

**2nd Place
Middle School**

**Nexus
By Carissa Skye**

The Nexus Guard.

They are the strongest, the fastest, and the smartest. They protect us when no one else can.

None of them are over nine years old.

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Rider surveyed his bunk. Nothing in it was moving, and there were no wet patches. He swept back the sheet and made a close inspection of the mattress. No new stains. Rider hopped on. It seemed he was safe, for now.

The rest of the small, dark room was a madhouse. Small children ran, screamed, jumped, wrestled, and generally did what small children do. That was why Rider had checked his bed, in case any of them had dared played a practical joke. Rider was way up in the Guard's hierarchy, since he had the double blessing of a powerful gift and age. Rider was the second oldest kid in the block. He would be ten in two months and - Rider stopped for a second and counted on his fingers. Two months and 18 days.

"Rider?" He looked down at the kid tugging on his pant leg. It was Bolt, a five-year-old boy who could do something the white-coats called "the voluntary escalation of a body's electrical charge to produce a lightning effect." The bunch of fancy words, it turned out, meant the kid could shoot lightning bolts. He was pretty high in the pecking order, too.

"Yeah?" Rider asked absently.

"Can you come? We wanna play a game."

"Sure. Whatcha doin'?" Rider responded, jumping off his bunk and following Bolt through the mess of children.

"We're gonna play tackle-tag. But ya ain't allowed to use any cheats," Bolt sighed. That particular was instigated after Racket, the only kid older than Rider, had started playing tag by using his powers of mind control to freeze everyone in the room. The white-coats got mad and said the "excess use of extra-sensory powers could cause unanticipated side effects." But the rest of the kids agreed that mind-freezing wasn't a fair way to play a game. So they made a rule. It was the way the Guard worked. The kids ruled themselves and paid as little attention as possible to the white-coats.

Tackle-tag was taking place in one of the training yards. The goal is to keep away from the person who's 'it,' while 'it' tries to tackle people. Tackled people die and have to sit out for the rest of the game.

Forna was 'it' for this game. She was an eight-year-old girl who was really fast and could jump and flip and run really well. The white-coats called it 'agility' or 'dexterity.' As Rider and Bolt watched, she used a post as a springboard to leap onto the back of eight-year-old Durna, bringing the super-strong hulk of a boy crashing to the ground. Rider shook his head, teasing Bolt.

"You didn't tell me Fornia was it! I'm waiting 'till next round." Rider went over to sit next to Racket, his best friend. The two watched Fornia leap and flip over the court like a demented butterfly, bringing down one kid after the other.

“It’s been no fun since I can’t use my mind,” Racket told Rider. “I’m no speedy. I’m weak in my body.”

“But you’re mind-strong,” Rider argued, surprised at this sudden down in Racket’s usually happy self. “Only Senti can beat you in school, and you can beat her in the races. It’s like the white-coats say, that all the gifts have a down-side.”

“Yeah,” Racket agreed. “Still, it’s harder when you’re body-weak. The strong ones get all the attention.”

“And you saved ‘em all when that giant cat-mutt was eating Knocker. You got it to run off and jump in the river!” Rider protested.

“Yes, I do feel that my mind-powers are getting stronger. I wonder what I’ll be able to do soon.”

Forna concluded the game as she kicked the legs out from under Boulder, leaving Riona the last one standing. Riona had fangs and retractable claws. She was really good in a fight, and no one liked to get near her just in case. As Rider hopped up to join the bell rang, calling the kids to mind-school. They all groaned. Only the mind-strong people, like Senti and Racket, enjoyed the book learning. The rest of them, with body-gifts, preferred the training and fighting classes. Rider was somewhere in between. His Gift was a mind-gift. It let him see and understand what creatures like humans and mutts were going to do before they did it, a mind-gift that was used for fighting. Those sorts of Gifts are very rare. It meant that Rider was a good student, but he didn’t particularly like school.

“All right, kids, settle down, settle down. This is the start of you lesson on basic genetics. This will help you explain and understand some of the abilities that you exhibit,” the white-coat in the front of the room bleated as the Nexus kids spilled into the classroom. This was the highest-level class, for older kids and those with strong mind-gifts. The white-coat who ran it, a black-haired woman who liked the kids to call her ‘Auntie,’ was one of the least liked white-coats in the Nexus Guard compound. She was always pushing for more tests, nightmare sessions where children were hooked up to computers and forced to run on treadmills or take electric shocks while their bodies’ responses were monitored. Auntie thought that they were essential research.

Despite their dislike, the children settled down quickly. They knew the consequences if they didn’t.

“Now, let’s start with an overview of the recent history which caused your mutations.” That was another reason Auntie was disliked. She treated them like they were all as dumb as the newest body-gift Guard. They’d only gone over the nuclear apocalypse once a month, in relation to different topics.

