

# The Contest

A Guardians of Reyth short story  
prequel

By  
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*The Lord of Light created the universe and filled  
it with light, but where we have light, we also  
find shadows.*

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All characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons living or dead is coincidental.

# The Contest

## Part 1: Da's Offer

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"I'm boooored!"

Eight-year-old Crystu, sitting at a table in her family's luxurious private room, glared at the pile of dust in front of her.

"Can't I do something more interesting, Mei-mei?" she asked, although she could guess the answer.

Queen Elish put down her book.

"Have you completed the exercise?"

Crystu shrugged.

"It's gold."

Elish stood up to see, her red satin robes rustling as she moved.

"It's gold *dust*, Chrissie; it's *supposed* to be a gold cube. You can't move on to anything more interesting until you can do this successfully."

"But it's boring!" Crystu insisted.

"So is listening to you complaining, yet here I am!" The queen shook her head. "Chrissie, life is full of boring things that you must do before you can do the interesting ones."

Crystu felt the tingle that told her that her mother was using magic. The dust on the table shimmered and reformed as a cube.

Elish moved the cube to the side and picked up another wooden cube from the nearby box.

“Try again. You’re focusing too much on the material and not enough on the shape. That’s why it’s disintegrating.”

Crystu sighed. Her mind was half in the sky today but, unless her mother relented, she could go nowhere until she had finished her practise.

She took the wooden cube, studied it, looked at the one her mother had made and back at the one in her hand. She imagined a nice shiny gold cube and released her power into the image. The wooden cube in her hand shimmered and changed into an almost perfect gold cube. She had even remembered to make allowance for the change in weight.

For a second, she felt elated, then she realised her mistake and her face fell.

“Mei-mei, my fingers are stuck inside it.”

Her mother’s face twitched suspiciously, as though she was trying not to laugh.

“Reform it. This time with your fingers on the outside.”

Trying hard not to panic, the young princess again pictured the cube in her mind. This time she added a clear image of her fingers around the outside before she sent her magic into the cube.

“I’ve done it! Look, Mei-mei, I’ve done it!” She held the cube up proudly, her boredom forgotten.

“So you have.” The queen smiled. “Now do it again.” She nodded towards the box of wooden blocks.

Crystu reached eagerly for another, but before she could try again, the door opened. Her father, King Tarek, walked in.

“Light! That ceremony was long! I wish I could have crept away early like you did!” he said as, with a sigh of relief, he tossed his crown and heavy fur robe onto the nearest chair. His thick, black, curly hair was squashed in where the crown had sat on his head, and he ran his fingers through it a few times as he headed to the decanter on the shelf.

“Dear! Treat them with a little more care.”

Elish picked the robe off the floor where it had fallen, folding it lengthwise before draping it neatly across the back of the chair. She laid the crown carefully on a side table.

“Da! Look! I did it!” Crystu waved the gold cube at her father.

Tarek smiled.

“Show me.”

Crystu nodded. A moment later, she smiled with pride at another gold cube.

“Well done, Chrissie, and perfectly timed because I have some news for you, but there is a condition,” Tarek said, pouring himself and his queen a drink before sitting beside Elish.

“News? What news?” his daughter asked.

Tarek grinned.

“I’ve agreed the date for Rededication Day – it’s two days after your birthday.”

Crystu gasped. She would be nine years old. She would be old enough for the games!

“Lady Aren says you are ready to enter the archery contest,” her father continued.

Crystu squealed with excitement; she so badly wanted to enter that contest!

“The real one? Not the baby one?”

“The real one. You’ll be competing against apprentice Soldiers, and a few other apprentice Sorcerers and Sorceresses, up to the age of fifteen. You’ll be the youngest. But, as I said...” He wagged his finger.

“There’s a condition,” Crystu finished. “What is it?”

Tarek looked at her and she just *knew* what he was going to say.

