

INTO HER OWN



AMANDA WINTERS

Queens of Raz Series:
Book 1

Into Her Own

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Into Her Own

Book 1 in the Queens of Raz series

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This book is dedicated to the very awesome and fun Joleene Naylor who I'm very glad to have met!

Queens of Raz series

Book 1: Into Her Own

Book 2: A Matter of Time

Book 3: Retribution

Book 4: Prophecy of Atlantis

CHAPTER 1



North Dakota, United States of America

The more Ann Kerwin tried to concentrate on her story, the more she was distracted. Nothing seemed to work. It was true she wrote for pleasure, but lately she hadn't had any motivation.

She closed her eyes. The music playing from her radio sank into her mind, and suddenly she was in another place at another time.

William smiled at her as he reached for her hand. "This is my song for you."

Her heart melted when he kissed her. It was that single kiss, their very first kiss, that she realized she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

She loved him and he loved her. That was never in doubt. Then she found out she had to move to Florida and leave Ohio and her only love behind. She had no choice, for she was seventeen and was a senior in high school. Had she been old enough for college, she could have stayed. He was only eighteen, and they were too young to resist the move.

It was, of course, a hard and emotional goodbye for them. They clung to each other, cried, and promised to remain together despite the distance.

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Time passed, as it always does. She held on but he eventually let go. It was too painful for him to keep holding on, and it was too painful for her to let go. He assured her they would always be friends, but she just couldn't seem to deny any romantic attachment to him.

Now it was four years later. She was twenty-one. She had a chance to return to Ohio and he still lived there, but deep down inside, she knew it wouldn't be the same, especially since he was looking for another type of girl now. So instead of going back to a painful memory, she decided to try somewhere completely new: Fargo, North Dakota.

She opened her eyes and glanced around the apartment. Did she belong here? The university classes would start next week. Meanwhile, she was trying her best to forget her loneliness by writing a story. She used to get so much joy out of writing. These days, however, she didn't get any pleasure out of it. In fact, she didn't get much pleasure out of anything.

"This is useless," she muttered to herself as she threw aside her pen and paper.

She turned off the lights and fell into a blissful sleep that temporarily wiped aside her loneliness.

The Royal Palace
Planet: Raz
Galaxy: Enchanted

"I am getting old in my years. Very soon, I will be forced to step down from my throne," Queen Basilia announced at the breakfast table.

Hathor paused as he lifted his forkful of pancakes to his mouth. When he saw the pain in his mother's eyes, he set the fork back on his plate, his hunger forgotten.

"I have failed as a Queen, my son," she softly said.

"We'll figure something out," he stated matter-of-factly. "And you can't talk this way! You can't help the fact that you couldn't have a daughter. Have you spoken to the Great Magician? I'm sure he can find the next Queen for Raz."

She smiled. "You do well to remind me of such things. It's a shame a king can't rule because you'd make a wonderful ruler."

"Thank you."

After breakfast, Queen Basilia consulted with the Great Magician who told her he would announce the new Queen's location at an assembly so that all of Raz would know about their new Queen.

"He also informed me of something else," she continued as she weeded her garden and Hathor used his knife to carve into the block of wood in his hand. "You must bring her to Raz."

He stopped what he was doing and looked at her, bewildered. "You mean, she's on another planet?"

"Apparently so. He wasn't specific on her location although I did my best to get an answer from him."

Hathor couldn't help but grin. Oh yes. The Great Magician could be mighty stubborn, even to the Queen.

"When you bring her safely to Raz, you will have the high honor of marrying her," his mother added.

He dropped the knife and wood and rose eagerly. "Really? I'll take care of her?"

She nodded, smiling at his enthusiasm.

He wanted to shout for joy! He would have the awesome responsibility of serving the next Queen of Raz!

"And you will assist her in producing the heir," she stated proudly.

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"This is fantastic!" The husband of the Queen was the most honored person in Raz. He secretly vowed to serve the new Queen the best he could. In all his twenty-five years, he never imagined he'd have the Queen of Raz for his wife. "When will I get her? What will I wear to impress her?" He unconsciously combed his sun-gold hair with his fingers.

"Oh Hathor." She chuckled. "The Great Magician did not feel at liberty to tell me anything else. Now, I do think it's important that you look your best when you meet her, so let's find you the best outfit we can."

Alpha Head I

Planet: Pale

Galaxy: Enchanted

On Planet Pale, Omin paced back and forth in his office, his desire for violence and power reflected in his deep black eyes.

All Palers were extremely white, all slender and tall. None had hair on their heads, and their eyes were as dark as coal, so Omin didn't stand out because of his looks.

He stood out because of the evil that lurked inside of him.

For once his thoughts were on his people rather than himself. His people were starving, and it was his duty as their Leader to find a solution. He sighed heavily. He had to feed his people. Thousands of Palers were wasting away because of the Laxes, an inferior species that suddenly decided to rebel against the Palers.

Laxes ... Omin grunted. "Those lazy thing reproduce faster than weeds," he mumbled gruffly.

It was true. In fact, compared to Palers, Laxes were a great majority. Laxes could, in all honesty, rule over Pale, but they were

so incredibly lazy that they let the Palers take over, even when the Laxes became their food.

On Pale, there were no animals, plants or anything else that was edible to Palers. Laxes had the remarkable ability to survive on air alone, and Omin resented that, although it had proven useful in his rise to power. But Laxes weren't the only food source around. Raz was close and full of edible beings. His mouth watered, but he forced his hunger aside.

Where the Laxes got the strength and motivation to resist being eaten, he didn't know. Palers were beginning to turn on other Palers because of the widespread hunger. He refused to let this madness continue.

"Leader Omin," his secretary called as she opened his office door. "First Commander Paff is here."

"Thank you," he replied. "You may leave, Jaz."

"Yes, sir." She nodded and left.

"You requested my presence, Leader?" First Commander Paff asked.

"That I did. Will you have a seat?"

Paff obeyed and waited for him to speak.

"As you know, the Queen of Raz, Queen Basilia, is advanced in her years and must step down from her throne without an heir to take her place on her next birthday. Her birthday is very soon." Omin paused for a brief moment. "We must not allow the next Queen to be sworn to the throne. Without a Queen, Raz will cease to exist."

Understanding lit Paff's eyes. "I see ... When Raz dies, we can eat all the creatures we want."

"I figure we'll be set for at least a year if we preserve the corpses. That will be plenty of time for the Laxes to admit defeat and be eaten by Palers again, as it is meant to be."

"The Laxes are so lazy they will probably give up their fight within a week or two, so there's no need to involve Raz."

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"Who is the Leader here?" Omin snapped.

Paff gulped nervously. "You are."

"You will do well to remember that. Now, I want you to go to Raz and use magic to make yourself look like one of their hideous creatures. You must find out who this new Queen is and where we can find her."

"And when I find out?"

"Tell me. Then we'll take care of her."

"Take care of her?"

"Kill her."

North Dakota

Planet: Earth

Galaxy: Average

A week passed by and Ann felt even more isolated and alone. At the university, she couldn't help but notice how everyone knew each other.

Not her though.

She didn't know anyone.

She couldn't get rid of the loneliness that plagued her. She needed to talk to someone, to hear someone's voice other than the teacher's.

She bit her lower lip. Maybe she should call William, just to say hello. She had promised herself she would be strong and learn to live without him. North Dakota was a new beginning, a chance to forget her past and move on with her life.

Her fingers itched to dial any number on the phone and talk to someone so she could reassure herself that she wasn't alone in this world like she feared. Before she could talk herself out of it, she dialed his number.

"Hello," he greeted on the other end.

She couldn't believe how wonderful a familiar voice sounded.

"Hi, William. It's Ann."

"Oh hey," he replied. "You know, I was just about to call you."

"Really?"

"Yep. I was just thinking about you the other day."

Her heart pounded. He thought of her! It felt so good.

"You should have come to Ohio for school instead of North Dakota," he continued.

"Why?" She wanted to hear him say he wanted to be with her. If he said it, she would eagerly pack her bags and fly to Ohio.

"It's freezing up there. And it's just January. I heard the weather gets worse in February. Besides, I can't tell you all about Carol over the phone."

"Carol?" Her heart constricted. William never got lonely, she thought.

"She's my new girlfriend. Boy, she means more to me than anyone I've ever known. She brings out a part of me no one else ever has before. She's great! I wish you could meet her."

Ann forced back her tears. Was she the only one without anyone? And how could he talk about Carol bringing out his best when he knew how sensitive she was? Didn't his past relationship with her mean anything to him? Didn't she ever make him feel special?

Did her life amount to nothing?

Pushing aside her emotions, she said, "It sounds like you're very happy."

"I am at last. Don't worry, Ann. Someday you'll find your true love," he consoled her.

You are my true love! she wanted to scream.

An all too familiar ache welled up in her heart. She sighed. If she could go back in time ...

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She wasn't aware that he was discussing all of Carol's positive characteristics. She blinked.

"Carol is the perfect girlfriend. For the first time in my life, I feel complete."

She couldn't take this anymore! What a mistake she made in calling him. Now she felt worse!

She made up a flimsy excuse and hung up. That was when the tears started to fall.

She walked over to the window and looked at the white wonderland outside. A couple of teenagers passed by, laughing and throwing snowballs at each other. How simple life seemed for everyone but her. She fell into a deep depression.

Throne room in the Royal Palace
Planet: Raz

Paff, disguised as a unicorn, entered the Royal Palace and marveled at the lush vegetation. If Pale had been so fortunate, perhaps he wouldn't be going through this ordeal right now.

Why did he become First Commander anyway?

"Finally! At last we'll know who our new Queen will be," a centaur said to the elf standing next to him.

Paff sighed. Different creatures got along with each other remarkably well. Why couldn't Palers and Laxes work on the same side?

"Please, may I have your attention?" Queen Basilia requested.

The assembly immediately grew silent.

"The Great Magician will inform us of the next Queen," she announced.

The crowd murmured excitedly. Who among them would be the Queen?

The Great Magician entered the room and bowed before her. Then he lifted his crystal ball. The room was silent. Everyone held their breath and gasped expectantly as the ball shifted from clear to a milky white color that matched its owner's eyes as he focused all of his attention on it.

"What do you see? Who is she?" a goblin anxiously asked.

Paff listened carefully, his body tense.

"She is not from our galaxy," the Magician exclaimed.

What? How could their Queen belong to another galaxy? After all, they lived in the Enchanted Galaxy where magic reigned. Outside their galaxy, life was scientific and boring.

"Our next Queen resides in the Average Galaxy on a small planet called Earth. The chosen one bears a birthmark under her left wrist. The birthmark is in the shape of a crown. That is how we will know she is our Queen," he said.

"Must we search all over Earth to find her?" a fairy asked.

"No. I can easily cast a spell on the one who will go to Earth and bring her to her rightful place."

"Who will go?" a ghoul asked.

"My son, Hathor, will go," the Queen replied.

The crowd's attention turned to the young 5'8" man with blond hair that reached the collar of his white shirt. His blue eyes showed his determination and his excitement. The crowd nodded their approval.

"Tomorrow Hathor will go to Earth and by sunset, he shall bring her to us," Queen Basilia stated.

Paff took a deep breath and left the assembly, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. However, the Great Magician narrowed his eyes, immediately suspicious. Once the crowd left, the Magician requested to speak to the Queen and her son.

"I sense mischief is in the air. Someone doesn't want our new Queen to make it here safely."

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The Queen and Hathor stood speechless. Finally, she found her voice. "Who is against us?"

"I don't know. All I know is that you have a trial ahead of you, Hathor. You must bring the new Queen here despite any obstacles you encounter. This is your chance to prove yourself worthy of a Queen. Should you fail to protect her, our world will die. Should you succeed in bringing her here but if she should protect you in any way, then she will decide whether or not you deserve the honor of being her husband. This is your test."

"You can do it," she told her son. "I raised a hero."

The Magician patted his shoulder comfortingly. "You are young and inexperienced, but you are bright. I'm sure you'll do well. You will need my Book of Spells to help you, but you must use it wisely."

He entrusted Hathor with the book as he turned to the Queen. "Make sure everyone is aware that Hathor will take an undetermined amount of time in bringing the new Queen to us. There's no need to panic, but a slight delay is inevitable." He glanced at Hathor. "Make sure you study this book before you depart tomorrow."

Hathor took a deep breath. "I will," he promised, and he followed through on that promise.

North Dakota
Economics Class
Planet: Earth

Ann yawned as she wrote down what the teacher said. She glanced around the classroom and saw that her classmates seemed just as bored as she was. She couldn't help but grin. No matter what state a person went to, university classes had the same effect on people.

As she was writing the definition of inflation in her notebook, she tumbled over her desk and hit the floor with a resounding thud.

What the ... ?

She blinked. She was in her apartment, face down on the floor! Quickly, she stood up and shrieked when she saw a stranger right before her.

Hathor clasped his hand over her mouth. "Shh ... I'm not going to hurt you. If you promise not to scream, I will release you."

Oh! She wished she could faint. She didn't want to be conscious when he did whatever he planned to do to her.

When he released her, her survival instincts kicked in. All she could think of was defending herself against this intruder. The first thing she spotted was her cheap folded kitchen chair. Without thinking about how the weight of the chair would not be enough to knock him out, she charged at him, the chair lifted above her head.

He easily caught it before it landed on his head. "I wish you would listen to what I have to say instead of jumping to conclusions." He held her wrist before she could grab something else to throw at him. She looked like a scared animal trapped in a predator's grip. He took a deep breath and concentrated on calming her down.

"Relax," he whispered as he stared into her frightened eyes. He spoke a few magic words, and he felt her body respond. She was relaxing. Unable to resist the urge, he turned her left hand over and looked at her wrist.

The birthmark! It was a crown! She was the next Queen of Raz. His heart swelled with excitement. And she was pretty. Dark blue eyes, rosy lips, flushed cheeks, and brown hair that was neatly pulled back into a french braid.

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She snatched her hand from him, her jaw clenched. "How did you get me here?"

"I used the Book of Spells," he replied.

"The what?" She shot him a look of disbelief.

"The Great Magician let me borrow his Book of Spells. I came here to bring you to Raz where you will be Queen."

Insane! That's what he was, she firmly decided. She was alone with a madman.

When she bolted to the front door, he quickly recited a spell that froze her.

At first, it didn't register in her mind. Then slowly, it sank into her. She couldn't move.

She couldn't move!

Her heart pounded. Her breath quickened. Her head felt light.

He walked over to her. "I'm sorry I had to freeze you in place. Please, this will be easier for both of us if you stop resisting me. I promise I won't hurt you. In fact, I will protect you from any harm that may come to you. But you must come with me, and I would prefer it if you didn't fight me."

She could only stare at him, her eyes wild with fear.

"I am Hathor from the planet Raz in the Enchanted Galaxy. I came here to bring you safely to your new home. Everyone on Raz needs you. You were chosen by the planet to be the next Queen. My mother, Queen Basilia, has to step down from the throne in a couple of weeks."

"If your mother is a Queen, then why can't you become a king? That's the way it usually works."

"Maybe in your world but not on Raz. You see, centuries ago kings used to be rulers over Raz. Then King Edmund married a witch named Kathz. Once Kathz found out he had multiple affairs with other women and he never loved her but only married her for her Book of Spells, she put Raz under a curse. The curse makes it so that a Queen must rule Raz. Naturally, the Queen

must marry in hopes of having a daughter to continue her lineage. Unfortunately, my mother never had a daughter, so I had to find you. Now I must bring you safely to Raz, especially when someone out there will try to stop you from arriving on Raz."

"Well, I don't want to go," she spat.

"Raz chose you, so if you don't come with me, then Raz will lose its magic and die."

This guy is insane, she thought.

"My purpose is to take you to Raz, safe and sound, so that Raz will be safe from the enemy," he continued.

"And who is this enemy?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea, but I'm sure we will find out soon enough."

She tried with all her might to move, but she failed. How did he bring her here? She had been in her economics class when she popped into her apartment where he was waiting for her. It was unexplainable. And now she was frozen in place. He couldn't belong to another world. The idea was too outrageous to be true. So how could she explain her appearance in the apartment and her frozen state?

"If I succeed in my mission, then I will become your husband," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Never!" she snapped before anything else came to mind.

"You will have to." He dismissed his initial reaction to her rejection. "We must marry so that we can ensure Raz's future with our daughter."

"I do not have to marry you, you sicko!"

"Once you have a daughter, then you may divorce me," he softly replied. He had anticipated her willingness to go to Raz and marry him. Now he didn't know what to think.

"Sure. It's as simple as that," she sarcastically replied.

"That's the way things are on Raz. I didn't make the rules. I'm just following them."

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"Let me move!" she demanded, agitated by her helpless condition.

"If I unfreeze you, will you promise not to run away?"

A plan quickly formed in her mind. She agreed. He said a few words and she unfroze. She took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. She had to act nonchalant if she wanted her plan to work. "Would you like something to drink?" she offered.

He didn't hide his surprise at her sudden calm. "No thank you. I'm anxious to start our journey to Raz."

She eyed him quickly so that she would give an accurate report to the police when she called them. Short light blond hair, blue eyes, average weight and height, and he wore a white silk shirt and black pants. She hoped he wouldn't change clothes anytime soon so that the police would have an easier time finding him.

"I'll be right back," she responded, forcing herself to smile.

His face lit up when he saw her smile.

Dimples! That was an important detail to tell the police. Before she left the family room and went into the kitchen, she glanced at him to make sure he wasn't following her. He was good-looking, and she adored dimples. She cleared her head. The man was insane!

"What a waste," she muttered to herself as she entered the kitchen.

Just as she reached the phone, it rang. She groaned, irritated. Figures, she thought as she grabbed the receiver. The one time she actually needed to make an important phone call someone decided to call her.

"Hello," she impatiently greeted.

"Hello? Ann?"

"I'm sorry, William. I'm just under a lot of stress," she vaguely explained. What were the chances of his calling?

"Did I call at a bad time?" he asked.

"Well, I was just about to make an urgent phone call," she replied. She was glad to see she was still alone in the kitchen.

"I just had to talk to somebody. Carol .." He sighed.

"I'm sure Carol is lovely. We'd probably get along great if we met, but right now I have to-"

"Carol decided she wanted to go back to her ex-boyfriend," he mumbled.

She paused. So this was another one of those calls. The only time he called her was when he was enduring yet another heartbreak. Well, she didn't have time to listen. Who knew what Mr. Insanity was plotting?

"Can I call you b-" she began.

"Why can't I find a girl who will treat me right? Am I hard to get along with?"

"Of course not. But right now isn't the time-"

"Why can't I be good-looking?"

She gritted her teeth. Obviously, he was not going to make this easy for her. She'd had enough. It was time to hang up. She'd listen to him later.

"Can you hold on for a minute? Someone's at the door," he stated. Before she could respond, he put her on hold.

She never hung up on anyone before, but this was an emergency. The longer she waited, the lesser her chances were that she would get to the police.

"William, I love you but I'm going to hang up now," she finally said aloud as she reached for the button to hang up.

"Who is William?" a voice behind her asked.

She froze. Her heart stopped.

"Do you already love someone?" Hathor asked.

"I suppose I will always love him," she realized. Of course, she had never fallen out of love with him. When someone as wonderful as William entered your life, you didn't just forget him.

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But she ... Well, she was the kind of person people could forget. Her heart ached.

Oh William ... If only ...

"If you wish it, then after you have our daughter, you may divorce me," Hathor told her.

"Divorce you?"

"Certainly. The Queen has all the power. As your husband, my two duties will be to serve you and give you a daughter. So if you still want William, then you may divorce me and marry him. But you must have a daughter first in order to ensure Raz's survival. As a Queen, you will have complete authority."

"So your opinions don't count?"

"Correct."

"And you're OK with this?"

"It is the way things are done on Raz."

"But I have no choice but to marry you first," she repeated. This was too weird.

"If I succeed," he said.

"After our divorce, I can marry anyone? Could I marry a man from Earth?"

"William?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"You really are crazy, you know that? Raz doesn't exist, and you need to see a psychologist. I would offer my experience as a psychology student and listen to you, but I-"

"I can't believe you think I'm making this up," He sighed, shaking his head.

"What do you expect me to believe?"

"What I'm saying."

She could only stare at him, bewildered.

"Ann? Hello? Are you there?" William's voice broke the silence.

She lifted the phone to her ear. "Yes, I'm here."

"Well, that was Carol at the door. You won't believe it! She decided she didn't want her ex-boyfriend after all. Is that terrific or what? I'll talk to you later. She wants to see a movie. Thanks for listening to me. You're a great friend. Goodbye," William said.

"Bye," she sadly replied and hung up the phone.

"You're upset." Hathor's gentle voice snapped her out of her familiar depression.

"I don't know you, so why do you think I will reveal anything to you?"

"Since we will be engaged once I get you safely to Raz, I only think it's fair if you're honest with me now."

"I refuse to pour my heart out to you."

"If that is your wish ... " He shook his head, realizing this journey to Raz may not be as easy as he had hoped.

"I think you should leave," she spat.

"I agree but you must come with me. Don't worry. You can have him once our daughter is born."

"Suppose Raz really does exist," she began as she rolled her eyes so he would know what she thought of that idea, "I doubt William will want me by then."

"Does he want you now?"

She knew his question was asked out of innocence, but the pain in her heart was as sharp as if he'd been sarcastic. "He will again, if I'm patient," she tensely replied, although she often wondered if William would love her again like he used to.

"Why? Doesn't he want you now?"

"He did once. But then I moved away, and he couldn't handle the distance so he ended our relationship."

"Did you ever tell him you want him back?"

"I've told him several times."

"And ... ?"

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"He never feels the same." She shrugged. "It's just friendship for him and nothing more." Feeling foolish, she turned away from Hathor's intense stare and wiped the tears from her eyes.

When she felt his hand touch her shoulder, she froze. Then a strange realization came over her. She was safe with him. Her instinct told her she was safe. Suddenly she felt calm.

"Once you are Queen, you will be able to control time, without magic spells. The Queen's powers far exceed anyone else's on Raz. You must have a daughter before you divorce me, but after you are free to marry again, you can go back to Earth and go to the time he loved you. Then you can bring him to Raz and marry him. But Raz needs a Queen, and you're the only one who can fill that position. So you must come with me," he whispered. "There's no reason to be afraid of me."

She might feel safe with him, but she remained skeptical.

He said some magic words and a thick large book appeared before him, floating in mid-air.

She gasped.

He glanced at her. "I'm going to recite the spell for immediate arrival on Raz, but don't be surprised if we end up somewhere else first," he responded as he flipped to the page he needed.

"This has to be a dream. I fell asleep in economics class," she said to herself.

"Well, here goes nothing," he said and then recited the spell.

Alpha Head I

Planet: Pale

"Hathor is bringing the new Queen to Raz. What can we do to prevent their arrival?" Leader Omin asked, looking expectantly at First Commander Paff and Second Commander Seta.

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"I know how we can counter Hathor's spell and destroy them." Seta grinned slyly. "Of course, we will have to send Paff on this mission."

"All right." Paff nodded, standing perfectly straight.

"Good," Omin replied. "Let us hear your plan, Seta."

CHAPTER 2



Planet: Red

Galaxy: Unborn

One minute Ann was floating through space, vaguely aware of the many stars and planets surrounding her and Hathor. Then, rather abruptly, they were violently thrown by an invisible force onto a red planet that seemed uninhabited.

Ann blinked and stood up. Miles and miles of red sand covered the ground. Red sand as far as the eye could see. The temperature was amazingly hot, probably 110 degrees. In the red sky she saw three gold suns. They certainly weren't in North Dakota anymore.

"So this is Raz. I'm going to rule over sand," she said, not leaving the sarcasm out of her voice.

"This isn't Raz. It's Red, one of the planets in the Unborn Galaxy," Hathor informed her

"Unborn Galaxy?" Just how many galaxies were there?

"The Unborn Galaxy has yet to have life on it. Obviously, whoever is trying to destroy Raz has intruded on my spell and is ready to kill you."

"Kill me?" she cried in alarm.

"Absolutely. You are going to be Queen of Raz. Don't worry though. I won't let any harm come to you."

"If Raz exists," she muttered under her breath. She crossed her arms and looked around. This planet gave her an uncomfortable feeling.

Everything was so quiet. Not even a breeze broke through the stillness. Was she dreaming? How could any of this be real? How could she be on another planet in another galaxy? It just wasn't scientific. So it must be illogical. Right?

But if it was illogical, then how could she be here?

She knelt down and touched the sand. Surprisingly enough, the sand was cool. So odd, she thought. None of this made sense.

"I wonder who's going to attack us," Hathor said as he fingered through the Book of Spells. "If I knew what to expect, I could look up a counter-spell to mess them up. Then we could be on our way."

"Why can't we go to Raz now? I mean, nothing is stopping us," she replied.

Suddenly the ground began to shake. She lost her balance and fell backwards. Fortunately, he caught her so she didn't land on one of the icy spears that surrounded the surface of the cave.

"That was a close call," he said, relieved. "That spear would have gone right through your heart. Quite clever of the enemy, don't you think?"

She could only stare at what had come up from the ground. A cave, big and imposing, loomed before them. She pushed aside a shiver as she thought of how close one of those spears came to killing her. She withdrew from his arms and touched the spear. "Ouch!" she cried out, snatching her hand away from it.

"So our enemies are the Palers," he commented thoughtfully.

"How can you tell? And who are the Palers?"

"The Palers live on Pale, Raz's neighboring planet, and they are violent by nature. The reason I know the Palers are behind this," he pointed to the cave, "is because they are the only ones who use the Law of Opposites."

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"The Law of what?"

"Law of Opposites. What you see is not what you get. Appearances can be deceiving. They like to use this Law because it confuses their victims."

"And we're the victims?" She gulped nervously.

He took her hand in his and assured her, "I won't let any harm come to you."

She believed him. But one question remained in her mind. "Who will protect you?"

He grinned, flattered by her concern. "I'll be fine," he answered. "Shall we enter the cave?"

"Do we have to?" Suddenly, North Dakota life didn't seem so bad.

"We must fight the Palers in order to continue our journey to Raz." Turning to her, he asked, "Shall we?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "If we must... "

He led her into the cave.

She gasped in surprise. Torches lit with white fire hung on the cave's sparkling blue walls. It was beautiful. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Hopefully, you'll never have to see it again," he replied.

They walked silently through the cave. Their steps were cautious. Even though the fire lit up the cave in a cheerful fashion, they could feel the tension in the air.

Someone was watching them. And waiting for the right moment to strike.

They walked until they reached a dead end. There was nowhere else to go.

"What are we going to do now?" Ann asked as she turned around. The only way left was the way they had entered the cave.

"This is really bizarre."

"I agree," he said.

They stood silently as they tried to figure out a way through this obstacle.

"Wait a minute!" she exclaimed. "If this cave is following the Law of Opposites, then this really isn't a dead end!" When she noticed his hesitation, she took his hand and threw it at the wall.

"Hey!" he protested. Then he realized his hand was fine. In fact, his hand seemed to have gone right through the wall! He cautiously put his hand up to the wall. Then he pushed it forward, and it went through. He grew excited by this prospect.

"That's amazing!" He grinned. "How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

"So why didn't you use your hand?"

"I didn't want to hurt my hand in case I was wrong. I am not foolish," she explained with a grin.

A deep rumbling sound came from above them.

"What is it?" she wondered.

"It sounds as if the top of this cave is about to collapse," he said as his eyes scanned the ceiling. "Follow me," he insisted as he plunged into wall. Fortunately, the invisible opening was big enough to take him in.

Ann, however, was too terrified to move. The ceiling was collapsing! She started to panic. Here she was in a weird galaxy, far from Earth, and she was about to die. Who would tell William?

A few pieces of ceiling were already falling down. In a couple of seconds, she would be dead. Death. She wondered what it would feel like?

She didn't get to find out. At the last minute, Hathor reappeared from the wall, grabbed her, and pulled her into it. They fell on a soft floor. Soft?

She looked down. The floor looked like steel. It should have been hard, not plush and soft. Then she stood up and examined her surroundings. This time the cave was dark, except for a light several feet away. She found it difficult to remain standing.

Into Her Own

"Nothing in this cave will follow logic," Hathor stated as he stood up. He looked at his clothes. Silk was the cloth of great honor, which was worn by those who served the Queen, but he realized it wasn't good for confronting Palers. He quickly recited a spell he remembered his mother using a few times, and his clothes converted to cotton material.

"Shall we get going?" she asked. "I'll follow you."

"Let's go." He nodded and walked towards the light.

When they reached the lit section of the cave, they were surprised. The walls extended a mile above and below them. The area was one large circle. In the center of the circle was a twisting staircase that went downward and ended at a door. Blue fire lit the area, thanks to the many torches lining the walls.

"This shouldn't be too hard," he said, smiling.

"Watch out. When something looks too good to be true, it probably is," she warned. "There has to be a catch somewhere."

"I can't imagine what it could possibly be after what we just went through." He was in the process of placing his foot on the step when he bumped into an invisible barrier. "That didn't feel so great," he admitted as he rubbed his shin.

She knelt down and reached for the first step. Instead of feeling empty air above the step, she felt something solid, something wooden. "I think this staircase goes up, not down."

"Up? Really?" He reached up and felt wood where empty air should have been. Then he felt empty air where the visible step was. Sure enough, the staircase really was going up, not down.

"And the door, the invisible door, is up there," she concluded.

"I have to admit, that's pretty smart for Palers. Well, shall we go?"

"After you," she agreed.

He carefully placed his foot on the invisible step. Once he found it, he tested it. "The steps seem strong."

Ann followed quietly. She was incredibly nervous. What if she fell? Would the fall break her neck? Who would tell William about her demise?

"The door should be in front of us," Hathor said when they reached the wall.

Ann noticed a peculiar smell. "Do you smell something strange?"

"No. Why?" He tested the wall to see if it had an invisible opening. It didn't. Instead, he felt more wood. He spread his hands over the wall until he realized that he was feeling the door. Maybe he could find a knob or something.

"Something doesn't smell right," she said, growing worried.

"It's probably just the cave," he reasoned.

He found the doorknob and tried to turn it, but it was locked. What was he going to do now?

Then Ann screamed.

He almost fell off his step. Ann didn't have to say anything. He saw the fire spreading below them. Its malicious flames reached upward, eagerly seeking their victims. In a few seconds, the smoke would surround them, and the fire would catch up to them soon after that!

"Hurry up! Open the door!" Ann cried as she grabbed him.

"I'm trying!" he nervously replied as he frantically searched for a key. There had to be a key somewhere!

"Hathor! Come on!"

"I'm hurrying!" He fumbled at the air, hoping against hope he would find a key.

Smoke affected their visions and made their eyes water. Below them, the fire crept up to them, five steps away from them now. Ann started crying, and Hathor lost any calm he was able to hold onto since they entered the cave.

He finally found the key!

Into Her Own

He immediately unlocked the door. At that very moment, the door flung open and they fell into the next area of the cave where everything was quiet and cool. There was only a wall behind them now.

No door.

No steps.

No fire ready to devour them.

She tried to calm her beating heart by taking deep breaths of fresh air.

"Here, let me help you," he offered as he touched her shoulder and willed her body to relax. It was a gift his mother had given him when he became a man.

Her body relaxed. "Thanks."

"That staircase wasn't so bad now, was it?" he joked.

"It was awful," she responded. "This whole thing is absurd. What else can happen in this cave of horrors?"

As if to mock her, the cave disappeared. Once again, they were sitting on the cool red sand.

His smile grew wider. "We made it, and you're safe. Now we can leave this planet."

"Good. I never want to come back here again," she muttered.

He held her hand and said a few magic words. Then they disappeared.

