcrest Fox Press

## **Golden Guardian**

### **One**

No one truly knows how difficult the life of a soldier is until they choose to become one. The training, the knowledge, the battles, even the social structure. . . no form of media ever successfully paints that life. It's impossible to understand until you're in it.

Many people simply can't handle it. I can't say I blame them. I chose this life, and there are still times I want to leave it. The pressure to succeed consistently wages war with the feeling of inadequacy. And it's very easy to feel inadequate in this job. Especially when expectations are high, and you aren't meeting them.

Problem was, I wasn't meeting expectations.

And I had to. I was training to be a Golden Guardian. Third highest ranked soldier in the Defender military. I had to meet expectations. There was no other option. Only I didn't know how.

The Master Guardian did, however. And he was determined to ensure I met expectations.

Nothing could have prepared me for his plan to make that a reality.

The day he took action started out fairly normal. I had taken up residence at a long gray table in the Defender Academy's main cafeteria, trying to force down a plate of pasta and fruit. The sun glared at me, burning through the golden-brown quills on my head and heating my fur, reflecting its hateful rays at my white Defender uniform.

White. The color for someone who hasn't yet gotten their Gem specialty. Someone who hasn't activated their magic yet.

Someone who isn't meeting expectations.

As I poked at my lunch, the room filled with other Defender students and soldiers. Many still wore the plain black uniforms of a Defender in training, though most of the rookies were still in boot this time of year. Most others wore colors fitting their Gem's specialty. Teal accents for the elemental users. Navy blue for shielders. White accents for healers.

I glanced over at the healers. They were mainly support, dropped into packs to bolster shielders, elementals, and cloaklers, aka "the real soldiers." Healers were absolutely necessary to make the Defenders work, but they weren't well respected. No one really thought of them as real soldiers.

I was glad I wasn't going to be a healer. I was supposed to be an elemental, according to my family's long pattern of Gem specialties. I couldn't be a proper Guardian as a healer.

I chewed my lip, turning back to my food. Well. Perhaps that wasn't entirely true. My father had been a healer and a Guardian. One of the best around in both categories. But he was a fantastic soldier. Strong in mind and body. Sure, I passed the necessary physical tests to be a soldier, but I was no body builder. I needed an element.

I couldn't be a healer.

But I was taking too long to get my element. I was the only one in the whole room wearing pure white. It was so hard to ignore the stares the others gave me. Me, a future Golden Guardian, still without power.

"Hey, Izzy!"

I turned, perking my catlike ears up, and caught a glimpse of my adoptive brother and partner, Matt Azure. His white, blue-tipped quills and catlike ears bounced on his head as he crossed the room, and his teal accented Defender uniform was hard to ignore. He lightly tossed a tray full of food on the table and pulled up a chair across from me. He grinned. "Mind if I join you?"

I stared at him. Matt had earned his Gem specialty in high school nearly thirty-five years ago, at an age before most people were even bound to their Gems. One of the few benefits of being Black Bound, though Matt would likely argue that it was the only benefit. Far as we were concerned, being Black Bound only came with ridicule and fear from average Zyearthlings and impossible expectations from Defenders. Black Bound individuals were rare, and the benefits and drawbacks of being one were not well understood.

It did mean we had to learn Gem responsibility early. Most Zyearthlings got their Gems at age twenty. Matt had miraculously bound both of us when he was six and I was four after an event in my childhood I'd rather not explore.

Imagine explaining to a four-year-old how to take care of something as precious as a Gem. The magical object their life was now permanently bound to. The whole reason why I could be fifty-five years old and still look twenty, and why I'd live close to four hundred years.

The exact problem keeping me from meeting expectations.

Matt waved a furry white hand in front of my face. "Yoo-hoo. Zyearth to Izzy. You're spacing out here."

I shook my head. "Am I? Sorry."

"What's got you so broody?" Matt asked, sneaking a bite of pie off his plate. "That's not like you."

I shrugged. "You should know."

Matt swallowed. "Thinking about your powers again."

I poked at my pasta, but didn't say anything.

Matt shifted in his chair, his ears turning a soft pink. I couldn't tell if he was

embarrassed or just sorry for me. "You'll get there, Iz. Just give it time."

"I'm sick to death of giving it time," I said, flipping my ears back and crossing my arms. "I'm the only one of my year still wearing white. It's ridiculous."

"Well," Matt said. "Not the only one." He pointed to the cafeteria's entrance.

A tall, gray stag with bronze antlers and copper-colored hooves walked into the room and glanced around a moment before heading for the lunch line. Roscoe Wendigo. Just as Matt said, he wore white.

My face grew hot and I turned away, pulling my ears down. "Oh, Draso. He's not looking at me, is he? Tell me he's not looking at me."

Matt grinned and waved at him. I snuck a peek and caught him waving back. I glared. "You idiot."

"I think he likes you," Matt said, leaning his head down.

"Shut up," I said, though the blush grew from my cheeks to my ears.

"And I mean *likes you* likes you."

"Shut *up*, Matt."

Matt picked an apple from his tray and bit into it. "I'll refrain from commenting on my observations about whether or not his feelings are reciprocated."

"You better or. . . or you'll regret it," I snapped at him.

Matt's grin increased. "Niiiiiice comeback."

"Do you have to be such an ass?"

"Ooo, language!" Matt said, waving a finger and *tsk, tsk*-ing with an exaggerated snobbish look. He lowered his gaze. "Seriously, Iz. Why are you so nervous around him? You've known him since high school. We used to hang out all the time."

"That was. . . before."

Matt smirked. "Before you realized what a handsome young male he was?"

"Before he became a Captain," I shot back. "He's brilliant in everything he does. I'm sure he'll end up the leader of some top pack once he gets his Gem powers. He's got clout here."

"And you're going to be a Golden Guardian," Matt replied.

I leaned down, bending one ear back. "Not if my powers never kick in."

Matt frowned. "Izzy. . ."

"This seat taken?"

I sat straight up and looked to my left.

Roscoe stood there with a tray in his hands, smiling at me. Gosh, that handsome snout. Those big, shining eyes. Those soft, felted ears. That gorgeous voice. . . I clutched my fingers tight against my palm and forced what I hope was

a decent smile.

Matt leaned back on his hands. "Not at all! Have a seat, Roscoe."

I shot Matt a glare.

"Thanks." He took a seat. I prayed he wouldn't notice my blushing. "Seems like everyone's intimidated to sit next to the Golden Guardians, huh?"

"Future Golden Guardians," I mumbled.

Roscoe shrugged. "All the same to me." He took a bite of salad. "So, no luck on your powers yet either, huh?"

I frowned. "No. Not for my lack of trying."

"What power do you want?"

I shook my head. "If only I got to choose."

"Your family history kind of chose for you already anyway," Matt said. He turned to Roscoe. "Traditionally Gildspines have been either healers or elementals, and it always skips a generation. Izzy's up for elemental if history stays true. She even has her dad's Gem."

"Nice," Roscoe said, grinning. "You guys will match well."

"I dunno," I said. "Matt's wind powers allow for so many excellent fart jokes. I doubt mine will do the same."

Matt rolled his eyes. "Funny."

Roscoe laughed. "She makes a good point." He picked a little at his salad. "Though I do wish our powers would come through. Sometimes I feel so useless."

I frowned. *You're not alone, Roscoe.*

"Master Guardian, sir!" someone shouted from the front of the room. "Defenders, *attention!*"

As one, everyone in the room stood and saluted, a quick sweeping fist across the chest, heels snapped together. We all turned toward the front door.

Master Guardian Lance Tox entered the room. The leader of the Defender military and our country of Zedric. A rare white wolf, sporting ice manipulation and combat skills to match, Lance was probably the greatest Master Guardian ever to walk the halls of the Defender Academy.

For Matt and me, he was part terrifying boss, part doting uncle. We grew up in the Defender Academy, doing pretty much whatever we pleased. Lance had indulged all kinds of behavior that most Defenders probably found scandalous.

Matt secretly told me one time that he thought Lance did that because he wanted us to enjoy our childhoods before we joined the Defenders. The life of a Golden Guardian was extremely difficult.