“I want to see much better grades in your transmutation and your illusion exams. I want you back at the top of the class where you belong. I never again want to hear Lady Aren tell me you’re not trying. You are not just an ordinary Sorceress; you’re a Rykatu, and you must master your magic Gifts, all seven of them. If you want to compete, you will get good grades in the exams next month. You must improve at dreamwalking, shapeshifting, transmutation, and illusion. You can’t even *start*

Life Studies until your visualisation skills are considerably better than they are. Good grades or no contest – do you understand?”

Crystu nodded.

“Yes, Da.”

“Good. Study, get good marks, enter the archery contest and win it. Show those apprentices what you can do. You’ll be their commander one day, so start impressing them now.”

Crystu nodded again. Then she grinned, threw her arms around her father’s neck, and kissed him.

“Thank you, Da. I will.”

She turned to look at the box of wooden cubes.

“Ten more, then I’ll go do the visualisation exercises Lady Aren gave us yesterday.”

She had wanted to spend at least some time practising eagle flying, but shapeshifting could wait; she had exams and a contest ahead.

She intended to succeed in both.

## **Part 2: The Long-Haired Boy**

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Crystu was happy. Even having to spend hours reading about the history and growth of Tyreen's Protectorate Kingdoms couldn't dent her good mood.

She sat alone in an alcove of the school library, making notes, and checking facts, and wondering why anyone needed to know in what order, exactly, the kingdoms were founded. Surely all that really mattered was that they existed and that her people protected them?

Even that nonsense could not stop her excitement.

Yesterday had been her birthday. She had spent all morning in a beautiful silk dress, red with gold dragons all over it, participating in official birthday ceremonies thrown for the king's eldest child.

Then, in the afternoon, she had changed into the simple leather trousered outfit she preferred for every-day wear, and she, some friends, and her family had translocated to a distant field for a simple picnic. They had eaten cake, played ball games, climbed trees, and she had loved every minute of it. Even her younger brothers, Chrys and Allar, had managed to not be annoying, which was a miracle.

In two weeks' time, her non-magical exams would begin, so she had to study for them today, but her marks in her magical exams had been



everything her father had wanted. That meant Da had said that tomorrow she could compete in the archery contest for apprentices. She would not officially become a full apprentice Sorceress until after the rest of the exams, but she was close enough to it now to be allowed with parental permission.

Rededication Day was a celebration of the day her people, the Guardians of this world of Reyth, had recommitted themselves to the Lord of Light and to the defence of their world. There would be music, games, contests, special food, lights, magic, plays, and... She ran out of things to list.

Da wouldn't allow her to enter any of the magic contests, which she reluctantly admitted was fair because she *was* a Rykatu, which meant that she had all seven magic Gifts, and they were stronger than those of her peers.

Da said that she could enter any non-magic contest that she wanted, so she had decided to enter one running race in the morning and the archery contest in the afternoon. She could compete on an equal level with the other youngsters in those. She was so excited that she swung her legs under the chair and grinned happily.

The library door creaked as it opened. Rustles, footsteps, and muffled laughter disturbed the silence as the newcomers entered.

Older apprentices by their voices, they settled in the next alcove and, after some discussion, began working through some magic exercises. Crystu took little notice, despite the slightly distracting tingle across her scalp when they used magic. The door opened again and more joined the group.

“Did you know that Princess Crystu will be in the archery contest tomorrow?”

Hearing her name, Crystu looked up.

“How do you know?” That was a calm, quiet voice, deeper than the first.

“They’ve posted the lists. You’re in it, Tam, and Karan. So am I.”

“Good. I look forward to it.”

Crystu could almost hear the smile in the deeper voice.

“Didn’t you hear me? The *princess* is competing. This could be our chance to make friends with her. She’s a Rykatu. One day she’ll have to choose a Warrior to be her Ponfour and I want to be in with a chance. We should let her win.”

Crystu gasped. She stood up quietly and tiptoed to the obscuring bookcases. There was a narrow gap at the end, between the bookcase and the wall, through which she could just glimpse some of the group. They looked about thirteen or fourteen years old and were all wearing the uniform of apprentice Soldiers.

