

The Guardians

Mary Cumbie

I am not heartless.

I am not malicious or contemptuous.

I am not the monster everyone thinks I am; the one that only cares for herself.

But I am human; flesh and bones with a heart that has been dropped carelessly and broken many times, by people I thought I could trust. I remember the day one of them broke my heart and I lost one of my best friends. I had just gotten the results from my ranking test, the test that determined what I would do with the rest of my life, and I was happy because I had been given one of the most prestigious positions in the Commune. Things were going perfectly and I was a guardian, the leader of a whole unit of people. Everything seemed so right.

I remember running downstairs excitedly; to the room where my best friends and I agreed we'd all meet after the test. All my friends were there, waiting and talking... everyone except for my best friend, Jonathan. I didn't have a clue where he could be.

"Hey, guys." I said, "Did you guys get your scores back?"

"Yeah," my friend, Laura, sighed sadly. "Anna's a magnate and Jason and I are guardians."

"Wait! Are you actually disappointed?" I laughed, "Only you, Laura Walters, could be disappointed over being a guardian. We're at the top of the system; we'll be living like kings and queens for the rest of our lives. I know we're not prime ministers or something, but, seriously, Laura, how could you not be excited?"

“Don’t bother asking her why.” My friend, Jacob, walked closer to the group. “She’s been this way since she came in here this morning. I think our two lovebirds had a bit of a spat last night.”

“Really?” I asked, “What did Jonathan do this time?”

“It was probably something small, like forgetting to open the door or carry her books for her or something.” My cousin, Anna, smirked, “Laura, he’s your boyfriend, not your slave. I mean, Jacob has never opened the door for me in my life.”

“It’s not that at all!” Laura exclaimed. “I hate how you all make it seem like I’m such a jerk to him! Have – have you guys seen him yet today?”

“No,” Jacob answered, “He’s been so busy studying he hasn’t had any time to hang out or anything. Why do you ask?”

“He – Jonathan – wanted me to blow off the test today and purposefully flunk.” Laura started to pace back in forth while she spoke. “I told him I wouldn’t and he broke up with me. He was being totally ridiculous! I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

“He asked you to flunk the test?” I asked, “But that’s ridiculous! He knows how important this is to you! And he himself was studying all weekend! I can’t believe him!”

“Talking about me?” A voice said from the doorway. It was Jonathan. He didn’t look like himself at all; he looked sad and angry, two things I had never known him to be. He walked to the rest of our group and said. “I suppose you all have been chosen as guardians.”

“Yes, we have.” I said, “Except for Anna, she’s a magnate. Isn’t it amazing?”

“Yes, amazing.” He sneered, “I’m common rank. I don’t need everything passed to me on a golden platter.”

After that, everyone knew our friendship with Jonathan was over. Just by his manners and conversation, you could tell he was convinced all people of higher rank were evil, including me. It no longer mattered that we had been best friends since we learned to walk; I was nothing more than an enemy to him now. It hurt a lot.

The morning bell rang to tell me it's time to get up and wake up everyone else in the unit. I didn't want to wake up, but I walked over to Jonathan. He was the first person I had to wake up every day; the first person to glare up at me every morning. He looked peaceful and I could almost imagine he was the same boy I used to be friends with all those years ago, but he isn't at all. He's changed so much since back then. He's become rebellious and some days I wish he wasn't even in my unit. He hates me now; me and every other person of high rank. No matter what he thought of me or how often I wished I didn't have to put up with him, it was time for him to get up. So I shook him softly and said, "Jonathan, get up. It's almost time for breakfast."

He groaned. "It's too early to get up."

"Well, I'm up." I responded. "Jonathan, hurry up! If we're late, trust me, there will be consequences."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized that what I said sounded like a threat. I didn't mean it that way, but I can't take it back now.

"Whatever." He sneers, "I'll get up now, but know that I'm not scared of your 'punishment'."

"Okay, Jonathan. I'm sorry for what I said, okay? Just make sure everyone's ready by the time I get back with Rachel, okay?" I turned around to go help Rachel, the

youngest girl in my group. She was the youngest in the unit and needed lots of special attention.

“Yeah, sure,” Jonathan said, “but you really should get her help.”

“Help?” I asked. “How does she need help?”

“Ruth, I know you’ve heard her. She coughs practically every night and she can barely even stand up on her own. She needs help and I’m sure there’s some good medical agency that will –”

“Will what? She’s fine,” I said. “I can take better care of her here than any old medical agency.”

Jonathan shook his head like he didn’t believe me. He didn’t understand; the agencies that the Commune could afford were worse than prisons. I would never let Rachel go there.

“That’s a lie and you know it,” He said. “You’re selfish, you know that. Will it really hurt your reputation that badly if one child in your unit needs medical care?”

“She’s fine.” I said, coldly. “Hurry along; It’s almost time for breakfast.”

After that, I walked own to Rachel’s room. She was already up, playing with her dolls happily.