I think he felt guilty for our parents' deaths and was trying to make up for them.

All that stopped when we officially entered the Academy though. He was still the doting uncle, but he also made it very clear that he was our boss. Our leader. There was no room for shenanigans anymore.

Lance crossed his arms behind his back and glanced out over the cafeteria through the small glasses resting on his long snout. As he scanned the room, he caught my eye.

I took a deep breath, but said nothing.

“As you were,” Lance said, his voice calming, but commanding. He stepped into the room. Everyone went cautiously back to their previous activities.

And Lance kept his eye on me.

“Oh, hell,” I muttered. “He’s coming this way.”

“Defenders,” Lance said, walking up to our group.

All of us leapt to our feet again in a smart salute and a sharp “Sir!”

Lance nodded. “At ease. Roscoe, Izzy, I was hoping I could have a word with the two of you.”

I exchanged a glance with Roscoe. “Uh, certainly, sir. What about?”

“Let’s take it in my office. If you’ll both follow me.” Lance turned to the door.

Matt perked both ears. “Sir?”

“I’m afraid this is a private matter, Matt,” Lance said. “Give us a moment.”

Matt frowned and glanced at me. “Um. Sure. Yes, sir.”

I offered him a small shrug.

“Thank you for understanding,” Lance said, then led us toward the door. A short walk later and we entered his office.

Small, plush, and old, the office sported comfortable wing-backed chairs, a heavy oak desk and walls lined with bookcases filled to the brim with books, memorabilia, and a handful of small statuary, including a foot-tall figure of our dragon god, Draso. His desk held a wire Gem holder, which he dropped his pure white Gem on, and an assortment of papers and computer tablets. All very neat and tidy. All perfectly organized.

It’s a good thing Lance never saw my room. He’d be scandalized.

Lance took a seat behind the desk as Roscoe and I sat in the dark red chairs.

“I know the two of you are worried that you’re falling behind without having your Gem specialties.”

I took a deep breath.

Lance let a little smile cross his black lips. “How would you like to accelerate your training and get them?”

A shot of adrenaline burst through my spine and made my fur stand on end. I had heard rumors about this before. Purposefully forcing a Gem to activate its

powers. I didn't know much about the idea, but what I did know was. . . dark. It was hard. Grueling. Dangerous. And often those that did it ended up in intense psychological therapy after the fact.

But those were just rumors. Right? Lance wouldn't actually do that. Not my doting uncle. And how could I pass up the chance to finally get my powers? Even if it was hard, it'd be worth it. I needed them. It was the only way to be a Guardian.

"Um. Yes, sir. Absolutely. I'd love to."

"As would I," Roscoe said. "Sir."

"That's what I like to hear," Lance said. His smile faded. "This will not be easy. You know this."

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"But we're up for the challenge," Roscoe said for us both.

"Good," Lance said. "Meet me on Lower Beach tonight at midnight and we'll get started."

"Yes, sir," I said. Roscoe nodded and the two of us turned back toward the door.

"One more thing, Defenders," Lance said, and we turned toward him. He lowered his gaze. "Please don't tell anyone. Consider this top secret, okay? I'll explain more tonight."

That was ominous. Was I making the right decision? "Um. Of course. Sir."

"See you both tonight."

We left the room and a shiver ran up my spine.

Roscoe rested a hand on my shoulder, doubling the buzzing feeling in my body. As if the ominous adrenaline spike wasn't bad enough. I looked up at him.

He frowned. "You okay?"

I rubbed my arms. "Nervous."

He squeezed my shoulder. "Same. But we'll be doing it together. We'll be fine. And we'll finally get our powers tonight."

"Yeah," I said. "Hopefully."

He gave me one more smile, then walked off, leaving me in the long hall. I watched him leave, still feeling slightly hot under my fur.

I tilted my head for one more cautious gaze at the door to Lance's office.

Lance wouldn't hurt us. I didn't care how dangerous things might seem. Lance would never put his people in danger. Especially not his future Golden Guardian.

But the buzzing in my bones wouldn't stop.

## Two

The sun had long since set by the time Roscoe and I met at the top of the cliff stairs leading down to Lower Beach. He gave me a smile, then waved me ahead of him. The walk down the steep stairs carved into the cliffs took longer in the dark, but we both made it down safely.

Several electric torches mapped out a large circle about two hundred feet from the bottom of the stairs. I exchanged a skeptical look with Roscoe, then we headed for the lights.

Lance stood in the center of the torches, a grim look on his face.

And a sword in his hand. Images of ancient rituals and bloody sacrifices floated through my brain, exaggerated to the point of outlandish fiction, with the darkness and my imagination urging it on.

I swallowed hard.

“Thank you both for meeting me,” Lance said. He pasted his ears back. “I’m sorry it has to be under such difficult circumstances.”

“If I may ask, sir,” Roscoe started. “What are we doing here?”

“We’re hopefully going to convince your Gems to activate,” Lance said.

“Yes, but,” I started, frowning. “How? Why here? Why in the dark under torch light? What do we even have to do?”

Lance’s tail stopped its slow swish. “That. . . is not an easy question to answer.” He leaned his sword against one of the torches. I eyed it nervously. Lance took a deep breath. “We really have no idea what causes a Gem to activate in a way that grants an extra powerful specialty to its user, despite thousands of years of research. Not all Gems do, as you know. Most Gems don’t. But Gem-bound individuals in decidedly dangerous situations are more likely to develop one. It’s why soldiers, military personnel, and specifically Defenders, who undergo some of the most strenuous training on the planet, tend to be more likely to get one.

“This means though, that in order to force a Gem to activate a specialty magic, you need to be put in dangerous situations. Hence the darkness, the soft sand, the late hour. All things designed to make you uncomfortable.”

I frowned. Designed to make us uncomfortable? What was he going to do to us?

“Starting tonight, we’ll be working on a special kind of training. In which you face me, two-on-one, in true combat. Battle-ready swords. No protection. No help. No healers nearby. It’ll be as real as being on a real battlefield.”

My heart stopped. Facing off against the Master Guardian? Alone? In the

dark, on the sand, late at night, with no help?

And no healers? What if I got hurt? Could. . . could one of us die? The thought of Roscoe dying on the ground, blood spilling on sand. . . Chills ran down my body. I tossed a glance at the gray stag next to me, almost surprised at the fact that he was perfectly safe and healthy, what with my imagination running wild.

Could Lance really do that to us?

Roscoe's jaw dropped. "Sir, you can't be serious."

"I am, unfortunately," Lance said. "Izzy, Roscoe, I cannot stress enough how dangerous this exercise is going to be. You will be in real danger here." He took a heavy breath. "But this is the only way we know how to force a Gem's activation. It's treacherous. It's scary. And yes, it has the potential to be deadly, though I hope it doesn't come to that."

I didn't like that he didn't say he'd try to prevent the deadly side. Just that he hoped it didn't come to it.

There was no safety in this situation.

"I won't force you into this," Lance said. "If you're not comfortable with it, we won't go through it. It won't do any of us any good if you're not willing. But know this." He glanced at us over his glasses. "You've both been out of the Academy program for quite some time. You've been doing the work of soldiers for years. You've already faced dangerous situations. Statistically, your Gems should have activated already. Since they haven't, it's very likely they won't without the extra push. This may be your only option." He eyed me specifically.

I gritted my teeth. He meant that I was running low on time to be eligible for Guardianship. Because if I didn't have my Gem specialty, I couldn't be one.

He said he was giving us the option. He meant this was our last chance.

"Sir," Roscoe said quietly. "Could you give us a moment?"

"Certainly," Lance said. "Take as long as you need."

In my shock, I barely registered Roscoe's words. It wasn't until he slipped an arm across my shoulders and led me down to the water's edge that I noticed we had moved. I clung to his calming, musty smell, his gentle touch, his soft fur, his shining eyes. I needed that.

Roscoe faced me. I could barely make out his face in the dim light. I frowned at him.

He frowned back. "What do you want to do?"