“Let her win? Why would we do that?” A new voice sounded startled. That was a tall thin boy who probably came from a southern town, judging by his very dark skin.

“She’ll be happy and we’ll have made a good impression.” That was the first voice – a ginger-haired boy leaning against the table.

Crystu scowled. How *dare* he?

She pulled back, intending to storm around and tell him exactly what she thought of his suggestion, but the calm voice spoke again and caught her attention.

“I can give you two good reasons why that is a bad idea.”

Crystu peered around again. She had to lean further to see the speaker. He was a broad-shouldered boy, sitting with his elbows on the table, fingers laced, and his chin resting on his knuckles. Unusually for an apprentice Soldier, his black hair was tied in a long thick braid that reached halfway down his back. He was more olive-skinned than the others, so probably lived locally – in or near the city. His accent when he spoke, confirmed that.

“What are your two reasons?” Ginger-hair sounded scornful.

“First. She’s a Rykatu and, like all Rykatuui, she has a terrible temper. If she realises that she won unfairly, she’ll feel humiliated and angry. We’ve all heard the stories about her, and I, for

one, do *not* want to find myself swimming in a cess pit or my clothes on fire!”

Crystu almost translocated the boy somewhere nasty right there and then, but a tiny voice of sense in her head pointed out that dropping him into a cesspit because she was angry that he said she had a foul temper, was *possibly* just proving him right.

She decided to wait and find out what his second reason was.

“Tam’s right, Edric,” the thin boy said. “What’s your second reason, Tam?”

The long-haired lad smiled.

“I saw her practising two days ago. I watched her for a while and she is easily as good as any of us. She doesn’t need to be ‘let’; I’d say she has a good chance of winning. It’s her first apprentice level contest. Don’t spoil it for her; let her win or lose, fairly.”

Crystu smiled with delight. She didn’t know the boy, but she decided that she liked him. Quietly gathering up her books, she left the library by the rear entrance.

### Part 3: The Contest

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With two fingers hooked around the bowstring, Crystu pulled her right hand back to her ear and sighted along the arrow. Without thinking about it, she lifted the point slightly up and to one side to compensate for the wind and gravity. She counted in her mind and when she reached ‘seven’, released the string. The arrow flew straight as the moving target swung back into sight.

Perfect bullseye!

Grinning broadly, Crystu looked at her parents to make sure that they had seen. Da smiled back at her as the scores for that round were announced – she was in second place. The long-haired boy was first.

With each round, the target became harder to hit. After the first few rounds of just moving the target further back, the challenge had become increasingly difficult.

Sometimes there were moving objects in front of a stationary target, sometimes a moving target, sometimes moving target *and* moving obstructions. The last round had involved a target which swung backwards and forwards, disappearing behind tree trunks.

Stepping forward for her next turn, Crystu took a deep breath and raised her bow. As she pulled back on the string, something hit her

cheek and the arrow fell. The string had snapped.

“You have five minutes to restring your bow and take your turn, my Princess,” the referee said.

The girl hurriedly pushed her hand into a pocket. Nothing.

Oh no! Her spare string was in her other trousers!

She looked at her father, who opened his empty hands to show that he didn't have one either.

“Quickly please, my Princess.”

“I can't!” she replied, fighting to keep from wailing. “I forgot my spare.”

The referee grimaced.

“Then you must withdraw, my Princess. I'm sorry, but it's the rule.”

Crystu nodded. Determined not to cry, she stepped back.

“My Princess, wait! I have a spare.”

Crystu turned to see the long-haired apprentice holding out a string.

“Quickly, my Princess,” he urged. “There's still time.”

Without hesitation, she snatched the string from his hand and restrung her bow. With seconds to spare, she let fly her arrow.

It hit slightly off-centre, which cost her two points, but she was still in second place.

As the next round started, she went to the older boy.