“Now, children, as you may remember, the world a little over ten years ago was very different. There were thousands of cities, all of them bigger than Nexus, and billions of people all over the globe. Animals were very rare, as humans took up most of the room. There were no mutts or Gifted, not yet. Then bad people got hold of the nuclear weapons supply of a country called North Korea. The world’s governments refused to answer certain demands, so the bad people set off the bombs. These bombs made huge explosions and wiped out almost all of the humans and animals. Then the effects of these bombs, called radiation, infected a lot of babies, both human and animal. The radiation changed certain parts of your genes, causing you to be different from normal.” Auntie rambled on. She talked to them in a mix of white-coat blather and baby talk, another

reason she was hated.

Rider watched Racket out of the corner of his eye. Racket always hated this class, but today he was worse, staring strangely at Auntie. Rider remembered the phrase he heard one time, 'if looks could kill.' He enjoyed thoughts of what different kinds of looks might do to Auntie.

Racket clenched his fist, nearly growling. Suddenly Auntie's mouth snapped shut mid-sentence. Her head jerked backwards, and she fell against the wall behind her. Racket was glaring murderously at Auntie.

"Racket, no! Don't hurt her!" yelled Grallay, a gentle, sweet girl who could lift almost any weight. "Racket! Stop!"

Racket looked down, seeming confused, his fist still clenched in front of him. Auntie struggles for air.

WEEEEEOOOOOO!!! WEEEEEOOOOOO!!!

The alarm rang, impossibly loud and far away, bursting through everyone's thoughts, shaking off Racket's grip over Auntie. A mutt attack. The children leapt out of their desks, running pell-mell for the door. Racket hesitated, then went with them as Auntie used her desk as a crutch to struggle upright.

The kids filled the hallway. There were no more than two dozen of them, but somehow they filled up the space as if there were twenty dozen. There had been only five in Auntie's class, but they had all been trained to fight the mutts, the mutated animals, aggressive and powerful. They attacked the city of Nexus for food and survival. They had run virtually unopposed until the powers of these children had been discovered. Now the safety of the last city, the last human outpost in North America, lay in the hands of a few dozen children.

Those children dashed into a room, rather like a gymnasium, filled with strange piles of equipment. Some of it looked like bullet-proof vests. There were iron rods and packets of seeds. These were the children's equipment, the things they used to fight. Bolt used an iron rod to channel his electricity. A girl called Flower could manipulate the plants, making them grow up fast and dangerous. Rider took only a thin suit, designed to protect but not inhibit movement. He needed nothing to channel his Gift of knowledge, of the foresight into creature's actions.

Rider didn't consider such things as he ran with the another, a boy who could hear with amazing accuracy. He could hear a fly buzzing across the room, and he led them to the place the alarm was ringing from, on the far side of Nexus. Ringtail, a girl who could run twice as fast as Forna, scouted ahead then returned. She shouted as the kids ran.

"It's some kind of mutt wolf pack. They've got a building closed up, and they're going to break in soon! There must be ten of them!"

The children pounded around a corner onto the scene. A few bikes were overturned, and one of the mutts looked like it had already found a meal in a Nexus citizen. The ten wolves, all of them taller than Rider, turned to see this new threat. They growled, coming together to form a menacing line.

Rider ran ahead, into the ranks that had been practiced so often. Agile people in front, then the strong attackers, kids with no fighting-skills behind.

He was the first rank. They were there to protect the strong ones behind them, the ones his kids called the Pounders. They ran into the enemy first, distracted and

scratched them so the Pounders would be safer.

Rider was in the center of the line, Ringtail on his right and Forna on his left. A bolt of lightning shot overhead, distracting the wolf-mutts even more. Then the ranks crashed into them.

Rider dropped as he came in, sliding under the wolf-mutt's snapping jaws. He came up, side-stepped to let Ringtail pass, and grabbed the long fur of the wolf, climbing onto its back. The wolf growled and turned to snap at him.

Just in time to get Riona's claws in its eye. The wolf yelped, half blinded and in pain. Racket leaped off it seconds before it ran, away from a raid gone horribly wrong. Then it stumbled and froze, held in place by Racket. Rider turned away. Watching Racket force creatures to kill themselves always seemed to him a perversion, something wrong and twisted. But the white-coats liked it.

The battle raged around him. The Guards were as close to outnumbered as they ever were, and counting out kids like Senti who did nothing but stand and watch made the numbers almost equal. Rider and Riona's easy victory hadn't reflected the rest of the battle.

After the initial shock of the attack, the fight dissolved into simple melee. A whirl of fighting, of kicking and dodging and injuries and pain. The white-coats told the kids it was awesome, important work, but that didn't mean Rider had to like it.

Still, none of that mattered now. His senses were on high, reacting to the slightest movement, kicking into an opening and moving out before it closed around him as the jaws of a wolf-mutt. This was what the Guards trained for, and they were good at it.

Then something went wrong. Rider heard a scream, Forna's scream. He turned, leaping away from the wolf he was fighting, to see her clamped in the bloody jaws of a wolf-mutt. Rider ran to her, dodging around wolves, joined by the other children who could get away from their wolves to help Forna. How had she gotten caught? The wolf-mutts were slow, and she quick and fast.