*I want to leave, my mind screamed. I want to forget this. I want to wait. I want to do anything I can to avoid watching you get hurt.*

*I want my powers, another voice echoed. I want to help Matt. I want to be a worthy Golden Guardian. I want to stop waiting.*

I chewed my bottom lip. "I don't know."

"You want your powers," Roscoe said.

"But if he hurts you. . ."

Roscoe perked a long stag ear. "If he hurts *me*? What about if he hurts you?"

I felt a blush come on and turned my head, grateful that I couldn't possibly show it in the dark. "I . . . I don't know. But I . . . I don't want to see you get hurt. Or . . . worse."

Roscoe smiled, and squeezed my shoulder. "I appreciate it." I didn't stop him when he pulled me closer to him. "Honestly. . . I feel the same. I don't want to see you hurt either. But Lance was pretty clear. We aren't likely to get our powers on our own. We need to push. As hard as it might be." He patted my back. "I'll be right here with you."

I knew Roscoe finally noticed my blush when his smile widened. But I kept the frown. "But is it worth it?"

"Is it?"

I released a slow breath. Matt and I needed several more years as ranked soldiers before we were eligible to apply for Guardian status. More years of dangerous missions, helping people on the field, and supporting each other and other members of our military. Matt already had his power, and had an expert level of control over it and had proven time and time again that he was excellent Guardian material.

And I had nothing. I couldn't contribute to the team. I couldn't support Matt on the field.

I couldn't be a Golden Guardian.

"Fine," I said. "It is. I have to be strong. For the Defenders, and for Matt."

"I agree," Roscoe said. "We'll do this together."

Somehow I managed a smile. "Okay." Roscoe slipped a hand into mine and squeezed. I squeezed back, then turned us back around to the circle of torches.

Lance faced us both. "Your decision?"

"We'll do it," Roscoe said.

Lance smiled. "Good." He pointed to the sandy circle in the center of the torches. "Let's warm you up. Grab a sword and get in a little practice."

Roscoe walked over to the sword rack just outside the circle, then lifted a piece. He frowned. "Sir, these are also battle-ready."

Lance nodded. "They are."

I picked another sword. "You want us to use battle-ready weapons against you?"

Lance lifted a brow. "Will you feel confident otherwise? A sharp broadsword against a fencing foil?"

“Well, no,” I said, frowning. “But what if we seriously hurt you?”

Lance smirked. “If either of you can get a serious hit on me without a Gem power and in these conditions, then this is a pointless exercise and you’d both be ready for the jobs you ultimately hope to have in our military.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “It’s two against one.”

“Yes,” Lance said. “And I’m the Master Guardian for a reason. Now face each other. Get some warm up in.”

I flattened both ears. “Wait. You want us to warm up with the battle-ready swords?”

“Nothing about this is safe, Izzy,” Lance said. “Not even warm up. It won’t work otherwise.”

I eyed him warily, then turned to Roscoe. He nodded at me, and raised his sword.

Lance held up a hand. He looked back and forth between the two of us. “Do not hold back. Concentrate on your Gem, your life force. Focus your strength into it. Think about how it will protect you and weave that into your self-preservation. That’ll make it activate. Understand?”

I didn’t answer, but I did understand. To a degree. I tried picturing Roscoe as an enemy. Maybe I could make him into the seniors that sprayed me with black paint the year before I graduated high school, or one of the red-colored quilar that took my home from me when I was four. He even growled and bared his teeth, adding to the effect.

But his soft smell and warm touch lingered in the back of my mind.

Lance drew his hand down. “Go!”

### Three

Roscoe lifted the sword and swung it down hard. I held up the flat of the blade and blocked, then kicked at his legs, trying to knock him off his feet. He leapt over me and swung again, this time at my left side. But he swung weakly, and I easily blocked.

He left his leg exposed and I went to stab at it, but an image of blood welling up from a wound penetrated me. At the last moment, I stopped myself and aimed at the copper-colored hoof instead, missing him completely and burying the tip of my weapon in the sand.

Roscoe whipped around, attempting to take advantage of the opening I left. But he faltered and tripped instead, falling to his knees.

This was getting us nowhere and I knew it. Lance let us go at it for almost an hour, each swing slightly less deliberate and slightly more pathetic than the last. If anything, this was quite the workout. Sweat beaded on my forehead and soaked my fur and uniform. My arms ached and my legs throbbed, trying to hold back Roscoe's heavy swings.

"*Halt!*" Lance finally called, and both of us dropped our blades. I leaned on my knees, letting the sweat rain down on the sand below. Everything ached. I was done.

"Good start," Lance said. He lifted his blade. "But now you face me."

I nearly collapsed. Was he kidding? "Sir, I'm worn out."

"Me too," Roscoe gasped.

"A perfect time to face me then," Lance said. "Exhaustion increases the danger."

"But--"

"The point of this exercise is to make it dangerous," Lance said. "Nothing about battle is safe. It's the same situation you'd be in if you were on the battlefield. Now face me."

I wanted to scream at him and walk off. But he had a point. Now really was the perfect time. I picked up my sword, forced my back to straighten, and took my place next to Roscoe. With difficulty, I lifted my blade. Roscoe followed my example, lifting a shaking arm.

Lance took his place on the sand and raised the broadsword. Without warning, wearing a battle-hardened glare, he swung at Roscoe's side.

I gasped, and jumped to Roscoe's aid. Together we managed to block Lance's attack, but the force of the blow reverberated through my weapon and up my arms. It was like my very bones were trying to rattle into pieces.

That's when I realized this was a double problem. Not only would I be concentrating on keeping myself safe, I'd also be worried about keeping Roscoe safe. I mentally reached for my Gem. This better be worth it.

Lance didn't let up. He swung at me next and I barely had the time to block. His swing was so powerful that I nearly fell over.

Together, Roscoe and I held Lance off for nearly ten minutes. Every muscle screamed at me. Sweat poured down my face, blinding me, stinging my eyes and throat, and I gasped for air. Roscoe wasn't any better off. Dodge. Block. Attack. Parry. Jump. Run. All if it happened so fast, it was nearly impossible to keep up. My heart threatened to leap right out of my chest, and panic set in.

And then the inevitable happened. Lance swung down at my head and when I moved to block, I slipped in the sand and fell, losing my weapon. Lance didn't stop.

"No!" Roscoe threw himself in front of me, holding up his sword, but he wasn't quite quick enough. He managed to hit Lance's blow away, but the broadsword caught Roscoe's shoulder and ripped through flesh. Blood splattered over the sand, one of the torches, and my uniform, and Roscoe cried out. He fell to the ground, clutching his damaged shoulder.

All heat left my face. "Roscoe!"

Lance dropped his sword and fell to Roscoe's side. He pulled Roscoe's hand away and examined the wound, frowning.

"Superficial," Lance said. "You'll be fine." He stood. "I think that's all for today. Izzy, can you get Roscoe to the hospital ward?"

I stood, shaking, and helped Roscoe to his feet. "Y-yeah."

Lance bent both ears back and his frown worsened. "I'm sorry it has to be like this, you two. It's one of the most unpleasant duties I have as Master Guardian. If it ever becomes too overwhelming, we can always stop."

No, we couldn't. I knew that now. Intimately. If all my training, all my time as a soldier, and this incident combined didn't activate my Gem, it was going to take something utterly miraculous. And we were desperate. That was obvious.

We had no choice.

"Yes, sir," Roscoe said, still gripping his arm. "I think we're up for it."

Lance smiled, but he kept both ears pasted back and his tail between his legs. "Good. Get to the ward. The healers will fix you right up. Five AM tomorrow okay? Back here again. We'll try something different."

My heart sunk. Five AM? After this level of exercise at midnight? Throw in lack of sleep to add to the danger, I suppose. The thought terrified me.

But I couldn't give up.

"Understood." I saluted, barely able to lift my arm to chest level, and left

with Roscoe.

Roscoe and I rushed to the hospital ward as fast as he could move. The nurses took him immediately.

“I’m staying with you while they heal you,” I told him.

Roscoe frowned. “I’ll be fine. Go shower.”