“Good morning, Rachel.” I said, “You’re up early this morning.”

She smiled, “My legs woke me up. They’re hurting me again.”

“Really?” I asked, “You haven’t put any pressure on it, have you?”

Rachel looked at the floor, guiltily.

“Did you, Rachel?”

“Well, I know I shouldn’t have, but Thomas asked me to play tag with him and... well, I really wanted to and... you know, Ruth.”

“Oh, Rachel,” I shook my head. “You know you shouldn’t be running. You could really hurt yourself.”

“Okay, Ruth.” She said, “but can I ever run again?”

“Wait until after your ranking test.” I told her, “after that you can do whatever you want.”

Breakfast time came and I decided not to sit with my unit. Ruth was sitting with some girls her own age and there was no need for me to stick around.

“Ruth?” Anna asked. “Ruth! Are you there?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry, just thinking.”

“Wow, that’s a change.” Anna laughed, “Are you sure you’re okay? You’ve seemed so depressed lately.”

I sighed, “I’ve just been feeling stressed. I think I may transfer to another base sometime. My whole unit hates me and nothing I can do will change that.”

“What about Jonathan? Has he gotten better?”

“No, he’s still on his whole ‘guardians are evil’ rampage where I’m the prime target.” I forced a smile, “It doesn’t matter, though. I won’t have to deal with him today, anyways, seeing as he’s been assigned work in the garden today.”

“Really?” Anna asked, “I can’t believe it. I’ve got to supervise the work done in the garden today. Oh, gosh, I am so not in the mood to put up with him.”

“Put up with who?” A voice asked behind me. I turned around to see Jacob.

“Jonathan.” I answered, “Don’t worry, Anna. I’m pretty sure Laura got the garden shift too, so you won’t be by yourself.”

“No, she won’t.” Jacob said, “A last minute guardian meeting. You, me, and Laura all have to go.”

“Darn.” Anna sighed, “No offense, Ruth, but I hate working with your unit.”

“So do I,” I answered. “Jonathan’s turned them all against me. They’re convinced all guardians are evil and that my only care is how highly I’m ranked as a guardian. Sometimes I think they’re all just set on rebellion.”

“Knowing Jonathan, they probably are.” Jacob agreed, “He can persuade anyone to do practically anything. I don’t know how he didn’t get chosen to be a guardian or magnate or anything, he’d probably be the best one the world’s ever known.”

“Yeah, he probably would’ve.” Anna agreed, “But it doesn’t matter anymore. He’s set against us and hates our guts.” She stood up and smiled, “Well, anyways, I’ve got to get ready for work today. Later.”

“Wait, Anna. I’ll come with you.” I said, “I’d better get ready, too. I’ll see you at the meeting, Jacob.”

The heading “Disciplinary issues in the Chamenos unit” greeted me in bold writing as I picked up the meeting’s agenda. The Chamenos, my unit, were out of control, but I didn’t think it was *this* bad.

“What’s going on?” I asked, “Since when did we start discussing unit issues at meetings.”

Laura looked uneasy. “Look, Ruth, it’s nothing against you, but your unit is full of troublemakers. We *have* to do something... for the good of the colony!”

I just stared at my best friend in shock.

“We wanted to tell you, Ruth, but you’re stressed and ... you know.”

“Oh, well, what a load off my shoulders.” I quipped sarcastically.

A hammer sounded on the table, interrupting our conversation.

“Order, order,” The supervising magnate said at the other end of the table. “Okay, good morning, today. If you have looked over the morning agenda you will see that the topic is the Chamenos.” I tuned the magnate out. He didn’t understand. He couldn’t. He didn’t know Jonathan.

“Um, excuse me, sir.” I said, quietly. “When did the Chamenos become such a point of great importance that we’re actually discussing them in a supposedly crucial meeting? Talking about them just gives them the satisfaction they crave.”

“Their cause? Miss...?” The magnate looked down at his sheet, “Ah, Miss Smith. That explains things, doesn’t it? You lead the Chamenos group, don’t you?” As he said this I could feel the heat rising to my cheeks. He thought it was my fault, like I wanted the government and the whole squad to fall.

“Yes, but I - ”

“You what?”

“Sir,” Jacob said, quickly. “I’ve known Ruth since first year schooling and I can tell you with full confidence that she is totally devoted to this country and this base and would never have anything to do with the Chameno problem. Jonathan Waltz is out of

control and he's been stirring up rebellion since he flunked the ranking test. Even such a qualified man, such as yourself, would have trouble controlling him."

"So you are saying nothing can be done?"

"No, not at all. Jonathan has always had a bit of a soft spot for talking, I believe that if Laura, Ruth, and I go to try to persuade him we may be able to change his mind. Please, sir, give me a chance."

Rachel, Jacob, and I walked in silence for a few minutes. I didn't know what to say at all. My emotions were all in a jumble right now. I didn't know whether to be mad at Jacob and Laura for not warning me about the meeting or thankful that Jacob covered for me.