Alpha Head I

Planet: Pale

Leader Omin and Second Commander Seta were not pleased.

Commander Paff entered the Leader's office, fully aware of their disappointment. "I did the best I could," he said when they turned their full attention to him.

"Why didn't you start the fire sooner? They were on the staircase long enough," Seta demanded. "Or you could have made the ceiling crumble on top of them as soon as they walked into the cave."

"I wanted it to be a fair fight," Paff replied.

"Fair fight?" Omin screamed. "Our planet is in chaos, leaving many Palers hungry, and you're concerned about a fair fight?"

"Well... " He didn't know how to comment. His white body began to shake in fear. Omin's anger was nothing to ignore.

"Nothing is fair, Commander," Omin barked. "The universe is full of injustice. If we don't eat, someone else will. Your behavior is totally unacceptable! Once I think up a suitable punishment for your crime, I will let you know." He walked over to an intercom and called for the guards. "Until I devise your punishment, you will be in the Great Prison. Maybe you'll remember whose side you're on while you're there!"

"No! Please. No! Don't take me there. Kill me. I deserve death. Don't take me to the Great Prison. Have mercy on me," Paff screamed in terror.

Omin and Seta dismissed his urgent pleas as the guards carried a struggling Paff to the Great Prison.

"Now I must go to our second plan," Omin said.

"Agreed, leader."

The Great Prison
Planet: Pale

The guards threw Paff into the prison, which was one gigantic steel room. There were ten light bulbs that cast an eerie glow over the entire 150 yards.

Into Her Own

Paff's eyes slowly focused on his surroundings. Hundreds of Palers and Laxes stumbled around, as if in a daze, and moaned in agony. Some Palers acted on their naturally born violent natures. They gnawed on Laxes who were too lazy to care they were being eaten alive. Other Palers were attacking each other, screaming and snarling. Still, a number of Palers wandered around aimlessly and groaned an incomprehensible language. Some Laxes just sat around with dazed looks in their eyes while other Laxes simply screamed, "White Terror!" over and over.

White Terror? What was that? he wondered.

Something jumped on his back and started chewing on his neck.

"No you don't!" he yelled and struggled to knock his attacker off his back.

He swung his elbows back so that they landed right in the thing's stomach. Then he bent over, grabbed the thing's neck, and threw it on the ground in front of him. When he saw it was a female Paler, he was sorry he had hurt her. But she would have eaten him if he hadn't stopped her. Even so, he felt guilty. He even felt guilty for trying to harm the future Queen of Raz. His guilt had always been his downfall in Omin's eyes. Other Palers would have just walked away without another thought. Survival was the key, especially in a wild environment like this.

"May I help you up?" he asked her.

"Don't hit me!" she hissed.

"Who are you?"

She hissed at him again. This time she reached out to him and scratched his chest. He was surprised at how quickly his blue blood seeped out of his wounds. She had sharp nails! She tried to scratch him again, but this time he was too fast for her. At first, she just stared at him, like a lion stalking its prey. Then she ran away from him and disappeared into the crowd of Palers and Laxes.

"Wait! You didn't tell me your name!" he called after her retreating figure.

Despite her wildness, she was beautiful. Her silver clothes were torn up quite a bit, but at least they were still on, which was more than he could say for many of the other prisoners. He looked down at his metallic blue uniform, or what used to be his uniform. Leader Omin would never forgive him for letting the future Queen escape alive. Paff forced himself not to think about his punishment, whatever that might be. Omin could think up many terrible punishments.

"Don't think about it now," he told himself.

His thoughts returned to the wild woman. True, there were so many female Palers in the room it would be nearly impossible to find her from where he was, but he would definitely be able to recognize her the next time he saw her.

"The Paler you're thinking about is Halima," someone said.

Paff turned around.

"Halima means gentle," the Lax explained. "She is gentle too. That is, until she was put in this place."

Paff shook his head. He never realized the horror of Paler violence before. "I've heard terrible things about what happens here."

"Each Paler and Lax has their own weakness. This prison has a mechanism—a very small but incredibly powerful computer chip. This chip is hidden in one of the million steel blocks that surround us."

"You mean, there's a chip somewhere in this room?"

"Exactly."

"So what does this chip do?"

"You mean even the First Commander, an individual who's only second to the Leader, doesn't know?"

"I didn't even know there was a computer chip."

Into Her Own

"That's unfortunate. It makes me wonder how much more information only the Leader has access to."

Paff had a very uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"To answer your question, the chip, which is called the Main Control Chip, is programmed to read everyone's brain waves. This chip can expose your greatest weakness, exploit it, and tear you apart. Your mind will turn to mush. Those who are wandering around aimlessly and speaking strange sounds are almost gone."

"Gone?"

"They have almost lost all the power and functioning their brains once possessed. Once the brain has been completely drained of its competence, a guard will take the individual, now just a mere shadow of his former self, and take him to the Great Chamber."

"Where the police will brainwash him."

"Actually, the police just feed his brain a new personality, neurons, and all that. So, in reality, the Paller or Lax becomes a new individual without any memory of his former existence."

"I didn't realize it was so complex." Paff said.

"Only the Leader does."

"But how do you know?"

"Mine is a complicated past. Maybe I'll tell you another time."

"Wait a minute. Everyone here seems to be wild. Why are you still sane?"

"I'm not like other Laxes."

Paff could see that. Paller were 7 feet tall while Laxes were 3 feet tall. But this Lax was three and a half feet tall, which was rare. This Lax was blue, with pointed ears and yellow eyes, just like the other Laxes. However, his posture was straight while other Laxes usually had slouching postures due to their lazy natures.

"Besides," the Lax began, "before the individual's mind can be scanned by the Main Control Chip, he must receive an injection. The injection complements the chip's code. Until you get injected

with the needle hidden in the ceiling, you're safe. I haven't been injected yet."

"Tell me, do you know why Halima is in here? If she was gentle, then what kind of mischief could she have caused?" Paff wondered, his thoughts on her wild eyes. She had incredible eyes.

"Her gentleness was her crime," the Lax said. When he saw that Paff did not understand, he explained, "Palers despise gentleness or fairness in their own kind. It's a weakness to be rid of, which you are aware."

"Yes. Unfortunately."

"Why are you here?"

"I tried to be fair," Paff replied. "The Leader had a bad reaction to it."

"What was your task?"

"To kill the next Queen of Raz."

"Oh. Of course, you failed."

"I sure did. But I lost fairly."

"My name is Cem," the Lax introduced himself. "As long as you don't try to eat me, I'll be on your good side."

"Agreed. And I'm Paff." They shook hands.

CHAPTER 3



Middle of the Planet
Planet: Forestaria

Once again, Hathor and Ann were traveling through galaxies at an incredible speed. And once again, they came to an abrupt stop at another planet. This planet reminded Ann of a tropical rainforest, except this rainforest seemed to cover the entire oval planet.

"Is that music?" she asked.

"Yes. We're in the Musical Galaxy. Every planet has its own music. The music helps keep nature in balance," Hathor explained.

She listened closely. She smiled. She heard flutes, pipes, and harps playing a melodious tune as birds chirped, monkeys squealed, and lions roared in the background.

"There are a lot of animals here," she observed as she watched a squirrel run up a tree.

"Naturally. You don't think your planet is the only one with animals on it, do you?"

She didn't know what to think anymore.

He yawned. "It's getting late."

She noticed that the four suns were setting for the day. Soon it would be night. The day sure had been long. She was tired too. And to think she started out the day in class!

"We can sleep on the ground. The grass over here is soft, and these mushrooms will be our pillows," he said.

She never saw giant, pillows-sized mushrooms before. "What is this place called?"

"Forestaria. Thank goodness we didn't land on Earthquakery."

"What's on that planet?"

"Nothing but earthquakes, and the music is so loud, you can't sleep through it, though I can't imagine anyone being able to fall asleep on a shaking planet."

"It all sounds so fascinating," she admitted.

"Once you're Queen, you can travel to any planet in any galaxy."

"Does anyone else on Raz travel?"

"If they can afford to, they may," he replied.

"What about you? Can you afford it?"

"Only if the Queen permits it. As your husband, I am to obey you."

She was surprised.

"What's wrong? You look confused."

"Can't the king do anything without the Queen's consent?"

He grinned mischievously. "He can kiss her."

"And?"

"And that's enough, isn't it?"

"I don't think so," she argued. "I think the king should have more of a say in what goes on."

"He used to before Kathz's curse. Besides, Razian Queens may rule completely but they also rule fairly. All of them. If they don't, the planet's magic will consume them."

"You have an explanation for everything, don't you?"

Into Her Own

"I'm only answering your questions," he replied. "I have an idea. Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"Well, I'm starving. We should find a nice place to sit and eat dinner."

She couldn't argue with that, especially when her stomach was growling and her body was tired. She followed him to a fallen tree. They sat on it.

For awhile, all he did was look at the trees.

"Is this how you eat?" she asked. If so, there were going to be problems.

"Oh no. I digest food like most species. I'm just looking for something appealing to eat. If you take a careful look at the trees, you'll find all kinds of food in the branches."

Anything was possible, she reasoned. Certainly Earth's scientific laws and technology didn't matter here.

Earth.

A sudden longing swept over her. Would she ever see Earth again? Would she ever see William?

"Hey, do you want cheeseburgers and soda?" Hathor suggested, interrupting her thoughts.

"Cheeseburgers and soda?" she repeated, dumbfounded. "What about apples and bananas?"

"Those grow from the ground, and they're not good for you."

"But cheeseburgers and soda are?"

"Absolutely. They are rich in nutrients and low in fat. I understand that is important on Earth."

"It is for dieters."

"What is a dieter?"

"A person trying to lose weight," she explained.

"I see," he replied. "I'll grab the food and soda. Wait right here."

"Where else am I going to go? Tornado Planet?" she muttered under her breath.

It was a funny sensation at first, one hardly worth noticing, but it slowly grew more intense. Something was behind her, breathing down her neck. Gulping, she carefully turned around, hoping it was just her imagination.

Her hopes plummeted. Fear gripped her heart. She couldn't breathe. A lion!

A lion was breathing down her neck! And it was staring at her. Ready to kill! She screamed. She never knew she could scream so loud. The lion roared in fright and ran behind a nearby tree. She was so scared that she kept on screaming.

Hathor quickly conjured up a sword, thanks to the Book of Spells, and ran to protect her. When he saw that she was terrified of a lion instead of a Paler, he threw down his sword and laughed.

Her screams stopped. "What's so funny? Shouldn't you be saving my life?"

"The lions here are not going to harm you," he replied. "You probably scared the poor thing to death. Look, he's shaking behind that tree."

Ann watched in amazement as he walked over to the lion and started petting its golden mane. Since when was a lion's welfare more important than her own? After all, she was going to be a Queen!

"There, there now. Everything's all right," she heard him murmur soothingly to the lion. "She just doesn't understand your nature yet."

Of all the nerve! He was making excuses for her behavior! This was utterly ridiculous.

"Come on. I promise you she won't scare you this time," he continued to assure the animal.

"Good grief," she muttered.

Into Her Own

He urged the lion over to where she sat, her arms folded over her chest. "The lion is more afraid of you than you are of him," he told her.

As if she hadn't already figured that out!

"Do you want to pet him?" he asked.

"No," she snapped. She couldn't help it. She was upset.

"He's soft," he urged, smiling as he ran his hand over the lion's mane.

She shot Hathor a dirty look. She should yell at him, let him know how enraged she felt at his lack of concern for her safety. And she was about to. She would have. Well, at least she would have if she didn't happen to glance at the lion and if the lion hadn't seemed so cuddly.

Oh darn! Her heart was growing soft. She reached out and tentatively touched the lion's mane. Wow! It felt like silk!

"You see, he's really gentle," he said. "I think he likes you too." He sat next to her and patted the lion's back.

"He is peaceful," she dumbly stated. "Where I come from, a lion is likely to eat people."

"We're on another planet. Rules are different everywhere you go."

"I must remember that."

The lion purred, totally content.

"What if this lion had been violent? What if he attacked me?" she asked.

"I would have killed him," he simply replied. "I had a sword ready, but I thought a Paler was after you."

She saw the sword on the ground. "Oh." That was all she could think of to say. Once, just once, she would love to ask him a question he didn't have an answer for.

He gathered several cheeseburgers and sodas for her and the lion. After dinner, they sat on the soft grass, grabbed some mushrooms, and fixed their beds.

"The Palers are probably done for the day," Hathor commented.

"How can you be sure?" she asked.

"I can't. But Palers usually don't attack twice in the same day. They like to plan their attacks carefully. Once the suns come out, then we should be on our guard."

They settled down in their forest beds, the lion between them. "I'll be sorry to leave this planet," she admitted shyly.

"Me too," he agreed. "Everything is so calm and quiet here."

"If I become Queen-"

"When you become Queen," he corrected.

"All right. When I become a Queen, I'm going to make this my first visit," she promised.

"What about Earth?"

"I lived there all my life, but this is new. Besides, if I can travel in time, then I won't miss anything."

"Don't stray too far from Raz."

"I won't." She yawned. Her entire body felt like lead.

"Good."

"When I travel, will you join me?"

"If you want me to."

"Good."

They fell asleep.

Morning arrived and Ann was reluctant to get up.

"Rise and shine! Another adventure awaits us today," Hathor sang cheerfully.

"Let me sleep for five more minutes," she mumbled.

"Aw come on. You don't want to miss out on life, do you?"

She finally sat up and opened her eyes. The sunrises on this planet were spectacular!

"There is a waterfall in that direction." He pointed to the south. "You can use it as a shower if you feel like cleaning up."

Into Her Own

"Is it private?" she asked.

"Completely. Don't worry. I'm not interested in seeing you naked," he assured her, although it was a lie.

"Well, I should hope not," she retorted before stomping off to the waterfall.

He chuckled. She could be amusing sometimes. He might enjoy being married to her after all. Of course, she would reunite with William after their daughter was born. He turned to the lion. "Tell me the truth. Do you think I would look good with a mermaid? I hear they make interesting wives."

The lion purred.

"Of course, nymphs are pretty passionate" he thought aloud. "So many choices. Who to pick, who to pick ... ?"

The lion stood up, stretched and walked over to him. He petted the lion. A few minutes later, Ann returned to the area.

"I'm all refreshed and ready to go," she announced.

"Really? I can't tell," he joked.

"Ha, ha," she sarcastically responded. She threw a mushroom at his head.

"Now that was uncalled for," he protested.

She shrugged. "Tough."

"If it's going to be that way..." He threw a mushroom at her.

"Bull's-eye!" he exclaimed when it hit her on the behind.

"Oh really?" She threw two mushrooms at him. Unfortunately, she missed him.

"Women have bad aim." He threw another mushroom which hit her in the head.

She lifted another mushroom, ready to throw it when the lion playfully snatched it from her.

"You see, he's on my side." Hathor grinned victoriously.

"Give me that mushroom," she ordered. She ran after the lion that had it securely in his mouth. "This is unfair!" She tried to grab his tail, but she slipped and fell down.

Hathor couldn't stop laughing. "He likes me best."

"Is this how you treat a future Queen?" she huffed, pretending to be upset.

Before he could make a fitting remark, a stream of blue fire lit up the trees around them. She quickly stood up and ran over to Hathor who grabbed his sword. The lion stood before them, looking for the attacker.

"What is it?" she whispered nervously.

"One of the Palers. I was wondering how long they would let us rest," he replied.

A loud roar was heard not too far from where they stood. She grabbed Hathor's arm, alarmed.

"I won't let it hurt you," he promised. "Lion, protect her while I look for the Paler."

The lion roared his agreement.

"You can't leave me here!" she panicked in a low voice. "I don't know how to defend myself."

"I'm leaving you in good hands," he assured her.

Somehow a gentle lion didn't make her feel very secure.

"Trust me," he pleaded when he saw her dubious expression.

Something deep inside her, some instinct, told her she could trust him and that this lion would indeed protect her.

"All right," she replied.

He quickly disappeared into the trees. She knelt down and hugged the lion.

"I hope whatever it is, it will be gone soon," she stated.

The lion purred his agreement. The first few minutes were complete agony because she couldn't hear anything but music and animals. It was so eerie. No sense of a struggle or anything. She shivered. The lion nuzzled his head against her chin, comforting her in its own way. For once, she was glad to be in a lion's company.

Into Her Own

When the noise of a great struggle did arrive, she nearly had a heart attack.

All of the sudden a magnificent white dragon with cold black eyes came charging in her view. She could tell it was greatly aggravated as it shook its head violently. She realized it was trying to get rid of something on its back.

Curious, she looked up and saw that Hathor was on the dragon's neck, hanging on for dear life.

The lion raced forward and jumped on the dragon's massive tail. The lion roared and took a bite out of the dragon's tail.

The dragon hissed, puffed blue smoke, and whirled Hathor around in an amazingly fast speed.

The lion fell off its tail.

"Oh no!" Ann cried out. She ran over to the lion. She petted its mane. "You'll be fine. You just have to be!"

In response, the lion jumped up and licked her face playfully.

"Why you ... ! Well, you scared me!" She hugged him.

The dragon sent a blast of fire their way.

Ann screamed, more alarmed than hurt. The dragon crouched low until it was close to her. The lion bared its teeth and clawed the dragon's right eye.

The dragon cried out in pain.

That was the distraction Hathor needed. He raised his sword and plunged it into the dragon's neck.

Ignoring the fierce pain, the dragon snapped at Ann's feet. It caught one of her shoes in its teeth. Terrified, Ann struggled to get her foot out of her shoe but failed. Hathor plunged the sword into the dragon's head, exposing part of its brain. At the same time, the lion scratched out the dragon's left eye.

The dragon let go of Ann's foot and disappeared.

Hathor fell to the ground, but he landed on his feet so he was fine. He rushed over to her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm OK. Just shook up, that's all," she replied.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt. I'm also glad that the lion was here to protect you." He smiled and petted the lion appreciatively.

The lion purred and licked his face.

"I guess we should continue on our way," he said.

"Do we have to leave now? Can't we stay for the day and leave first thing in the morning?"

The lion panted his agreement.

"It doesn't look like he wants us to leave," Hathor commented. "He has the saddest eyes."

"You know, he reminds me of a dog."

"A dog?"

"A dog is an animal on Earth. Usually, they are really friendly and loyal."

"I think I'd like dogs."

"Well, can we stay one more day?"

He wanted to get to Raz as soon as possible, especially since the Palers were bound to pull another stunt before their safe arrival on Raz. But one look at her hopeful expression made him realize that he could not deny her anything she asked for. "I don't see any harm in staying here one more day."

"Oh good!" she cheered as she hugged him and the lion. "Why don't we do something fun?"

"Like what?"

"Let's explore the planet. Lion, do you know any neat places around here?"

The lion didn't even wait for her to finish her sentence. He just ran into a dark part of the forest.

Without a word, they followed him.

Into Her Own

Alpha Head I

Planet: Pale

Omin was not happy. He paced angrily around the hospital bed.

"How could you let them go like that?" he demanded, his face whiter than usual due to his rage.

"That Razian Hathor was killing me! And the lion scratched out my eyes. Fortunately, the surgery corrected my vision, although you can still see the scratch marks. I was completely blind for a while. I couldn't see where anything was and Hathor kept stabbing me in the neck with his sword. Thank goodness I disappeared in time for the surgeons to heal my wounds."

"I expected better of you," he pressed angrily.

"I almost died!"

"Paff could have done a better job than that."

"Paff is a loser! I don't know how he made First Commander in the first place," she retorted. "Don't compare me to him."

Omin slapped her as hard as he could. "I'm surrounded by incompetents."

She snarled and jumped on him. Then she dug her long fingernails into his neck.

"Seta, get off of me right now," he ordered.

She didn't though. She was an expert fighter and he was an expert planner. She was going to show him exactly what she could do! She bared her sharp teeth at him. "Magic might make me a dragon, but I don't need magic to act like one!" She released a blue blast of fire from her mouth.

The smell of Omin's rotting flesh filled the room. His face dripped like wax. "Let go of me immediately!" he commanded. Then he threw her against the far wall. "You're going to the Great Prison."

She bounced back with grace. "You'll have to catch me first, Omin. I won't give up like Paff."

"With pleasure," he hissed. He lunged forward.

She swiftly escaped his attack by jumping up and grabbing the light fixture in the ceiling. She swung back and forth with ease. "You have no idea how long I've been practicing my fighting skills. Maybe you should think twice before assigning commanders under you who are more powerful than you."

"You're not more powerful than me. No one is more powerful than me! I created Pale the way it is today, so I'm the one who rules over it."

"We'll see about that in a minute, won't we?"

He was ready to jump and attack her when she dropped from the light and kicked him as hard as she could in the jaw. He landed against the far wall and crumpled to the floor. She smiled in pleasure when the nurse showed up.

"Omin has decided I should be Leader of Pale now. As you can see, he's in no shape to rule, and I have proved my superiority over him. I would greatly appreciate it if you would send him to the Great Prison," Seta insisted.

"I will obey, Leader Seta," the nurse replied.

No one questioned Seta's new authority. Why would they? She defeated Omin who at one time had defeated the previous leader. That was the way things were done on Pale. No need to question it. Accept it for what it was. That was how Palers handled such matters.

The Great Prison
Planet: Pale

Paff woke up slowly. He heard moans and screams, sounds that were too familiar now. He could barely remember what it was like to hear complete silence. The Great Prison was a restless place.

Into Her Own

Sighing, he opened his eyes. To his surprise, the first image he saw was Halima. She stared at him curiously. So there was a shred of sanity left in those wild eyes after all.

"Hi," he greeted.

She gasped and ran off.

"Wait! Don't go!" he cried, standing up. He wanted to run after her, but he lost her in the crowded room. Would she show up again? He hoped so.

"It seems like you have an admirer," Cem said.

"Oh, I don't know. She sure is intriguing."

"Most wild women are."

"Do you think she can be tamed again?"

"Tamed?"

"Well, a part of her seems wild and another part seems rational."

"She can resume her natural state if she gets out of here before all her sanity is lost."

"You mean, there's a way to get out of here?"

"There is indeed."

Paff almost jumped for joy. A way to escape! "How?"

"I don't know." Cem shrugged sadly. "But I know there is a way."

Paff didn't hide his disappointment. He needed to find a way to escape before Omin thought up his personal punishment.

CHAPTER 4



Planet: Forestaria

No Paler showed up on Forestaria during the rest of the day, so Hathor, Ann, and the lion had time to relax and enjoy themselves. The planet was one big rain forest. All the animals were friendly, and all the plants were healthy and strong.

When it was night, they set up their beds and settled down.

"What is Raz like?" Ann asked. "I know the Queen has the true authority, but what else goes on in Raz?"

"Well, we have many festivals," Hathor replied, not entirely certain he understood her question.

"What kind of festivals?"

"One festival, and my favorite, is the Day of Song where everyone on Raz gathers together and competes for awards. You can choose funny songs, serious songs, love songs, planet dedication songs, songs for the Queen-"

"I get the point." She laughed. "What does Raz look like?"

"You mean things like size and color?"

She nodded.

"It's like Earth in the respect that it has blue water, green grass, and a yellow sun. Actually, Raz has two suns," he corrected. "Raz is round too. I guess there are quite a few similarities."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed."

"I was just hoping for something spectacular."

"Perhaps the familiarity will help you adjust to it sooner than if it were totally different," he said.

"You're probably right."

"Raz is simple," he added. "The Palers have a complex system. They like to use technology with magic, which can be a deadly combination. Razians just use magic."

"It sounds more like a fairytale than an actual planet."

"I know for a fact you'll love Raz."

"I hope so." She sighed as she lay on the soft grass. She petted the lion that was already sleeping.

"You will. We must get to sleep. Tomorrow we will attempt to get to Raz."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight and sweet dreams."

Her dreams that night were indeed sweet. They were, perhaps, the sweetest dreams she had had in a long time.

She was seventeen again, an age she wished to remain forever. She stood in the park where she and William used to frequently go to before she moved.

In her dream, she waited for William. He told her he would meet her here. The sun warmed her spirits. The park was deserted, except for a few cheerful birds that decided to enjoy the cool pond. Smiling, she sat down on her favorite wooden bench. She spent her childhood playing in this park, so it wasn't surprising that she felt attached to it.

"There you are," she heard someone behind her say.

Happily, she turned around and greeted William.

He handed her a single red rose and whispered, "For my queen."

While they dated, they had a joke that she was a queen and he was her king. He definitely had treated her like a queen.

"You shouldn't have." She smiled, delighted at his thoughtfulness. She would always treasure it.

He sat next to her. "Why didn't we stay together? Our love was perfect. What messed it up?"

She couldn't look away from him if she tried. "Don't you remember? I moved and you decided to date others."

"Did it have to be that way?"

Her heart broke, for she had often asked herself the same question. Finally, she was able to turn her gaze to the rose in her hand. It was a beautiful red flower.

His arm went around her shoulders. Just like old times. She sighed.

"It doesn't have to be this way," he told her.

"How could it not be? It's in the past. What's done is done," she answered.

"But can't you turn back time when you're a Queen?"

"Well, I could once I secure Raz's survival with a daughter."

"There you go. You have your solution. We can be together, just like we planned. Won't that be wonderful? Our love will continue."

"Just like we were," she murmured softly, her heart filling with hope and a new kind of happiness.

"I never wanted us to end. Both of us know that," he stated.

"Then why did you let it end? I would have gone to Ohio to be with you. You know that."

"Fate made us separate the first time, but now it's giving us a second chance. We can begin again."

A second chance. Yes, a second chance. A new opportunity to make things work, to correct what happened. This time there would be no good-byes. Their love would continue as it should have the first time.

"Yes," she agreed, excited.

He hugged her tightly to him. Overwhelmed with joy, she hugged him back. Finally, she could get him back again! Their heads inclined. They were about to kiss when something woke her up.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Hathor said as soon as she opened her eyes.

She groaned. He could be incredibly annoying first thing in the morning.

"We have much to experience today," he continued with a stupid smile on his face.

"Do you ever wake up in a bad mood?" she muttered.

"No. Every day is a new experience, and each experience is filled with the possibility of adventure."

"You are nauseating when you're like this," she replied sourly. How could he wake her up when she was getting to the good part of her dream? Life was so unfair!

At least she would be able to travel in time and have her relationship with William again after she had a daughter. She smiled, thinking of how wonderful kissing William would be.

"That's the spirit! Start each day off with a smile."

For once, he was wrong. Hathor had no idea what she had on her mind. She closed her eyes, savoring the remnants of her dream. It had seemed so real. She felt William's arms around her, his breath on her face ...

Then she did feel someone's arms wrap around her and pick her up. Startled, she opened her eyes again. Hathor was carrying her somewhere.

"Let me down!" she demanded.

The lion followed them, wagging his tail.

"You need to wake up. Fortunately, I know how to wake you up right away." He grinned mischievously.

"Hathor, I mean it! Let me down right now!"

"Well ... " He pretended to think it over. "All right."

To her fury, he dropped her in the lake! She was too busy glaring at him to realize he took her to a lake. When she surfaced, she screamed, "I can't believe you did that!"

He laughed and the lion jumped around playfully. They obviously thought this whole idiotic, childish episode was fun. She, however, did not. She stood up, hating the way her wet clothes stuck to her body like glue. She got out of the lake. She huffed right past him and the lion, not bothering to acknowledge them. If they knew what was good for them, they'd leave her alone until she calmed down.

Unfortunately, they followed her.

"Why don't you lighten up?" Hathor said, still amused. "I only wanted to see you smile."

"Dropping me in the lake is not the way to make me smile," she responded through clenched teeth. She stopped walking and faced him.

"What would put you in a good mood?"

"Seeing you beheaded," she snapped even though that wasn't true.

"Now, now. Is that the way a Queen should act?"

"I wish you would leave me alone!" That was true, at least for the moment.

"Bitter words do not become you."

"Who cares?" She was so mad at him! In pure frustration, she turned and walked away.

He started to follow her, but he tripped on a tree root and fell on the grass. She noticed the Book of Spells that fell on the ground. It was smaller than before, but she could probably use it. She snatched it.

"You don't know how to use that. Give it back to me," he said, suddenly serious. He stood up and reached for the book.

She tucked it under her right arm. "Forget it." She'd make him regret throwing her in the lake if it was the last thing she did.

Into Her Own

"You could get us into some serious trouble if you attempt to use it," he patiently told her.

"Well, you could get into some serious trouble by throwing me in a lake." She refused to listen to reason. She was furious, but she also missed Earth, especially William.

The lion leapt at her, trying to retrieve the book.

Oh! He had the stupid animal on his side. She ran. She ran faster than she thought she could. At that moment, she felt as if everything was against her.

First, she had to move to Florida and leave her true love. Then, Hathor dragged her away from Earth to force her to be a Queen of a planet she never even heard of. And now a lion, a stupid animal, was taking sides. Nothing ever worked out her way. Everyone received what they wanted, but she never had a choice. They kept pushing her. When would it stop? When would she be able to make her own decisions, to choose her own fate for herself?

Earth. She would go back to Earth where she belonged. Then she would have control over her future again. OK, so maybe it was bound to be dull and sad. Still, it would be her choice.

Hathor was hot on her trail, and she was slowing down due to exhaustion. The lion shot out in front of her. She screamed, tripped over him, and fell into a large hole. She tumbled down the pathway and she finally landed headfirst in the dirt.

Great. Just what I needed, she thought sarcastically.

A stream of light lit up the area. She had to get to Earth, and the sooner, the better.

"Ann? Ann? Are you in there?"

She ignored him. She had had enough of him!

"Please answer me."

She opened the book and flipped through it.

"This silent treatment won't get us anywhere."

She took a deep breath as she scanned the table of contents.

"All right then. I'm coming down there," he finally stated.

She dismissed the annoyance in his voice.

Travel. .. Travel. .. Travel. .. Ah! There it was. Travel to distant worlds. She eagerly found the designated page.

"To travel to another world, you must focus all your energy into the place of desire. Once you feel your energy igniting, say the following verse in your mind," she read.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on Earth. She envisioned the planet in her mind. Slowly, she felt a spark begin to form in her mind. Then the pressure spread and grew more intense. It was like a warm glow seeping throughout her entire body. A glimmer of the light overwhelmed her senses.

Pow! Some strange feeling, a feeling of being consumed by fire, swept through her entire body. She had ignited her total energy. Immediately, she read the page in front of her.

"Away, away, far, far away, far, far, far from here," she began reciting.

Hathor made it to the end of the descent, the lion at his heels.

"Take me, Magical Realm, take me away, away, far, far away."

"Oh no! Ann, stop! You don't know what you're doing!" Hathor protested.

"Take me to-"

"No! Ann, don't say it!" He jumped towards her, hoping to knock the book out of her hands.

The lion joined him.

"E-Oh! Ump! Ahh!" she cried as she was knocked to the ground.

The book flew out of her hands, and suddenly, she, Hathor and the lion were floating through space. The sensation made her dizzy. They came to an abrupt halt on another world. Once again, they were in a forest, but this one was different from the one on Forestaria.

"Where are we?" she groaned, trying to regain her sense of equilibrium.

"We're on Olympia," he snapped. "The only good thing I can say about this is that we're in my solar system."

"What are you yelling at me for?" she asked. "It's your fault."

"My fault? My fault!" His face turned bright red with anger. "What were you doing with the Book of Spells?"

"Trying to return to Earth. Thanks to you, I'm somewhere else."

"Gee. Poor Ann. She loses some guy who doesn't even love her, yet she insists on going to Earth so she can rekindle a flame that died out long ago. Forget that everyone on Raz depends on her for their survival. After all, what is the survival of the planet compared to her love life?"

"You're mocking my feelings," she observed, hurt.