“But--”

“Izzy,” Roscoe said, lowering his voice. “Look at yourself.”

I glanced down. My white uniform had been stained an ugly red. Roscoe’s blood. I shivered.

“Go shower,” Roscoe said. “I’ll be fine.”

“We’ll have him fixed up in no time, Ms. Gildspine,” a nurse added. “Go take some time for yourself.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, then turned to Roscoe. “I want to stay here.”

Roscoe reached over with his good arm and clutched my hand. “I’ll be fine. Go clean up. I’ll see you in a bit, okay?”

I sighed, defeated. “Fine. But you better come find me. Superior’s orders.”

He chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

I entered the locker room and claimed a shower. The water ran sweat and frustration off my body.

And Roscoe’s blood. The realization made me shiver.

Was this really what I had to endure for the next several weeks? Fighting for my life? Drowning in Roscoe’s blood?

And it was all that damn Gem’s fault.

I shoved down panic and forced myself to calm down. I wasn’t really drowning in Roscoe’s blood. The wound was superficial after all. The healers would have it taken care of in no time.

But what if it had been bigger? We were at least a ten-minute walk from the hospital. What if Lance had hit a vein, or severed a hand, or cut through bone? Ten minutes from a healer was a long time. One of us could die.

I shook my head. Lance wouldn’t let us die. Not really. He wouldn’t really try to hurt us. Right?

But Lance insisted on the danger. It had to be that way to make things work. He meant business. I could tell by the look he wore on his face. That alone unnerved me. He looked ready to kill. Is that how he looked on a real battlefield? I pushed the image from my mind and turned off the shower.

What had we gotten ourselves into?

## Four

I dressed in a spare uniform and left the locker room. Roscoe waited outside, looking much better now with his wound healed. The healers didn't even leave a scar. He even looked freshly showered, his gray fur shining in the artificial light from the various streetlights.

It had been a long time since I had felt so much relief. I swallowed my fear and forced a grin. "Hey, Roscoe. All better now?"

Roscoe nodded. "Yeah. They fixed me up real good. You doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said. He eyed me. I blinked, then sighed. "No, honestly, I'm not. I'm unnerved."

Roscoe rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah. Same."

I perked one ear. "But hey, I can say I faced against the Master Guardian and lived to tell the tale."

Roscoe chuckled. "I have a feeling you'll have a whole book of stories like that before this is over." His face softened. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

I relived the event in my mind. The frantic fighting, the constant fear, the adrenaline barely keeping me steady, and Lance's look of bloodlust. I pressed both ears back.

"Not at all," I said. "But I'm going to try for more than one day. I can't give up that easily."

Roscoe smiled. "That's the spirit." He glanced around a moment. "So. . . heading for bed I suspect?"

I nodded. "Considering we're getting a five AM wake up call, yes."

"Well, then." He hooked my arm around his and led me away from the locker room. "May I walk you home?"

A blush made its way to my cheeks, but I didn't care. I leaned gently into his shoulder. "Certainly." We headed for my home in Academia Towers, arm in arm, where I shared an apartment with Matt and our adoptive father Jaymes Fogg. I enjoyed every brush of Roscoe's soft stag fur.

Oh, well. If I was going to have to endure hardship and pain to get my Gem's power, at least I was doing it with someone I cared for.

Matt was waiting for us at the Academia Towers, sitting on a decorative rock right outside the tall apartment building. He was slumped over, looking completely exhausted.

I frowned. "Matt?"

Matt looked up and it seemed to me like he suddenly relaxed. "Izzy, thank Draso! Where have you been? It's nearly 2 in the morning!"

“Sorry,” I said, suddenly regretting the fact that I couldn’t vent about the situation to Matt. Imagine having to keep something from my lifelong partner. “Lance. . . Lance kept us a long time.”

“Oh?” His gaze rested on my arm draped around Roscoe’s and he smirked. “Are you sure that’s the only thing you were doing?”

I flushed and slid my arm out from Roscoe’s. Roscoe stepped away from me and took a sudden interest in the dark night sky. Matt just laughed.

I glared. “Yes, that’s the only thing we were doing.”

“I believe you.” Matt grinned. “So what did Lance want anyway?”

Roscoe and I exchanged looks.

“We, ah, can’t say,” Roscoe said. “Lance’s orders.”

Matt eyed him. “Sure.” He jerked a thumb behind him. “We should head home, Iz. Dad’ll kill us both if he finds us out this late.”

“We’re adults,” I said, rolling my eyes. “We can stay out as long as we want.”

“Try telling Dad that,” Matt said with a big grin. He lowered his gaze at Roscoe. “And Roscoe?”

Roscoe frowned. “What?”

“You’ll take good care of her, right?”

My face flushed. Heavenly Draso, he had to bring this up now? That jerk! I chanced a glance at Roscoe.

The gray stag stiffened and I could almost feel his body heat up. He shifted from hoof to hoof. “Um. . . yes, of course.”

Matt smiled. “Good. I wouldn’t expect anything less. Come on, Iz.”

I bit my lip. If Matt was going to come out in the open with this, I might as well run with it. “One moment.” I turned to Roscoe, and before I lost my nerve, reached up and kissed his cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Roscoe.”

The insides of Roscoe’s ears turned pink and his shining eyes widened. “Um. . . yeah. . . sure. Uh. Thanks, Izzy.”

I only smiled at him and followed Matt inside. The moment we were in the elevator, I turned on Matt. “You asshole.”

Matt wasn’t fazed. “What?”

“Why did you do that?”

Matt shrugged, a mild smirk on his face. “I just asked a question.”

“But of all the questions in the world, Matt--”

“It got you to kiss him finally, didn’t it?” I didn’t have any words for that. Matt grinned, ears perky. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

I blushed and pressed myself into a corner of the elevator. “Thanks.”

“So what did Lance have you guys do anyway?”

I shook my head. “We really can’t say. We’re sworn to secrecy. And in fact,” I lowered my voice. “Don’t tell Dad we’re meeting with the Master Guardian. I know Lance told me not to say anything, but you know Dad won’t let that stop him.”

Matt laughed, nodding. “My lips are sealed. For real this time.”

I smirked. “Right.”

## Five

That first night of training set the tone.

The next morning, before the sun had even risen, Lance had us running up and down the beach while he blasted sharp iceballs at us. The day after that we dodged arrows, hoping to get the Gem to shield. By week's end, we battled him two-on-one, with no help. Him with his broadsword and ice powers. Us with piddly rapiers.

"You call that an attack?" Lance had shouted at me, catching my rapier in a wall of magic ice. I tried to pull it free, but Lance dove forward with his weapon aimed at my head.

Roscoe slid between us, blocking the attack, snarling. He pushed against the Master Guardian, but Lance pushed harder and knocked both of us to the soft beach sand, my rapier still stuck. As we scrambled to get to our feet, Lance flushed a wall of ice spikes at us. One of ripped right through Roscoe's leg, threatening permanent damage.

That had been the end of that session.

Roscoe's damaged leg was the first of dozens of injuries. Within the span of two weeks, both Roscoe and I had visited the hospital with broken bones, ice-slashed flesh, cuts, abrasions, cracked ribs, concussions, and a variety of other issues. I was nimbler, so I managed to avoid the worst of it physically, but watching Roscoe take injury after injury wore on my psyche. Fear for Roscoe, fear for me, fear about death meant that panic gripped my heart before every session.

"Roscoe, look out!" I dove between Roscoe and a flying ice spike, barely able to shatter it with my battle hammer. We hadn't even made it all the way to the beach before Lance started in.

Screw the pathetic swords. I wanted my personal weapon.

Roscoe flew back, but scattered ice pierced his shoulder.

But we didn't have time to look at the damage. Lance chased us down the rest of the steps with ice spike after ice spike.

That session ended with an ice shard through my foot.

But despite everything we had gone through, we still saw no sign of Gem specialties.

By the start of the third week, Lance started surprising us, popping up as we walked the campus, tossing ice balls at us in our own rooms, and ambushing us when we least expected it.

