

The Queen's Loss (Part I)

A Reading A-Z Level Z Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,818

Connections

Writing

Why do you think the Queen manipulates people and the world of sand? Write a paragraph explaining your ideas about her behavior.

Art

If you were in the Queen's world, what would you create out of the sand? Draw a picture or make a model of your creation. Write a paragraph describing your art.

THE QUEEN'S LOSS — PART I —



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Written by Rus Buyok • Illustrated by Thomas Boatwright

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Glossary

all-encompassing (<i>adj.</i>)	enclosing or covering completely (p. 6)
ascending (<i>v.</i>)	moving upward; rising in position (p. 7)
delusion (<i>n.</i>)	an idea or belief that is not true; a fantasy (p. 5)
dilapidated (<i>adj.</i>)	rundown or in bad condition because of lack of care; old and worn out (p. 8)
dissipate (<i>v.</i>)	to disappear by spreading out or separating into parts (p. 10)
expedient (<i>adj.</i>)	offering a quick and easy way to do something (p. 4)
fruition (<i>n.</i>)	the state of being done or complete (p. 14)
gaudy (<i>adj.</i>)	overly decorated in a showy or tasteless manner (p. 10)
imperceptibly (<i>adv.</i>)	in a slow and gradual way that is almost unnoticeable (p. 4)
membrane (<i>n.</i>)	a thin layer of material that acts as a partition or lining (p. 8)
minute (<i>adj.</i>)	very small (p. 15)
sloughing (<i>v.</i>)	shedding or falling off (p. 7)

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— PART I —



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Focus Question

What does Qynn discover about true happiness and illusions?

Words to Know

all-encompassing	fruition
ascending	gaudy
delusion	imperceptibly
dilapidated	membrane
dissipate	minute
expedient	sloughing

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Correlation

LEVEL Z	
Fountas & Pinnell	U-V
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	50

Then a realization hits me like a punch in the chest: "The opposite is also true," I say, looking at the Queen. "Someone who only feels sadness and can't move beyond it is also stuck."

I glimpse a **minute** shift in the Queen's face—my words have struck a chord—but then her skin becomes like polished stone.

"Why have you stayed here all these years, manipulating people and these innocent cephaloids to do your will and changing this world into something it's not?" I ask as she begins to walk away.

"Since you have rejected my offer, I have no further need of you," she says, sounding exhausted. "Be gone."



"Perhaps not presently, but they will if your schemes come to **fruition**," Seth says quietly. "Happiness and sadness are opposite sides of the same coin—one doesn't exist without the other."

Seth's words click in my mind. "You can't really know what happiness is unless you've experienced sadness, and vice versa," I say, more to myself than the Queen. "It's the same with all negative emotions."

"Haven't they experienced enough fear, sadness, and pain?" the Queen asks, her face becoming the epitome of sympathy.



"No," I say, "because that's all part of being alive. We experience fear, pain, and sadness so we can learn and grow to overcome those emotions and find happiness. If we're happy all the time, there's no reason to

change and become better. The pain of losing her mother pushed Sarah to become strong and brave enough to face the Hollow. The fear and sadness we both felt kept us moving forward toward finding Anna and Jasper."



The room grows smaller as Uncle Jasper, Seth, Odie, Thomas, and I crowd around Anna, who continues to coo at the baby she believes is wriggling in the empty bundle of blankets in her arms. After Thomas explains that Sarah's mom is too lost in the illusion to hear us talking, Uncle Jasper describes how Anna was able to save him from the same fate years before.

"I don't have the strength to do it," Uncle Jasper says, "and it might not even work."

"It's worth a shot," I reply.

"The instant you start manipulating the sands, the Queen will be alerted to our presence," Seth cautions. "You must be **expedient**, child, and unwavering in your commitment to liberate her."

"I'm not concerned about that last part," I say as I kneel down before Anna. She pushes a lengthy piece of dark hair behind her ear, and I'm struck by how content she seems, as if nothing could ever be wrong with the world.



It's not real. It's not real, I remind myself and place my hands on her forearm. It feels like billions of

tiny, electrified insects are swarming beneath my palms, and I realize the sand is covering her in an **imperceptibly** thin coating.

With a deep breath, I concentrate intensely on the sand flowing over her, imagining it enveloping my body, pulling me deeper and deeper. I close my eyes as the prickling electric sensations pulse over me.



"It's not real, though," I snap. "No matter how realistic you make them seem, that's not really Sarah's mother in there, and that prairie girl in Jake's world really isn't me. We're out here, feeling the pain and loss you caused by taking them away from us."

"There must always be balance," Seth says. I look down to see him sitting at my other side. I'm not sure when or how he escaped the cephaloids, but I'm happy for the support. "By giving these few eternal happiness to serve your own will, you condemn their families to suffer the agony of losing them."

"They know nothing of loss!" the Queen screams, suddenly furious. The crack in her facade is terrifying, though it only takes her a moment to compose herself again.

"None of that is real," I say defiantly.

"Look how happy they are, how blissful. How can you say that isn't real?" She walks over to stand beside me and places her hand on my shoulder in a very maternal gesture. "They can feel, taste, hear, smell, and see everything around them, just as you can here. The only difference is that their worlds are filled with nothing but joy. No pain, sadness . . . or loss."