"You deserve to be mocked! You act before you think of the consequences."

"How can I act? Everything is decided for me before I have time to act."

"That's your perception, not reality. We are on Olympia with no Book of Spells so we can't get to Raz. Thanks a lot!"

"If you hadn't knocked the book out of my hands, then I would have it with me!"

"If you had listened to me in the first place, we wouldn't be here. I told you not to mess with a book you know nothing about. Admit it. You messed up."

She would admit nothing to him! "I don't have to do anything I don't want to," she finally replied coldly. "I'm going to do what I please for now on, and no one will stop me. Have a nice life, Hathor!" Fuming, she stomped away. She walked past him and the confused lion and disappeared behind the trees.

"Good!" he shouted. "See if you can survive on your own on this planet. I don't care anymore!"

He didn't get a response. Figures. She was probably just ignoring him again.

Fine. Let her venture out there alone. Sooner or later she'd run into one of the many gods on this planet. Then she'd regret leaving. It would serve her right too. He crossed his arms and paced back and forth. Why was he feeling so nervous? He should be relieved to be rid of her.

The lion whimpered softly.

"If you miss her so much, go with her," he muttered.

The lion immediately leapt up and followed her trail.

He sighed. At least she would have protection. As mad as she made him, he had to ensure the survival of Raz. His mother would be upset with him if she heard of what had just occurred. Razians were supposed to be patient and calm when interacting with species from inferior planets like Earth. After all, did Earthlings know any better?

Soon he calmed down. Then he regretted his own behavior. He got on her case about her actions, but what about his own? Was he better than she was?

Alpha Head I
Planet: Pale

Leader Seta studied the aspects of the Great Prison. "Incredible," she whispered.

Omin had built a complex system into a chip the size of a pinkie nail. The little chip controlled everyone's brain waves, exploited any weaknesses and, upon request, altered certain brain waves to desired levels.

Seta smiled. She could make anyone become a weak coward with this chip. Someone like Omin. This was almost too easy, she

Into Her Own

thought as she laughed to herself. She signaled Jaz to enter the office.

"Yes, Leader Seta?" Jaz asked as she opened the door.

"As you know, former Leader Omin has been withdrawn from society and placed in the Great Prison. I read through the details of the prison and am aware of certain requirements that must be dealt with in order to ensure that Omin's mind will be altered to meet society's needs the best. I order you to request the injection. Then we will let it reach his brain and be absorbed for twenty-four hours. Once twenty-four hours passes, bring the main guards to me where I will give you further instructions."

Seta sat down, a signal that she was finished with her commands.

"I will do as you say, Leader." Jaz nodded and closed the door as she left the office.

Seta sighed. As soon as Omin was injected with a solution that would complement the Main Control Chip's readings, she would know every intimate detail of his personality. The treatment could begin as soon as twenty-four hours after the injection. The treatment, over a period of time, would destroy him mentally so that he would be only a shadow of his former self. Next, he would go to the Great Chamber where a computer, set up by the police, would give him the personality of a cowardly slave.

A slave. She loved the sound of it. Omin would serve her!

"Your punishment is to be a coward," she whispered. "You will do my bidding for the rest of your life. At least as long as I let you live." She laughed again.

Her telephone beeped.

She answered, "Leader Seta."

"Leader, the main guards want to know what you plan to do with Paff. Omin had a punishment in mind, but no one knows what the punishment was," Jaz said.

"Leave Paff in the prison but do not give him any punishment. He is harmless," she replied.

"It will be done," Jaz stated and clicked off her phone.

Paff was just a minor annoyance, nothing to be concerned about. Besides, being in the prison should be punishment enough.

Now ... what should she do about those pesky Razians?

"Crystal Graph, show me where Hathor and the next Queen of Raz are," she ordered.

A crystal three-dimensional map centered itself in the middle of her new desk and gradually took the shape of Forestaria.

"That's odd," she commented aloud. "They should have left there by now. Show me exactly where they are."

The Graph focused on a deep hole in the midst of a huge forest.

"What are they doing in a hole? Making out?" She chuckled to herself. "You may resume your natural state," she told the map.

It became a flat surface again.

She called Jaz into her office. "How do you feel about being a secretary?"

"I like it. Am I not doing an adequate job?" Jaz wondered, disturbed. Inadequate secretaries usually got sent to the Great Prison.

"Oh no. On the contrary. You are doing a superb job. In fact, you are so good at what you do that I have decided to make you First Commander."

Jaz was overwhelmed with relief. "Thank you, Leader Seta."

"Our first duty together as a team will be to look for the Razians on Forestaria. Once we find them, we will eliminate them. Our survival depends on it."

"Certainly," she quickly agreed.

Seta smiled. Jaz would do quite nicely. Seta considered herself lucky to gain such a willing-to-please and competent First Commander.

Into Her Own

The Great Prison
Planet: Pale

No one recognized Omin when the guards threw him into the crowded room. And Paff was on the other side of the room, so he wasn't aware that his Leader could no longer punish him.

When the shrieking sound came, Paff jumped nervously.

"Relax," Cem said. "It will not affect us."

"What won't affect us?" Paff demanded.

Then the room shifted violently.

Fear gripped him as he watched the Palers and Laxes scream at the top of their lungs and scratch themselves. Torment masked their faces. They were in so much pain that Paff couldn't stand it! It was so unfair! No one deserved this.

"It's the treatment," Cem told him above the shrieks. "We are not affected because we did not get the injection."

"Do they all get the same treatment?"

"No. Each one is receiving different signals from the Main Control Chip."

"A tiny chip can do this?"

"Unbelievable but true."

Paff was speechless. How could one chip contain so much power?

"Make it stop!" someone cried out in anguish.

Paff turned around.

It was Halima. Despite her wild movements, her eyes reflected sanity. She grabbed his shirt. "I can't hold on much longer," she whimpered.

He held her close to him. "We'll get out. Cem said we will."

Mercifully, the siren stopped and the room shifted back to its original position. The terror ceased, the screams ceased, the scratching ceased.

Then he noticed a painful sensation in his shoulder. He was surprised to see that she was biting into his shoulder. He sighed. She lost touch with her sanity again, just like everyone else. He gently pulled her away from him, ignoring the blood seeping from his shoulder.

She quickly ran the other way, and once again, she disappeared as swiftly as she had arrived.

A Forest

Planet: Olympia

Ann wanted to cry, but she forced back her tears. She didn't want to argue with Hathor. After the calm and pleasant day they had shared yesterday, she couldn't believe the events that transpired that morning. He was just joking around. Why did she have to be so difficult?

An animal purred behind her.

She recognized the lion before she saw him. "What are you following me for?" She smiled, glad to see him.

The lion rubbed against her side lovingly.

She petted him. "I am so happy to see you."

He wagged his tail.

They walked together in silence. Then they reached a clearing in the forest.

She gasped, impressed. Before her was a massive mountain made of gold. A set of ivory steps led to a beautiful and elegant ivory palace.

"Have you ever seen a more breathtaking view?"

Into Her Own

The lion roared his agreement.

Suddenly an awful fury, a green woman with snakes for hair, a forked tongue, and red eyes pushed her to the ground.

The lion pounced on the fury.

Scared, Ann could only watch as the fury fought to push the lion aside. She needed a sword or some kind of weapon. Then her eyes fell upon the spear that the fury must have accidentally dropped when the lion jumped on her. Should she grab it while the fury wasn't looking? She hesitated. She didn't know anything about defending herself!

As if to relieve her of such a decision, someone grabbed the spear. Ann looked up to see Hathor. He picked up the spear and stabbed the fury in her back. She screamed and whirled around on him.

Ann shook all over as Hathor and the fury struggled for possession of the spear. She had read about the furies in Greek mythology when she was in high school. But that was mythology. This was real!

The lion bit the fury's leg. The fury's attention moved from the spear to the lion long enough for Hathor to gain control of it. He stuck it in her heart.

She let out a loud squeal as she died.

Hathor released his breath as he watched her body fall lifelessly to the ground. He finally glanced at Ann whose frightened expression moved him to action.

She tried to move as he came over to her, but she was shaking so badly that she couldn't.

"You're safe now. Relax," he soothed in a gentle voice. He touched her shoulder and used his talent to calm her.

"I almost died," she realized. The truth sent a shiver down her spine.

"Are you kidding? She never had a chance," he lightly replied.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"Saving my life."

"It's my duty. Raz needs a Queen," he responded. "Here. Let me help you up." When she stood up, he turned to the lion and said, "You were fantastic. How did you ever learn to fight like that?"

The lion purred in pleasure.

She didn't know why she felt jealous as she watched this exchange but she did. She had a chance to grab the spear. Why did she freeze like that? The lion distracted the fury long enough. She just had to grab the spear and stab the fury. Why had she chickened out?

"Your hair and clothes are a mess. Let's find a waterfall for you to take a shower in, and I promise not to watch," he added when he saw her ready to protest.

"All right," she finally agreed.

He took her hand and whispered, "Stay close to me in case something else should attack."

She didn't argue. "Do you think the Palers will attack?" The last thing she needed to see was a Paler.

"I honestly don't know."

They walked cautiously around the base of the mountain. An incredible forest surrounded the mountain's base. Then they came upon an expansive beach.

Hathor stopped.

Ann wondered what he was waiting for. "Should I swim in the water?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he softly replied. "To tell you the truth, I thought I heard something behind us."

That was when someone hit the three of them on the head and knocked them unconscious.

CHAPTER 5



The Great Prison
Planet: Pale

Omin vaguely took note of those around him. Where was he? He put his hand to his forehead, hoping to massage the pain away. Wait!

His heart pounded, his senses reeled.

His face! Anxiously, he ran his hands over his face. Most of his face was melted off. His nose was almost gone, his eyes were smaller, and he had a small hole where his mouth used to be.

No! No!

It couldn't be true. He wasn't in the Great Prison. He couldn't be! He was the Leader. He designed this place. He sent all of his enemies here. This prison was how he became the Leader. No one remembered what life was like on Pale before he took over. He had seen to it that all the documents on Pale, before he came to power, were destroyed.

How was he to know anyone would ever defeat him? How was he to know he would ultimately seal his doom?

He gasped when a needle fell from the ceiling and swiftly jabbed his arm. "No!" he screamed in anguish.

His treatment would begin in twenty-four hours.

Mount Olympus

Planet: Olympia

The three travelers slowly regained consciousness. Hathor opened his eyes first. They were in a golden cage in an enormous ivory room.

He recognized Jupiter, Juno, Athene, Apollo, Pluto, Proserpine, Venus, Mars, Hermes, and Vulcan who were once the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome on Earth. They stood before the cage, their eyes sharp and demanding.

Ann groaned, rubbing the back of her head as she opened her eyes. When he felt her trembling next to him, he wrapped his arms protectively around her.

The lion guarded them, watching for any signs of attack.

"You have upset Pluto, god of the underworld," Jupiter, the head god, announced. "Did one of you kill a fury?"

"Only in self-defense," Hathor replied.

"You see, he admits it!" Pluto cried, his face red with rage.

"Calm down, beloved," Proserpine, his wife, said to him. "Let him explain why he defended himself."

All eyes turned to Hathor.

"I was protecting her." Hathor nodded towards Ann and squeezed her shoulder, assuring her that everything would be all right.

"Protecting and killing are two different things," Pluto grumbled.

"Describe the situation," Jupiter demanded.

"Ann and I had a disagreement," Hathor said.

"Ann, is that her name?" Juno asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"It sounds like an Earth name," Juno said.

Into Her Own

Mars laughed. "Earthlings are boring, and they are very naive. Why, they worshipped us while we were on their planet. There's nothing special about us except for our immortality and magic. If your planet had embraced magic instead of focusing on science, then the Earthlings would have realized we weren't so special after all. And not only that, but you could have found the secret to immortality."

"The secret to immortality?" Ann asked, puzzled. She looked at Hathor but he shrugged. Apparently only the Olympians knew that secret.

"It's in the magical stone," Mars said. "I still get a kick when I remember millions of people bowing down to my many statues and offering me sacrifices. Your planet will believe anything. Thank goodness we got out of there."

"Oh, I don't know." Venus grinned slyly. "Being worshipped by the men I made love to was great." She winked at Hathor.

Something inside of Ann rebelled when she saw Venus flirting with Hathor.

"You spoke of a stone responsible for immortality?" Hathor finally asked after clearing his throat.

"The Sphinx stole the stone because she wishes to overtake us," Venus replied, focusing on him.

Ann wanted to scream. Did he have to gawk at Venus like that?

"Because that stone is not in the throne room in this palace, the fury is now dead," Pluto fumed.

"If I had known-" Hathor began.

"Please, tell us how the incident occurred," Athene spoke up. "We must keep a clear mind in order to act wisely."

Hathor explained it to them and concluded, "I saw that the fury wanted to kill Ann, so I killed her first."

"And now she's dead," Pluto mourned.

"I'm sure there's a solution that can benefit everyone here," Athene said thoughtfully. The owl on her shoulder hooted his agreement.

"I say we take a life for a life! Kill the man who killed one of our own!" Mars yelled, ready to take out his sword.

"Mars, stop behaving like a child," Athene said.

"Athene is right," Jupiter replied. "She knows best."

"Thank you." Athene nodded. "If you retrieve the stone, the fury can be placed over it, and then she will be alive again."

"Brilliant," Venus cheered. "Then they can do as they please." She looked at Hathor suggestively.

Ann couldn't stand her flirtation anymore. "All we have to do is take a stone from a Sphinx. Why can't you do it?"

They looked at her sadly.

"The Sphinx will kill us," Pluto replied. "We cannot fight her. You see, if we even get a scratch from fighting her, we will automatically die because she has control over the magic in the stone. But you three will not perish from a scratch."

"If you retrieve the stone," Jupiter began, "we promise by the River Styx that we will free you and let you go on your way to your planet."

"How do we know your word is any good?" Hathor asked.

Ann placed her hand on his arm. "When they take an oath by the River Styx, they're bound to that oath regardless of what happens." Ann recalled her Roman and Greek mythology.

"She is correct. Listen to her," Athene replied.

Hathor smiled. So Ann could put her two cents in when it was necessary. She would be an effective Queen.

"So the oath has been sworn," Jupiter said. "I will tell Saturn to make the ocean waves suitable so your boat will arrive safely on the Sphinx's island."

"You'd better return with the stone," Pluto mumbled, still dissatisfied.

Into Her Own

"We will," Hathor said. "Or we will die trying."

Ann gulped. She didn't like the sound of that.

Soon the lion, Hathor, and Ann were sent out to sea on an ivory boat with silky gold sails. The water was calm and provided good speed and the wind kept the boat safe on course.

"How are we supposed to get a stone from a Sphinx?" Ann asked, pacing back and forth on the boat while Hathor remained seated. "Do you have any idea how big that creature is?"

"Yes. She's twenty feet tall," he replied nonchalantly.

"How can you remain calm? This is a crisis. We're doomed!"

"There's no need to be dramatic."

"Do you know what the Sphinx looks like?" she continued. "She has the head of a woman, body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle. Doesn't that description frighten you?"

He only stared at her curiously.

"Did I mention that she's a mean creature too?" she added.

"You sure did study your mythology."

She rolled her eyes. They didn't need to talk about her past class lessons right now.

"Are you forgetting our major advantage over her?" he finally asked.

"What advantage?"

"Our height. The smaller you are, the harder it is for a large creature to find you."

"She could accidentally step on us."

"She won't."

"How can you be so optimistic in a time like this? You make me want to scream!"

He started to laugh. She made him want to kiss her, but he didn't dare tell her that.

"Oh! You are so frustrating," she pouted.

The lion looked back and forth, clearly excited by this exchange.

"Nothing is ever as bad as it seems." He walked over to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "We'll get through this like we got through the cave and the dragon."

"It's just one deadly encounter after another," she moaned. She walked over to the other side of the boat and sat down.

"You might as well get used to my touching you because we'll be married when we get to Raz."

"We're not on Raz yet," she reminded him.

"Not yet but some practice can't hurt." He strolled over to her side and touched her shoulder. "I have a feeling we'll have a fun marriage."

"The only person I want to marry is on Earth."

She pushed him away from her, but she accidentally used too much force. He fell over the side of the boat and landed in the water. She gasped, putting her hand over her mouth. The lion leaned over the side of the boat.

When Hathor surfaced, he sputtered, "What did you do that for?"

Realizing he was all right, she giggled. "You should see yourself. You look ridiculous."

"Not as ridiculous as you did on Forestaria," he countered as he reached for the side of the boat.

She helped him in. His sense of humor impressed her.

The lion roared, jumping around them. They petted the lion that loved all the attention.

On impulse, she hugged him and the lion. "I'm sorry for taking the Book of Spells. I overreacted when you dropped me in the lake."

"We'll get the book back. And I promise to never throw you in the water again." He petted the lion affectionately. "I think he should have a name."

The lion nodded excitedly.

"What kind of name suits a lion?" she asked.

Into Her Own

"Hmm ... How about Leo?"

"Do you like the name Leo?" she asked the lion.

Leo nodded enthusiastically.

"Leo it is then!" Hathor replied.

They docked on the island and got off the boat before Hathor tied the boat to a nearby tree.

Glancing at all the trees in front of them, he said, "We better find that stone before it gets dark."

Ann saw that the two suns were ready to set. "We'll survive?" she asked, her fear beginning to return.

He nodded. "Definitely."

They walked forward, not knowing where they would end up.

The Hole

Planet: Forestaria

"Where are they?" Leader Seta demanded as she threw the Book of Spells on the ground.

"Your Crystal Graph showed us this specific spot," Second Commander Riles replied. "I don't understand what could have gone wrong."

Seta grabbed his neck and gave it a painful squeeze. "Obviously, the Crystal Graph only picked up where they were."

"I believe the Crystal Graph is tracking the Book of Spells," First Commander Jaz softly inserted.

Seta glanced at her. "Go on."

"Well, they were using the Book of Spells to get to Raz."

"Agreed."

"If the Book of Spells provided the transportation and if the male carried that book with him the whole time, Leader Omin—

I mean, ex-Leader Omin—would have tracked him down through that book."

"I'll thank you to remember that Omin was the Leader and that I am the Leader now." Seta removed her hand from Riles' neck. "Very good deduction, Jaz. I do see your logic. Now we have another dilemma, which will prolong the Paler suffering. Where are they? How can we find them?"

"May I make a suggestion?" Jaz asked.

"Please do."

"The Book of Spells is important to Raz. I suggest we take it with us to Pale and wait for Hathor and the new Queen to come to us."

"Then we can take care of them." Seta smiled maliciously. "I'll leave the Paler symbol right here in the dirt and take the book with me."

Soon the three walked to their spaceship.

The Great Prison
Planet: Pale

"What are you thinking?" Cem asked Paff.

Paff stared blankly ahead of him, deep in thought. Slowly turning his attention to Cem, he said, "Dreading is more like it."

"You're dreading something?"

"Yes. Leader Omin is bound to announce my punishment soon, if he hasn't already done so. I'm waiting for the needle to inject me."

"Perhaps Omin has forgotten."

"Impossible, though it's a nice idea."

"Can I offer you a word or two of advice?"

Paff nodded.

"Try not to dwell on things you cannot control. That only increases your troubles. Instead, concentrate on what you can do."

"It's not the most original statement I've heard but I like it."

"Wise men do not dismiss the obvious."

Paff smiled. "You're not lazy and you're not stupid. How can you be a Lax?"

"Appearances are deceiving, as are preconceived notions. Take you, for example. Palers are violent by nature. However, you are a Paler, and you're not violent. Or you can use Halima as an example. She was too gentle to be the proper idea of a Paler, so she was sent here to become violent. The basic idea is simple: someone along the way decided to stereotype the Palers and Laxes. Laxes do have a tendency to be lazy, but they can act effectively when motivated. However, Laxes fear Palers, so they have not tried to protest until now."

"What do you know of the Laxy Rebellion?" Paff asked, interested.

"I know it all started when one Lax lost his wife and children to the Palers who ate them. He loved his family more than anything in the world, and his family loved him as well. He once lost his parents to some Palers, so his wife and children were all he had to live for. He worked at Beyond Star Systems IV where he helped build the spacecrafts that Palers use to explore galaxies. But I digress. On this particular morning, he and his family sat on the patio, perfectly content. Then four Palers came to his home."

"And they were hungry," Paff inserted.

"I do not know why they let the man live," Cem continued. "Maybe they had their fill and couldn't eat any more or maybe they wanted to scar him for life. The man went through many restless nights. He couldn't get the image of his family's slaughter out of his mind. Finally, he realized he couldn't take it anymore. He would not let another Lax endure the same pain and torment he was in, so he slipped into Beyond Star Systems IV late one

night. He knew how to operate a spacecraft, so he traveled to another planet. Laxes are not familiar with the planets in this solar system. All they do is build spaceships for Palers who have all the information.

"Well, on this planet, a large scorpion and bull were in the midst of an awful fight. The scorpion stung the bull, but the bull counterattacked and almost ran the scorpion into the ground when this man intercepted on the scorpion's behalf. The bull never saw a Lax before, so it got scared and ran away. The scorpion was grateful and immediately promised anything in return for this deed.

"So the man followed the scorpion to a large body of water. Scorpio summoned the crab and two fish. The three creatures listened to the Lax, and they decided to help him. They gave him a potent magical formula. Then they ordered him to rub the mixture on his body when Scorpio's stars pass through the Cancer and Pisces stars. The man traveled back to Pale as instructed.

"Incredible things happened then. Laxes from everywhere began to come to him and demanded to know how they could stop being food for the Palers. And that is how the Laxy Rebellion began," Cem concluded.

"What happened to the Lax? Is he still leading them in the Rebellion?" Paff had no idea the Rebellion was so complex in its beginnings. He wondered if Omin knew the details.

"Yes. He is still leading the Rebellion."

"I understand Laxes want to survive but so do Palers. Palers can't eat air like your kind can."

"There are always alternatives."

"What alternatives? Killing the future Queen of Raz so everyone on Raz becomes food for the Palers?" Paff asked.

"That is one solution, but it is not the only one."

There was another way? Paff sighed. What other alternatives could there possibly be?

"We will get out of here," Cem said. "It's only a matter of time. Someone is coming who will release us."

"How do you know this?"

"I'm intuitive."

"You mean to tell me that you just know?"

"Exactly."

"I hope you're right."

"I've never doubted myself before."

Suddenly Paff realized he was hungry. Palers usually got hungry three days after eating. He refused to eat any Laxes or Palers though. For now on he'd rather die of hunger than eat anyone else. Cem made him aware of how dastardly the situation was. But what other choice did Palers have?

Paff sighed. Where was Pale headed?

Cem blew a peculiar whistle, and Halima appeared.

"What did you do?" Paff asked Cem.

"It's time you knew that she went to the Lax side. That's why she was placed here."

"I thought that her gentleness was the reason she was here."

"Partly true. A violent Paler would never side with the Laxes."

"I didn't think of it that way."

"She and I met in the speech arena where the leader of this rebellion was speaking. There are a few other Palers who joined us but not many."

"Other Palers have sided with the Laxes?"

"Yes. You see, a couple of Palers believe in this cause, and they are in here, receiving treatments. Halima is my favorite Paler."

When Paff looked at him curiously, he laughed. "No. She's just a friend. I have to watch after her, and in order to do that, I have to be able to summon her. So I trained her to respond to my whistle."

"Oh," Paff replied.

"Halima, it's all right. I'm Cem, remember?"

Slowly, awareness came over her. She mutely walked over to Cem.

"I wanted you to meet a fellow comrade. His name is Paff," he introduced.

"Hello. How do you do?" Paff greeted.

She hissed and tried to claw his eyes out.

Fortunately, he ducked in time. However, when he stood up, she jumped on him, knocked him to the ground, and bit into his chest. Paff screamed, partly alarmed and partly in pain.

"He's a friend! He's on our side!" Cem yelled.

She stopped her attack and stared at Cem.

"Friend," Cem emphasized.

"Friend?" she repeated. Finally, sanity returned to her. "But he has a First Commander uniform on."

So that's why she constantly attacked him! Paff somehow felt better knowing this.

"He no longer belongs to their side," Cem said.

"Really?" she asked as if finding it hard to believe.

"Really."

She turned to Paff. She looked as though she was about to smile. Then she turned wild and quickly ran off, screeching at the top of her lungs.

Cem sadly sighed. "To fluctuate between sanity and insanity must be horrible. She's getting worse."

"If we're freed and take her with us, will she regain her sanity?" Paff asked.

"I'm not sure, but I do believe she can if we manage to escape with her before her treatments are done."

"How much longer does she have?"

"Not long. I don't think she can hold out for more than five treatments."

"I hope we're freed soon."

CHAPTER 6



Sphinx's Island
Planet: Olympia

"It's so dark in here." Ann shivered, following Hathor into the dense forest.

The many trees blocked the sunlight from the two suns. The lion stayed close behind her, ready to attack anything that posed a threat to them.

"Are you afraid?" Hathor asked, concerned.

"Yes," she admitted.

He held her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, which sent a reassuring nonverbal message to her.

"Thank you," she whispered. She held onto his arm and stayed close to him. "Why is everything so quiet? Shouldn't birds be singing or something?"

"Perhaps we're being watched," he said.

They glanced at Leo. Leo didn't seem alarmed, and since animals had a gift for sensing threatening situations before humans did, they were relieved.

"We'll get that stone," Hathor promised.

She hoped this was one of those times when he was right.

They continued to walk along the worn trail in silence. She petted Leo.

Nothing happened. No Sphinx appeared out of the blue. No attack. Just silence. The kind of silence that could drive a person mad.

"Why doesn't something happen?" she whispered, urgently.

Hathor had been so busy trying to figure out when they would fall into the Sphinx's trap that he forgot to use his talent to calm her. He put his arm around her shoulders, using his talent to its maximum ability. She didn't resist his touching her this way. She was just relieved to feel calm again.

The truth was, he was terrified. He didn't know how he was going to get this stone, but he had to protect Ann, no matter what. He knew he had to keep on his brave face for her sake because if she suspected his fear, she would really panic. So he kept a courageous expression on his face and moved with the solid determination that he really lacked.

Leo was more concerned for their safety than his own, so he dismissed his fears easily.

Everything was so quiet and peaceful that it was hard to believe there was anything to fear in this place. Then they came to a clearing. The forest surrounded a meadow, and in the middle of the meadow, stood a majestic mountain.

"This mountain is made of stone," Ann commented, her voice full of wonder.

"And there's the entrance," Hathor said, pointing to a large hole in the center of the mountain.

"This must be the Sphinx's place. Just imagine ... She built a stone mountain because the gods and goddesses live on Mount Olympus, and she took the stone of immortality because they had it. Didn't Juno say that the Sphinx wants to rule over them?"

"Something like that. Why?"

"Don't you see? The Sphinx is imitating them. I think she wants to be like them."

"So how do we get the stone and escape alive?"

"I don't know."

"Then what's significant about a Sphinx wanting to be like these gods?"

"I just thought it was an interesting observation, that's all. Besides, didn't you assure me we would get everything taken care of?"

He blushed.

This time she was the one to squeeze his hand. "We'll get through this." She smiled encouragingly.

He grinned. "You're using my own words to calm me. Now you're acting like a Queen."

She couldn't deny her pleasure at his compliment. Queen. The word came with so much authority, and with authority came responsibility. Would she be able to handle it effectively?

"You will help me rule, won't you?" she asked. "After all, you will be the king."

"You have to make the final decision, but I'll help in any way I can. Then you can teach William the rules of kingship once we get a divorce."

Divorce? Oh right, she remembered. Of course, she would end up marrying the William who loved her before she moved to Florida.

"I might as well get this over with," he said, leading the way to the stone mountain.

Ann followed him, and Leo followed her.

Once they reached the opening of the mountain, he turned to her and said, "Maybe you should stay here with the lion. She might be waiting for us inside."

"No! I'm coming with you." There was no way she was going to stay outside, perfectly visible to the monster.

"Leo will keep you safe. Besides, I have a feeling she's in the palace."

"Hathor, I demand to go in with-"

Before she could finish, he ran through the entrance.

"Oh! He is impossible!" she complained.

The entrance was too dark for her to see where he had gone. Leo wagged his tail. She knelt down and petted his mane.

"You're the only one who understands me," she said with a heavy sigh.

Leo purred his response.

"Do you miss Forestaria?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Do you wish you were there right now?"

He shook his head.

"No? You mean, you want to be here?"

He nodded and licked her face.

"Oh! You want to be with me and Hathor," she realized.

He jumped excitedly.

"Would you like to return to your planet?"

She didn't know it was possible for a lion to shrug, but he shrugged all right. She laughed. "I am as undecided as you are," she confessed. "At first I wanted to return to Earth. In a way, I still do. But the idea of being a Queen ... Well, it's really something, you know? But I feel inadequate. I never imagined I would be in a position where I could save an entire planet. It's scary."

She hugged him tightly. She would miss him when the time came for him to return home.

Suddenly they heard a loud bang coming from inside the mountain. Startled, she stood up, and the lion prepared to attack.

Hathor ran out of the entrance carrying a sword in one hand and a stone, the size of walnut, in the other. "I found the sword next to a skeleton," he gasped, out of breath. "Here. Take the stone, run to the boat, and wait for me."

She took the stone, but she didn't move.

"Go on," he urged.

"No."

"No? I'm going to save you."

"Who is going to save you?" she demanded.

"I have to save myself," he replied. "If I fail, then I won't be king."

Before she could respond, the Sphinx appeared.

Nothing could prepare her for the shock of seeing a real Sphinx. She was so frightened that she couldn't even scream.

"Give me that stone," the Sphinx hissed.

"It doesn't belong to you!" he yelled.

"It doesn't belong to you either." She bent down, ready to bite him.

Ann could only watch in horror as he managed to dodge her sharp teeth.

The Sphinx had not expected him to escape, so she paused, confused. That was all the time he needed. He wielded his sword and struck the Sphinx's cheek. Immediately, red blood dripped to the ground.

"You insolent little beast!" she shrieked. "I'll kill you for this!" she raised her hand, lion claws clearly displayed, and aimed to rip him to shreds.

"Watch out!" Ann cried.

He managed to avoid her claws by dropping to the ground. He waited for another attack, but it did not come. Not towards him anyway. This time her attention was on Ann. He struggled to stand up. His heart pounded. He had to save Ann! The lion was gnawing at the Sphinx's side, but Leo was so small, he was only an annoyance.

"Take me but leave the Queen for Raz!" Hathor screamed at the top of his lungs.

The Sphinx paused. Slowly her expression switched from ferocity to gentleness. To their surprise, she bowed before them. "Forgive me, Queen. I did not realize who you were."

"Well, I'm not the Queen yet," Ann admitted, feeling nervous. No one had ever bowed down to her before.

Leo stopped attacking the Sphinx, but they hardly noticed.

"You will be soon. I must honor you. Please stay at my home for the day," the Sphinx said.

Ann glanced at Hathor to see what he thought of the strange turn of events.

He nodded his encouragement.

"I will on two conditions," Ann replied, sounding more confident than she felt.

"Anything!" the Sphinx replied.

"One, you let me return the stone of immortality to the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus. Two, Hathor and Leo stay with me in your palace."

"I will do all you say, but if you listen to my concerns, perhaps you'll understand why I took the stone," she inquired.

"I will listen to you."

"Thank you. First, may I provide you and your companions with my best hospitable treatment?"

"You may."

As the Sphinx called for her servants, Ann wondered about the sudden turn of events. Was being the Queen of Raz really that important? Apparently so. It felt strange to be honored by such a large creature. Thank goodness Hathor had screamed that she was going to be the next Queen of Raz! Once again, Hathor had saved her life.