The first occurred while I was walking toward the cafeteria for breakfast.

Without warning, a massive ice shard had burst through the ground, nearly taking my head off. I shrieked and ran for the cafeteria, unarmed and unable to defend myself. The shards chased me all the way there. Every time I turned, I caught a quick glimpse of Lance following, baring his teeth, growling, feral.

He only stopped when I entered the public space of the cafeteria. Left no traces of his attack.

My nerves were shot. Who knew when Lance would strike next? I was never safe. Ever. I became so jittery that I started carrying my battle hammer with me everywhere I went and keeping my Gem close at my side, desperately hoping that it would finally realize that I was in danger and just *do* something.

But nothing happened. I had never been more frustrated.

By the start of our second month, I was beginning to lose hope. What if this didn't work? What if I was just stressing myself out for no reason? The stress ate away at me so badly that at times it was hard to eat and even harder to keep food down.

Before the start of the fifth week, I sat at my computer, my battle hammer at my side, desperately trying to focus enough to write an email.

*Knock, knock.*

I leapt to my feet, brandishing the hammer, glaring at the door. Matt stood there, frowning. "Hey, Iz. It's just me."

I noticed my heavy breathing and calmed it a little. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Matt said, then shook his head. "No, Iz, it's not fine. What has you so on edge these days? You look like you're prepped to fend off an attack at any moment."

I dropped my hammer and sat back down, willing my body to calm. "I'm fine."

"You're not," Matt said. He dragged a beanbag chair over and sat next to the desk. "Talk to me. If not me, then who?"

"I'm fine, Matt," I snarled, glaring at him. "Just leave me alone."

"Is Roscoe threatening you?"

The very idea that Roscoe, sweet Roscoe, who had injured himself on multiple occasions trying to protect me in these dangerous games, threatening *anyone*, was enough to send me over the edge. "Are you freakin' kidding me? Roscoe would never do anything like that!"

Matt narrowed his eyes at me. "Is Lance?"

I opened my mouth to protest, but the words choked in my throat and all I managed was a squeak.

Matt sighed. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Matt--"

“Don’t,” Matt said, holding up a hand. “I have an idea about what he’s doing. He’s trying to get your Gem powers to activate. Am I wrong?”

I sighed, my body shaking. When was the last time I had trembled like that? “No, you’re right.”

“And I’m assuming Roscoe is doing it with you. He’s got that hunted animal look in his eye.”

“...Yes.”

“Any luck then?”

I wanted to say it was working. I wanted to say that there was a good chance that I’d get my powers. That it wasn’t affecting me as badly as it looked on the surface. But as much as I wanted to say these things, I couldn’t believe them. “Not so far, no.”

“Izzy.” Matt took my hand in a way that only an old friend can. “I know you want to get your powers. But is this really worth it? You’re killing yourself.”

“That’s an exaggeration, Matt.”

“It’s not and we both know it,” Matt said. “I’m honestly surprised that Lance hasn’t stopped this nonsense already. But I suppose you guys don’t want to think that this was all for no reason.”

I sighed. “No.”

“Look,” Matt said. “I won’t stop you. I’ve known you too long and you’re too dang stubborn for that. But I’d like you to give yourself a deadline, so you know when to stop.”

I frowned. “But what if nothing happens by the deadline?”

“Then you stop and find another way to get your powers,” Matt said.

“But how am I supposed to support you?”

“Izzy,” Matt said, his look growing serious. “You’ll be no use to me as a partner if you’re dead. Or driven mad by this exercise. Or so stressed out that you can’t function. There’s a reason why we don’t try to force Gems to activate. It’s psychologically damaging.”

*But I’ve come so far! I can’t quit now!* I gave a noncommittal mumble.

Matt frowned. “Just. . . take care of yourself. Okay? Don’t make me pull the Roscoe card.”

I lifted a brow. “The Roscoe card?”

“I’ll tell Roscoe that I’m worried about you and he’ll make you stop.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “And you’d think I’d listen to him?”

“I think he’s the only zyfaunos alive right now that could convince you to back down, and that includes me, when I thought I’d always be able to convince you to stop doing stupid things,” Matt said, eyeing me. “So don’t make me pull it.”

I sighed dramatically, trying to convince Matt that I'd set a deadline. Though I had no intention. I had come too far to let this go to waste. "Fine."

"Good." He gave my hand a squeeze and left the room, leaving me alone to stew in my own stress, trying to think of a way to prove to Matt that he didn't need to pull the Roscoe card.

But it turned out, Matt didn't need to.

The next morning, after a grueling midnight session with Lance in the dark, Roscoe found me in the cafeteria, desperately trying to convince myself to eat something.

"Izzy," Roscoe said, glancing over my small frame, his voice grave. "You aren't eating."

I swallowed, trying to keep what little food I had eaten down and hide my discomfort. "What do you mean? Of course I'm eating."

"You're not," Roscoe insisted. "You're skinny as a rail. Look at you!" He pointed to my bare side. I was in the habit of wearing tube tops on days when the uniform wasn't required, but the way he pointed made me instantly regret the decision to do so that morning. "I can see your ribs."

"I've got food right here. See?" I shoved a bite of toast in my mouth. It took an enormous amount of effort to force it down my throat.

Roscoe sat next to me and gently wrapped an arm around me. My face grew hot as he tapped my side. "What?"

He eyed me.

Then I realized he was counting ribs. I pasted my ears back. "Alright. I see your point."

"Do you?" Roscoe said, frowning at me. "Then what's my point?"

"That I'm not taking care of myself."

"No," Roscoe said. "That this is killing you. Izzy, if you're so stressed out that you can't even get yourself to eat. . ."

Everything inside me screamed protest. I wanted to shout at him, tell him he was stupid, refute everything he was telling me and get back to this difficult task of eating while Lance still gave us the moment of peace to do so.

But Matt's voice rang in my head. His worry. And with Roscoe telling me the same thing, it was hard to ignore it. Maybe Matt was right. Maybe Roscoe was the only person I'd listen to about this. I let out a long sigh. "No. You're right. Matt pointed it out too."

Roscoe stood. "I'm going to Lance. We're done with this."

"No, no!" I shouted, grabbing his arm. That wasn't the reaction I wanted. I needed sympathy and encouragement, not a flat refusal to continue. "I'll set a deadline. Let's try just one more week."

“You’ll be nothing but skin and fur by next week.”

I gave him my best puppy dog eyes. “Please, Roscoe. I don’t want all of this to be for no reason. Just one more week. If we don’t get anything, I’ll stop.”

Roscoe rolled his eyes. “This is against my better judgment, but. . . fine.”

I heaved relief. “Thank you.”

“But only if you eat.” He sat down next to me. “I’m not leaving until you eat that whole plate and prove to me that you’re going to keep it down.”

I stared at the eggs, toast, and hash browns on my plate, my stomach churning. Glancing over Roscoe and his loose shirt, I frowned and pushed the plate between us.

Roscoe narrowed his gaze at me. “Izzy. . .”

“Help me finish this,” I said, before he could protest further. “Before I have to start counting your ribs too.”

Roscoe frowned, running a hand over his side. He picked up a piece of toast and bit down. “Fair enough.”

## Six

Two hours later, my stomach still fighting to hold on to breakfast, Roscoe and I hiked down to the beach to meet Lance. The hike took more out of me than I wanted to admit. I tried keeping my face neutral, for Roscoe's sake.

It didn't do a bit of good. Not once Lance saw us.

The white wolf furrowed his brow, frowning. He tightened his grip on the large sword he held. "Izzy--"

"One more week," I said, before Lance or Roscoe could protest further. "Matt and Roscoe made me promise to set a deadline for this."

Lance raised an eyebrow. "You told Matt what we were doing?"

"He guessed," I said. "I can't keep anything from him and you know it."

Lance tilted the corner of his mouth up in a smirk. "A blessing and a curse. He'll make a good partner for you. Fine. One more week. But after that, I'm dropping it." He glanced over our sunken bodies. "You two won't take much more of this. That's obvious. Roscoe, get your sword."