The wolf-mutt saw the determined, shocked children closing in around it and decided it had had enough. It bounded off, Forna still in its jaws, signaling a mass retreat for the five remaining wolf-mutts. They leaped over the bodies of their comrades and away, away from the slaughterhouse. Ringtail raced after them, but she soon stopped and came back, knowing she couldn't take on six wolf-mutts by herself.

What was Racket doing? He should have stopped the wolf, easily, yet he didn't. Then the wolf was gone, and with it, Forna.

Rider stopped, stunned. Forna, gone? How was that possible? She was always there, fast and powerful. No one ever got...taken...by the mutts. They were too good for that. No. It wasn't possible. He turned, to see Racket standing next to him.

"Why didn't you stop it? It got Forna! What did you do, Racket?" Rider wailed. Racket simply stood there, grinning a little.

"Don't you see, Rider? This is what the white-coats do to us. They put us in danger and act like it's a good thing. I just wanted to point it out."

"What are you saying? What did you do to Forna?" Rider cried, attracting the attention of the others.

Racket shrugged carelessly. "I zapped her for a second, is all. Anyways, why do you care? You're always prying into me! Why don't you leave me alone?" Racket

abandoned his usually casual attitude, getting suddenly violent and defensive, settling into the an attack posture, glaring angrily at Rider.

“You killed her, Ra...”

“So?!” Racket screamed, his eyes blazing, his face twisted into a demonic caricature of a smile. “I’m sick of this, of tagging along like a puppy, following orders! I’m leaving, and the rest of you would be better off if you did, too!”

Suddenly Rider’s legs fell out from under him. A red-hot spot of pain flared in his side, like someone was digging a hot poker through his ribcage. He screamed and writhed, curled up on the ground. *Oh, make it stop, just make it stop.*

Riona crashed into Racket, breaking his concentration, leaving Rider gasping on the ground. The fifteen remaining members of the Guard circled around Racket. They stood in silence, staring at him. A low rumble started around the circle, a growl as they watched Racket, the one they all turned to when they needed help, the calm, mellow boy who had just killed Forna and tortured his best friend. What was happening to him? He was getting more and more angry, whirling in circles, glaring at them, fingers curled into claws.

Ringtail collapsed. She fought with herself, her hands forcing their way to his throat. Durna grabbed her hands, holding them back, until he, too, was invaded and staggered away, gasping as his mind forgot his body needed to breathe.

Racket was smiling, sure of his power now as he held in place every one of his classmates, the hated Guard, the little blank-minded followers. He was different. He was strong. He could do anything. He needed no masters, no people who like these who would question his every action.

And he could do this easily in his anger, finding levels of power he didn’t know he had, easily stripping a mind of its defenses and pushing it to the limit. He laughed, exultant, safe in the knowledge that nothing could hurt him. The master looked down at the screaming children. He had put them there. They were weak. He would rule.

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In a lab back at the Guard house, three white-coats were examining files. A fourth ran up, holding a sheet of paper. He spoke.

“Do you remember when we realized the genes changed by certain mutations caused side effects such as paranoia and aggression?” this white-coat asked his colleagues.

“Yes, and we charted the dates that these changes would occur for each of the children so that we could take them out of commission and ensure the safety of Nexus,” answered another, easily, unworried but curious.

“I just realized, looking at these files. We made a mistake in the calculations. Subject 00027, the one who can control minds. His date is today. He is powerful enough that the mutated genes will probably cause him to attempt to destroy or dominate whoever he’s with. We have to get him out.”

“The subjects are out fighting, though! There was a breach. Ten wolf-mutants got through the wall. He’s with them,” gasped a different white-coat. “The fight will trigger the aggression genes and speed the process. We may have to neutralize the subjects. All the subjects. We don’t know what he’ll do to them.”

“Neutralize? How? This is going to be a sociopath who is capable of mind-

control! I've seen him force creatures to quit breathing, or take them over and make them fight for him!"

"With those chips we implanted in their brains. We can cause them to self-destruct. The only problem is that the signal for the self-destruction system is sent through a wave. Any other chip within thirty feet of where we send the signal will also self-destruct."

"What will the chip's self-destruction mechanism do?"

"Basically? Blow up in miniature, blasting a hole in the brain and causing instant death with no recognizable symptoms from the outside."

"Is there any way we can avoid killing our other subjects?"

"Not unless they are far away from him, and if his mental structure is indeed decaying he'll probably have the few he hasn't terminated under his control and acting as a bodyguard."

"Let's look at the security camera on that street. If need be, I have the authority to use the cameras and to make a choice like that," said the last white-coat, a trace of sadness in her voice.

The white-coats went to a nearby computer and logged onto the security system, pulling up the camera on the street where the attack was. Racket is walking away from the camera, a few of his fellow Guards surrounding him, walking like zombies. Others lie dead on the ground behind them.

The white-coats sigh. The woman brings up another program and types in a long, complicated series of passwords. Then a window comes up.

SEND SELF-DESTRUCT SIGNAL?

Y/N

The white-coat hits the yes key and turns away from the screen.