Three nymphs ran over to her, each excited to care for a Queen, or rather a soon-to-be Queen. Three other nymphs rushed to Hathor who looked too pleased to be surrounded by beautiful women, Ann thought sarcastically. Another nymph went over to Leo who was happy to get as much attention as possible.

The three travelers were shown to separate bedrooms where they were cleaned and dressed.

Into Her Own

"Can I style your hair?" a nymph asked.

"You may, thank you," Ann replied. She sat down on the soft peach colored chair.

Surprisingly enough, her room was decorated in silk curtains, soft peach colored carpeting, and wood furniture with silk coverings. It was hard to believe this place was made of stone.

"Do you like your dress?" the nymph asked as she combed her hair.

Ann looked down at her silky white dress that was trimmed in delicate pink lace and flowers. "Yes. How did you make it fit so well?"

"Oh, that was easy. All nymphs here are expert dressmakers, and we know how Queens on Raz dress. We created the dress while you bathed in the perfumed bath. And this room is similar to the bedrooms Queens are used to," the nymph explained.

"Well, I'm glad you washed my hair. It was starting to get too tangled."

"You have glorious curly hair. Many mortal women would kill for it."

"Thank you. What's your name?"

"Joy. The other two nymphs helping you are Pleasure and Sweets."

Ann raised an eyebrow. She wondered how Hathor was doing with the nymphs who were pampering him. Trying to sound nonchalant, she asked, "What are the nymphs doing for Hathor?"

"Is that the name of the young man you came with?"

"Yes."

"Sensation, Happiness, and Kisser drew his bath and made a male Razian outfit while he bathed."

"Did they dress him like you and Pleasure and Sweets dressed me?"

"Probably. That is the custom of our service to our guests, especially royalty and those associated with royalty. Is Hathor your love?"

Ann's head snapped up. "Not really. We have to get married because he's the present Queen's son and I'll be the Queen soon."

"Do you want to marry him?"

"I have no choice."

"If you had a choice, would you?"

She sighed. She looked at Joy who was reaching for some barrettes on the table next to the chair. "I love someone on Earth," Ann finally confessed.

"Oh. How unfortunate." Joy shook her head. "You can't marry your true love because you have a responsibility as a Queen to marry the one who brings you to Raz safely."

"How do you know so much about Razian customs?"

"Raz and Olympia have a special alliance."

"A special alliance? I haven't heard of this."

"Did Hathor tell you? Oh, I forgot. Only the Queen of Raz is aware of it. It's her privilege."

"Doesn't the Queen tell anyone?"

"Only the king who really can't do much about it."

"Am I going to have to become Queen before I find out?"

Joy used the barrettes to pull Ann's hair away from her face. Then she wove a few pink flowers into her hair. Finally, she answered, "The Sphinx will probably tell you about it at dinner. If you prefer for Hathor to know, it can be arranged. Only you can decide whether or not the future king should know."

"All right. He should know too," Ann decided.

"I will inform the Sphinx. Please, take a look in the mirror."

Ann did just that, and she couldn't believe it. She looked like a different person. She looked like a Queen. As if to verify that she was staring at herself, she touched the mirror. She had not dressed up since she visited William over Spring Break almost a year ago.

Into Her Own

She frowned. Not that William noticed or appreciated her efforts. He'd been too hooked on Laura at the time. The William she knew before she moved would have noticed. He would have noticed all right! And he would have told her how beautiful she was before he kissed her.

"What are you thinking?" Joy asked.

"I'm just thinking about William," Ann replied.

"Is that your beloved?"

Ann nodded.

"Perhaps he will marry you once you have a daughter."

"I'll have to go back into his past in order to get him to accept me."

"Why? Isn't the present good enough?"

"He no longer loves me."

"How sad."

"He loved me once, but then I had to leave. Waiting for my return proved to be too painful for him, so he ended our relationship. I still love him though. Actually, I never stopped loving him. I can be with him again, and things will be the way they were between us before I left."

"Forgive me for prying, but doesn't love wait? And how can you know things will be the way they were? You've changed, but he won't have the advantage of changing with you since no time will have passed for him."

Ann never thought about it that way. She just assumed things would be the same. Would her four more years conflict with his lack of that time? Thankfully, a knock at the door interrupted their conversation. It was another nymph, announcing that dinner was ready.

Joy patted Ann's shoulder. "Hathor seems nice. Perhaps you won't miss your beloved so much while married to Hathor, and the time it takes to divorce Hathor won't seem so long after all. I know that being away from your beloved seems like an eternity."

"Thank you," Ann replied, forcing herself to smile. She felt sad although she couldn't figure out why.

The other nymph led her to a grand dining room. The ceiling was massive, as would be expected because the Sphinx sat at the head of a long table. Food filled every corner of the center table, and nymphs ran around, urgent to serve the guests and the Sphinx. One hundred candles lit the dining room. Ann didn't hide her awe.

"Welcome to dinner. Thank you for attending," the Sphinx said as soon as she saw Ann.

Everyone, even Hathor and Leo, stood up to honor Ann. This all felt so awkward to her.

"I'm glad to be here," she finally managed to say.

She sat next to Hathor who held her chair out for her. She tried not to stare at Hathor, but he looked so different. His blond hair was neatly combed and he wore a silky blue outfit.

He caught her eye and smiled. "You make a most lovely Queen," he told her. "I am extremely impressed."

She blushed. Why was he looking at her like that? "Well, you'll make a handsome king," she said, pretending to be nonchalant about the whole thing. Why hadn't she noticed how attractive he was before?

Then she glanced at Joy who was busy filling her plate with food. She remembered their discussion about William. William. He was ruggedly good-looking, not regally handsome like Hathor.

She forced herself to concentrate on her meal. Thinking about William or Hathor wouldn't fill her stomach.

"I hope you will enjoy the meal. I understand Razian humans eat chicken, mashed potatoes, and corn," the Sphinx said.

"I'm sure the meal is wonderful." Ann smiled before she bit into her grilled chicken. When she swallowed her food, she said, "This is delicious!"

The Sphinx glowed with pleasure.

Into Her Own

They ate and made small talk. Then dessert was served, and Ann had never tasted a sweeter piece of chocolate cake in her life. She looked at Hathor to see what he thought, and he winked at her, letting her know he enjoyed the meal as much as she did. When the meal came to an end, the nymphs poured wine in their glasses and left.

"I understand you wish to know of the special alliance between Olympia and Raz," the Sphinx spoke to Ann.

Ann nodded. "That's right. I also want Hathor to know since he will be my husband."

"Very well. Anything you desire, I will grant," the Sphinx said. "As you know, the gods, goddesses, and all the other beings you see on this planet once resided on Earth. The Greeks were the first to notice us, and soon they worshipped us, although I can't understand why. Then the Romans conquered Greece and worshipped us too. We are not special, except for the stone of immortality and our magic. Then again, most other planets in the universe possess magic of some sort.

"Well, the Roman Empire was on the decline. All of what I told you is no secret to anyone in the solar system. However, what I am about to relate is revealed only to the Queen and, upon request, the king of Raz. A group of Romans found the source of our magic and immortality and they threatened to destroy us with our own magic. Fortunately, the Razian King Edmund happened to be searching the galaxy for a unicorn. He stopped on Earth. Although he found no unicorns, he did find us on Mount Olympus in a miserable state. You see, we were held as captives by that group of Romans. King Edmund had the Book of Spells with him. The Book of Spells may not appear to be important, and the Romans laughed when King Edmund threatened to send them to a vacant planet. Of course, they stopped laughing when they vanished from Earth.

"Then Edmund saw our misery, for we were no longer popular on Earth. He used the Book of Spells again and transported us to Olympia. We've been here ever since. And upon our arrival, everyone made a vow before King Edmund that we would always remain loyal to Raz and do all we could to ensure Raz's survival and safety. Edmund chose to keep the special alliance a secret between all Olympians and the king of Raz who had sole authority at the time. Naturally, when Kathz placed her curse on Raz, the authority and knowledge shifted to the Queen."

"Wow. I had no idea," Hathor responded.

"We must retrieve the Book of Spells," Ann said, glancing at him.

"You lost the book?" the Sphinx asked, her eyes wide.

"What if the Palers get a hold of it?" Ann suddenly asked, frightened.

"Palers believe their magic and technology surpasses anyone else's magic, so if they found the Book of Spells, they would dismiss it. Besides, they're looking for you, not a book," Hathor assured her.

"What do the Palers want with you?" the Sphinx asked.

"We're not sure," he responded.

"We must return to Forestaria and get the book, but we have no way to get there," Ann said.

"Vulcan has built some spaceships in the last century, and I'm sure the gods and goddesses will be more than happy to help you," the Sphinx said.

"Then we must go to them tomorrow," Ann decided.

"That reminds me. You promised me you would listen to my side of the story about the stone of immortality," the Sphinx said.

"Yes, I did."

The Sphinx glanced at Hathor uneasily. "Do you permit him to be here as I relate my story?"

Into Her Own

"Oh, yes," Ann quickly replied. There was no reason he shouldn't be told too.

"Very well. For as long as I can remember, the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus have treated me like I'm not important. I tried to let them know my role on Olympia is important. I can confuse many with my riddles. They only laughed and said all I would ever be is the protector of the nymphs. All I want to do is reside in an ivory palace. Stone can be so cold and unattractive. The gods and goddesses denied me my wish, so I threatened to take the stone of immortality until they gave the nymphs and me a better palace. They didn't believe me. I had to let them know I wasn't bluffing."

"Can't you and the nymphs build an ivory palace?" Ann asked.

"Not like Vulcan can. He may be lame, but he's an excellent craftsman."

"When I go to Mount Olympus, I'll talk with them."

"Thank you! Surely they will listen to you."

"Right now, I am tired. I would like to sleep."

"Anything you desire."

The Sphinx summoned the nymphs into the room. The nymphs cleaned the tables while Ann and Hathor and Leo retired for the night in their own rooms.

In the middle of the night, Ann woke up feeling sad. She stirred in her bed restlessly. Why did she feel so sad? Then the answer came to her. Earth. She missed Earth.

She got out of bed and wrapped a robe around her nightgown. She was amazed at how the nymphs made such wonderful clothes for her and Hathor. Was Razian Queenship really so important?

She left her room and walked down the deserted hall until she came to a balcony. She immediately went to it. She smiled. Beneath her were beautiful trees, and above her were millions of stars. Just like Earth. She inhaled the fresh air and closed her eyes. A soft breeze caressed her face. Then, in her mind, she was back

on Earth. Peace. Everything was so peaceful. Nothing could harm her now.

She heard footsteps behind her. She quickly opened her eyes and turned towards the sound. She sighed, relieved. It was just Hathor.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said as he tucked in his robe. "Are you thinking of him?"

"If you're referring to William, the answer is no. I was remembering Earth," she replied.

"Is Earth like this?" He nodded towards the trees and stars.

"Yes. At least parts of it are. Some areas have plains, hills, mountains, and canyons ... Earth has its good points."

"Maybe it does," he admitted, although he still wondered how a planet could be so boring. "Do you miss your parents?"

"My parents died when I was nineteen. They were killed by a drunk driver."

"I'm sorry. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really. At least not now. It happened so long ago that I've pretty much put it behind me. But how about you? I heard you mention your mother, but what about your father?"

"He died when I was very young, so I don't remember him much. After he died, my mother didn't want to remarry. But it didn't matter to Raz's future because shortly after my birth, she was defending herself against an ogre. The sword fight went on for quite awhile before the ogre stabbed her in her lower abdomen. She managed to cut his head off, so she got even with him. Fortunately, the Great Magician healed her wound so she survived, but she was no longer able to have children. She didn't see any reason to marry a man she didn't love since she could no longer have a daughter. That's why she had to consult the Great Magician about the next Queen."

Into Her Own

He gently took Ann's left hand and touched her birthmark. "Your birthmark is in the shape of a crown. That is how I knew you were to be Raz's next Queen."

"Oh," she replied. "I never realized that it had a specific shape."

"You have your identity right here. Too bad the gods and goddesses didn't see it before we had to search for the stone."

"We didn't know about the special alliance, and now that we do, we have that advantage. They will help us against the Palers."

"That's true. It seems you're not so pessimistic after all."

She shrugged and grinned. "I have my moments."

They remained quiet for some time, just looking at the sky.

"Do you miss Raz?" she asked, breaking the silence.

"Yes. Raz is lovely. You'll like it. It has lots of trees, mountains, and plains. A lot of nature."

"Sounds nice."

"It is."

They continued to stare at the stars, each lost in their own thoughts.

The next day, the Sphinx and nymphs wished Ann, Hathor, and Leo a safe journey to Mount Olympus. Ann carried the stone of immortality in a purse the nymphs made for her. When the travelers entered the palace on Mount Olympus, the gods and goddesses eagerly surrounded them.

"What happened?"

"Did you get the stone?"

"Did the Sphinx provide those clothes?"

Ann held her hands up to silence them. "First of all, we did get the stone." She opened her right hand and showed it to them.

Juno ran to grab it but Ann closed her hand.

"I'd like to talk to everyone before I give you the stone." Ann glanced at Hathor who nodded encouragingly. They had planned

out what to say. She lifted her left wrist and showed them her birthmark. "I am to be Queen of Raz."

The gods and goddesses gasped and dropped to their knees to honor her.

"Forgive us. We had no idea," Jupiter said.

Pluto bowed his head and added, "Please forgive me for losing my temper with you yesterday. If I had known of your importance ..."

"That's all right," Ann replied. "I just found out about the special alliance. Hathor knows because he will be king soon. I am pleased to find out we're all on the same side." Ann smiled although she certainly didn't feel nearly as brave as she sounded.

Thanks to all of the conversations she'd had with William, she had learned to portray a certain emotion while feeling another.

The gods and goddesses stood up.

"Please, you must let us pay you homage, at least for today and tonight. We will feed you and your companions, and we will set up the finest bedrooms befitting your status. Then tomorrow we will wish you the best of luck on your safe arrival to Raz," Jupiter insisted.

"Actually, I must express a few concerns I have," Ann replied.

"Oh. Then please sit down," he urged the three companions, and they did.

"What is it you wish to discuss?" Athene asked.

"Before I hand over the stone, I want you to know that I spoke to the Sphinx and promised I would talk to you about establishing an ivory palace for her and her nymphs," Ann began.

Jupiter and Juno sighed.

"She wants to be one of us," Juno responded. "She cannot be one of us because she is a crossbreed."

"I don't believe she wants to be one of you, but I did have my suspicions at first. What she really wants is a nicer home. She

poses no threat if you agree to have Vulcan build a new palace for her."

"Then do you agree to have Vulcan build her an ivory palace?" Jupiter asked, clearly seeking his favorite daughter's wisdom.

"Yes. The next Queen is right," Apollo spoke up, using his gift of telling the truth from the seeds.

"Very well," Athene said. "Vulcan will start immediately."

Vulcan stood up and said, "Good day," and left.

Ann was surprised at how fast he obeyed Athene. Then again, Vulcan was a pushover, she recalled from past readings on mythology.

"We accidentally left the Book of Spells on Forestaria in the Musical Galaxy," Hathor said.

"Yes," Ann quickly recalled, thankful he didn't blame her for losing the book. "We need to get it, but we have no way to get to Forestaria since I'm not Queen yet."

"The Book of Spells!" Juno gasped, alarmed. "Is that the same book King Edmund carried with him?"

Hathor nodded. "And the Palers are trying to kill Ann before she arrives on Raz," he informed them. "It's my duty to make sure she gets to Raz safely. But I must also return with the Book of Spells if I'm to avoid shame."

Ann glanced at him, feeling guilty. Shame? She never wanted him to suffer shame.

"Well, Vulcan has built some spaceships. We insist on giving you one to travel with," Jupiter immediately said.

"Perhaps it would be wise for a number of us to accompany them to help him protect the new Queen," Athene added.

"We cannot afford to lose the next Queen of Raz," Juno agreed. "Plus, we have a duty to protect Raz."

"Thank you," Ann and Hathor said.

The lion panted happily, and Hathor petted Leo's head.

"However, I beg you all to stay with us for one night so that we may entertain you properly. After all, I am the god of hospitality," Jupiter said.

"All right." Ann smiled. "And here is the stone of immortality." She handed it to him.

He bowed and took it.

They placed the fury over the stone and soon she resumed her natural state of immortality. Pluto and Proserpine took the fury back to the underworld.

Alpha Head I

Planet: Pale

Leader Seta sighed. "How long will that man Hathor wait before he retrieves this book?" she demanded, sitting in her office chair.

"I'm sure it won't be long," First Commander Jaz encouraged her. "He must try to find it on Forestaria first. When he sees our trademark on the ground, he will come here and fall into our trap. He wouldn't dare arrive on Raz without that book,"

"True."

The telephone buzzed.

"Speak," Seta greeted.

"Leader Seta, there is a Lax in the Great Prison who has not undergone treatment because he hasn't been injected yet," Freme, one of the Main Control guards, said. "And this Lax is part of the Laxy Rebellion."

"Inject him at once," Seta replied. "His punishment will be total submission to Palers, and he will gather Laxes to Palers who will eat them."

Freme cleared his throat nervously. "Ah ... well, there's going to be a problem."

Into Her Own

"What problem?" she snapped. "A planet cannot survive on problems."

"The liquid ah ... The solution that goes into the injection needle ... "

"Get on with it!"

"It's gone."

"Gone?"

"There's no more left in the needle."

"Who is in charge of the supplies?"

"Ahh ... "

"Who?"

"Me," he softly replied.

"Oh, really. Well, you're going to be my dinner tonight. Jaz, take care of the supplies."

"Done," Jaz replied and left the room to follow the orders.

The Great Prison

Planet: Pale

The treatment rang throughout the Great Prison, and this time Omin was affected. Pain, both mental and physical, vibrated through him. He gritted his teeth, unable to control the jerking motions of his body.

This was insanity!

Finally, and thankfully, the awful shrieking tune stopped. It was a tune especially programmed for his specific weakness. He should know. He had designed this prison himself.

He relaxed. Slowly, he reached up and touched his face. He grimaced. Most of his features, like his nose and cheekbones, were melted off. Seta had done a pretty good job of disfiguring him, but he would get her yet.

Somehow, he would get his revenge.

Paff and Cem ran over to Halima's body, which was crumpled in a corner.

The last treatment had been extremely horrific for her. She was getting worse. Soon she would have no personality left.

Paff touched her shoulder. When she didn't respond, he got scared and held her to him.

"Please, never let go," she whispered, her voice void of strength.

Surprised, he looked down at her. "What? You spoke to me?" He smiled.

"You're with me and Cem. Shouldn't I be on good terms with you?" She weakly smiled back.

"I'm glad," he said. He gently caressed her cheek.

"Cem." She grimaced. "I don't know if I can hold on when the next treatment comes."

"Don't give up, Halima," Cem encouraged. "You've outlasted many here. Hang on. The one who will release us is coming soon. I promise."

Unfortunately, his last statement was lost on her, for she grew wild again.

She snarled at Paff who released her, and then she ran off into the crowd.

CHAPTER 7



Space Port Central
Planet: Olympia

Jupiter, Athene, and Apollo followed Ann, Hathor, and Leo into the spaceship the next day. The gods started the ship and warped to the Musical Galaxy.

Hathor sighed. "I'm almost sorry to leave."

Ann rolled her eyes. "Why? Because you had to leave Venus?"

"And I thought you only cared for William," he replied, looking pleased.

"It's just that I couldn't help but notice how you acted as stupid as any male when confronted with a sexy, beautiful woman." She shrugged. "It has nothing to do with emotion."

"Sure," he snickered.

"You read too much into things."

"Don't panic. I was able to push aside all her advances."

"How difficult it must have been," she sarcastically replied.

"It was, actually. But I have a duty, and with that duty comes great honor. I cannot fail Raz, no matter what the cost."

"What duty are you speaking of?"

"I must bring you to Raz, and I must do it by defending you completely. When I have accomplished this, then we will be

married. To put any confusion to rest, anyone of royal lineage must wait until the wedding night before mating."

"Mating?"

"Yes. Venus promised to show me all kinds of interesting techniques, but Raz is far more important than curiosity."

"Well, that's good," she stiffly responded.

He took her hand in his. She tried to snatch her hand back, but he held on tighter. "I will be your husband before the day is over, so you might as well get used to physical contact."

She struggled again. However, his grip was too firm. So she opted for another avenue. "How do you know we'll be married today?"

"Simple. Once we're on Forestaria, I'll retrieve the Book of Spells and transport us to Raz. We're so close to Raz now that there's no way we can miss."

"The Palers might pull another stunt," she warned.

"No. I don't think so."

"I have a feeling you're wrong."

"Aw ... come on. Try not to be pessimistic." He grinned at her.

"You make me sick." Some people were just too cheerful all the time, and Hathor was one of them.

"We must remedy that because I can't have a sick wife and Raz needs a healthy Queen."

"Let go of my hand," she demanded.

"Why?"

"It's annoying."

"Your hand is hardly annoying."

"You are an incredibly stubborn, obnoxious-"

"Please, let's not get our wedding day off on a bad start. You have already won my full approval as Queen with your remarkable negotiating skills. Raz will be glad to receive you." He hesitated and reluctantly released her hand.

Into Her Own

"We're approaching Forestaria," Athene told them. "Brace yourselves for the landing impact."

They braced themselves, but the landing was so smooth, they didn't need a warning.

"Do you want us to wait here or do you want one of us to come along?" Jupiter asked.

Hathor didn't pick up on any danger, so he replied, "We'll go alone."

"But could you please wait for us in case something happens?" Ann requested, petting Leo.

"We will wait," Apollo replied.

She followed Hathor and the lion down the familiar path. When they reached the hole she had fallen into, they descended into it. She watched him search for the book, and a sense of dread washed over her when he didn't find it.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

"I have no idea," she replied after she searched the area. "This is awful! What could have happened to it?"

Then they saw the Paler symbol etched in the dirt.

"Palers?" Ann asked.

He sighed, putting his head in his hands miserably. "How did they know it was here? I don't understand."

Leo softly purred.

"I'm sorry I took the book," she said.

"You already apologized. Besides, no one's to blame for this. We assumed the book would still be here when it wasn't."

"What are we going to do now?"

"The Palers are waiting for us to go to them."

"Go to them?"

"To Pale. Their planet. It's a good thing you told Jupiter, Athene, and Apollo to wait for us. Otherwise, we'd be stuck here for who knows how long."

"The last thing I want to do is confront a bunch of dragons."

"Dragons? What are you talking about?"

"The Paler we encountered on this planet was a white dragon," she reminded him. "I don't see how you could forget that."

Then he started laughing.

She didn't understand what was so funny, but she had a sinking sensation he was laughing at her.

"Oh, Ann. Palers aren't dragons!" he said between fits of laughter. "The Paler that looked like a dragon used magic. On Red, the Paler had shape-shifted into a cave."

"Oh." That was all she could think of to say.

"They have magic of course, but Razian magic exceeds theirs."

"They seem to have a good amount of magic to me," she argued.

"But Raz's magic is still superior."

"I wonder if you're proud of Raz."

"We might as well go back to the ship and go to Pale," he said, ignoring her sarcasm. He turned to Leo. "I suppose it's time to let you go."

Leo whimpered and rubbed his head against Hathor's hand.

"I don't think he wants to stay here if we're leaving. He wants to be with us," Ann replied.

"He's just saying good-bye," Hathor replied.

The lion shook his head and turned to Ann.

"You want to be with us," she softly acknowledged as she petted him.

He yelped happily and jumped up and down.

"Looks like I was wrong," Hathor admitted with a sheepish smile.

"See? You don't know everything," she gloated.

"I never claimed I did," he replied as he climbed out of the hole.

Into Her Own

True, she told herself. She followed him out and Leo followed her. Once they returned to the ship, she explained the situation to the gods and goddess.

"It does sound like something the sneaky Palers would do," Athene commented when Ann was finished.

"We must help you retrieve the book," Jupiter said.

"I am impressed with your loyalty to Raz," Ann replied.

"All right," Apollo said. "Prepare to take off for Pale."

Beta Quarters: Outside the Great Prison
Planet: Pale

"The Crystal Graph is now set on Hathor," First Commander Jaz reported to Leader Seta who was supervising the injection refill.

Seta turned to her. "Good work, Jaz. Commander Riles, accompany me and Jaz to my office."

"Obeyed," he said as he followed them out of the Beta Quarters.

Seta gave them a satisfied smile as she sat before the three-dimensional graph in her office at Alpha Head 1. "Yes. See, Hathor is on his way here in a spaceship. Jaz, make sure Riles and the two office guards restrain Hathor and this new Queen while I reveal their fate to them."

Riles refrained from arguing that he was Second Commander and fully capable of taking responsibility. He didn't need a supervisor, but he knew disagreeing with the Leader would result in death. So he remained silent.

Seta picked up the Book of Spells that had been sitting on her desk. "As the ship reaches our atmosphere, we'll let them believe they're safe. Then, I'll summon a spell which will transport them here. I can't wait to see the look on their faces when they realize

they're going to meet their deaths today." She laughed coldly. "Being a Leader can be so rewarding."

"How did they get a ship? Raz has no need for spaceships. The Queen uses the Book of Spells for trouble," Riles began.

He quickly shut up when Seta grabbed his throat. "Does he have the book now?" she pointedly asked him.

"No," he squeaked, his eyes filled with fear.

"So someone probably decided to give them a spaceship to get to Raz safely," Seta dryly stated. "If you have any further stupid comments, which I am certain you don't, we can satisfy your curiosity by throwing you into the Great Prison. Then you can ask Hathor and the new Queen all the questions you want. So, have you any comments?"

He shook his head, barely able to breathe.

"Good." She immediately released him and he fell to the floor, gasping for air. "Don't mess with me, Riles. Even Omin can't defeat me. Jaz, let's watch the Crystal Graph and track down their progress."

Jaz agreed.

Aboard the Olympian Spaceship
Galaxy: Enchanted

"We're approaching Pale," Hathor informed Ann. He pointed to the white planet.

"No wonder it's called Pale," she remarked. She had never seen a planet covered in white sand before.

"As we get closer, you'll be able to see the buildings. The buildings are made of lead and steel, so they look like gray dots on the planet's surface," he explained.

Into Her Own

She wanted to laugh. After all, what would people on Earth do if they found out how much extraterrestrial life forms there really were? Earth seemed so insignificant in the whole scheme of things. She sighed. Just about as insignificant as her heart.

"What are you thinking?" Hathor asked.

"Nothing important," she replied.

"Their Leader knows we're here. I'm sure of it," Athene said. "Omin has obviously set up a trap, but no Paler spaceships seem to want to attack us."

"What could they be up to?" Hathor asked.

Apollo quickly handed Ann and Hathor purple drinks. "In case we get separated, our radar will track the liquid in your bodies so we can find you."

"What about Leo?" Ann asked.

"Leave Leo with us," Apollo replied.

"All right. Alpha Head I is in sight now," Jupiter announced. "We must make this fast."

Then, without warning, Ann and Hathor disappeared from the ship. They reappeared before the Leader in her office.

It took them a few seconds to orient themselves. Ann studied her surroundings. Very technological. But very dismal. Just about everything in the room was metal, black or gray. There was absolutely no warmth in the place.

Ann didn't like it.

"Welcome to your final destination, Queen-to-be," Seta greeted coolly.

Ann's attention switched to the Paler in front of her. She cringed. This thing was not only ugly but also frightening, the source of many nightmares.

"I thought Omin was Leader," Hathor said, surprised to see Seta as the new Leader.

"Omin is no longer anyone's concern," Seta snapped. "I am Seta, the new Leader. Meet First Commander Jaz and Second Commander Riles and your personal prison escorts."

"We must get to Raz," Hathor insisted.

"Oh. Well, you see, there's been a slight change of plans," Seta said as she picked up the Book of Spells.

"Our survival depends on it," he responded.

How could he hide his anxiety? Ann wondered. He did it so well.

"And what about our survival? We need food too," Seta retorted. "The Laxes survive on air alone and there's plenty of that, but Palers need food to live. And now that the Laxes are rebelling, we have no choice but to find an alternative food source."

"Why don't you farm?" he asked.

"Farm? What's that?" Riles wondered.

"Grow food. Grow fruits and vegetables. It's certainly more peaceful than murder," he replied.

"Look outside the window, Hathor. What do you see?" Seta demanded.

Hathor sighed, knowing he had lost the argument. "Nothing but white sand."

"Very good. And how do you propose we farm?"

He didn't bother answering since it was obvious she had made her point.

"I shall have Riles, Jaz, and my office guards escort you to the Great Prison where you'll be the gourmet feast for some hungry Palers. As for the Book of Spells ... I'll hold on to it. Off with them," Seta demanded, grinning.

One guard grabbed Ann and another grabbed Hathor. Ann screamed, terrified while Hathor remained in a state of shock.

Death.

Death! Eaten alive!

Into Her Own

Ann wasn't ready to die, and she surely wasn't ready to be eaten by a fiendish white creature. She squirmed, kicked, waved her arms, and yelled. The guard's grip remained strong, and Riles laughed at her.

"Jaz, once Hathor and the Queen are settled in the prison, make sure that the Lax we talked about gets his treatment started," Seta ordered. "Go on."

As they dragged Ann and Hathor to the prison, Hathor tried to reach out and touch her so he could calm her down, but the guards put as much distance between them as possible. Riles and Jaz followed, ensuring the captives reached their destination.

"I won't die!" Ann shrieked as she struggled to get out of the guard's hold.

"You have no choice in the matter," Riles commented, amused.

Finally, when they reached the end of a long steel hallway, Jaz touched the metal door which slid open, revealing a downward slide. She ordered the guards to push Ann and Hathor into it. So Ann and Hathor fell down the slide which seemed to go down forever until suddenly they landed on the steel floor.

Since Ann hit her head on the floor, she felt dazed.

Hathor tended to her. "How do you feel?" he asked as he held her close to him.

"Awful," she mumbled, rubbing the top of her head. "Is this really it? Are we going to be eaten by those horrible things?" she whispered, very afraid as her eyes scanned all the Palers and moaning Laxes.

One Paler approached them, hissed, and then ran off.

She shivered.

"I'll die before I let one of them harm you," Hathor promised. Somehow, she wasn't comforted.

"Who are the strange creatures?" a Paler asked.

Ann cringed, and Hathor squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. This Paler didn't seem violent like the other Palers in this place, but still ...

"I am Hathor, defender of Ann who will be Queen of Raz," he declared.

"Oh. That's right. I should have recognized you both," the Paler said thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" Hathor asked.

"I was the one who set up your first obstacle on Red. I was the cave."

"Charmed."

"Oh don't worry. I'm being punished because I gave you a fair chance and let you live." Paff laughed. "My downfall is my fairness. But now I see Omin has found a way to capture both of you anyway."

"Omin's been replaced by Seta. You're not caught up on your planet's current events."

Paff gasped in surprise. "He is gone? What happened to him?"

"How should I know? I just got here."

"And Seta took over. Seta. Who would've guessed?" Paff grinned. "Omin got his just desserts. He was going to punish me, but now I don't have to worry about that. I wonder how he died? He must have been torn apart! That would have been a sight!"

"Paff, who are you talking to?" someone asked from behind him.

"The would-be Queen of Raz and her protector," Paff replied.

Cem gasped when he saw them. "Where's the one who will free us from this prison?" he asked, looking anxiously from Hathor to the startled Ann. When Cem saw their confusion, he quickly explained, "I know of one who is going to break the prison walls and set all the prisoners free. Where is he? I know he is on Pale with you!"

Into Her Own

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Hathor replied, uncertain about the blue creature.