I gripped my battle hammer tight, waiting to defend Roscoe if Lance sprung while he retrieved his sword.

My instincts were right. The moment Roscoe had his back turned, Lance sprung. I darted forward and smashed my hammer into his weapon, blocking him from getting any nearer to Roscoe. Roscoe snatched the sword up too, and whipped it around, swinging hard at Lance's head.

Lance leapt back and smashed his fist on the sand, sending up a flurry of ice spikes, which caught Roscoe's blade.

And so the battle began. Being the nimbler one, I danced around at Lance's feet, keeping his mind on my quick movements as Roscoe closed in on him for an attack. Working together, we managed to corner Lance at the edge of the water within seconds.

Lance wasn't going to stand for that, though. He turned toward the water and formed a path of ice over the surface, dashing across it. I darted after him, Roscoe on my tail.

But as soon as Lance was a safe distance away, he waved a hand and the ice disappeared out from under our feet. We both sank below the surface.

In a mad scramble, I threw my hammer toward the beach, underwater, knowing it would drag me under if I held on, then swam as hard as I could for the surface. Who knew what kind of crazy thing Lance would try here?

I got my answer before I ever hit the surface. Spikes of ice flew underwater at me, blasting down from the surface like arrows. Dodging them raced my

heart, and for a few seconds, escape seemed impossible. But I wouldn't let him win. I forced myself to ignore the fear of the spikes and pushed my way to the surface.

The moment my head popped out from the water, Lance roared at me, feral and terrifying. He waved his hand at the surface of the water and ice slashed across it aimed right at my head.

A pair of hands pulled me under. We disappeared underwater for a brief moment before rising up again, away from the spiked ice. Desperate to get to a place where I had a better vantage point, I swam harder than I ever had toward the shore. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Roscoe. A thin, icy frost covered the tips of his copper antlers, but he seemed otherwise unhurt.

My hammer had embedded itself in a sand hill right near the edge of the water and I snatched it up as I hit land, whipping around to defend myself against Lance. The white wolf had already created a long path of ice and was rushing toward us, blasting spikes at us. Roscoe smashed several spikes away with his sword, his face a mask of anger and frustration.

Cold, wet, and already exhausted, I knew I'd be little help to him. And we had only been at it a few minutes. Maybe this had been taking a bigger toll on me than I had realized.

Lance finally reached the shore and he ran around us, back toward the cliffs, forming a wall of ice spikes around us. Roscoe and I managed to break the top spikes off it, but we would be buried behind it soon if we didn't do something.

Roscoe fell to one knee, worn out. He snarled. "Enough of this!" He smashed a hand to the sand.

The moment Roscoe's hand hit the sand, the familiar whine of a Gem echoed over the shore. The ground underneath us shook, ready to break apart, and a huge chasm opened up in front of him. The gash in the sand raced after Lance, smashing his ice wall to pieces.

All my exhaustion disappeared in a moment of elation. Roscoe did it! He got his powers! Earth manipulation! There was no questioning it.

Lance's eyes widened and his jaw dropped in surprise at the racing chasm. He waved a hand, panicky, blasting ice spikes through the air.

And he aimed them straight at Roscoe.

Roscoe stared wide eyed and held up his hands to shield himself. Several slabs of rock burst forth from the ground and the ice spikes embedded themselves into them or shattered to diamond dust.

But one escaped. One large piece of ice slipped between a gap in the rock slabs. And it caught Roscoe square in the chest.

Roscoe fell to the ground, gasping, clutching at the horrible wound in his

chest as blood spilled out and soaked his shirt. The rock slabs disappeared back into the earth.

All my elation gave way to panic. “*Roscoe!*” I ran to him.

Lance followed, his eyes wide with uncontrolled panic. “*Medic! Here, now!*”

My secret suspicion that Lance always had a healer on hand while we did this was confirmed, as two Defenders came whipping out behind a large rock on the beach.

But they’d never make it in time. Roscoe’s inner ears already looked pale and his gasping grew more frantic. His eyes grew wide, his pupils no larger than pinpricks.

I didn’t think. I couldn’t. I had to do something. I ran to him, grabbed his hand, and pressed my free hand to his chest.

The sound of a Gem whine came back and light burst from my palm. I watched in shock as the thin, long ice spike in Roscoe’s chest pushed its way out of his body. The hole it left behind closed itself up and Roscoe’s breathing returned to normal. He coughed once, bloody, then again, clear. He ran a hand over his chest, staring, then turned to me.

“You healed me, Izzy.”

I sat down hard on the sand, glancing at my fingers. Roscoe’s blood covered the tips, mixed with an odd black substance, too dark to be mud. Blinking, I ran a hand over Roscoe’s wound.

But it wasn’t there. It really was gone. The shirt now had a gaping hole in it, but his fur and flesh were fine. There wasn’t even a scar.

Relief washed over me like a warm bath and I gripped the remains of Roscoe’s shirt, shaking. He wrapped an arm around me and held me tight. My whole body buzzed as the adrenaline ran itself out. My breath came in shudders.

He was alive. He was okay. I had healed him.

I had healed.

I was a *healer*.

The relief blew away like dandelion seeds on the wind and shock rose in my chest.

I. Had. Healed.

My Gem had finally awoken. I finally got my powers. And it wasn’t elemental like it was supposed to be. It wasn’t following my family’s history properly. It wasn’t a strong super power.

It was healing. It was *healing*.

Before I even knew how to process this new information, Lance trotted over with the two Defender healers at his sides. They both helped Roscoe up and checked him over for more wounds. The circle of blood he left on the sand was

the only evidence that anything had happened.

“Well,” Lance said. “About time. Congratulations to you both.”

But the shock prevented me from processing anything more.

## Seven

“So. I’m a healer.”

Matt, Roscoe, and my adoptive father, Jaymes Fogg had surrounded me at the dining room table. I hardly noticed them. The shock still swam through me. I didn’t know how to process it. All I could do was grip Roscoe’s hand.

Roscoe. I had healed him. I clung to that. I saved his life. Healing wasn’t worthless. I knew that. I knew I could be a Guardian even with it. My dad was. He was one of the best.

So why did this feel like failure?

Matt gripped my shoulder, frowning. “There’s nothing wrong with being a healer, Izzy. You complement me that way.”

I took a shaky breath. “I know. I know that.” I shook my head. “But I’m not *supposed* to be a healer. My dad was a healer. I’m supposed to be an elemental.”

Dad sat next to me, drawing one of my hands into his fire-red one. “Is okay, Izzy,” he said in his broken accent. “Is good! Healing is strong.”

I knew that too. Healers were necessary. And my power was apparently very strong. Roscoe should have died.

He should have *died*. I saved his life. I stared at him, and that impossible, gorgeous face of his.

He smiled at me, still gripping my hand. “I suppose I should thank you. I guess I forgot in all the excitement.”

I pressed my face to his chest and said nothing. His musky smell clung to me, masking my disappointment. I knew I had saved his life. If I hadn’t gotten healing, he’d be dead now.

But healing still felt like defeat.

It wasn’t good enough. *I* wasn’t good enough. I couldn’t be good enough without something offensive. I wasn’t my father. I wasn’t strong.

I still wasn’t meeting expectations.

Someone knocked on the door. Dad stood up to go get it.

I gripped Roscoe’s shirt. “I’m glad you’re okay. I can’t put that feeling into words. If I. . . if I hadn’t gotten healing. . .” I gripped him tighter. Images flew past my mind. The ice in his chest. The blood. The gaping wound. His broken, gasping face. The thought that I’d never, ever, ever, get to hold him again, smell his soft scent, feel his gray fur.

The tears came slowly. I couldn’t tell if they were for Roscoe or my powers. Maybe a bit of both. “I just don’t understand. Why did my Gem break pattern? I even have Dad’s Gem. I know he was a healer, but his father had this Gem before him and was an elemental. I just don’t get it.”

“Izzy?” Dad’s voice broke my concentration. “Someone to see you.” I lifted my head.

Lance stood next to Dad, ears flattened, black lips turned down in a frown.