“Why?”

The boy smiled.

“Because a contest is always best if you are competing against someone who can beat you. If you lose, you have lost fairly, but if you win, then it is the best win ever. You are an excellent shot, and I want to know if you’re better than me.”

Crystu grinned back happily, pleased at the compliment and very grateful to be able to continue to compete.

“Then let’s find out. And thank you, thank you very much!”

“It is my pleasure and my honour,” the apprentice replied as he bowed.

## **Part 4: The Final Round**

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The final round began.

Crystu stepped to the mark and took two deep calming breaths before raising her bow.

The long-haired boy had won; she knew that. The question now was, who would be second? Crystu was the last to shoot. If she was on target, it should be her. If she did poorly, she could sink to third or fourth place. If she missed completely, she could fall back to tenth.

This final target was the hardest – small, oddly shaped and rotating, moving from one side of the range to the other, on a course which took it behind obstacles. She must time her shot perfectly.

Two contestants had missed this one completely. One of those was the ginger-haired boy – a fact that pleased Crystu no-end.

Sighting along the arrow, she focussed on the target. Trying not to think, she followed the target with her awareness. Her fingers released the string, and the arrow flew straight.

Perfect shot!

Grinning, Crystu turned to be sure that her parents had seen. They smiled proudly back at her as the judges finished adding her score to the board. Second place in her first real contest was excellent.



The prizes for the first two places were the same: a golden arrow on an ornately carved stand. The long-haired boy took his to show some people nearby. Crystu accepted hers and ran to show Da and Mei-mei.

Her mother smiled and raised an eyebrow at her.

“Did you thank him?”

“Yes, Mei-mei.”

“We must replace his string. What’s his name?”

Crystu shrugged.

“I don’t know. They said it when they gave the prizes, but I forgot it.”

He was just an older boy, after all, even though he had been very nice to her.

“I’ll have one sent to him,” Da said. “The judges will know his name and where he lives. He was very generous, but let’s not forget that he may just have been trying to ingratiate himself with our little princess.”

“True.” Mei-mei nodded.

Crystu thought that Da was probably wrong. The boy had been nice yesterday when he hadn’t known that she was listening. Maybe he was just a nice boy. Not that it mattered when he was so much older and an apprentice Soldier. She might never see him again.

She was very grateful for his string, though, and the compliments. If she did meet him again, she would be friendly.

From his vantage point a little higher up the hill, Lord Jareth, the only other living Rykatu, watched the young princess skip away with her parents. The long-haired apprentice left with his family, his prize carefully placed in his father's bag for safe-keeping.

"Happy?" Jareth asked his wife, who was also his bonded Ponfour – advisor, protector, confidante, and friend.

"That was perfect," Lady Aren replied.

"You took a risk, snapping her string magically. You're lucky no-one noticed."

Aren shrugged.

"It had to break at the right time."

"How could you be certain that she would forget her spare, or that Tam would give her his?"

Aren smiled.

"Making her forget her string wasn't hard; she's easily distracted. As for Tam, he's naturally generous. I was confident that he would help her."

"And now?" Jareth asked.

"And now we keep them apart for the next ten years until she's ready to choose her Ponfour."

“Apart? He’s the one for her. My vision was clear; she *must* choose him. Shouldn’t we throw them together?”

Aren shrugged.

“Tam’s a Homesteader – you know how the king feels about Homesteaders. Tarek will never let his daughter become friendly with one. No. We keep them apart until the right moment. Don’t worry, my love, I know what I’m doing. When the time is right, they’ll meet again and she’ll remember. By then, she’ll be old enough to go her own way.”

“I wonder if anyone did this for us,” Jareth mused.

Aren laughed. “Probably.”

The elder Rykatu smiled at his wife.

“Matchmaking is hungry work. Let’s find some food,” he suggested.

“Good idea,” Aren agreed.

A foggy translocation nimbus built around them. When it cleared, the two elders were somewhere else.

The end.