Suddenly another Paler jumped on Ann. Ann screamed. Hathor released his hold on her and started struggling with her attacker. The Paler turned to Hathor, opened her mouth, and bit into his shoulder.

At the same moment, Ann noticed a small needle heading straight for Cem. Without a second thought, she pushed him aside to protect him and the injection that was meant for Cem was injected into her instead.

Hathor yelled when the Paler chewed on his shoulder.

"Halima! Stop!" Paff ordered as he pulled her off of Hathor who was now bleeding heavily from the wound. "Halima, he is with the one who will free us."

Slowly comprehension swept over her wild eyes. "He is our freedom?"

"Yes," Paff replied.

Cem patted Ann's arm where the needle had gone and left. "Are you all right?"

"I think so," Ann said. "It happened so fast. I didn't even feel anything!"

"Good. The injection was meant for me. Thank you. I am safe from treatment. I give you my loyalty," he solemnly declared.

She raised her eyebrow quizzically. "Whatever you desire," she finally replied, confused. Then she looked over at Hathor who was bleeding. "Hathor! Are you all right?" She stood up and ran over to him. "Does it hurt? Will you live?"

"Calm down," Hathor replied. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

She put her hands on her hips. "You're wounded and I'm not supposed to worry about you?"

He gritted his teeth, determined to hide his pain.

"See! You are hurt," she pointed out when she saw him wince. She tore off the bottom of her long dress and tied the cloth around his shoulder. Hopefully, it would stay in place. She grimaced at the sight of his bloody arm. She tore off her sleeves and wiped his arm. When she was satisfied that his bleeding had been soaked up into the fabric, she sighed with relief. "That should help you from losing more blood, although I can't say much for the pain."

"Thanks," he replied.

"Don't mention it. You did save me from the Paler. It's the least I could do."

"Halima is violent because of the treatments," Paff said, quick to defend her. "She will be gentle when she regains her sanity."

"Regains her sanity? Do these treatments make everyone insane?" Hathor asked.

"In a sense, yes," Paff answered.

"Why don't Razians know about this place or the treatments that go on here?" he pressed.

"Omin created this place. And only other Palers in command know about it."

"Actually, I knew about it before I was put here," Cem spoke up.

"How?" Paff wondered. "How do you, a Lax, know so much about the Great Prison?"

"Appearances can be deceiving," Cem vaguely replied.

"What do you mean by that?" Paff challenged. "Is there something I don't know about you?"

Before Cem had a chance to respond, a deep rumble vibrated above them. Silence fell over the group. Even many of the moaning prisoners paused in wonder.

"He has arrived." Cem smiled, satisfied. "We are free."

Then the entire room shook violently: Ann grabbed onto Hathor to maintain balance.

Into Her Own

Another rumble emerged from above. Everyone but Cem was in a state of panic and confusion. What was going on? Ann had heard that noise before. She forced her mind to focus on the sound. Where had she heard it before? Then it came to her. Thunder! That was the sound of thunder!

"It's Jupiter!" she exclaimed, recalling her mythology.

Jupiter was the god who had the dreadful lightning and thunderbolt! Thank goodness Olympia and Raz shared a special alliance! And thankfully Apollo had given her and Hathor that purple liquid drink on the ship.

Suddenly a bright light filled the entire room and the ceiling began caving in. Sparks flew all over the place. The walls started to slice in half. Then everyone went crazy. Some ran around screaming, some curled up into balls, and some jumped up and down in anticipation of their escape. When the wall behind them spread far enough that they could fit through, Hathor took Ann's hand, saying, "Follow me."

Despite his injury, he managed to help Ann, Paff, Halima, and Cem out of the prison, careful to avoid touching the hot wall.

"I need to get the book," he told Ann. "Tell the gods to meet me in the Leader's office. I see Jupiter walking over here. He'll get you safely on the ship."

He started to walk away, but Ann grabbed his arm and pleaded, "Be careful."

He paused at the concern in her voice. He looked at her worried expression. An impulse swept over him, and he couldn't resist it even if he tried.

And he didn't want to try.

He cupped the side of her face with his hand and kissed her as if they would never kiss again.

"I will," he whispered in her ear before running towards Alpha Head I.

She stared after him, breathless. Never had a kiss had such an impact on her.

"Thank goodness you're safe!" Jupiter called out as he approached her. "Quick! We need to get you safely to the ship."

"What are you three going to do?" she asked Paff, Cem and Halima. She blinked in surprise. They were gone.

"The prison guards are close to us. We must leave now," Jupiter stated.

Sure enough, two guards, with guns, were running towards them.

Something inside her snapped, and she raced with Jupiter across the open white field, if white sand could be considered a field. Behind them, the guards were shooting at her, anxious to have her die. Somehow, she didn't know how, she managed to dodge the guns' beams.

She kept running. She ran faster than she thought possible. Finally, they entered the building labeled Alpha Head I, and she gasped for air. She was really out of shape if that short distance wore her out!

Jupiter locked the door behind them. "They won't be able to shoot you in here. The laser beams can't pass through this metal." He pointed to the door.

Still gasping, she could only nod in response. How could Jupiter breathe normally after such a perilous race? Then she remembered he was immortal which might have had something to do with it.

"Where's your betrothed?" he asked. "He was with you in the Great Prison."

Once she could talk, she said, "Hathor went to get the Book of Spells. Leader Seta has it. We can't leave him here."

"I never intended to. Leader Seta should be in this building somewhere. I'm sure Athene and Apollo have tracked him down.

Into Her Own

Just in case, we must go find him. Do you feel up to it? I know this has been a difficult experience for you."

"I want to make sure we get Hathor and the Book of Spells safely on Raz," she told him.

"Then let's go."

They hurried down the empty hall.

CHAPTER 8



Hathor's head was spinning. He was losing too much blood, and he needed immediate medical attention. But he had to get the Book of Spells first.

All the guards, Jaz, and Riles were so busy trying to round up the many prisoners escaping from the demolished Great Prison that he had no trouble reaching Seta's office unnoticed. Taking a deep breath, he slowly opened his eyes. On the floor, right in front of him, was a gun.

What luck! A guard must have accidentally dropped it. He didn't hesitate to grab it. Unfortunately, the sudden movement knocked him off balance.

"Focus. Need to focus," he whispered to himself.

Finally, the hallway stopped spinning. Wincing in pain, he forced himself to stand up. He wobbled on his feet for a few seconds, but he managed to straighten up.

He gripped the gun firmly in his hand. Just one shot. One good shot and Seta would be taken care of. Then Raz would be safe.

He walked to the doors and cautiously opened one so he could peek into the office and spot his opponent.

"What do you mean Hathor and Ann have escaped?" Seta demanded into the phone. "I don't care how powerful Jupiter's lightning bolt is! You must find the new Queen. At least find her

and destroy her. Hathor means nothing to Paler survival, but she does. So get going and find her!" She slammed the phone down. Then she smiled and picked up the Book of Spells. "Perhaps I can summon her here."

"No!" Hathor yelled as he flung the door open and shot at her.

Her reflexes were too fast. She jumped towards the ceiling, grabbed the chandelier, swung towards him, and kicked the gun out of his hand. Then she landed on her feet and kicked him in the chin.

His body flung through the air. When he fell to the floor, his head hit the corner of a bookcase, and he lost consciousness.

Seta licked her lips, anticipating dinner. "He'll be a delightful feast."

"Not so fast, Leader," Athene cried from behind her.

Seta turned to face the goddess. She sighed, as if bored. "What do you want?"

"The book and Hathor," she replied. "Are you going to give in peacefully or must my owl force you?"

She ran to her desk and clutched the book to her chest. "Force," she snarled.

"As you wish." Athene shrugged. She waved her hand and the owl, that had been peacefully perched on her shoulder, grew to half her size and flew to Seta.

Seta dodged it expertly the first time it came for her. Then Athene joined in and punched her in the nose. Seta immediately raised her fists to start fighting back. When she did that, however, she dropped the book. The owl pounced on the book, grabbed it with its claws, and flew out the broken window. It grew smaller and flew into the spaceship, which hovered outside the window.

Meanwhile, Ann and Jupiter raced down the deserted hallway, quickly approaching the office. A guard suddenly appeared from one of the many rooms along the hallway.

"I thought I might have to protect Leader Seta," he growled from behind them. "Stop."

They kept running. They were so close to the office!

"I said stop!" he shouted, running after them. He found his gun once they reached the office doors. He fired the gun but missed them.

Ann's heart was pounding in fear. Once she was inside the office, she noticed that Hathor was lying unconscious on the floor. When she saw the gun a few feet away from him, she snatched it. She briefly noted Jupiter and Athene who were busy fighting Seta.

"Hathor? Hathor, wake up," Ann said as she tapped his face with her free hand.

"Ah ha! There you are," the guard hissed as he aimed his gun at her.

Before she had time to think about it, she raised her gun and fired. It all happened so fast that she was barely aware of her actions. When he dropped dead, she began to shake. She never killed anyone before.

Was she a murderer now?

Somewhere in the back of her mind she was aware that Seta escaped the gods' clutches and yelled something about this not being over as she ran into the hallway.

Then Jupiter picked Hathor up and carried him into the ship. Athene put her arm around Ann's shoulders and led her to the ship.

"The shock will wear off soon," Athene said comfortingly. "You had to defend him, as well as yourself. You had no other choice."

"It all happened so quickly," Ann stated softly. She gave Athene the gun. "I never want to see this again."

"On Raz, there are no guns. Only magic," she assured her.

Into Her Own

After they got on the ship, Apollo closed the door and flew the spaceship away from Pale. He turned to Ann who was still in shock. "Seta told the truth, you know. She hasn't given up yet."

"You're telling me she's going to find another way to stop me from going to Raz?" Ann asked, her mind beginning to clear.

"No. We will get to Raz without any difficulty," Apollo prophesied, a remarkable gift he had. "However, your right to be Raz's Queen will be tested. You must face Seta on your own if Raz is to be safe."

"How? I don't know anything about Raz or defending myself. I'm just an average human from Earth."

"You will learn. You'll have to. Because if you cannot learn, Seta will destroy Raz. Hathor won't be able to save you on Raz."

Ann didn't want to hear that. She just wanted to get to Raz and rule peacefully. She didn't want more complications. She sighed. What could Seta possibly do next?

Ann entered Hathor's room after Jupiter had tended to Hathor's wound. Hathor's eyes were closed, and his shoulder was freshly bandaged. Thankfully, his blood had been washed off his body, she thought as she knelt by his bed. She reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"How do you feel?" she asked, concerned.

"Much better," he replied. "Where's the Book of Spells?"

"Athene has it. Her owl managed to get it while Athene and Seta fought."

"I must have been unconscious for awhile because I don't remember you and Jupiter entering the office. I did see Athene coming through the window before Seta kicked me in the face."

"Seta sure is violent," she remarked.

"That is normal Paler behavior."

"What about the Paler in the Great Prison? The one who pulled the Paler off of you? He didn't seem violent."

"There are exceptions to every rule I suppose, although I never came across a gentle Paler before."

"I never want to return to Pale ever again."

He laughed. "Did the Palers make a bad impression on you?"

"I won't justify that question with a response. At least you're OK. At first I was terrified when I killed a guard, but now that I see you're doing fine, I can live with the memory."

"You killed a guard?" Suddenly he wasn't joking around. He was serious, a change she noted right way.

"I had to. He would have killed us if I hadn't. I'm glad I made such a lucky shot."

He didn't reply. Instead he frowned, turned his eyes towards the ceiling, and sighed in regret.

"What is it, Hathor? Did I say something wrong?" When he didn't respond, she stroked his cheek gently. "Hathor, why won't you tell me what's wrong?"

He reached up, pressed her hand firmly against his cheek, and stared at her. His eyes held so much sorrow that she felt desperately confused. Why didn't he tell her what was on his mind? She would help him if she knew how.

A door slid open behind her.

"Excuse me, Queen. I came to announce that dinner is served," Athene said.

Ann looked uncertainly at Hathor.

"Go on," he told her softly. "You need your strength."

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me. Besides, Raz comes first."

What did that mean? Why was he being so ambiguous?

Athene touched her shoulder. "He needs to rest."

Ann reluctantly followed her to the other room.

Into Her Own

Hathor closed his eyes. He replayed their kiss in his mind. Actually, he kissed her. But he felt her response. He groaned. He didn't want to think about it now. It was best to assume the kiss meant as much to her as it did to him. He sighed miserably. He didn't want to admit it, especially not to himself. He couldn't even pinpoint when he began feeling this way. He was in love with her. When did he start to love her? He didn't know, and he didn't care. He groaned and closed his eyes. At least he had the bittersweet memory of the kiss.

Alpha Head I
Planet: Pale

Seta returned to her office when she was positive her opponents were gone. Olympians were remarkably strong, she grudgingly admitted.

She sat down in her chair. She had Hathor and the new Queen in the palm of her hand and now they were gone. They had managed to escape! Now the Great Prison was destroyed and all the prisoners were running wild all over the main city. She hoped her guards would find all the prisoners and stick them in the Police Room soon.

She hated those Razians! Why did they bring the Olympians with them?

"Leader Seta, I'd like permission to speak with you," First Commander Jaz said.

"Permission granted. Come in and speak your mind."

Jaz entered the room and sat across from Seta. She showed her the Main Control Chip that had been in the Great Prison ceiling. "I found this in the midst of the destruction."

"How did you know about the chip?" Seta asked.

"Omin had me initial it. No one knew I knew all about the prison's systems except Omin."

"Why was the prison built?"

"I don't know. At one time I think I knew, but I don't remember now."

"Jaz, have you heard the prisoners screaming something about the White Terror?"

"Yes, and I think I should know something about that too."

"What is it, Jaz? I don't have any clue about any of this. I think I'll never know either." She shook her head, puzzled.

After a few minutes of silence, Seta cleared her throat and asked for Jaz's report.

"The Lax you instructed us to inject was a prominent member of the Laxy Rebellion. In fact, he's the leader's right-hand man, so speak. He goes by the name Cem. Cem and Paff have somehow escaped together. The guards have been unable to find them. My guess is that they went to be with the leader of the Laxy Rebellion, wherever he is hiding. Anyway, the needle missed Cem."

"Cem wasn't injected after I ordered him to be!" Seta snapped.

"Correct. However, I do have something more valuable to our cause."

"What could be more valuable than tracking down the leader of the Laxy Rebellion?"

"The needle injected Ann instead."

Seta leaned forward in interest. "Go on."

"The injection translated all of Ann's information. All her genes, memories, cells ... Everything in her mind is copied in here. We have a wealth of information about her in this tiny chip."

Seta smiled. "So we can explore her inner being, find a weakness and exploit it."

"Not only that but if she wants to, she can leave Raz and go back to Earth."

"What would convince her to do such a thing?"

Into Her Own

"A man named William. The love of her life. If anyone can convince her to leave Raz, he can."

"Perfect. We have the magic to take her back to Earth, and she'll be more than happy to go back to Earth because that's where her heart is. And Pale will survive. Excellent!"

"Let's start right away in reading this chip."

Hidden Core of the Laxy Rebellion
Planet: Pale

Paff followed Cem and Halima into a dark tunnel. The passage was narrow, so they walked in a single file.

"This is a new passage. The Palers found and destroyed the old one," Cem told Paff.

"Passage to what?" Paff asked.

"The Laxy Rebellion," he replied.

They came to a bright room with a blue light. Paff glanced around in amazement. He had never seen so many Laxes in one area before. They seemed energetic. But Laxes were known for laziness.

"Their energy comes from the crystal star in the middle of the room," Cem explained, as if reading his thoughts. "If the star shatters, it will lose its energy."

"Does it stop Palers from wanting to eat Laxes too?" he asked, noticing the many Palers in the room.

Cem nodded. "This is a very special star. The scorpion gave it to the leader as a gift to help ensure the success in gaining support. The star feeds Laxes, and it will produce fragmented crystals all over this cave which Palers can eat. But the Palers came here voluntarily. All the star does is curb their appetite for Laxes. It cannot control their free will."

"So this is how the Laxes got the energy to rebel."

"Essentially, yes."

"It's amazing. Neither Omin nor Seta could figure this secret out. It's absolutely brilliant! And Palers don't need to eat any living creatures in order to survive. They can eat crystals instead."

"This star cannot feed all Palers. It's only twelve inches high and wide. Palers, all of them, would require something as large as this room to adequately satisfy their appetites."

"There has to be a way."

"I agree. That is what we're trying to figure out. We're also trying to figure out how we can get the Paler Leader to negotiate with us."

"Negotiating has never been a Paler characteristic, especially in Seta. She pretty much wants everything done her way right away."

"No work is successful without compromise."

"Cem, how do you know so much? Even with the star to give you this energy, you couldn't gain enough energy to learn all of this in such a short amount of time. The Laxy Rebellion hasn't been going on for more than five weeks. Plus, you knew where the hideout was without needing any directions. You were in the Great Prison when the Palers destroyed the old hideout."

"I am Scorpio, and I am dedicated to the leader who saved me from the bull. I changed myself into a Lax so I could aid the leader, and I brought the star from my world to further help him."

Paff was surprised and glad he had Scorpio on his side. Scorpio didn't have a reputation for making a delightful enemy.

"The leader is ready to speak," Cem said.

When the entire room became silent, the leader walked to the center of the room. Paff marveled at his posture, which was unusual for a Lax because this Lax's posture demanded respect and attention.

"Up," the leader quietly said.

Into Her Own

The star brightened and he was lifted high up in the air so everyone could see him.

Everyone waited in anticipation.

"Greetings, friends. For those of you who do not know me, I am Zak. I am a common Lax like many of you here. I am not special, but each and every one of you, Palers included, are very important. Without you, my desire for Lax safety would not be possible. Today's the day of great celebration! The Great Prison has been destroyed and many of us who had to endure its horrible treatments because of the Laxy Rebellion are at last safe in this cave. If you were tortured for this cause, please come up here and touch the star. Its powers will heal you and make you as strong as you once were. Please, come up and be healed!"

One by one Laxes and Palers touched the stars. Paff watched expectantly as Cem walked Halima to the star and placed her hand on it. He watched in amazement and relief as her wild eyes calmed, her posture relaxed, and her snarl turned into a gentle smile.

Cem was right.

She was not a common Paler.

Eventually, everyone returned to their prior place and turned to Zak.

Zak scanned the room. "Does anyone know the whole story of how this remarkable fall of the Great Prison took place? Will someone who knows please tell me?"

Cem came forth. "I know part of it, but I do not know it all."

"Cem! How good it is to see you!" Zak cried. "Please, come up here and tell us what you know!"

Cem obeyed. "Paff has informed me of many things while we were in the Great Prison together. He contains much information, and it was a great privilege to have met him. As you all know, he used to be the First Commander until Omin discarded him from his office. He was on a very important mission. The Palers are

desperate for food, and they have decided to seek another food source."

"Other beings are being eaten?" Zak demanded.

"Not yet. We're all aware that Raz needs its Queen in order to survive. The Palers figure that if they destroy the new Queen before she gets to Raz, then they will destroy Razians. Then those dead creatures will be food for all Palers."

"Will they stop at nothing in their cruelty?"

"They're not known for morals. They're being true to their natures. Seta managed to capture the new Queen, Ann, and her protector, Hathor. I met them in the Great Prison. Obviously, Seta planned for them to be food for some hungry Palers. They were not alone in their approach to Pale though. They came with the Olympian god Jupiter who used his lightning and thunderbolt to tear down the prison walls. So, essentially, the Razians have freed the prisoners," Cem concluded.

Paff walked forward. "May I say something?"

Zak nodded.

"I doubt Seta has given up. And she's never been one for leaving a job undone. The Razians may still be in trouble," Paff said.

Zak sighed. "This is sad news for all of us, friends. Others may suffer unnecessarily due to our rebellion."

"We cannot give up," Halima said. "We've come so far! We've suffered too much to turn back now."

"We must figure out a way to help the new Queen defeat the Palers," Cem agreed. "She prevented the Great Prison's injection from reaching me. If she had not done that, Seta would be able to tell an outsider is against her. You know how the Main Control Chip reveals everything about someone."

"If Seta knew you were helping us, we would be weakened," Zak replied. "What course of action should we take from here?"

Into Her Own

Cem turned to everyone in the room and proposed, "We should help the next Queen."

"We will defeat Seta and her followers!" Zak proclaimed. "We will win this war."

Everyone cheered.

Location: Olympian spaceship heading for Raz

Ann opened her eyes. She hadn't realized she'd fallen asleep in her chair. She yawned and stretched. What time was it? She looked at her watch. She only slept for twenty minutes.

Funny. It seemed longer than that.

She stood up and walked over to Athene who set the coordinates for landing on Raz.

"We will arrive at your new home soon," Athene said. "Are you excited?"

"Nervous. Scared. Unsure. I don't know what to expect," Ann replied. "I don't even know what a Queen does."

Athene smiled. "You'll learn. Experience is the best teacher."

"You know a lot," she noted.

"I'm also immortal. I've had a long time to experience things, but even immortals have things to learn. We all have to start somewhere."

Ann nodded and paused for a moment before asking, "Athene, what's wrong with Hathor?"

"Nothing. He's healing nicely, and soon his shoulder won't have so much as a scratch on it."

"No. That's not what I meant. What is wrong with him emotionally? He seems sad. He's usually optimistic. I think he should be ecstatic right now since we'll finally get to Raz with the Book of Spells."

"That does make him happy," she said.

"But I sense a sorrow, a deep pain. I saw it in his eyes earlier when I visited him in his room. I've never seen that kind of sorrow before."

"Oh. I see what you mean." She nodded. "Are you aware of Razian customs?"

"I know the Queen rules over all and has power over the king. She can divorce him when she has a daughter, and then she is free to marry someone else."

"That's true. And the king has no say in it."

"Yes. I remember that too, although maybe it's wrong. After all, a husband should have a say in whether or not he gets a divorce."

"Not on Raz. Then again, I never married, so I know nothing of such matters. Ann, do you know that if Hathor fails, in any way, to protect you on your approach to Raz, then he loses his claim to marry you?"

"I briefly remember him telling me something like that."

"He failed."

Ann looked at her in surprise. "Failed? How? When?"

"When you protected him."

"Protected him?"

"You shot the guard."

"Oh that. I couldn't just sit there and let him kill us. Hathor was unconscious, and I had to save him."

"I know. You did the right thing. But Hathor cannot change Razian rules."

"So I can't marry him now?"

"No. You can marry him if you want to. It's up to you. You get to decide."

"Decide between him and who else?"

"Whoever you desire."

Into Her Own

The words struck Ann like a bolt of lightning. She was free. Free to marry whomever she wished. She looked Athene in the eye. "I can marry anyone, even someone from Earth?"

She nodded. "Yes. You are free to choose anyone you want."

The news filled Ann with wonderful joy. William! She recalled the dream she'd had on Forestaria. William had come to her, telling her that their love did not have to end.

"I never wanted us to end. Both of us know that," he had said. Then he softly added, "Fate made us separate the first time, but now it's giving us a second chance. We can begin again."

Her heart soared. Begin again. A second chance. She could go back to the point when he loved her most and bring him to Raz where they would rule as king and queen.

William.

At last, they could be together without any prospects of ending. She wanted to jump up and down for joy. She wanted to sing at the top of her lungs. She felt wonderful! Love could be hers again! All she had to do was seize the opportunity and it would be hers!

Then she thought about Hathor, and her joy subsided. With a heavy sigh, she walked over to his room and knocked on the door.

"Come in," he said.

She opened the door.

He was sitting up and examining his shoulder.

"Hi," she greeted.

"Hello," he replied. "I'm practically brand new. See? My shoulder is almost healed."

"That's good."

Suddenly she was at loss for words. She wondered how he felt about her. Perhaps the kiss meant nothing. She sighed. She knew she was lying to herself to ease her guilt. She knew that she had nothing to feel guilty about. Hathor knew about William. She never kept her feelings a secret from him.

"You realize that you're free," Hathor slowly stated. He watched her response carefully.

She jumped slightly. She hadn't expected such a straightforward comment. She nodded. "Athene filled me in on the details."

They both knew he was talking about William.

"I've loved him for four years," she replied. "Four years is a long time."

"I know. I've known since day one."

She wanted to mention their kiss, and he wanted too also. But neither of them had the courage to bring up the subject.

"I hope you will be happy," he finally commented.

"What will you do?" she impulsively asked.

He shrugged. "I'll probably make furniture. I've always had a gift for making things with my hands. Once your children are born, I'll be summoned to teach them the ways of royalty since I came from the royal line."

Ouch, she thought. Tutoring her and William's children? Wouldn't that be like pouring salt on an open wound?

"Will that bother you?" she asked. "I mean, after all that's happened ... "

He smiled at her, but the smile did not reach his eyes. "By then this journey to Raz will seem like a dream. I love children, so I'll be delighted to teach them."

"Oh. Right." She forced herself to smile. "Well, I'm glad there won't be any problems. Thank you for protecting me. I guess being dragged across countless galaxies wasn't so bad after all."

"You'll love Raz."

"I believe you."

The door opened and Apollo announced that they had landed on Raz.

"Are you ready to see your new kingdom?" Hathor asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she answered.

Into Her Own

"Good. Follow me."
She did.

CHAPTER 9



Planet: Raz

Raz was indeed beautiful.

More beautiful than any place Ann had ever seen. It was filled with enchantment, the kind fantasies were made of.

She stood by Hathor and Leo in front of the ship's open door. Before them was a marble palace, elaborately decorated with carvings of fauns, centaurs, goblins, nymphs, sprites, merpeople, and other fantasy creatures she had read about in books and seen in the movies.

Trees and flowers lined the road to the palace. But what made her breathless were the mountains in the background. The two sunsets, for she saw two suns, cast a pink hue over the sky.

Truly, she had stepped into an enchanted kingdom. The kind that excited the imagination.

"We hope Raz will prosper under your reign. Good luck, Queen Ann," Jupiter said.

"Thank you for everything." She smiled gratefully at the Olympians.

"Would you mind if I escort you to the palace?" Hathor asked as he offered her his arm.

For a moment as she looked into his eyes, she regretted their broken engagement. But only for a moment, for William's image

returned to her. She smiled and slipped her hand around his arm. "Yes. I would be delighted if you escorted me."

She petted Leo, urging him to come with them. They walked out of the ship and down the road. Behind them, the Olympians left.

Ann took a deep breath. Nothing could have prepared her for this moment. It seemed so monumental, as if her entire life led to this point in time.

Hathor seemed to understand, for he smiled at her encouragingly, as was his usual way. "My mother will be glad to see you. She'll probably make you Queen tomorrow."

"What is she like?"

"She's an incredible Queen who rules with her heart. She has a special gift for detecting everyone's feelings."

"She's empathic."

"You could call her that. She's very fair too. No innocents have suffered injustice during her reign."

"How is she as a mother?"

"She's great," he eagerly replied. "Of course, she's done her fair share of disciplining me."

"You needed disciplining?" She couldn't picture a little Hathor terror. He was usually so calm and good-natured.

But he assured her that he had done his share of mischief. "I gave my mother gray hairs before her time." He grinned at whatever memories played in his mind. "She loved me anyway, and she often showered me with affection."

"So that explains why you touch me a lot."

"Why?"

"Well, I took some psychology classes in college and found out that children exposed to affectionate parents grow up affectionate as well."

He chuckled. "You and your psychology classes."

She grinned. "Being with you certainly is an experience. I can hardly remember how lonely I felt before you showed up."

"You were lonely?"

"I just moved to a new place. I didn't know anyone, and I was never outgoing enough to attract people to me. You could probably have friends the minute you enter the room because of your personality."

"I never thought of having many friends, but I have felt lonely before."

"When?"

"Growing up as an only child. I always wanted a brother or sister to play with. That's why I want a big family."

"Did you play with other children?"

"Not often. I had to study a lot because I was the Queen's son. When she found out she would never have children again, she had me trained in combat, magic, and the galaxies so I could teach the future Queen's children."

"Oh."

She glanced at Leo and patted his head.

Turning to Hathor, she stopped walking and impulsively kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for everything. I think you did a great job as my protector."

He blushed. "It was my duty."

She smiled. "You're humble too."

They reached the steps leading to the palace entrance. Queen Basilia opened the doors and cheered when she saw them.

"Hathor! Welcome back!" she cried as she ran down the steps and hugged him. "I heard all about how the Palers were trying to harm you and the new Queen. Thank goodness you're both safe!" Then she hugged Ann. "You're very pretty. I can tell you are going to be an excellent Queen. I feel it. Welcome to Raz! I hope you won't miss Earth too much."

Into Her Own

Basilias was certainly affectionate, and Ann liked her immediately. "I can barely remember Earth. Isn't that funny?" she said, more to herself than Basilias. She was surprised at the realization.

Leo roared for attention.

"Oh my! Who is this?" Basilias asked.

"He is Leo. We found him on Forestaria," Hathor replied.

"Forestaria? What were you doing there?" the Queen asked as she pet the lion.

"The Palers tried to kill us," Ann replied. "They were disgusting."

"Are you ready for a long story?" Hathor asked. "Let's sit down. Ann and I will tell you everything that happened from the moment we left Earth."

"Fortunately, the Olympians helped us get the Book of Spells back, and we're safely here now," Hathor finished.

Basilias sighed in amazement as she leaned forward in her comfortable chair.

The three sat in soft chairs in the Queen's private den. Leo was curled up at Ann's feet, fast asleep.

"I'm glad the Olympians remembered the special alliance," Queen Basilias finally commented. "You two certainly did have an adventure."

"I'm relieved to be here," Ann said. "I've had enough adventures to last me a lifetime!"

"Oh, then I hate to disappoint you because ruling Raz is definitely another adventure in itself."

"That's something I'm not qualified for. I don't know anything about being a Queen. I don't even know much about Razian ways. How am I going to do a good job?"

"I'll be here to help you as you begin your reign. But you will pick the knowledge up as you go along," Basilias assured her. "You

must have a good night's sleep. Tomorrow is a big day. I'll have Athen show you to your room."

When Ann and Leo wished the Queen and Hathor a good night and followed Athen out of the den, Basilia turned her tender eyes to her son.

"You love her," she softly said.

He groaned. "I wish you didn't know me so well," he complained, frustrated enough without her noticing it.

"Would you rather not discuss it?"

"What's there to discuss? She saved my life, I failed, and now she's going to marry the great love of her life, William. If I hear his name one more time, I'm going to ..." He sighed. "I've heard enough of him to last me a lifetime."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "Did you tell her how you feel?"

He blushed. "I sort of kissed her on Pale."

"Oh. It seems you didn't tell me everything after all. Do you feel like talking about what's going on with you and Ann?"

He nodded and they talked on and on through the night.

Ann fell into a light sleep. She dreamed that William put his arm around her shoulders. Before them played a movie. She couldn't be sure, but she thought the movie was about Palers building sandcastles on Pale. Such a strange movie.

"What's on your mind?" William urged.

"The movie. It's ridiculous," she replied.

"I think it's fascinating."

When she glanced back at the movie, it had changed. Now she watched a dragon forcing people into a cave that appeared dark but was really light inside. She shook her head, as if it would bring back a memory of something she once did.

Into Her Own

William smiled at her, and she forgot the movie. She smiled at him in return.

"I can't wait to be with you," he told her. "It will be great. Just the two of us ruling Raz."

"Didn't I tell you? Only the Queen rules."

"Of course. I have yet to understand Razian customs. At least you will show me the way. Together again. This time we'll never part."

"Will you take care of my heart?" she asked, needing reassurance even if it came from her imagination.

He leaned forward and kissed her. His kisses always made her spirits soar high above the clouds. Her eyes were still closed when the kiss ended.

"I will," he whispered in her ear.

Startled, she opened her eyes. Before her was Hathor.