For a brief, hateful, terrifying moment, I blamed him for my Gem powers going wonky. If he hadn’t been so quick to attack when Roscoe’s powers broke through, Roscoe wouldn’t have been in such danger. If Roscoe hadn’t been in danger, my Gem wouldn’t have had to manifest healing. I could have my elemental power.

But I knew that was wrong. That was grief speaking.

Who knew it was possible to grieve over something that was supposed to be so positive? Especially when my powers had saved someone so close to me?

What the hell was wrong with me?

Everyone moved to stand and salute, but Lance waved his hand. “No need. Today I’m the Doting Uncle, not the Master Guardian.” At my confused look, he gave a slight smirk. “I know you’ve never called me that outright, but Jaymes tells me that’s one of the names you have for me.” He held out a hand. “Walk with me?”

I blinked, trying to force the tears away. “Okay.”

Lance walked with me down the beach where we started the whole thing. He kept his ears slightly flattened and didn’t meet my eyes. “Didn’t get what you were hoping for.”

Thinking of Roscoe’s near death waged against my worry about my power’s potency, I didn’t know how to answer. I just shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Lance lowered his gaze. “You’re not happy with healing.”

I formed fists. “I don’t. . . I don’t know.” I glanced down at my hands. “I saved Roscoe’s life. He’d literally be dead if it wasn’t for my powers.”

Lance pasted his ears back and let out an uncharacteristic wolf whine.

I tried to ignore it. “But healing is useless in battle. I’ll never be able to support Matt correctly. I’m not a body builder like my father. I can’t. . .” I forced back a sob as I finally came to the root of the problem. “I can’t be a strong Guardian.”

Lance said nothing. The sob kept fighting my throat, desperate for escape as we continued down the beach.

I was right then. I couldn’t be the Guardian I wanted to be. That I needed to be. Lance’s silence answered for me. I wasn’t good enough. I wasn’t meeting expectations.

What was I going to do?

“You know,” Lance said. “It’s been nearly two hundred years since I became Master Guardian.”

I frowned. "And?"

"If and when you and Matt are inducted into the Guardianship, you'll be my third pair of Golden Guardians." Lance shook his head. "Third generation Guardians even."

My ears flattened. He wasn't lying. His first pair had been mine and Matt's grandfathers. Our fathers came after that. Then us, if we were lucky.

"You may not know this," he continued. "But I am the only Master Guardian to have this issue."

I blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Previous Master Guardians have only had one set of Golden Guardians. Two, if the previous set retired. Injury and early retirement is common for Golden Guardians. But I'm the only Master Guardian to have lost two sets, in a row, to death." He lowered his head as we walked. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel like a failure. Like I wasn't meeting expectations."

I stopped walking.

"I'll be honest," Lance said, stopping too. He faced the waves and dipped a naked, clawed toe in the water. "I'm terrified at the thought of you and Matt going into the Guardianship. I failed your grandfathers. I failed your fathers. What if I fail you two as well?"

How could Lance feel any form of failure? He was the Master Guardian! The leader of a military and country! He stood above everyone here! The thought was incomprehensible.

"You didn't fail them," I said. "They died doing their jobs. Fighting the good fight. They died being Guardians."

"Which is something I can take pride in," Lance said. "They died for the right reasons, if there really is such a thing. They made choices as Guardians and paid the price for it. But I was in charge. I feel like I failed them. That's a feeling that will likely never go away." He turned to me. "Sometimes I feel inadequate as a Master Guardian."

I pasted my ears back. "You shouldn't."

"And neither should you feel inadequate because of your powers," Lance said.

I perked both ears.

"Look, Izzy," Lance said. "I know this job is hard. Nothing can truly prepare you for it. And it's easy to feel like a failure. You will have many periods where you feel that way. It's simply part of the job. But the one area you should not feel like a failure in is in your power."

"It's weak," I said, splaying my ears.

"It absolutely is not," Lance said. "Your father was a healer and frankly, he

was one of the greatest Golden Guardians who ever lived. History tells us that.”

“But Dad was a body builder,” I said. “He made up for his weakness.”

Lance lowered his gaze. “Your father never thought of healing as a weakness. He held on to that as a strength. The greatest strength. Because he could support his team in a way no one else could.” Lance faced me. “You have already proven yourself capable of the same thing. If you hadn’t been there when I hit Roscoe. . .” He winced, baring teeth and splaying his ears. “He’d be dead. Plain and simple. The healers I had on standby would not have gotten there fast enough. Your quick thinking and newfound powers saved his life. Don’t devalue that.”

“I . . . I’m not,” I said. “I know I saved his life. I . . .” I rubbed my arms. “I can’t imagine what would happen. . . if he died.”

“I don’t even want to think about it.” Lance took a deep breath. “I know healing isn’t what you wanted. But that doesn’t mean it’s not valuable. It doesn’t mean you can’t support Matt. And it certainly doesn’t mean you can’t be a strong Guardian. Assuming that’s what you still want with me as your Master Guardian.”

“I . . . I can’t imagine answering to anyone else,” I said. “And not just because you’re the doting uncle. I trust you.”

“And I trust you too,” Lance said. “Especially now that I’ve seen what you can do.” He gripped my shoulder. “We can make this work. We will make this work. And you’ll be ever better than your father.”

“I’m not sure I want that,” I said. “But. . . I could make him proud I guess.”

“Good,” Lance said. He smiled. “Honestly, I think your father is smiling down on you. He’s excited for your powers.” Lance’s smile turned to a smirk. “And frankly, if he saw your reaction to getting healing powers, he’d probably roll his eyes and tell you to stop being such a wimp.”

I pasted both ears back. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Lance perked both ears. “If we’re okay then, we should get you back to your young stag.”

I blushed. “He is not my young stag.”

“Tell him that,” Lance said grinning. “Come on.” He turned for the cliff stairs.

I watched Lance walk off, then stared down at my hands.

I did not want healing powers. I didn’t see how they could help me support Matt. Not in the way I expected to. I didn’t see how they could make me a good Guardian.

But. . . maybe I could be a good soldier. A good healer. Soldiers could be healers too, despite what other Defenders thought. Maybe I could still meet expectations, even if the expectations changed.

And maybe. . . maybe Roscoe was “my young stag” after all.  
I could live with that. I turned and followed Lance up the cliff.

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When I got home, Dad and Matt were in the living room. Matt glanced at me with a flattened ear and a frown, but I waved him off and smiled.

Roscoe was still there, sitting on the large oak table in the dining room. He stood and perked up when I entered, but he frowned. “Izzy?”

I took a deep breath. If Roscoe was. . . “mine”. . . then there was no backing down. I crossed the room, wrapped an arm around his neck, and pressed my lips to his in a quick kiss.

He blinked at me, stunned. “Uh. . . um.”

I hugged him around the neck, burying my face in his fur, taking it all in. I almost lost this. I’d never take it for granted again. “I’m glad you’re okay. And I’m glad I was able to help you.” I leaned back and looked him in the eye. “I’m grateful I got healing. More than grateful. Lance said if I hadn’t been there. . .”

“I know, I know,” Roscoe said. He wore a sheepish look, then slipped his arms around my waist. I didn’t bother hiding my blush. “Maybe. . . we could, ah. . . talk about it at dinner tonight? Just you and me?”

I smiled. “I’d like that.”

“Get a *room*, you two,” Matt quipped from the living room, but he grinned. Dad nodded his approval as well.

The life of a soldier is not easy. It’s full of difficult expectations, heartache, and failures. These are inherent to the job and I’ll never truly escape them.

But even if I couldn’t escape them, that didn’t mean I had to deal with them alone. And with Roscoe and Matt at my side, I knew I could face them, even with my healing powers.

And who knows? Maybe they might come in handy some day.

## About the Author

R. A. Meenan was born in London during the golden age of science fiction, but somehow time traveled to the Modern Era (some say a mad man with a blue box was involved). She was dropped on the doorstep of a house owned by anthropomorphic cats and though they were disappointed she didn't have furry ears and a tail, they took her in to teach her the ways of elemental magic. After setting fire to her furry cat friends' tails one too many times (final score – fire: 2612, cat's tails: 0) they called an exterminator and sent her out on her way.