The Queen gives me a sorrowful smile. "I gave them endless happiness, just as I can give it to you. All you have to do to help me is live happily ever after in your own personal paradise."



Opening my eyes, I find myself in a sunny, clean nursery, the walls covered with cheerful multicolored balloon wallpaper, the bed covered with fresh linens. The prickling feeling has vanished, and my hands are still on Anna's arm. She holds a squirming baby with curly black hair, who happily gurgles, grabs Anna's index finger, and, with an expression of surprise, sticks it into her tiny mouth.



Almost immediately, I am nearly overwhelmed by the sensation that this place—its warm sun, bright colors, and happy sounds—is more authentic than the existence that I had come from. Maybe it would be better to stay here rather than return, since everything was so scary there—back there, where people are waiting but becoming hazy. Maybe all that was the **delusion**, but no, I remember someone—who was it?—saying, "Nothing you will see is real—remember that. Say it to yourself. Concentrate on remembering that none of it is real."

It's not real, I think, focusing on the words because they seem important. *It's not real. It's not real.* "It's not real," I say out loud. "It's not real."

Anna looks up at me and blinks, mildly surprised, as she says, "Oh my! Who might you be, young lady?" Her smile is gentle and kind.

"It's not real."

"What did you say?"

"It's not real. It's not real." I'm shaking my head now. I hear a thunderous crack, and a fissure appears in the wall beside me as Anna, now terrified, protectively covers the baby, who lets out a heart-wrenching wail. "It's not real. It's not real."

"Why are you doing this?" Anna cries as tears begin to fall from her eyes and onto the screeching baby. The wallpaper begins to fade and curl, and the bedding frays on its own.

"I'm sorry," I say, realizing that I'm forcing her back into a harsh reality. It is for the best—it has to be. This isn't real. The words feel **all-encompassing**.



"I will, of course I will. The last thing I want to do is cause anyone pain, but first I need your help." She stands and walks down the steps, her heels clicking.

"I'll never help you," I hiss.

"Before you make any decisions, look at this."

She lifts her hands, and the huge stained glass windows on either side of the dais slide forward. With a flick of her fingers, the glass separates at the bottom and splits up the center like a zipper. On one side, I see Sarah and her mom curled up on the couch I recognize from her house. They're laughing together, Sarah's face filled with a joy I've never seen before. On the other side is Jake, galloping on a great steed through a cartoony looking desert, a broad grin slapped on his face.

The walls and floor crumble and then **dissipate** to nothing, and we're standing in the most amazing room any of us had ever beheld. Silver and gold columns climb skyward, seamlessly transitioning to an ornately painted ceiling, and the floor, a mosaic of precious stones, is warm to the touch. No fires or bulbs illuminate the immense room. Instead, everything glows softly with its own light.

"What a **gaudy** display," Seth mutters with disgust.

Before us, on an extravagant throne made of glass laced with gold, atop a raised dais, sits the Queen, appearing perfectly at ease, with a casual smile on her face as she straightens a wrinkle in her scarlet gown.

"You have finally arrived," she says, her voice velvety and kind. "I'm so happy."

"Where are Jake and Sarah?" I yell.

"My, my, what greeting," the Queen says unceremoniously, tapping her finger on the armrest of her throne, which must be some sort of signal. Out of nowhere, a group of mutated cephaloids appear and grab everyone but me.

"Let them go!" I scream.



"It's not real. It's not real," I continue, suddenly feeling the electric pulses of the sand again. I imagine the invisible layer **sloughing** off like a snake's shed skin. My concentration is fixated on that image, and slowly, I feel the sand begin to recede, starting at my feet and **ascending** steadily.

My head clears, and I begin to remember that I'm in the bowels of the Queen's castle, and somewhere beyond this illusion, Uncle Jasper, Seth, Odie, and Thomas are watching me.

Then something shifts, and it seems as if the sand is struggling against my will. I focus even more intensely, but my progress is still sluggish. Looking at Anna, the expression of pure terror as she shields what she believes is her child, I realize the resistance is coming from her. She is clinging desperately to the illusion, which to her is more real than anything else. I have to break her free.

I shift some of my intention away from the enveloping sand to the bundle of blankets, envisioning it for what it really is—a pile of sand. It takes only a moment, and then the baby and blankets dissolve and sift away.

Anna gasps and stares at her hands, the shock providing me a window to concentrate all my effort on shedding the **membrane** of sand. With a great rushing *WHOOSH*, the sand falls to the floor, and we're standing in the **dilapidated** room with everyone else.

Uncle Jasper kneels down beside me as Anna shakes her head and runs her hands through her hair. After a moment, her eyes seem to focus again, and she whispers, "Jasper, is that you?"

"Yes," Jasper replies, and the two embrace like the old friends they are.



"I can't believe . . ." she starts, hesitating. "It seemed so real, that world, and so perfect. How long was I trapped in there?"

"Too long," Jasper says before adding, "years."

"Sarah! Is she here? Is she okay?"

"I apologize for interrupting this tender reunion," Seth interjects, "but we must evacuate this location immediately."



As soon as he has spoken, the door to the hallway smashes shut with incredible force, and in the next moment, it vanishes altogether, becoming a solid wall.

I open my mouth to speak, but the room suddenly shifts. We all fall to the floor, and I get the distinct sensation that we're actually moving—fast. Then, with a violent jerk, we come to a halt.