She immediately woke up. At first she didn't recognize her strange new surroundings. Then, as she sat up in her huge firm bed, she remembered Raz. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Beside her, Leo slept soundly, curled up in a furry ball. She smiled and petted him. She was grateful for his presence. They were both strangers here.

The dream was so odd. What did it mean? She got out of her bed, walked across the spacious room and looked out of her window. She saw mountains standing in the majestic full moon's silvery light.

William. He looked so handsome in her dream. His dark brown hair was lightly feathered. His brown eyes twinkled as he looked at her. His body was thin unlike Hathor's regular build.

Hathor? Now why was she thinking of him? Why did she dream of him? It was so odd.

She searched her heart. She knew deep down that the William she talked to on the phone in North Dakota did not love her

anymore. He was fond of her, yes, but she would always be just a friend to him.

"Why did I keep trying when I knew his feelings had changed?" she asked herself, her forehead pressed against the cool glass. In fact, that was one of the reasons she moved to North Dakota. She figured a new environment would help her get over him once and for all. It hadn't worked. She only wanted him more.

But the old William ... He loved her when he was eighteen. He was the one she would marry. She smiled as she imagined their wedding day. Surely, she would be the happiest bride alive. Yes, they would be together again.

Streets of the main city
Planet: Pale

Omin was hungry. Actually, starving was more like it. He walked along the city, barely aware of the night.

Free. What a miracle! And Seta had been so sure of herself. What a joke!

Jaz. He wondered what Jaz was up to. Surely, Jaz was in a commanding position. Seta had always seemed to favor her quick thinking abilities. He, too, had been amazed with Jaz's wonderful qualities in the past. He frowned. Jaz had been perfect; at least she had been, once upon a time.

He touched his face. His nose was gone, except for the two small holes that allowed him to breathe. His cheeks felt like dried wax on a candle.

He spotted a sheet of metal ahead of him. He knew he shouldn't look at what he'd become, but he had to. He had to see himself. He approached the metal with dread. Bracing himself, he

looked at his reflection. It took all of his willpower not to vomit. He was hideous! He was a monster!

He didn't resemble himself. No one would ever recognize him. He could hardly believe the Paler in his reflection was the same Paler who built the Paler empire.

"The only way anyone will recognize me is by my Leader uniform," he thought aloud.

"Freak! Get out of here!" someone yelled at him.

He turned around and saw a Paler, perhaps another ex-prisoner, scoffing at him. He growled, clearly expressing his hatred.

"You're not a Paler. What kind of mutation are you?" the instigator spat.

Omin approached him. "I created you, and I can destroy you just as easily."

It was then that the Paler's eyes widened. "White Terror," he croaked.

Omin would have grinned if he could have. "So you remember." He swiftly and effortlessly grabbed the Paler by the neck. Without another word, he snapped it.

"Gross freak!"

Omin glanced up. Two Paler women screamed, fleeing from him. Omin understood their fear. He understood it and detested it.

He was a freak now.

Thanks to Seta. Omin howled as loud as he could in his agony. He had to get his revenge!

"This time I'll change you into a mutation," he promised Seta. "Just you wait. I'm going to get you. Then you'll regret the day you messed with me!"

The Great Palace

Planet: Raz

Ann yawned and smiled to herself. The bed was so comfortable she never wanted to wake up. She petted Leo. His fur was very soft. He purred, obviously content.

"Today's your day, Queen Ann."

She groaned and pulled the covers over her head. "Why don't you let me sleep in, Hathor?"

"It's already nine in the morning. The morning's half over," he cheerfully stated as he sat down beside her on the bed.

"I should have locked my bedroom door," she mumbled sleepily.

"Why would you want to lock me out? I brought you breakfast in bed."

Breakfast? What did Razians eat anyway? She reluctantly opened her eyes and sat up. "You're very annoying in the morning," she told him.

"How do you mean?"

"You're too chipper."

"It's a brand new day! It's full of promise! Can't you feel the magic in the air?"

She was never a morning person, and hearing him first thing in the morning didn't make her feel glad to wake up. However, he had come with a tray full of pancakes, French toast, eggs, ham, and milk.

She cringed. "Don't you think this is too much? I may not be the slimmest woman in the world, but I'm not able to eat all this food."

His eyes lit up and he left the room in a hurry.

"He is so strange," she said to Leo who was staring at her food hungrily. Hathor returned with two extra trays. "I was hoping you'd request my company during breakfast."

She laughed despite herself. "You are silly. You know that, don't you?"

He only winked at her as he loaded his and Leo's trays with some of her food.

"Why did you bring me breakfast in bed?" she asked. "I could walk to the kitchen."

"The Queen is the most important person on Raz, so she must be served in the best way possible. Your husband will do this every morning."

"You mean, the king serves the Queen?"

"That's his job."

"And what if he doesn't like it?"

"Then it's your job to divorce him and find someone who will serve you."

"I've never been waited on in my life, and I'm not sure I like the idea of having a husband who has to serve me and give me a daughter."

Hathor stopped eating and stared at her, bewildered. "Why?"

"I've always thought of marriage as a partnership. It's a give-and-take relationship where both parties serve each other."

"The husband gets the title of king and he gets to support her and be the father of the next Queen. What can be more rewarding than that?"

He was serious, she realized. Then she reminded herself that Razian customs differed from America's on Earth. Would William ever happily serve her? He would surely like to be involved in ruling Raz too. Wouldn't he?

She pushed her doubts aside. Instead, she said, "I dreamt about you last night." She blinked. Oops. She had momentarily forgotten what he'd been doing in her dream.

"Really? What happened?" he asked as he poured more honey on his pancakes.

"Nothing. You were just there," she vaguely responded.

He sighed playfully as he set aside their trays. "Come on. Haven't we been through enough together for you to trust me?"

"I never said I didn't trust you."

"True. So why don't you tell me what happened in your dream?"

"Is it really so important?"

"It's interesting to me. After all, I was in it. Don't I get to know what I do in your dreams?"

"No."

"No?"

"No." She threw her pillow at him. "So stop pestering me about it."

He grinned mischievously as he flung the pillow back at her.

Naturally, this resulted in a pillow fight, and Leo jumped around them playfully, switching sides at will. For the first time since they met, Ann let down all of her inhibitions. She felt free again. Free to be silly and childish.

It was so much fun.

A knock at the door interrupted them. Ann immediately paused. Hathor laughed and hit her on the head with a pillow. "You should never let your guard down," he warned.

"Oh!" She pushed him off the bed. That would teach him to take advantage of the situation.

"Ouch. That hurt," he complained, rubbing his back.

"Are you OK?" she asked, concerned. She hadn't pushed him that hard, had she? She leaned over the bed to get a better look at his back.

Of course, she shouldn't have. She'd set herself up. He pulled her off the bed so she landed on the floor next to him. "You tricked me!"

"Ha, ha! Paybacks are sweet," he replied as he stood up. "You must get up. Someone is at the door."

She frowned and crossed her arms. "I'm never talking to you again."

He opened the door. Athen was standing in the doorway. "Hello, Hathor. I see you're entertaining the new Queen."

She stood up. Good grief! What kind of entertaining did Athen think Hathor was doing?

Turning to Ann, Athen continued, "Your majesty's presence is requested in the throne room in an hour."

"What for?" she asked.

"You're to become Queen today. Queen Basilia is already preparing the ceremony and festivities. Many Razians will be there to greet you as their new Queen. We're glad this day has at last come."

"I'll be in the throne room as soon as I can," she answered, feeling nervous and excited.

A Queen. She was going to be a Queen. She didn't know how she could become a Queen. It still seemed like a dream.

"I'll be happy to escort you when you're ready," Athen said.

"Don't bother. I'll do that," Hathor interrupted.

"Would you prefer Hathor?" he asked her.

"To what?" She hadn't realized they were talking. Her mind was busy trying to figure out how someone like her could be a good Queen.

"Would you like me or Hathor to escort you to the throne room?" Athen clarified.

"I guess I'll go with Hathor since I know him better," she decided.

"Very well." He bowed. "By the way, if you two continue your pillow fight, don't let Hathor trick you with his 'Ouch, I'm hurt' trick. He will probably pull you off the bed if you fall for it."

"I'll keep that in mind." She grinned despite herself. So Hathor had done it before. At least she wasn't the only one who fell for it.

Hathor shook his head as Athen closed the door behind him. "He's just sore because he never won a pillow fight with me when we were kids."

"Is he a good friend of yours?"

"I suppose. I knew him since I was three. We grew up together. Now, what are you going to wear for this special occasion?"

"The only clothes I have is the dress the nymphs made for me on Olympia, but that's all torn up from our visit to Pale, if it can be called a visit."

"Oh, nonsense. You are a Queen now."

"Will be a Queen. I haven't been sworn in yet."

"Soon enough. Did you look in your closet?"

"No."

"You have many clothes to choose from." He opened the two doors to her walk-in closet that were filled with many clothes of all colors and fabrics, and there were shoes to match every outfit.

"What am I going to do with so many clothes? Not even a mall has such a wide selection."

"Nothing is too good for the Queen of Raz. The Great Magician got all of your measurements from his crystal ball, and the fairies, nymphs, and maids went to work on your wardrobe. I hope you like it."

"Yes, I do." She didn't want to look like she was gawking at the selection of all the outfits, but she couldn't help it. This was amazing. All this was just for her? It had to be a dream!

"I'll be waiting outside the door while you shower and dress. Come on, Leo." He whistled and Leo followed him out of the room.

Once she put on her new purple dress, she gasped at the image in her mirror. The dress magically brought out her good features while hiding her not-so-great features. One thing was for sure. She was going to love getting dressed on this planet!

She left her room.

Hathor stared appreciatively at her. "You look like a true Queen. I'm honored to be your escort."

She blushed. "Don't make such a fuss. I had a hard time picking out this dress. I finally chose purple because it's the color of royalty. But I don't feel like a Queen."

"You will. Give it time," he said.

Leo purred his agreement. She laughed and patted his head. She wondered what she would ever do without Hathor and Leo. Just in a few days, they had become her entire world.

"You look beautiful," Hathor said as he took her arm and led her down the hallway.

The entire castle expressed laughter and warmth. She loved it here already. William would love it too. How could he not? It was enchanting.

They stopped before two large doors. He squeezed her arm. "This is it. You're about to become Queen of Raz."

"I hardly believe this happening," she whispered, feeling dizzy with nervousness.

Hathor pressed a button on the side of one of the doors so they opened.

Ann took a deep breath. The throne room was enormous. The floor and ceiling were made of marble. The Queen's chair was purple velvet framed in gold with diamonds. The king's chair was red velvet framed in silver and fewer diamonds than the Queen's chair. The Queen was truly the authority.

Ann saw the many people, or rather people and creatures from fantasy books, all standing around, looking cheerfully at her. They were most happy to see their new Queen at last.

Hathor urged her along the purple silk carpet that lead to the thrones, and the music began. Ann was too dazed to take in such details like what instruments were being played. Thank goodness

Hathor held her arm, for if he hadn't, she would have fainted from the realization that this was real.

"You're doing fine," Hathor whispered to her.

She was thankful for the vote of confidence and support.

Finally, they reached Queen Basilia who smiled at them.

"Please kneel before me," Basilia requested.

Ann bowed before her.

Hathor stood behind Ann and put his hand on her right shoulder, ready to witness the event.

"Stop! I'm the real Ann!"

Everyone paused. Everyone gasped. Everyone panicked.

Ann stood up and looked behind her, her heart pounding in fear. She felt as if she were looking in a mirror, for she saw an exact replica of herself.

CHAPTER 10



Everyone was in a panic because of the unexpected commotion. They needed to know who the true Queen was. None of them wanted to die.

"I can prove who the real Queen is," Hathor yelled above the crowd.

At his promise, everyone grew quiet and held their breath expectantly. He turned to the Ann next to him, looked at her left wrist, and held it up for all to see. "She has the birthmark of the royal crown. Therefore, she is our true Queen."

"How about me?" the other Ann cried as she walked over to the throne. "I have the birthmark. See? I'm the real Ann." She showed it to everyone.

Ann felt Hathor drop her wrist. She looked at him in horror. He no longer believed she was the real Ann. But she was the real one! How could she prove it?

The crowd went wild with confusion. They desperately needed their new Queen, but they needed the right one.

"Hathor, don't you believe me?" the fake Ann demanded in Ann's typical demanding way.

"You walked me to this room," Ann reminded him.

Hathor shook his head. "You both look identical. How can I tell?"

"Everyone! Please, listen to me!" Ann exclaimed above the crowd's panic. When they silenced, she continued, "Hathor escorted me into this room from my bedroom. Therefore, I am to be Queen."

They began to nod. It was true. They had seen her first and with Hathor.

"Why don't you tell them the truth?" the fake Ann asked her.

Oh my, Ann thought in dismay. Her fake twin mimicked her own behavior exactly. There was no way anyone could tell the difference between them. She could only stare as her duplicate continued to speak.

"I was dressing for this occasion when Leader Seta showed up in my room. I was scared of her. I don't know anything about defending myself! Hathor can tell you as much. Anyway, before my unbelieving eyes, Seta turned into me. I thought I was looking in a mirror. Apparently, the needle that struck me in the Great Prison on Pale has become her weapon against all of us on Raz. She explained everything. When the needle struck me, she was able to take all of my information, so she was able to change herself into an exact image of me. She even has my memories! She knocked me unconscious when I tried to scream for help. When I woke up, I ran here to warn everyone. She plans to destroy Raz by becoming Queen. If she succeeds, we will die. I can't let her destroy Raz!"

By now everyone was more frantic than before. Could it be true? Who was the real new Queen? Which one was Seta?

Chaos. That was the only word that could accurately describe the situation. Ann could only stare at the deceitful, albeit clever, Seta. What could Ann possibly do? Seta spun up lies as if they really did happen. And no one was there to watch her get dressed, so she had no witnesses. It was her word against Seta's, and it appeared as if Seta was on the winning side.

Into Her Own

Hathor turned to his mother who whispered something in his ear. He looked confused as he answered her.

Ann couldn't believe this was happening. How was she to know how dangerous the needle was? She felt something lick her hand and smiled at Leo. At least he knew the truth. That comforted her a little bit. Of course, everyone else was so busy panicking that they missed the small piece of evidence right before their eyes.

"Attention! Attention!" Queen Basilia called out.

Slowly, the commotion died down. The air was thick with tension as they eagerly waited for Queen Basilia to speak.

"Obviously, I cannot perform the ceremony today. I'll take a few moments in a private room to decide on a method that will reveal the real Ann. So for now, the ceremony is postponed."

"Will we get our Queen?" a centaur asked, not hiding his urgency.

"Yes. As soon as she passes the test I will have to set up," she promised.

The tension died immediately. They trusted Queen Basilia completely.

Hathor put one hand on Ann's arm and the other on her duplicate's arm. He urged them forward, and soon they were walking out of the room.

Ann felt the inner turmoil raging inside of him. He didn't know what to do, and he hated Seta but liked her. He simply didn't know how to behave to either of them. So Hathor didn't have an answer for everything. If circumstances had not been so grim, Ann would have gloated. He led them to the den Ann remembered from the night before and shut the door.

Sighing, he gave each of them a hard stare. "All right," he began, "since I know Ann better than anyone else on Raz, I want to know who's who."

"I thought your mother was going to figure that out," Ann responded.

"That's so all Razians will know. I want to know for my benefit," he replied.

"I guess we just have to prove I'm the real Ann, won't we, Seta?" Seta asked as she glanced at Ann.

This was intolerable! Ann gritted her teeth. "Very well."

"What do you need for proof?" Seta asked him.

He shrugged. "Tell me something we did together."

"That's a broad range. Can't you be more specific?" Seta demanded sarcastically.

"You sure sound like Ann," he commented.

"Are you saying that I'm a sarcastic person?" Ann wondered, appalled.

"Then again, so do you," he said.

"We're getting nowhere with this!" Seta groaned.

"You're telling me," Ann muttered, crossing her arms.

"Please, be quiet for a moment," he interjected. "OK. You." He pointed to Seta. "What did I do that stopped your conversation with William?"

"Besides taking me away from Earth? You stopped time," Seta easily replied.

"What did you do to me on Olympia as we sailed to find the stone of immortality?" he asked, turning to Ann.

"Do?" She only recalled panicking because they might have to face the Sphinx.

His face changed. She recognized the expression. Quickly, she stated, "I was worried about facing the Sphinx. I was frightened."

"What did you do to me?" he pressed.

"I pushed you off the boat," Seta finished before Ann had a chance to form the first word. "You see, I know because I was there."

"You know because you have my memories," Ann spat in return. She didn't know which was worse: being accused of being Seta or having her memories violated to inspection by this fiendish Paler. Then an idea popped in her head. Of course! Seta could only know what happened before the injection, and quite a bit happened afterwards.

"Who is Ann to marry?" Ann tested.

"William, my true love. We will be united once again," Seta said, rather smugly.

Ann's jaw dropped. How could she know? Ann had believed she was going to marry Hathor before the injection.

"That is right," Hathor replied.

Seta turned to Ann. "Seta, you knocked him unconscious, remember? When I entered the office, I rushed over to him. Then I shot the guard before he could kill us. Therefore, he lost his claim to me, and I chose William. After all, how do you replace your first love? Any more questions?"

This was impossible! Ann was losing her dignity to this impostor! She was desperate for any proof she could supply that Seta couldn't. She felt like someone who was drowning. She had to show Hathor somehow. Then another idea came to her. Let's see if Seta knew about this!

Under ordinary circumstances, she would never have done what she did. But, as her mother once told her, desperate times called for desperate measures. She walked up to him and kissed him.

"Outside the crumbling Great Prison walls," she said.

At that moment, he knew. She could tell that he finally believed her.

"You kissed?" Seta rolled her eyes. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Wait a minute. How did you know about my ending engagement?" he asked Seta.

"Word gets around fast on Pale. Plus, my First Commander saw the whole thing. She's very observant, except for a few minor details," Seta dryly replied.

"Not everyone on Raz will be satisfied with my reason for knowing who the real Ann is," he noted. "Thankfully my mother will have a test."

Seta smiled. "I guess the kiss wasn't all that important after all."

"You can't stay here pretending to be me," Ann said, frustrated more than ever.

"Why not? I have my planet's survival to think about!" she retorted.

"And I don't?"

"The difference is simple. I love my people whereas you do not."

"She just got here," Hathor defended Ann. "Give her time to love Raz. Besides, judging from the nature of Palers, I don't see how violent creatures such as yourself can feel love."

Before Seta could make a cutting remark, Queen Basilia entered the room.

All eyes anxiously turned to her.

"I thought the matter through on this serious matter, and I have found there to be only one solution to this dilemma," Basilia quietly informed them. She handed Ann and Seta their own maps. "The map I just gave each of you are different. They lead to the same destination but by different routes. You must find your way to the Dark Castle which has a magical diamond crown hidden in it. The one who takes the crown will be the next Queen. However, you must not be dressed as a Queen."

Immediately, Ann and Seta's clothes changed. Ann now wore a brown dress with a white apron tied around her waist. Also, a white bonnet was tied around her head. She looked as if she had just walked out of another century on Earth. She also realized her

hair was now shoulder-length. She frowned. She missed her long hair.

Seta, still an exact replica of Ann, wore a simple pink dress, and no bonnet covered her hair, which was still long.

"The transformation is complete," Queen Basilia spoke, satisfied. "Each of you will be given food before you leave. After that, you must find your own way."

Then she left.

Ann looked at her adversary warily. Seta was powerful and determined. How could she be a match for her?

"You'll get the diamond crown. I just know it," Hathor whispered in her ear.

Ann smiled. Hathor was always the optimist.

"I will get the diamond crown," Seta said coldly. "And I will do whatever I have to in order to obtain it."

That was exactly what Ann was afraid of.

Hathor had to restrain Leo from following Ann as she and Seta set out on their separate paths. He watched Ann and wished he was going with her. They had been through so much in the past few days that he felt as if he'd known her all of his life. He sensed her fears too. She was a stranger to Raz. She had no idea what was waiting for her, and she was uncertain about her capabilities. He knew she could do it, but she needed to believe in herself.

When they were out of sight, he was surprised at the sudden loneliness he felt. He had never felt anything like it before. He sighed. What if she needed him at some point along the trip? What if she got into some serious trouble?

He looked at Leo. Leo knew who she was out of the duo. An idea popped into his head. Excited, he grabbed a piece of paper in his room and quickly wrote her a note. Then he put a collar

around Leo's neck and attached a small wooden box to the collar. He placed the note in the box and nodded in satisfaction.

"There," he said. "I want you to give Ann this message." He patted the box for emphasis. "OK, Leo?"

The lion roared his agreement and licked Hathor's face.

"I'll miss you too." He laughed and patted his friend affectionately. "Protect Ann if she needs it."

The lion purred before heading out of the room to find Ann.

Once out of sight of the castle, Seta resumed her normal figure. She sighed with relief. Being in an Earthlings' body with all those sappy romantic memories of William made her shiver in disgust. Raz's new Queen was a wimp.

She focused her attention on her telecommunicator. "Commander Jaz and Riles, do you hear me?"

"Indeed we do," Jaz replied.

"Good. Transport down here immediately," she ordered.

They did as instructed.

"What if someone sees us?" Riles asked, glancing around nervously.

"You don't give me my due credit, Second Commander," Seta said bitterly.

He gulped nervously.

"Have the magic sands been sorted through so that they match Ann's brainwaves?" Seta asked as she turned to Jaz.

"Yes, Leader," she replied. "I left them in your office as instructed."

"Good." She turned to Riles. "Here is a map that will take you to some Dark Castle where a diamond crown is hiding. You must get that diamond crown if we are to defeat Raz."

"But this planet will kill a false Queen," Riles protested.

Into Her Own

"Relax, Commander," she snapped. "When it is time to find the diamond crown, a robot that resembles Ann will retrieve it, and the planet won't harm the robot until it has been officially declared Queen." She murmured a few words and he changed into a replica of Ann with a pink dress on. "Here's some food that humans like to eat. It's OK, but it's bland."

"What? You can't expect me to-" he began to argue.

She grabbed him by the throat and squeezed. "Excuse me?"

He gasped for air.

"You'll find that crown," she stated coldly. "Right?"

"Yes. I will," he gasped, desperate for air.

She released him immediately. "I thought you would be sensible. Make your travel to the castle a good one."

She turned to Jaz who stood still, studying her surroundings.

"What is it, First Commander?" she asked, confused by Jaz's interest in the trees and grass.

Jaz seemed to be reluctant in coming out her trance. "I'm not sure," she whispered. "Why does this seem so familiar?"

"Have you been to Raz before?"

"Not that I know of."

"Hmm ... it's probably not important. Come on. Let's get back to Pale."

When they returned to their planet, Seta smiled. She was glad to see her familiar office.

"It's so good to be back home."

Jaz forced herself to concentrate on the matter at hand. "Here is the magic sand within the crystal hour glass," she informed Seta as she motioned to the object on the desk.

"The sand of time." She grinned as she lifted the hourglass. Since the Main Control Chip only recorded Ann's life up to her accidental injection, the sand was at the bottom of the glass. A slight turn of the glass, a few grains of sand, and back to Earth she would go, without the annoying Hathor to interfere. Thank

goodness she had Jaz cast a spell preventing Hathor from finding her again.

"Her greatest weakness is William," Seta said thoughtfully. "If she returns to Earth, she will certainly want to stay when she hears the sound of his voice."

"Seta," Jaz spoke up. "Do you ever wonder where Omin is lurking?"

"Omin? That spineless excuse for a Paler? He's no match for me." She smirked. "And after the way I destroyed his face, he would be stupid to mess with me again." She paused. "Why? What is it?"

"I'm scared."

"Don't be. He's a fool."

"I don't know. I mean, he's demonstrated how smart and violent he is many times. And I have a feeling he will stop at nothing to get what he wants."

Laxy Rebellion Hideout

"Since Seta is planning to destroy Raz, we need a volunteer who will risk his or her life to protect Raz," Zak said at the next Laxy Rebellion meeting. "Whoever goes will spy on Seta and her Commanders to find out what they're up to. Only when we know, will we be able to form a plan to save Raz."

"I will go," Paff volunteered.

"It is dangerous," Halima argued, deeply concerned for her friend.

Cem put his hand on her arm to calm her. "Paff is a logical choice. He knows the Leader's office better than anyone else here."

"Are you certain you want to take this risk?" Zak asked.

"More than anything," Paff responded. "At one time I tried to destroy Raz. Now I need to save it."

"That is commendable. Best of luck," he said. "Return as soon as you can."

"I will," he promised.

Everyone cheered for him, wishing him luck. Paff never felt like a hero before. Omin never gave him any reason to, but these people, Palers and Laxes, made him feel that way. And he was happy. He exited the cave in good spirits.

When he arrived on the outskirts of the Paler main city, he slowed his pace. He must not be caught by one of the Leader's guards.

Since it was day, many Palers walked about, mostly wanting to know when they would be able to feed on Laxes again. It seemed only the Leader, the Commanders, and a few important guards knew of the Laxy Rebellion and Raz's predicament.

He took a deep breath and started walking to the city when he saw a sudden movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned to get a better view. He saw the back of a Paler. The Paler was eating another Paler. Paff was ready to dismiss it when something clicked in his mind. It wasn't that a Paler was devouring another Paler.

It was subtle.

It was the way the Paler slouched over the dead body. It was a slouch Paff was familiar with.

"Omin," Paff drawled. Intense hatred flowed through his entire body.

Omin glanced over his shoulder, and Paff caught a glimpse of Omin's disfigured face.

Paff laughed. "Did Seta do that to you?" he scoffed as he crossed his arms.

"Very perceptive, coward," Omin hissed. He gracefully stood up.

"I bet you're the terror of everyone on this planet. Too bad they didn't see you for your true self while you were Leader. They would have recognized you for the freak you are," he mocked. It felt so good to let him have it!

Without warning, Omin leapt for Paff's throat, but Paff's reflexes were remarkable and he managed to dodge his attacker.

"I will kill Seta when I'm done with you," Omin seethed.

"It looks as if Seta already defeated you."

Omin snatched Paff to him and tried to devour him, but Paff flung Omin off of him. Quickly, Paff kicked Omin so that Omin fell to the ground.

Omin wasn't on the ground for long: Before Paff could blink, he grabbed Paff's arm and bit into it as hard as he could. Paff screamed and threw him aside. He examined his bloody wound. This time Paff rushed to harm Omin. They clasped hands and struggled to push the other backwards. Omin kicked his leg, and Paff almost fell to the ground. Almost.

"I hate you," Paff spat in his opponent's face.

"I never asked you to like me," Omin snapped.

His response only added ammunition to Paff's hatred, and he managed to push Omin down. Omin wasn't prepared for this, so he failed to react in time. Paff had Omin securely in his grip. He grinned arrogantly.

"So much for your leadership, freak Omin," he snarled. "Eating you will bring me much pleasure."

Just as Paff was about to kill him, someone said, "You cannot evolve into a better Paller unless you set aside your violent nature."

Paff froze.

It was Cem.

"Don't do this," Cem advised. "You will only bring sorrow to Zak. You're trying to prove you aren't like the typical Paller. If you kill Omin, you will fail, and Laxes will never believe in gentle

Palers again. That means all the Palers on the side of the Laxy Rebellion will be killed because they can't be trusted."

"Why should my actions count for other Palers?" Paff yelled. Cem remained calm, and Paff marveled at his gentle power. "Well?" Paff demanded, using a lower tone this time.

"The majority is judged by the actions of a few," Cem quietly replied. "Before I met you, two Palers claimed to be on the Lax side but they ended up killing each other. Zak is wary of your kind now. He only wants peace. He's ready to give up on Palers and kill them all if another Paler exhibits violence. Omin is not worth the lives of the gentle and fair Palers on this planet."

Halima. That would mean Halima would die too, and her agony in the Great Prison would have been for nothing.

Halima.

The name struck something tender inside of Paff, something he never knew existed.

He looked back at Omin who dared him to eat him. Paff sighed. He stood up and walked over to Cem. "I'm sorry," he apologized.

"Fool," Omin grunted. "You should never leave your defenses down." He ran after Paff, ready to get rid of him once and for all.

Cem suddenly changed into a giant scorpion and delivered a powerful sting in Omin's direction. Even Omin, with his great fighting ability could not defeat a scorpion three times as large as he was.

Omin quickly ran from his powerful opponent.

Paff marveled at the transformation. And just as fast as he turned into his true self, Scorpio changed into Cem again.

"I always defend my friends," Cem stated. "I am loyal to the death."

"I'm sure glad that I'm on your side," Paff replied, hardly believing his eyes.

The two friends walked back to the hideout.

CHAPTER 11



Ann felt apprehensive as the castle fell out of view. Now she was officially on her own, without Hathor to protect her, to comfort her. She wondered for the millionth time what she was doing on Raz. She wasn't Queen material, although Hathor was convinced she was.

For now she needed to concentrate on finding the Dark Castle instead of dwelling on her lack of self-esteem. So far everything was normal. She followed the clear path as the map instructed. The suns created enough light and warmth to make her comfortable. Trees, plants, and flowers lined the path. So far it didn't look any different from Earth.

Suddenly she found herself in her apartment in North Dakota, talking on the phone with ...

With who?

"Hello?" she asked, feeling very strange.

"I'm here. I haven't gone anywhere," William replied.

William? What was she doing talking to William?

"How's school going?" William asked when she didn't say anything.

Ann couldn't believe this. "What day is it?"

"Are you serious?" he replied, laughing.

"Yes."

"It's January 17th."

"The 17th?"

It should have been the 22nd. Five days. Had it only been five days since Hathor appeared at her apartment and magically took her away from Earth? Could five days drag on like that?

She glanced at the clock. Didn't Hathor stop time at 1:47 p.m.? Now it was 1:48 p.m. And Hathor was nowhere in sight. What was going on? What was she doing here?

"Weren't you going out with someone? What was her name?" she asked William.

"Her name was Carol, but she went back to her ex-boyfriend. I just told you that a minute ago. Haven't you been listening?"

"Maybe it was all a dream," she thought aloud.

"I don't dream of girls who leave me," he replied. "If I were to dream, I'd find Miss Right and live happily ever after."

She looked at her wrist. There was her birthmark. Then she noticed her clothes. She had been wearing navy blue slacks and a white sweater when she met Hathor. Now she had on a brown cotton dress.

"I need to get back to Raz!" she realized, alarmed.

"Raz? What are you talking about?"

"Raz. It's a planet in the Enchanted Galaxy. I'm supposed to be a Queen. If I don't get the diamond crown, Raz will die."

"OK." He clearly did not believe her. "You're going to be a Queen on another planet."

"It's true! I know it sounds crazy, but I'm telling you the truth."

"Ann, I'm sure you believe you're telling me the truth but ... "

"Forget it. I have to go," she interrupted and hung up.

She knew she was being rude, but she had to return to Raz! Her pulse quickened as she desperately called for Hathor to help her. Could he even hear her? Probably not. He would be back on Raz. He certainly wasn't here. She sure needed the Book of Spells right now.

"I need to get to Raz!" she screamed, feeling helpless.

Then she landed on the dirt path in Raz. She shook her head in wonder. Looking around, she noted that she was on Raz again, on the same path she had been on when she somehow got transported back to Earth.

"That was so weird," she said, bewildered. Had she actually traveled in time?

Who had been responsible for it?

Then it dawned on her.

She had spoken to William again. Why hadn't she thought of it at the time? Because all she could think about was returning to Raz. After all, she had a mission to save Raz from Leader Seta.

She wondered why she was so concerned about Raz. Certainly, she didn't have any deep connections to this planet. But she knew Hathor. How could she let him die?