"Ruth," Jacob said, interrupting my thoughts. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, sure. What is it?"

"Well, Laura and I were talking... and Anna, too, and, every time we see you, you look so upset. Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, you look so depressed." Laura agreed, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine." I said, "I'm just feeling a bit stressed right now."

"It's more than just Jonathan, isn't it?" Laura asked, "There's something else; too, isn't there?"

"I told you, I'm fine."

"What's wrong?" Jacob asked, "Whatever it is, Ruth, Laura and I can help you. Don't you trust us?"

“I’m just sick of Jonathan, I suppose.” I shrug awkwardly, “It doesn’t really matter. After this he’ll either chill out or leave for good. It’s too late to do anything now.”

We were at Jonathan’s door now. Jacob lifted up his hand and knocked on the door. As we waited for the door to be opened, we could hear footsteps walking towards the door. The door opened, then, and Jonathan appeared at the door.

“Sorry to wake you,” Jacob said. “But we need to talk. May we come in?”

The look on Jonathan’s face showed that he obviously didn’t want us in his room, but it was against the law to deny a guardian, much less three, access to your quarters. There was a long silence before he spoke.

“Actually,” Jonathan said, “I was just about to head out. Could you stop by later.”

Jacob frowned, “This is important.” And Jonathan opened the door a little wider.

“C’mon, girls,” Jacob said, “We’re going in.” He grabbed Jonathan by the arm and we all proceeded to inside the bedroom.

Jonathan’s room was rather bleak. It was empty and cold and bare. There was a suitcase on the bed with a little girl sleeping on it; Rachel.

“Jonathan! What is Rachel doing here?” I asked, angrily.

“I’m saving her life.” Jonathan said sarcastically, “No, she deserves more than you giving her the cold shoulder.”

“Excuse me.” I said, louder now than before. “You’ve never even been to an agency before. They aren’t like those crystal clean hospitals you see on TV. They’re cold, like a prison, and darker than you could imagine possible. Maybe if you’re rich it’s okay, but for a young, poor child from the Commune it’s a nightmare. Trust me, I remember when I broke my arm and I was sent to what the ‘infirmary.’ I was only twelve at the time

and I thought I would die down there; sometimes I still have nightmares about it. No one deserves to have to go there, especially not someone as sweet and innocent as Rachel.”

“Yeah, right,” Jonathan sneered. “You’re a guardian. You’re all the same; you’re all selfish and lie and do whatever else you have just to get your way. I don’t believe you and I’ll never stop trying to help Rachel. I don’t care what you say or what you do.”

“Why you...!” Jacob lunged forward and, for a few seconds, I almost thought he was going to punch Jonathan. “Ruth, you don’t have to put up with him. We could report him for insurgency just for this!”

“It’s fine.” I answered. “Why don’t we all just talk through this? Um, Jonathan, why don’t you start?”

“With what?” He asked.

“How about with why you hate anyone of higher rank and why you’re so sure that I’m always wrong.” I said, “We haven’t done anything to you. Why did you change so much after the test?”

“The day you all took the ranking test, I tried to talk to all of you, but none of you had time, none of you except for Laura and she just ignored everything I said. I never thought a stupid, old test was more important than our friendship.”

“Oh, excuse us for actually wanting to amount to something in this world!” Laura yelled, “I thought our *relationship* was stronger than that!”

“I could never date someone like you!” Jonathan sneered, “I could never trust a guardian after I had seen what the power does to a person. Remember my brother? The one we all used to look up to? Guess what I saw him doing the day before the test? Abusing his power; bullying an innocent child. Later I asked him about it and he told me

that it was the ‘duty of a guardian’ to ‘discipline’ the boy. I couldn’t believe how much he had changed, so I swore never to trust anyone of upper ranks again. I kept to my word, so I couldn’t trust any of you anymore. You couldn’t be my friends and I’m glad it was that way, because slowly you’ve become as cruel and cold as my brother. You say you have reasons, but you don’t. You say you aren’t cold or selfish, but you’ll turn me in as soon as I walk out of this room. Go ahead, report me. I’m leaving now.”

He began to walk out of the room when I called him, not because I wanted to, but just because I felt like that was what I had to do.

“Jonathan!” I called. He turned and looked back at me for a second and then spoke.

“What is it?”

“We’ll miss you.”

He looked at me for a second like he couldn’t believe me. I was letting him walk out those doors without a fight. He smiled and then said, “Thanks. I’ll miss all of you here, too.”

I saw him walk out those doors and I never saw him again. Sometimes I wish I had gone with him, given up being a guardian for good, but life isn’t like that. I had a responsibility here; someone needed to lead the Chamenos unit and make sure Rachel was taken care of. Sometimes I think of Jonathan and wonder where he is now and if he still hates me. I guess that’s just another thing I’ll never know.