Now an adult (physically, not mentally), she ride-hops intergalactic military spacecraft, combing the outer reaches of space and time, writing science fiction and urban fantasy stories based on her experiences. She's also hoping to find the perfect cup of coffee and a better way to grow dinosaurs. Humans kind of look at her funny, but she's managed to make herself an honorary ambassador for furry and anthropomorphic aliens and space dragons.

She carefully feeds and brushes her wonderful husband Joe and the pair have four furry children (which are really cats, but don't tell them that). She also spends her spare time teaching essay-writing haters, molding them into people resembling Actual Students and Lovers of English.

She may not win the hearts of stiff military men or students who want good grades for no effort, but she certainly captures the spirit and imagination of time travelers, magic users, nerds, Students-In-Training, and fantasy lovers. Welcome to her nonsensical world. We hope you like it here.

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## Glossary

**Faunos:** Anthropomorphic creatures, usually based off of Earth animals, either real or legendary. Scientists on Earth and Zyearth believe that faunos probably evolved from feral animals with the help of Draso, the creator god, though nonbelievers have different opinions on the matter. All faunos have similar DNA and genetic structures and many species can interbreed, though hybrids are extremely rare. All faunos, regardless of the Earth animal they evolved from, give live birth, though not all infant faunos suckle milk.

**Zyfaunos:** Zyfaunos are a specially defined subspecies of faunos. All zyfaunos have similar characteristics – plantigrade or near plantigrade legs, human stance structure in the spine, humanlike eyes and sometimes lips, generally short snouts, and have humanlike, five fingered hands. Zyfaunos range in height between about 4'5" to 7' tall. All zyfaunos can interbreed regardless of the individual's species. Unlike most faunos, zyfaunos are not always “traditionally” colored, and often have unnatural colors in their fur, such as red, blue, green, purple, and others. Zyfaunos are the most human of all faunos and even share some human DNA. Though relationships are rare, humans and zyfaunos can produce children. Zyfaunos are named as such because the DNA strain originated from the planet Zyearth and Zyearth has the most pure forms of this species.

**Quilar:** Quilar are perhaps the most unusual of all zyfaunos, as it is unclear what Earth animal they evolved from. They have several key characteristics – catlike ears and snout, including wet noses, slightly humanlike lips, though usually black or dark pink, humanlike feet and hands, tails, and quills of various lengths on their head in place of hair. They range in height from about 5'4" to 6' for shorthair quilar and 6' to 7' for longhair quilar. Quilar quills are hard, though not usually sharp like a porcupine or hedgehog. Instead of fingernails, quilar have tiny retractable claws on each hand. These claws are not very sharp and are mainly used for scratching. Quilar also do not have any “traditional” colors. Their fur and quills tend to have very vibrant colors, such as blue, green, purple, and others. Some quilar are two toned and have a mixed of different colors, but this is a rare anomaly. Longhaired quilar and shorthaired quilar have differing characteristics.

**Longhair Quilar:** Longhair quilar have slightly longer, coarser fur and shorter quills on the head. These quilar also have slightly more catlike feet and a long, bent, rigid tail. Their ears are also slightly different, as they are bent

slightly backwards and cannot perk up the same way a normal cat's ears can. Longhaired quilar are rarer than shorthaired quilar and are almost exclusively limited to the Athánatos population.

**Shorthair Quilar:** Shorthair quilar have very short, very soft fur and generally longer, thicker quills on their heads. Quilar are the most humanlike of all faunos. Human-faunos relationships usually involve a quilar.

**Focus Jewels:** Focus jewels are found on many different planets throughout the universe. The term refers to any jewel that can be bound to a user's skin, soul, or life force that grants supernatural powers. Sometimes focus jewel power only grants simple powers, such as long life, but others exhibit more extravagant powers, such as elemental power, cloaking (the ability to hide a user from view) or healing.

**Lexi Gems:** Lexi Gems are focus jewels bound to the user's soul and grants users several powers. Average Gem users are granted long life (up to four hundred Zyearth years), basic shielding, which is used mainly for cooking and preventing injury from heat and sharp objects, and slow aging. Advanced users develop "Gem Specialties." There are a variety of specialties that users develop. The most common specialty is healing, followed by elemental fabricators and manipulators, and a select few specialize in cloaking. Users are usually granted only one specialty, though a rare few have two. In the case of a duel specialist, both specialties are significantly weaker than those in a single specialist.

Lexi Gems are usually about the size of a user's fist. Gems often take on the colors of their users in one of several forms, but they lose their color when their user dies.

**Ei-Ei Jewels:** Ei-Ei Jewels, like Lexi Gems, are focus jewels and are the source of magic and power for a member of the Athánatos tribe. Ei-Ei jewels are small and they are fused to the skin of the user just around the edge of their eyes. Ei-Ei jewels also come in pairs. Each eye has one set of the pairs. There are three jewels, but all of them work together to properly function.

The first jewel, the Mind Jewel, is yellow, representing the sophia flower, a symbol of wisdom. This jewel set keeps the user's mind fresh and free of deterioration. They even protect against mind aging issues like Alzheimer's and dementia.

The second set, the Body Jewel, is red, representing the purity of blood and flesh. This jewel set keeps the body from deterioration. Athánatos tribe members

are immortal because of this jewel, but they are not invincible.

The final set, the Soul Jewel, is the color of the user's eyes, representing the user's soul. This jewel set keeps the soul pinned to the body. Together the three sets make the user immortal.

**Defender:** The Defenders are a military group run by a small country called Zedric on the continent of Yelar on the planet Zyearth. The Defenders were originally created as a small private military designed to protect those who need protecting, but after a large scale war broke up the continent into smaller countries, the Defenders attached themselves to a new and neutral country. They still help defend the defenseless, though they also run international and intergalactic missions designed to protect their assets as well as the defenseless. Since the country is small, the army is small, and they generally try to avoid war or fighting as much as possible.

**Guardian:** Guardians are an essential part of the Defender army. Guardians are high ranking, highly trained individuals that perform tasks that average Defenders aren't trained for. There are two important types of Guardians.

**Master Guardian:** The role of Master Guardian is usually held by two people at the same time, often a former Golden Guardian pair. Master Guardians have a dual task – he or she is both the head of the Defender army and the leader of the country of Zedric. Master Guardians are chosen by the lawmakers, called the Assembly, a group of thirty zyfaunos that have been voted into office by the general population. The Assembly can vote anyone in, but they typically vote for high ranking army personnel, such as the Golden Guardians. Master Guardians must be smart, strong, courageous, and influential. Master Guardians are usually in office for life, though there are checks and balances that can remove a Master Guardian if the assembly feels like he or she is not properly performing duties, and some Master Guardians choose to retire. Master Guardians are generally considered by most Defenders to be the most powerful zyfaunos of their time.

**Golden Guardian:** Golden Guardians are a team of two Defenders specially trained to handle delicate situations and attempt to prevent all-out war that would make an intervention necessary. They are typically the first people to visit unsettled countries or groups of people. Golden Guardians are selected by the Master Guardian of their era, and are given an extra five years of special training beyond typical Defender training. Traditionally, Golden Guardian teams have always been composed of a member of the Azure family and a member of the Gildspine family, with few exceptions. There is a belief that there is something

special in their line that makes them especially adept at being Guardians. Usually the team has one healer and one elemental user, and the two Guardians usually share the same gender, but sometimes these conditions differ.

**Defender Pendant:** Defender pendants are worn by all Defenders, regardless of their position in the army or Academy. They carry holographic identification cards and are the most common means of communication among Defenders. The pendant also carries several symbols. On Zyearth, a legless dragon is a sign of peace, so the Defenders made the legless dragon the center of their pendant. The dragon's neck is tucked under, a classic move that prevents strangulation in battle. This represents defense. The outstretched wings are a sign of openness and welcome. Finally, the Gem at the dragon's side represents the world of Zyearth, since all native Zyearthlings are bound to Gems.