She studied her map. She had a long way to go, and she had to get to the Dark Castle as soon as possible.

Suddenly someone knocked her to the ground.

"What's the meaning of this?" she sputtered, appalled that Seta would physically attack her.

"Oh, please forgive me, but if I don't continue running, I may never find my way home," the faun panicked.

She could only stare at the faun, a handsome male child with horn-like toughs on his head. The lower half of his body resembled a brown goat. He couldn't be older than ten. She never saw a faun before, although she had read about them.

"Please, we must run! A harpy chased me out of my home and now it will try to kill you too," the faun urgently explained as he helped her stand up.

That was when she saw the awful harpy. It had the head of an ugly woman, breast, wings, and legs of a vulture. This was something that belonged in nightmares! Before she could respond, he was tugging at her hand. She followed him, so bewildered she

didn't think about where he was taking her. They plunged into the forest and ran as fast as they could.

"You are mine!" a deep voice hissed behind them.

She knew they couldn't possibly outrun a harpy. She glanced at the harpy, which was closer than she would have preferred. She spotted a ditch a few feet ahead of them. An idea quickly formed in her mind.

"Over there," she gasped between breaths, pointing to the ditch.

They fell into it.

"Put these leaves all over you!" she commanded anxiously as she began covering herself up with leaves. Thank goodness they were in a forest!

Finally, they were completely hidden beneath the leaves. So when the harpy flew over the spot, it couldn't find them. It knew they were in the area but grew frustrated with not finding them so it left.

When it was safe, Ann sat up. The leaves fell off of her. What a relief. She smiled at the faun as he sat up.

"That was clever," he said. "How did you think of it?"

"I saw it in a movie once," she replied.

"What is a movie?" he asked, his brown eyes wide.

"Oh. Well, it's not important. The important thing is that you're safe, but you can't find your way home?"

He nodded sadly. "I was bathing in the fresh water by home when the harpy saw me. It wanted to eat me, so I ran. I didn't want to endanger my family or friends, so I didn't run back home. I just ran in the opposite direction. I'm sure glad I ran into you! But now I am lost, and I do not know what to do."

She sighed, deeply troubled. She had dropped the map and her food when they were running. She had no idea where they were, and she needed to get to the Dark Castle. She looked at the scared faun, and she knew she couldn't leave him all by himself. She

didn't know her way around Raz, but two heads were better than one.

"I'll help you find your way home," she finally decided aloud.

"You will? Thank you! What is your name?" he asked.

She wondered if she should use her real name. No one knew who the real Ann was, except for Hathor and Leo. She chose the safe route.

"I am Victoria," she stated. She had always liked that name better than Ann anyway.

"Pleased to meet you, Victoria! I'm Inno," he responded politely as they stood up.

"Pleased to meet you too." She grinned. "Inno, do you know how to get to the Dark Castle from where you live?"

He shook his head. Then his eyes lit up. "I know someone who knows the way. My brother, Calhoun. And if he doesn't find the castle, then his girlfriend, a fairy, will find it for sure."

"A faun in love with a fairy?" This was a fantasy world!

"Of course," he began as they started walking in the direction where they came from, "they can't get married because he's a faun and she's a fairy. Their sizes create a major problem."

"I would guess so," she agreed.

"I'm sure glad you decided to help me find my way home! I hate traveling by myself. Time always goes faster when you have someone to talk to. Where are you from? I can see you're not from this area."

If only he knew, she mused. Hmm ... Where would Victoria be from? She had no idea where humans lived on Raz, besides the palace, and she couldn't let him know that the castle was her new home. Finally, she decided on a typical human location.

"Have you ever heard of a village?" she asked, hoping Raz had villages. Just about every fantasy book she ever read had some sort of village in it.

"Once or twice. My grandparents passed by a village once."

She sighed with relief.

"We prefer to live in trees and outside in the fresh air," he continued. "We don't like houses like humans do. But we're all different. As long as we respect one another's way of life, everything is peaceful. Of course, not everyone on Raz is peaceful. The goblins, harpies, and ogres are always getting into mischief. It's best to avoid them at all costs."

"I'll remember that," she replied. Goblins, harpies and ogres? She shivered.

They approached the path she had been walking on before Inno knocked her over by accident.

"We should go straight ahead," she said.

"The harpy chased me all over. I didn't run in one straight line," he admitted.

"That does give us a problem, doesn't it?"

They heard a roar.

Scared, the faun grabbed her hand. "Don't let it hurt me!" he cried, shaking all over.

"Leo!" Ann smiled, thrilled to see him. "He's my pet lion. He's harmless, and he protects me."

"Oh. He looks strange."

"Have you ever seen a lion before?"

He shook his head. "No. I didn't even know lions existed. Then again, I have much to learn. I'm only eight."

"Well, Leo is friendly. You can pet him. His fur is very soft."

At first, his hand shook as he petted the lion. Slowly, he relaxed. His smile widened. "He's very soft."

Leo purred, satisfied with all the attention he was receiving.

Ann's eyes fell upon the collar around Leo's neck. "Since when did you have a collar?" she asked even though she knew he couldn't answer her.

She knelt down and examined the collar. She sighed. She couldn't stand to see Leo with the collar on. He was a free animal.

As she tugged at the collar, she noticed a box attached to it. She opened the box and a piece of paper fell to the ground.

Surprised and curious, she picked it up. She smiled to herself. Hathor still wanted to protect her even though he no longer had a duty to Raz to do so. She thought about Inno and her lost map. She did need Hathor, not as a protector but as a guide through this unexplored land. But she had no pen to write down her request.

She was ready to tear up the paper when something caught her eye. It was a reply. Her reply. "I have lost my map and a young faun has lost his way from home. I need you to guide us through Raz."

Remarkable! This was a magical piece of paper indeed. She quickly put the paper back into the box that was on Leo's collar.

"Take this to Hathor," she whispered to Leo who immediately headed back to the castle.

"Where is he going?" Inno asked.

"He's going to get us a guide. The guide will know where your home is. That way we won't have to wonder if we're headed in the right direction or not."

"Oh. The lion sure does many things."

"Yes, he does," she agreed. "Let's eat some of the apples on that tree while we wait for the lion to return with help."

And so, they ate.

Alpha Level I

Planet: Pale

Seta was not pleased. The magic sands in the crystal hourglass had returned to the bottom.

"Why didn't our plan work?" she demanded. "She is in love with William. She dreams of him. She fantasizes about him. She is hopelessly in love with him. So what is she going back to Raz for?"

Jaz frowned. "Perhaps the Main Control Chip read her feelings wrong. I'll have to go through that chip again and look for any loopholes that might lead us to a more feasible time when she'll want William more than Raz."

"At least you're competent," Seta said as she stood up. "Unlike that sniveling coward Riles."

"I agree. He is repulsive," she replied as she slid the Main Control Chip into a computer for a more detailed analysis.

"Yes, that he is. But he poses no threat to us. That's why I chose him."

"A wise choice, Leader."

"Now I'm going to see how the rebuilding of the Great Prison is coming along. Why don't you check on Riles and see how he's doing? I'll return soon," Seta said and left her office.

Jaz pressed a few buttons on the computer and allowed the chip to be scanned. She wondered if there was a way to feed Palers without having to resort to killing an entire planet. Surely another solution existed.

A buzzing sound interrupted her thoughts. She blinked and sat up straight. Riles was calling her.

"Yes, Riles. What is it?" she asked into the telecommunicator.

"Can't I go back to Pale yet?" he pleaded in Ann's voice.

"No. You have a job to do for the Leader, remember?"

"I know, but I've never been here before. A freaky looking small creature just walked by and huffed at me. I think it was a goblin. Goblins are ugly things," he whined.

Unknown to Jaz, Omin crawled into the room. He was in the crawl space above the ceiling. Although he couldn't see anything,

he could hear the conversation perfectly. He grinned and put his ear to the vent.

"-Seta," Jaz finished.

So Jaz was talking to Seta, Omin thought.

"Raz is an uncomfortable place. Green things cover the ground," the Paler on the other end of the telecommunicator said.

"You mean grass?" Jaz laughed. "That's harmless and so are all the strange creatures there. You'll find the Dark Castle and retrieve the diamond crown."

"It's going to take days."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm by Gold Lake. There are many lakes here. This place is very strange."

She shook her head, trying to clear the nagging thought in the back of her mind. She forced herself to concentrate on the matter at hand. "I have your location at 147 degrees northwest of the planet's center. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"How far are you from the Dark Castle?" Jaz asked.

"I estimate a good two days."

"Everyone thinks you're Ann, right?"

"Unfortunately."

"Good."

"But I wish I wasn't in this color. Pink is disturbing."

"There's not much I can do for you. The sooner you get to the diamond crown, the sooner you can return."

"All right, Jaz. Sign out."

"Signing out."

Omin grinned wickedly. So Seta was on Raz, and she was disguised in a pink outfit. Since Ann and Hathor were the only humans in the Great Prison, he easily recognized her. He had a good memory. He would find Seta in Ann's body and get his revenge. Seta would be sorry she threw him into the Great Prison.

He crawled to the Beyond Star Systems IV room located far from the Leader's office.

Good. Everything was going according to plan. He touched his gun. Just in case something happened, he was prepared.

He removed one of the vents running along the ceiling and set it aside. He took a deep breath and jumped. He landed expertly on his feet. He would show Seta who the real Leader was!

He glanced around. No one was in sight. He didn't hide his surprise. Certainly he never would have been so careless as to leave Beyond Star Systems IV unguarded, even in a time of crisis. Right now anyone could enter this place and takeoff on one of the many mini-ships, which were spaceships made for one pilot.

He smiled. Seta's carelessness was her fatal mistake. She never should have taken his position. But she had to learn that lesson the hard way, and he would enjoy teaching it to her.

He easily slipped into one of the mini-ships. He turned on the power switch. The entire ship ran smoothly. Everything was fully operational and ready to go. He flew out of the dock.

His thoughts drifted to Jaz. It really was a shame he had to destroy her. At one time she had been his equal. The world he created was meant for them. Then she had to go and ruin it. Weaknesses. He hated weaknesses.

Which reminded him of Paff. Paff almost killed him. He just didn't understand it. Paff let him go. Why? Omin had no idea what the creature said to Paff so he didn't kill him, but Omin would kill both of them in his own time. But there was plenty of time for showing Paff who was in charge. Right now, he had to take care of Seta.

Laxy Rebellion Hideout

"I'm sorry to hear you almost killed in violence," Zak said sadly after Paff and Cem returned to him with their story.

"Cem talked me out of it," Paff softly stated. "If anyone should be disgraced, it's me. I let my emotions get the best of me."

Cem patted Paff's arm. "He will learn to control his Paler nature in time. He has a head start in being fair."

"That's true." Zak nodded. "However, how can we be sure this incident will not happen again?"

"Allow others to accompany him," Halima suggested.

Paff glanced over his shoulder. He hadn't realized she had been listening to their conversation.

She smiled at him.

His heart skipped a beat.

"Yes," Cem agreed enthusiastically. "Let Halima and I go with him. Surely we will keep him within his proper bounds."

Zak stared at them, testing his instincts regarding the situation. Finally, he nodded. "Agreed. Come back quickly with whatever you learn."

Forest

Planet: Raz

"Will he be here soon?" Inno asked. "It's already afternoon. Surely, my parents must be worried about me."

Ann squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. "He'll be here any minute now," she replied warmly. He was adorable. She now knew all about his hobbies, his family, and his schooling.

He was so busy telling her about himself that he forgot to ask her any questions. Thank goodness. She didn't know enough

about Raz to construct a good lie. When her eyes fell upon a lion leading a young man their way, she eagerly stood up. "I'll be right back," she promised Inno. "Don't go anywhere!"

"I won't," he responded.

She ran to Hathor and Leo. She petted Leo joyfully. "Now keep Inno company while I talk to Hathor," she told him.

He roared and walked to the faun who petted him.

"I'm glad you sent the message," she greeted Hathor.

"You do realize that by waiting for me to come and deciding to help him home you are endangering Raz. Seta is a day's walk ahead of you, and you're far from the Dark Castle," Hathor stated in a firm but kind voice.

"I know. That's been worrying me." She sighed. "But I can't leave Inno, the faun over there, stranded in unfamiliar territory. He is lost, scared and alone. I was all he had. What was I supposed to do? Leave him? My heart refuses."

He smiled at her. "You are sounding more and more like the Queen of Raz. I'm glad." He glanced around. "I know this area pretty well, and we should reach his home by sunset. Do you have the map?"

She frowned. "No."

"No? What happened?"

"A harpy chased us and I dropped the map and food while we ran away from her."

"I guess I should have told you about them. Running only attracts their attention. If you walk, they'll lose you."

"Now I know." She rolled her eyes.

"How did you save yourself and the faun?"

"We hid in a ditch and threw leaves over ourselves."

"Good strategy. You're quick to come up with a solution when you have to."

"I'm glad you're wearing cotton instead of silk," Ann changed the subject.

"Why? Do I look silly in silk?" he teased, eyeing his white outfit.

"No. It's just that no one is supposed to know who I am, so I told Inno that I'm Victoria."

"That's a strange name."

"And Hathor isn't?"

"Hathor was my father's name."

"Well, you're going to have to change it."

"I will not. Listen, there are other Hathors on Raz."

"Doesn't every creature on Raz recognize you?"

"Since I am the Queen's son, I suppose most do. But fauns usually spend too much time around trees to concern themselves with royal assemblies. Come on."

There was no getting through to him, she thought as she followed him.

The faun sat up as they approached. "Oh! You look familiar. Who are you?"

Hathor cleared his throat and glanced at her with an uncertain look in his eye. "My name is Nasot. I am Victoria's husband."

"She didn't mention you before," the faun replied although he was too busy petting Leo to care.

"I do know this area," Hathor said. "What family do you belong to?"

"I'm part of the brown fur trees family," he responded.

"I know how to get to that dwelling."

"Oh goodie!" he cheered.

The lion wagged his tale, easily caught up in the excitement.

"If we leave now, we should arrive there by sunset," Hathor informed him.

"Thank goodness. My parents must be looking all over for me."

"Then they will be glad to see you. Let's not hesitate."

They started walking. Then the faun paused.

Into Her Own

"What's wrong?" Ann asked, concerned.

"What if another harpy appears?" he cried fearfully.

She took his hand in hers. "I just learned a fascinating tip to outwit the awful harpy. Would you like to hear it?"

He nodded.

Hathor laughed quietly as she told him. He petted Leo who purred, perfectly content.

On another forest path on Raz

Riles gulped nervously. He could have sworn he heard a sound coming from the trees on his right. Something was watching him. He just knew it.

He touched his telecommunicator uncertainly. Seta hated to be disturbed, no matter what. She already detested him as it was. He didn't want to give her another reason to hate him.

He cautiously took another step. It was almost sunset now. He needed to get ready to sleep, but he was too afraid of the strange noises in the area to sleep here. It was safer at the Gold Lake. Why hadn't he stayed there? Because he had to follow Seta's orders or be killed. He knew her fatal penalties.

There was the sound again.

He stopped and looked around anxiously. This was awful!

Why couldn't Seta return to this horrible body? He had never wanted to be Second Commander! Yet if he had refused Seta's order, he would have been her dinner. What choice did he have?

None. And now he was terrified of the strange planet. So much life. It made him quiver.

He reached for his telecommunicator when a goblin emerged from behind the many trees lining the path. He gasped and dropped it.

"What are you doing here?" the goblin asked.

Riles cringed. The goblin was hideous and short. It carried a club and wore barbaric clothes. And it smelled as if it hadn't taken a bath in years.

Riles turned to run the other way, but he only encountered more of them.

More ugly little men.

"She'll make a tasty treat," one of them smirked.

"You mean, you're going to eat me?" Riles panicked. Is this how Laxes felt when Palers ate them?

"First, we'll have a little fun with you," another goblin sneered.

Riles shook all over, unable to move.

"Let's take her to our camp and see how fast she can run," the chief goblin suggested.

They cheered as they tied his arms together.

"What are you going to do to me?" Riles cried, alarmed.

"We're going to put you in a race against our other captive. The one who wins will not be eaten tonight," the chief explained.

"So you will free me if I win the race?"

"Did I say I'd free you? No! I just won't let anyone eat you tonight."

Shivers ran up and down Riles' spine as the goblins dragged him, kicking and screaming, to their camp.

CHAPTER 12



Forest
Planet: Raz

Omin landed the mini-ship in a clearing on the forest floor. He had seen Seta, disguised as Ann in a pink dress, being harassed by goblins. He wondered about it. Was Seta growing weak, trapped in a human's body?

The Seta he knew could wipe out the entire goblin tribe within three minutes. This time, she actually allowed the goblins to capture her. He frowned. She had to be up to something.

Of course, he would kill her before she could do anything. Fortunately, he was an expert runner. He wasn't far from that goblin camp, so he should reach it soon. He closed his eyes and listened. When his ears tuned into the camp, he heard a woman screaming and goblins laughing.

He opened his eyes. He had to get to Seta before the goblins did, for what pleasure would her death bring him if he did not deal that fatal blow? He raced over to the camp and peered around a tree.

By now the suns were setting, casting a rainbow of colors in the sky. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. The black, gray and white world of Pale appealed to him a lot more. Thank goodness he made Pale what it was.

"It looks like you win the race, lass," a goblin growled. "But tomorrow we'll see what to do with you."

Omin turned his attention back to the camp. He grunted. These goblins were attractive creatures. Their brown, worn-out, wool clothing would be better in a gray color, but they looked decent enough.

Then he looked at Seta who was so cleverly disguised. She was tied to a pole.

Why wasn't she resisting? Surely she was good at defending herself. Was she scared? He forced himself not to laugh. Since when was Seta afraid of anything?

"When will dinner be ready?" the chief demanded, his voice as rough as sandpaper.

"Soon," a female goblin snapped. "I wish we could eat plants instead of humans and other creatures."

"Are you crazy, woman?" the chief asked. "I need real food, something to fatten me up."

That was telling her! Omin silently cheered. Just as he once told Jaz ...

"You are detestable," she huffed.

Now was Omin's chance. The other goblins were watching the exchange between the chief and his wife. He crept over to Seta from behind, so she didn't see him. Then he put his hand over her mouth.

She tensed.

"Remember me, Seta? Omin? I'm here to pay you back for what you did to me," he whispered.

He took out his blazer gun and shot Seta in the head. He grinned as the goblins turned to him, shocked at what he'd done.

"Have a good night and enjoy your meal. She's a real feast," he sneered. He didn't wait for their response before he left.

Planet: Pale

Meanwhile, Cem handed Halima and Paff their blazer guns. "You may use them in self-defense only."

Cem had shape-shifted into a Paler so they wouldn't be obvious. A Lax walking with Palers would ultimately draw undue attention to them, and that was the last thing they needed.

Paff and Halima had ordinary gray uniforms on. Hopefully, the three friends wouldn't have too much of a problem getting inside Alpha Head I.

Zak approached them. "I wish you the best of luck, and may you find the information that will help us save Raz and hopefully make Laxes and Palers allies with Raz." He patted each one on the hand. "The gesture means that I am with you in spirit. Farewell."

Everyone wished them luck as they left.

Halima smiled excitedly as she put her gun in her belt strap. "I'm proud to be involved in the liberation of the Laxes."

"Me too," Paff agreed, smiling back.

Cem led them out of the cave's entrance. "We must not be overconfident," he warned. "Omin was overconfident and he failed to keep his leadership."

"Good," Paff replied. "He deserved what he got."

"Paff, remember to free yourself of your hatred for him. You cannot let your biases distort your mission. The survival of Razians and Laxes depend on accurate judgments."

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I'm trying. Really I am. But it's hard."

Cem nodded. "I know."

They walked along the sandy roads in the main city. So far, so good. No one had even glanced at them. Many Palers were moaning with hunger, and a few ate other Palers. Survival, Paff thought. That's what we're all fighting for. Our own survival.

Alpha Head I

Planet: Pale

Seta entered her office and was pleased to see Jaz hard at work on reconstructing the magic sand.

"Did you get a chance to talk to Riles?" Seta asked as she sat in her chair.

"About an hour ago. Seta, I have to be honest with you. Are you sure we should destroy Raz? Is this really the only way to save Pale?"

"Can you think of another way?"

"What made this planet the way it is? Raz and Olympia are full of vegetation and many creatures, but Pale is barren except for Palers and Laxes."

"Different planets are made differently."

"As I was walking through the old prison site, I found this beneath the debris." Jaz handed her several blades of grass and a wilted flower. "Several guards have found similar evidence that there must have been vegetation on this planet in the past."

"You are saying that something killed all the life on this planet, except for Palers and Laxes?"

"Something ... or someone," Jaz responded suddenly feeling strange.

Seta gave her a hard look. "Do you remember anything?"

"No, not enough to form an adequate explanation." She sighed. "But it couldn't have been too long since Pale had vegetation."

"Was every vegetation you and the guards found dead?" she asked.

Into Her Own

"Most of it. Apparently, life is trying to grow on this planet, but it's not having much success. If we could find out why, I think it will solve our problems without having to attack Raz."

"How long would it take to find a solution?"

"I wish I knew."

"You've seen what it's like out there. I'm hungry, you're hungry ... Everyone's hungry. Palers are destroying each other. You know there aren't that many Palers as it is." She shook her head. "I don't know if we can afford to wait any longer than we already have. Besides, I don't ever recall our bodies being able to digest vegetation. If we could survive on vegetation, I would've made a pact with Raz as soon as I put Omin in the Great Prison. I should have killed him."

"I wondered about that. Why didn't you?"

"I thought death was too good for him. I wanted to put him in the same misery he put Paff in."

"You cared for Paff?" Jaz asked.

"You never miss anything, do you?" Seta smiled. "I tried to deny my feelings for him many times, and now I'll never know what would have happened if I had given in to my feelings. But at the time it seemed so foolish to put love before duty. When the rebellion started, it was too late to worry about love. I don't want Palers to become extinct, and I'll do anything to ensure our survival."

An idea formed in Jaz's mind. She cleared her throat. "I had the sands separately analyzed by the computer after I scanned the Main Control Chip. I discovered some interesting points we originally missed that will greatly help us."

As she spoke, Paff, Halima, and Cem arrived outside the doors to the Leader's office. They held their breath and listened carefully.

"First of all," Jaz continued, "Ann's weakness does focus on William. However, it's not the William of today but the William of

the past. Specifically, four years ago when she was seventeen and he was eighteen. I have isolated the exact spot when she fell in love with him. Second, I can manipulate her memory cells enough so that she will temporarily forget everything connected to Raz. I can even go so far as to make her forget all of her memories up to the point when she and William were on their first date. And the only way Ann can possibly return is if the Olympians bring her back. You know how they rescued her from the Great Prison. They must like her. Of course, they have no idea what's going on, so they can't do anything about it," Jaz finished.

"Marvelous," Seta acknowledged. "And that all comes from a single chip. Hmm ... as soon as you reassemble the sands in the hourglass, we will tilt it far enough to transport her to the past she longs for. By the time she realizes she was supposed to rule over Raz, no one will be able to help her. Have a special spell set for Hathor so he won't be able to rescue her. He's the only one besides me who knows who the real Ann is. Cast a deep sleep on the Queen so she won't be able to do anything. The only thing that will set everything back to normal is her return, and she won't want to return once she's back in William's arms. Then Palers will be fed."

"Everything will be set," Jaz said.

"Good work, Jaz."

Paff snatched his gun from his belt and aimed it at the doors.

Cem placed his hand on Paff's arm.

Paff looked at him curiously.

"Do not give in to your violent nature," Cem whispered.
"Everything balances out in the end."

Paff reluctantly put down the gun.

Halima smiled at him. "Let's get back to Zak and tell him what we learned."

Into Her Own

Outside the Brown Fur Tree Dwelling
Planet: Raz

Ann tried not to think about her sore feet, but they ached from walking for hours on end. She hoped they would reach Inno's dwelling soon. Very soon.

Hathor stopped talking to the faun and looked over at her. "We're almost there," he said, offering her an understanding smile. "Then you can rest."

"I know," she replied as she petted Leo.

"Inno! Inno! Are you out there?" they heard someone yell from far away.

"That's my mother!" he cheered. "We're close to my home. Mother! I'm over here!"

"Inno? Is that you?" she cried, her voice full of excitement.

Ahead of them, in the distance, was a campfire. They followed the woman's voice until they met her. His mother ran over to them. "Oh, thank you so much for helping my son find his way home!" she exclaimed gratefully. "You must stay with us tonight and join us in the celebration. You'll be guests of honor. Come!"

Leo roared, feeling ignored.

"Oh my!" Her hand fluttered to her neck. "My! What is this creature?"

"He's Leo the lion," Hathor replied. "He's friendly. You can pet him."

She stood still, uncertain.

"It's all right, mother," Inno said. He petted Leo, and Leo purred. "He's nice."

She tenderly touched his mane. When he didn't bite her or growl, she relaxed. "Very well. Leo is invited too."

Leo jumped around playfully.

"He certainly is expressive," she said. "Come along. We must celebrate this wonderful occasion!" She took her son's hand and led him to the dwelling.

Ann didn't hide her surprise. Apparently, tree houses were in demand here, for she saw many tree houses. She also saw some huts near the trees. A fire in the center of the dwelling lit up the night.

"It's not very big," she commented.

Hathor nodded. "They live together in small groups, but many dwellings exist throughout the forests."

"Inno is safe, and his protectors are with me," Inno's mother joyfully declared to everyone.

Suddenly fauns were everywhere, rushing to welcome Inno home and eagerly thanking her and Hathor. They talked a mile a minute, overwhelming Ann's senses.

Then a male voice, possibly the leader of the group, cried out, "Cook plenty of food and start the music! We're celebrating!"

Everyone cheered their approval and quickly rushed about, getting the celebration started.

Hathor saw Ann's confusion and laughed. "We're heroes," he informed her.

Ann didn't have time to think about it. She found herself surrounded by happy fauns who sang, danced, and played flutes, drums, and violins. Soon she was caught up in the excitement.

"Dance with me," a male faun requested.

She was about to decline when Hathor said, "If you say no, you'll hurt his pride. Fauns are very sensitive."

"Oh. I was going to say yes anyway," she fibbed. Then she danced with the faun, despite her aching feet.

"You dance good for a human," the faun complimented.

"Well, I've never danced with a faun before, so I can't make a comparison," she replied.

Into Her Own

"My name is Calhoun, and I'm sixteen. Inno is my little brother," he said. "I wanted to have the first dance with his protector."

Fauns were open about revealing their personal information, she thought. "Do harpies come around here often?" she asked, trying to keep the conversation flowing.

"No. They live in the mountains. I don't know why this one bothered to come through here. We're safe most of the time."

"Most of the time?"

"Goblins are no pleasure to be around."

"What do they do?"

"They enjoy capturing unsuspecting creatures in order to torment them before eating them."

She gulped nervously. "Will they come here?"

"No. They rarely enter dwellings or cities or villages. They mainly stick to the paths where they can capture travelers."

Oh. A shiver ran up and down her spine. She was a traveler. She decided she would talk to Hathor about this later on.

The dance ended and everyone clapped.

"It's time to eat!" one of the chefs called. "The tables have been set. Our honored guests shall be seated at the head of the chief's table."

Hathor directed her and Leo to the chief's table. Once they were settled in their chairs, the fauns took their usual places. The chefs filled everyone's dishes and cups. Before they began the feast, the chief stood up and announced, "We welcome you, honored guests, to our grand celebration. We will provide you with shelter tonight, so please continue to stay."

"We will," Hathor and Ann replied in unison.

"Good," he replied. "Let the feast begin!"

The food was plentiful and delicious. Ann felt warmth and love surrounding her. No one was left out of any conversation,

and everyone smiled and laughed. She ate all she could. She hadn't realized how hungry she had been.

Once the meal was over, they sat around the fire. The fauns' attention was directed at Ann, Hathor, and Leo. Ann hid her smile. They were still trying to overcome their fear of the lion.

"Please, tell us of yourselves. Who are you? Where do you come from? Where are you headed?" the chief asked.

Ann glanced at Hathor. Who should speak?

"You should start," he gently told her. Then she understood. He needed her to start the story so he could follow her lead.

"I am Victoria," she introduced herself. "I live in a village far from here. I am searching for the Dark Castle."

"That castle is under an evil spell. You are very brave," Inno said, his eyes wide.

She cleared her throat nervously. "What makes you say the castle is evil?"

Hathor took her hand in his so she would relax. Of course, he would notice her nervousness, she thought.

"Surely you've heard of the witch Kathz who was married to a king of Raz when kings had power to rule," the chief said.

"Yes," she responded. Thank goodness Hathor gave her some background information to help her along in Raz.

"The Dark Castle was her castle," he continued. "She lived there by herself after she put a spell on Raz that made the Queen the true authority."

"Tell her about the diamond crown," Inno insisted.

"A diamond crown?" she asked, intently listening.

"The diamond crown was Kathz's crown when she became the sole authority of Raz. She put a special spell on it. You see, only the true Queen of Raz may put it on her head and still live. If someone else puts it on, they will die immediately. Kathz wanted to ensure Raz's survival from impostors because lots of people back then wanted to rule over Raz."

"What is so evil about that?" she wondered. It sounded like Kathz had a good idea and went with it.

"An impostor can steal a crown. That means, the entire mess that's going on right now with the real and fake Queens can be detrimental to our future. We don't know what the next Queen looks like, but we heard a fairy tell us of the mission her and her impostor are on. If the impostor takes the crown, the real next Queen will never be able to claim her right to the throne."

"Oh." And Ann was already a day behind Seta! She was going to have to run tomorrow if she was going to make up for lost time.

"The real evil about the castle is that it is set up with traps for anyone who dares to enter it," the chief's wife added. "Kathz's spirit is still in that castle, so she knows who's coming, and her magic is more powerful than when she was alive. Even the Queen of Raz may not survive in there. A century ago, the Queen at the time went in there and died. Fortunately, she had a daughter who was able to replace her immediately."

"I heard about the crown, but I didn't realize the castle is set up with traps," Hathor said.

"What are you going to the Dark Castle for?" the chief asked.

"Someone told us that the herbs along the castle grounds can cure serious fevers," Hathor lied. "Our three-year-old child is sick."

"They're the only herbs in Raz that can cure a fever," the chief replied.

Ann silently thanked Hathor for his knowledge.

"We had a map to the Dark Castle, but we lost it. Would anyone here know where the castle is?" Hathor asked.

"I know the way," Calhoun replied. "I can show you the way as soon as it's morning."

"Thank you," Ann said, relieved.

"Do you know how to get to the Royal Palace?" Inno asked.

"He's the expert on finding the Royal Palace." Ann pointed to Hathor.

"Would you take Calhoun to the Queen after you find your herbs? He's in love with a fairy, and he wants to become one so he can be with her." Inno giggled.

"Inno," his mother admonished.

"You love a fairy?" Ann looked at Calhoun.

"Her name is Erin, and she's beautiful," Calhoun admitted. "She'll turn sixteen in three days, and she'll be ready to marry someone, but she can't marry a faun. You see, only the Queen can change me into a fairy because she has access to all of Raz's magic. All she has to do is say the word and it's done."

"Aren't there any faun girls you like?" she asked.

"Not like Erin. She's incredible!" he insisted dreamily.

"At first, we weren't happy about the amount time he spent with her because she is a fairy," his mother said. "Yet, a year has gone by and they love each other. Normally, fauns only deal with other fauns, but every now and then something like this happens."

"I can't even kiss her, for she is so small," he complained. "I don't want to lose her, and she doesn't want to lose me."

"I'm sure that the Queen will grant you your wish," Ann said.

Hathor smiled at her.

"See, Mother? It's possible!" Calhoun grinned.

"I shall miss my young faun," his mother replied sadly.

"You know I'll visit," Calhoun assured her. "All I have to do is fly here."

"Let's dance!" the chief exclaimed.

Everyone cheered and stood up. The music played, laughter filled the air, and they danced by the fire. Leo leapt around playfully.

Ann danced with Hathor, Inno, and Calhoun. In fact, while she was dancing with Calhoun, something tiny fluttered around

his head. Then it settled on his shoulder and folded its arms across its chest.

"Oh! Is that Erin?" Ann asked when she realized it was a fairy.

They stopped dancing.

"Erin!" he greeted with a wide smile.

Erin only sniffed.

Ann hid her laughter by coughing as she noticed Erin's jealousy. Erin was indeed a beautiful creature, but Ann guessed that all fairies were blessed with beauty. Erin had magnetic blue hair that reached her ankles. Her dress was shiny magnetic blue to match her hair, and her dark skin was flushed with anger. Anger, Ann knew, from seeing Calhoun dancing with another girl.

"Aw, talk to me," Calhoun pleaded.

She fluttered her silver wings in response.

"I'm going to talk to my husband," Ann said, making sure to emphasize the word 'husband.'

Erin's mood did a 180-degree turn. "Please don't leave on my account," she gracefully greeted as she flew off his shoulder. "I'm Erin and my family guards the blue tulips."

"I'm Victoria. I come from a village quite far from here," Ann replied. "Calhoun wants to help me, my husband, and Leo find the Dark Castle so I can find a cure for my child who is ill. In return, my husband and I will take him to the Queen so he can become a fairy."

Erin's blue eyes lit up. "You are going to become a fairy for me?" she asked Calhoun, her hands covering her heart.

"Of course. I told you I'd find a way for us to be together," he replied.

"You're the best!" She smiled and kissed his cheek delicately.

He blushed.

"You must come along," Ann invited.

"Definitely! I know where the Dark Castle is also. If Cal messes up, I'll take over."

Ann left the two lovers and walked over to Hathor. "I just met Erin," she said. "She's charming when she knows you're no competition for Calhoun. It was funny. But she's in love with him, so I understand her emotions."

Hathor and Ann danced, petted Leo, and then decided it was time to sleep.

After all, it had been such a long day. When Ann found out the fauns had set up the same room for her and Hathor, she was ready to protest.

"We are supposed to be married, remember?" he whispered. "Don't worry. I won't touch you."

She decided to let his comment remain unnoticed.

They settled into bed, the lion between them. Despite the long day she'd had, she wasn't sleepy. Most of the dwelling members were fast asleep. Only a few fauns still celebrated.

She wondered what time it was. She sighed. On the other side of the massive bed, Hathor was sound asleep. She looked at Leo. He was asleep too. Ignoring her aching body, she got out of bed and left the hut.

She sat down by the first tree she saw, far from the dying campfire. She closed her eyes. The air was slightly chilly, but she felt comforted by it. She worried about being able to retrieve the diamond crown. What if one of Kathz's traps killed her?

She heard a noise behind her. She was too calm to look over her shoulder to see who it was. She would have sensed it if danger was near.

"I'm glad to see that Seta didn't kidnap you," Hathor said as he sat next to her.

"I can't sleep," she explained. She reluctantly opened her eyes. "You'd think I'd be fast asleep after the long day we had."

"Not really. You're probably still caught up in all the excitement."

"When will it end?"

"A Queen's work is never done," he said. "Your exciting days have just begun."

They were silent for a few moments.

"I like the fauns and fairies. I don't know about the goblins though," she remarked.

He grinned. "The goblin women are nice. It's the males you have to watch out for."

"I just don't want to run into any of them."

"When you are declared Queen, no one will harm you; no one from Raz anyway."

"Because if I die, Raz dies. Should Kathz have shifted all these responsibilities to the Queen? I'm not infallible."

"No one expects you to be."

She smiled at him. "Thanks."

"You have a beautiful smile."

The moment she looked into his eyes, she felt very strange. It was as if everything around her, except for Hathor, disappeared. And Hathor was looking at her in a way no one ever had before.

In the back of her mind, she knew another time her heart had pounded excitedly as she looked at someone else. Long ago. At least it seemed like such a long time ago. In another lifetime perhaps.

What was she trying to remember?

"I'm glad you dragged me from Earth. If you hadn't, I never would have gotten to know you," she admitted.

"I was only doing my duty, and I'm glad it was my duty to do."

She saw the kiss coming. Something in the back of her mind warned her to resist. But she didn't want to resist. The kiss was soft, and she never wanted it to end.

Then a memory came to her mind. A different time when someone else had kissed her just as softly. William! She immediately pulled away, hardly aware that Hathor had put his arms around her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I can't kiss you," she finally replied and forced aside his hurt expression.

"Did you want to kiss me?"

"Yes but, oh Hathor. I'm sorry, but I must marry William."

"You must? That's an interesting way to put it. It almost sounds like you don't have a choice."

"In a way, I don't."

"Why not? You're free to marry anyone you want. All you have to do is say the word."

She knew he wanted to marry her. Perhaps she'd known it before he kissed her outside the crumbling Great Prison walls. But her heart had been tied up in William for four years.

"If I don't marry William, I'll never know what could have been," she said.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded, slowly losing his temper.

"I invested four years into loving him. If I hadn't moved to another state, then we might have ended up together."

"Don't you feel anything at all for me? Be honest. Don't leave me hanging on a string like he's had you for all this time."

For a moment she couldn't respond. Finally she said, "I've never given you any romantic thought. I focused all of that on William."

"I wish I could turn off my emotions! But I can't. It is how I feel. And you're going to marry some guy who never loved you enough to move to where you were so he could be with you. I would have done that."

"We were both young back then. I've known him a lot longer than I've known you. How can you expect me to throw away four years of knowing him for several days of knowing you?"

"I don't know. I'm sure your Prince Charming will make you very happy." He took a deep breath to calm himself. "I love you,

Into Her Own

Ann. Don't ask me why. I just do. But if true happiness lies with William, then so be it. Just don't expect me to like it."

He stood up and stomped away. She was stunned. She never saw him so upset before. But he was right. He would have moved anywhere to be with her, she realized. Ann suddenly knew what she wanted.

Before she could stand up and follow him, she disappeared.

Alpha Head I

Planet: Pale

Jaz smiled at Seta. "Ann is officially back on Earth, and this time she's with the William who loved her."

Seta nodded. "Good work, Jaz. Now Pale will survive."

CHAPTER 13



Laxy Rebellion Hideout
Planet: Pale

Zak shook his head. "As you can see, this demands immediate attention," he said after Paff, Cem and Halima told everyone what they learned.

Cem, who had resumed a Lax body, spoke up. "Seta and Jaz did mention that the Olympians could bring Ann back to Raz. Obviously, Ann must have had some involvement with them on her way to Raz."

"I wonder if Raz has a special pact with the Olympians. Whenever Raz needed help in the past, the Olympians never hesitated to help them," Zak said thoughtfully.

"We have to go to Olympia and request their assistance," Paff added. "We have no other choice."

"Paff, Cem and Halima, will you go to Olympia and talk to the gods and goddesses about Ann? I'm sure they will come to her aid, and they have the magic to do this. Then hopefully, we can make an agreement with Raz and gain a powerful ally."

They liked the plan, so Paff, Cem and Halima boarded a spaceship Zak had built and hid in the cave. Everyone wished them luck as they left Pale.

Into Her Own

Dayton, Ohio

Planet: Earth

Daylight?

Ann blinked. Wasn't it just night?

And where was she? Where were all the trees? Why was she wearing a T-shirt and jeans?

Trying to clear the fog from her mind, Ann absorbed her surroundings. She shook her head. She could feel something slipping from her memory. Something important. The harder she tried to regain it, the faster she lost it.

"Are you going to hit the ball anytime soon?" a voice rang in her ears.

A familiar voice, yet it wasn't the voice she heard just a minute ago. Who was she talking to then? What had she been talking about? It was an irritating sensation to feel her memory slipping away so quickly.

"Ann, are you feeling all right?" the same person asked, this time concerned.

She blinked again. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw William waiting for her to take her turn. He smiled at her, the same smile that once told her he loved her.

She turned her attention to the game of miniature golf they were playing. She recognized the sights, sounds and smells of the place. Then she remembered where she was. She was on her first date with William as his girlfriend. They had dated for awhile before he asked her to be his girlfriend last night. My goodness, was it only last night? Somehow it seemed like years had passed since that happened.

"Good job! You got it in the hole, but I believe you forgot that we are trying to find out who plays the worst," he playfully

admonished. He wrote her score and handed her the score sheet and pencil.

She read it as he took a shot. She saw her name was 'z' and his was 'xavier.' Something was wrong with her name. She changed it to Raz.

"Weren't you watching? It took me seven times to get my ball in the hole," he said as he walked over to her. He looked over her shoulder. "What is R A Z?"

She shrugged. "I can't remember. Maybe I read it in an ad this morning or saw it on TV."

"It sounds cool enough," he said. "Are you feeling all right?"

She smiled. "I'm fine."

For the next few minutes, she felt like a machine going through the motions while her mind was somewhere else. Then slowly, the strange sensation went away.

She was seventeen. Her new boyfriend was eighteen. She was due to move sometime in the future, but she didn't care at the moment. She and William were the only ones who existed. She sighed, deeply satisfied, as she watched him goof off, demonstrating how not to play miniature golf. She laughed when he accidentally hit the ball so hard it flew into someone else's game.

Whatever she had tried to remember obviously wasn't important. And if it was, it would come back to her later. For now, she was determined to live for the moment and enjoy life to the fullest with the boy she was beginning to love.

He saw her smiling and smiled back. "So now you know the dangers that emerge when you don't hit the ball gently," he said as he put the ball near the hole. "Oh, hey, what's that?"

She unconsciously glanced over her shoulder to see what he was talking about. It was too late by the time she realized that he had tricked her. He already had the ball in the hole.

"You cheater!" she called out good-naturedly.

Into Her Own

Some people gave them strange looks, but she and William didn't care. They were too busy having fun and falling in love. When it grew late, he had to take her home. She was disappointed that the evening had passed by so swiftly. Why couldn't time pass this fast in school? she wondered as he parked his parents' car in her driveway.

"I had a good time tonight," he said.

"Me too." Suddenly she grew nervous. Would they share their first kiss tonight?

He put a cassette in the car stereo and played a song on it. It was a beautiful love song. He smiled at her and reached for her hand. "This is my song for you."

Then he kissed her. It was a simple kiss, a soft kiss. It made her body sing with joy. When she looked into his eyes, she realized she loved him.

He took her hand into his and squeezed it. "I'll call you as soon as I get home," he promised.

"I'll be waiting," she replied.

She walked into her house as he drove off. She sighed dreamily. It felt wonderful to be in love.

Planet: Olympia

Cem, Paff, and Halima arrived on Olympia early the next morning, which was about the time Ann fell asleep on earth. The suns were peeking over the horizon.

They landed on the base of Mount Olympia.

"I sure hope they can help us," Paff said.

"They can," Cem replied.

"How can you be so sure?" Halima asked.

"I just know. Call it intuition," Cem vaguely responded. He led them to the entrance of the mountain's trail. He sighed. "I didn't realize the climb was so high. This is unfortunate. The longer it takes us to reach their home, the longer Ann is stuck on Earth."

Paff and Halima shuddered. Stuck on Earth? What an awful fate! "We could fly the ship to the top of the mountain," Paff suggested.

Cem shook his head. "Olympians are very protective of their mountain. I suppose we will just have to walk. This isn't going to be any fun," he warned them as he started walking up the mountain.

"After you," Paff offered Halima.

She smiled and followed Cem. "Thank you, Paff. You're very kind."

Paff's heart leapt.

Alpha Head I

Planet: Pale

"So Riles, how did you survive the night?" Jaz asked after she clicked on the telecommunicator.

Seta was overseeing the construction of the Great Prison again, and so far the magic sand was still working in reverse, slowly undoing all Raz had hoped for. She sighed. Seta didn't really want to destroy Raz. Jaz was certain of that. Jaz had spent the entire night searching for a chemical that would revive the specimens of the dying vegetation she had found around the remnants of the Great Prison. She had a long way to go before finding a solution.

She hadn't even had time to think about the Paler physiology and why the planet lost its vegetation.

She turned back to the magic sand in the hourglass. She took one grain of sand from Ann's Razian memories and slipped it into her past memories of William.

Then she turned back to the telecommunicator. "Riles?" She waited for a response. None came. "Riles, if you're there, say something."

Silence.

She had an uneasy feeling. She might not like Riles, but she didn't want to see anything bad happen to him. She switched the telecommunicator to Seta.

"Yes, Jaz?" Seta greeted.

"Leader Seta, Riles is not responding to my calls," she informed her.

"I wonder what the problem is now. Could you check on him?" Seta asked.

"Yes. Sign off." She put aside her research and set the transporter's coordinates to Riles' last position on Raz.

She promptly arrived on Raz. The first thing she noticed was the trees. So many trees. So much vegetation. Perhaps if she studied the vegetation here and compared it with Pale's dying specimens, she would find the missing link.

A voice deep inside her was trying to tell her something important. She grimaced. Why couldn't she just remember what it was?

She heard voices. She immediately hid behind one of the thicker trees. Peering around her hiding place, she spied a pack of goblins walking through the forest.

"I wonder who will entertain us tonight?" one of the men grumbled.

"Why did that deformed creature have to kill her? We were only going to have fun. It's no fun eating a creature we didn't kill," another complained.

"Maybe now we can eat plants," a female huffed.

"I still don't understand what good a pink dress is," the chief said, his voice rough. "You're too short for a human dress."

"I plan to cut it up and make smaller dresses. Pink is a beautiful color," she replied as she spread the fabric over her small body.

The males groaned.

Jaz gave a good, hard look at the ground and found Riles, disguised as Ann, dead. If the goblins didn't kill him, who did?

She patiently waited for the goblins to leave before approaching the corpse. She shook her head. Poor Riles. He wasn't cut out for a leadership position. She used some magic dust from the leader's vault and transformed the human body into Riles' real body.

She gasped. Riles' mouth was open in a silent scream, and terror still showed in his dead eyes. Terror.

The White Terror.

She remembered part of it.

She remembered walking down a street in a city with trees, grass, and white flowers. Nearby, a Paler was selling white oranges, apples, and various fruits. She spotted other Palers exchanging pleasantries. She entered a white house, her house. She walked to the front hall where Omin was talking to three males and two females. They were studying a map of their galaxy.

"Jaz dear, come on in," Omin welcomed her with a broad smile. "Soon we'll rule all of Pale," he whispered in her ear. "Our plan is going smoothly."

She nodded. "Good."

She smiled at him, for she loved him. They went to the others who were to share in their reign. Jaz examined the map. She didn't recall a need for this map.

"What's this for?" she asked Omin.

"Last night I had a brilliant idea, and I found a way that will speed up our rule. By next year, we will have Pale under our control."

"How?" According to their plan, it would take at least ten years to convince Palers that they needed someone like Omin to be their Leader.

"It involves your Great Prison idea. Instead of using the Great Prison to reform the prisoners with injections that will change their brainwaves so they'll become suitable for a peaceful society, we should use the Great Prison to brainwash Palers into succumbing to our rule. We can create an entire planet of Palers who will do whatever we want," Omin explained excitedly. "We can buy the empty field in the Alpha Quarter of the planet. Then we can purchase the materials to build the Great Prison. We can bring Palers to it, and then they will emerge ready to do whatever we desire. It's a foolproof idea!"

"What's wrong with our plan? Once the public understands the importance of reforming criminals, they will pay more attention to us and be more willing to accept our authority," she argued.

He opened his mouth to say something but decided against it.

"So, what is this map for?" she asked. She didn't recall discussing anything about the galaxy in their plans.

Nil spoke up. "Planet Lax is in the Technical Galaxy and it is full of blue short creatures who reproduce at a fast rate. They only need air in order to survive. I propose to destroy the planet and bring them here."

"For what purpose?" Jaz asked.

"When we destroy the vegetation on this planet, we're going to need a food supply," Omin said.

"We chose the Laxes because they're lazy. They won't resist us once their planet is destroyed," Nil added.

"Their planet is their source of energy and strength. No other creature has the unique characteristic of inborn laziness. When Palers have no food, Palers will have to look to us for a solution," Xari concluded.

"There's vegetation on other planets," Jaz insisted. "So your plan won't work."

"I've taken care of that last aspect," Omin responded.

"I don't understand." Jaz shook her head. "What's wrong with our plan?"

She emphasized the word 'our.'

"Jaz, let's go into the other room," Omin pleasantly said as he took her arm and led her to the kitchen.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"This is my brainstorm. This plan is guaranteed to work, and it won't take nearly as long as the plan we created. You'll love it once you understand how it all works out. Don't worry about our comrades in the other room because they won't rule with us."

"They agreed to that?"

"Not exactly. They just won't be with us."

A chill ran up her spine. "They're our friends. Nil is your brother," she reminded him.

"So?"

She frowned.

"There will be no competition for us," he stated matter-of-factly.

"I'm surprised you don't kill me off too," she snapped.

"Now Jaz. You're my wife, and I love you. I fully intend for us to be equal leaders."

"I will be your partner if you follow the plan we both agreed on, but I will not agree to this new plan. We are Palers, not murderers."

"Jaz, listen to reason. In order to completely rule without opposition, we need to eliminate any opposition we may have. It's a reasonable thing to take care of."

"We didn't agree on that. You made up your mind before consulting me. What if I become your opposition? Will you kill me too?" She had never feared him before, but now she did.

"I thought you were strong, but it seems you have some weaknesses in you," he muttered, clearly displeased.

"If by weakness you mean I want to obtain power the right way, then you are correct," she said despite her growing apprehension.

"Jaz, Jaz," he whispered as he hugged her. "Now, listen to reason. My plan is better than the one we constructed. We will be rulers!"

She decided another strategy might prove more effective. "Don't do this, Omin," she pleaded. "We'll get to power. So what if it takes us longer to get there? The fact of the matter is that we'll get there one way or another."

"I'm tired of waiting."

That was when she knew he would never listen to her. "You're mad," she acknowledged as she struggled to get out of his arms.

"Not mad. No, not mad. I'm just ready to assume a leadership position once and for all."

Finally, she managed to break free of his hold. "You won't be able to go through with it. I'm going to tell the Leader what you're up to."

As she was turning to leave, he grabbed her arm and whispered in her ear, "I don't want to hurt you, my dear, but I will if necessary."

She trembled. She knew that she wasn't strong enough to fight him, not physically or emotionally. So she nodded. Avoiding his gaze, she consented to his will.

Later in the day, she slipped out of the house and headed to the Leader Capital in Beta Central. However, Omin was too clever for her and caught her before she entered the building. He knocked her unconscious, so she didn't even know what happened.

Jaz looked at Riles' dead body. Now she understood everything. The White Terror was a complicated scheme that Omin and his followers used to terrorize the Palers. First, they found a way to destroy the vegetation on the planet so only white sand covered the ground. Then they brought the Laxes for the hungry and desperate Palers to eat.

The three hundred Palers couldn't digest Laxes, so Omin led them into the Great Prison, telling them that when they were through with the treatment, they would be able to eat Laxes instead of dying. The Great Prison did do that, but it also brainwashed them and the five hundred Laxes so Omin could make them follow him like robots.

Once his task was complete and everyone followed him without question, Omin brought Jaz out of the basement where he had kept her prisoner.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded, struggling to get away from him.

"I'm going to reform your way of thinking, my dear," he kindly said, as if he was helping her.

"Where are our friends and your brother?" she asked.

"I got rid of them."

She screamed. So he had gone through with it. He killed them. She continued to scream and fight against him with all her might, but he calmly held on tight. He led her to the Great Prison. Despite her screaming, no one lifted a finger to help her.

Into Her Own

"They are under my control, and soon you will be too," Omin informed her. "I have created the perfect planet with the perfect people."

One of the main prison guards opened the entrance to the Great Prison.

Before Jaz could say anything, Omin gave her one last kiss. "I will miss you, my dear." And then he pushed her into the prison.

Her screams echoed in the empty room.

Jaz pushed aside the painful memories. She couldn't believe it. She felt sick to her stomach.

She heard a sound from behind her. She knew without looking who was behind her.

"Omin," she greeted coolly. "Or is it husband?" She turned to face him. If nothing else, she had learned to appear calm on the outside during her two hundred years as a secretary.

"So, your memory has returned," he acknowledged as he walked over to her. He glanced at the corpse. "I thought he was Seta," he growled.

"You got Riles instead." She shrugged, pretending to be unconcerned about Riles' death. An idea formed in her mind. "It's an understandable mistake. After all, Seta was originally in that human replicated body." Then her voice grew soft. "Omin, it's been a long time since we've been together."

He gently touched her cheek. "Two hundred and nineteen years."

"And all that time, Pale was in order. Then Seta assumed your position, and Pale experienced nothing but chaos ever since. If there was ever a time for you to show the Palers that you have the rightful authority, it's now. You have to be the one who destroys this planet."

"What does Seta plan to do?"

"She plans to go to the Dark Castle to retrieve a diamond crown. You see, the one who gets the crown will determine the

future of Raz. If Seta gets it, Raz dies. If Ann gets it, Raz lives. But," she looked meaningfully at him, "if you get the crown first, not only will Raz die, but all the Palers will be so grateful to you that they will overthrow Seta. It's the perfect opportunity, especially when they remember how orderly everything was when you ruled."

He smiled, as much as he could with the deformed mouth he had.

"Here's the map to the Dark Castle," she informed him as she examined it. "Getting there should be no problem for you. I must go back to Pale before Seta suspects something is up."

Before Omin could urge her to come with him, she kissed him softly. "Hurry. I will be waiting for you."

She transported herself back to Pale before he could say anything. She knew he would go to the Dark Castle, and she wanted to have time to draw the map from memory on Paler stationery. Taking a deep breath, she pressed the button on the telecommunicator. "Seta, we need to talk," she said.

CHAPTER 14



Ann's Bedroom
Planet: Earth

Ann stretched. Her dreams kept racing through her mind. Even with her eyes closed, she knew it was night. She rolled over in her bed. In her mind, she was on a boat with an attractive young man and a friendly lion.

She had no idea who the man was in real life, but he felt familiar to her somehow. They were sailing somewhere that frightened her, and despite his reassurance that everything would be alright, she shook with fear. Greatly annoyed, she pushed him aside, and he accidentally fell off the boat.

Then he kissed her. However, this time they were in front of crumbling walls. The kiss made her feel powerful and weak all at once. "I will," he whispered in her ear when the kiss ended.

The next thing she knew, she stood before an incredible palace. Two suns were setting, lighting up the sky with a rainbow of colors. She accepted the man's hand as he led her to the palace. The same lion purred beside them.

Then nothing in her dream made sense. The man kissed her under a tree. A dragon grabbed her foot between its teeth as the lion bit into its tail and the man tried to stab it in the eye.

"Why do you want someone who never wanted you enough to wait for you?" the man asked when they were back on the boat.

Then a cave emerged from the sea.

"Is it going to be him or me?" the man pressed.

"Who? What are you talking about?" she asked, confused.

His eyes were filled with hope. "Can I be your king?"

This didn't make any sense, she thought before she woke up. She opened her eyes. Now it was daylight. She glanced at her clock. It was early in the morning, and she knew her parents were watching TV in the other room. Her parents? She jumped out of bed and ran into the family room.

"Good morning, sweetie," her mother said and smiled at her.

Her father was reading one of his finance magazines like always. He grinned at her. "Aren't you up early for a Saturday?" he teased.

Her eyes filled with tears and her heart constricted. Why did she suddenly feel as if she had stepped into the past?

"Honey, is something wrong?" her mother asked, looking concerned.

On impulse, she hugged her parents as if she would never let go. Oh, how wonderful it felt to hug them!

Brown Fur Tree Dwelling

Planet: Raz

Hathor paced around the dwelling nervously. He should have kept his mouth shut. Now Ann had run off, and no one knew where she was. He spent the entire morning and a good part of the afternoon searching for her.

Into Her Own

Something awful must have happened to her. Why else would she be gone for so long? Surely, she wouldn't stray far away from the dwelling. She had a planet to save.

The days that Raz required a new Queen were rapidly approaching. Oh Ann! he thought anxiously. He would never forgive himself if something happened to her. But she had to be fine. She was smart. She would do the right thing. He trusted her judgment.

The lion returned to him, whimpering. He sighed and petted Leo. "Yeah, I miss her too," he agreed.

Alpha Head I

Planet: Pale

"I can hardly believe it," Seta whispered in shock as she sat down in her chair.

"I was one hundred and five when it happened. It's been two hundred and nineteen years since then. You weren't even born yet," Jaz added. "Here's a copy of the map I drew. Now we can go directly to the Dark Castle. I think Omin will be there by early tomorrow morning."

"What will we do to get Ann?"

"To tell you the truth, I saw Paff, Halima and another Paler listening to us as I told you about the Olympians. My guess is that they are part of the Laxy Rebellion and are on Olympia right now trying to find a way to get Ann back."

"You didn't tell me?"

"I knew you didn't want to destroy Raz. And I figured out a way to make Pale what it once was, but we're going to have to live with Laxes since we destroyed their planet."

"Thank you, Jaz." Seta nodded. "I am going to go to Hathor and explain the situation to him since he is closest to Ann."

Jaz turned to all of the injections that were ever taken in the Great Prison and took out Omin's sample. Now was the time to search through his memories and find Pale's solution.

Planet: Earth

The phone rang. Ann smiled at her mother. "That's probably William," she said. "Hello?" she asked when she picked up the phone.

"Hi there," he replied. "How's my queen doing today?"

Queen? Why did that word have such a familiar ring to it? She pushed aside the question. Instead, she responded, "I'm great. It feels wonderful to be alive!"

"I can tell someone is in a good mood."

"Am I ever! My parents are in the other room and I'm on the phone with you. What more could I ask for?"

"How about a trip to the park, followed by a movie I just bought?" he suggested.

"Sounds terrific," she agreed.

"Great. I'll pick you up in thirty minutes."

She hung up the phone.

"Are you seeing William again?" her mother asked as she rocked in her chair.

Ann sat on the couch. "Yes," she answered. Her dad was taking a nap in her parents' bedroom. She felt as if she hadn't seen her parents in years. She wondered why she felt this way. And why did she have a nagging sensation that her parents would die in two years? She forced the depressing thought from her mind. No one could predict the future, she reminded herself. "Mom?" she began.

Into Her Own

"Yes, dear?" her mother replied.

"This is going to sound crazy but I had these dreams last night, and in these dreams, there was this good looking guy but he wasn't William. The problem is that I shouldn't be dreaming of someone I never met, especially when I love William."

"It's common to dream of men you never met," she responded.

"Oh, I know. Still, in a very bizarre way, it was real. I've never had such vivid dreams before."

"Perhaps your mind is trying to tell you something."

"Like what?"

"Well, maybe you don't love William as much as you think you do."

"That's impossible," she argued, shaking her head. "William's the best."

"I dated boys when I was in high school that I believed I loved, but in the end I realized all I really experienced was infatuation."

"William's real, and the other guy is a dream. So I won't worry myself over it."

Planet: Olympia

At last Paff, Cem and Halima reached the doors of the palace.

"I can't believe it took so long to get up this mountain." Paff gasped for air. "I'm completely worn out."

"At least we're here," Halima said.

He smiled. "Of course, you're right. Shall we make our presence known?"

Cem nodded and knocked on the door.

Athene opened the door. "Hello. What is your business here?" she greeted.

"We are from Pale," Cem started.

"I know," she replied. "You tried to prevent Ann from reaching Raz."

"That was the Leader. We're against her. Actually, we are part of the Laxy Rebellion, and we have some interesting news concerning Ann. She is in terrible need of assistance, and we have no one to turn to."

Athene stiffened. "Ann needs help? Please enter."

She led them to the garden where Jupiter, Juno, Venus, Mars, Apollo, Vulcan and the Sphinx were discussing the Sphinx's new bedroom in her new castle that Vulcan was in the process of building.

All eyes turned to the strangers.

When Jupiter recognized the Palers, his face grew red with fury. "Out of my presence!" he screamed.

"Wait! Father, they're concerned about Ann. She needs our assistance," Athene quickly said.

"She tells the truth," Apollo confirmed. "We must listen to them."

Planet: Earth

Ann smiled as she saw William drive up to the house. "Bye, Mom! Bye, Dad! I love you."

"We love you too," they replied.

She took one good look at them, and then she ran to meet William. When she got into the car, she could tell he wasn't satisfied.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

He sighed. "I hate to keep bringing this up, but I wish you didn't have to move to Florida. It's not fair. You meet someone you love more than anyone else in the world and she moves. Why does life have to be so unfair?"

Florida? She had forgotten that she was moving. Seeing her parents put the move completely out of her mind. But why? She got to see her parents every day. What made them so cherished all of the sudden? Then images flashed in her mind. Images of beaches, new friends, a university. All were in Florida. Yet how could she know these things? They hadn't happened yet. Had they?

"Did you ever have a feeling you were experiencing déjà vu?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "Not that I know of." He took her hand in his.

She looked at him, expecting to see blond hair and blue eyes. Instead, she saw dark brown hair and brown eyes. She blinked.

"You're not even gone, and I already miss you," he said softly.

"I'm here now," she replied.

"Yeah but for how long?"

There was no answer. Her parents hadn't set a definite moving date yet. "Let's enjoy the time we have. OK?"

"OK," he reluctantly agreed.

When they arrived at the park, they sat down on a bench and stared at the lake.

"What are you thinking?" he asked her.

She blinked, startled. "Well, I was imagining a beautiful palace on a planet where I would be Queen and rule with complete authority."

"Can I rule with you?"

"You can't rule. I would have the power. You would serve me."

"You mean, I'd be your slave?"

"No. You'd have to take care of me and give me a daughter." She had no idea where this was coming from. She had to put a leash on her imagination.

"Oh. I can live with that," he said with a grin.

"But you don't like marriage."

"Can't we just live together?"

"No! I'm the kind of girl you marry, not live with."

"But it's a binding agreement. I'd feel trapped."

She turned to him. "I thought you wanted a commitment."

"I do."

"Then what's wrong with marriage? Even if Raz didn't hold marriage as necessary for the Queen and king, I want to be married."

"Raz? What is Raz?"

Raz? She paused. She had heard of Raz before! She wanted to cry. Deep down inside she missed someone she loved. But how could that be? And why did she miss some friends she never met? Everything she had to miss was right here in Ohio.

"Why are we making this up? All that matters is that I want to be with you," he whispered.

"Then why did you break up with me?" she demanded.

Another scene flashed through her mind. She moved to Florida that September, and she was visiting him in Ohio for Christmas. That was when he told her he couldn't handle the long distance relationship.

"But I didn't break up with you," he argued. He put his arm around her shoulders.

"Yes, you did! Then you called me up when I returned to Florida to tell me all about your new girlfriend. I remember! I remember I wanted you for such a long time, but you kept telling me we were only friends. So how can you sit there and promise me forever?"

Into Her Own

How much did he really love her? Suddenly it all became clear to her. All he felt was infatuation, and she was through with infatuation. In frustration, she pushed him away from her.

Then she recalled pushing another person away, and this person fell off the boat and into the water.

Hathor. Hathor! Raz! Slowly all the pieces that had been haunting her returned. She was to be Queen of Raz!

Planet: Raz

Hathor and Leo returned to the dwelling in despair. Hathor would have given anything to talk to Ann again, even if she did marry William. His heart ached. He wondered what William had that made him so important to Ann. Maybe it all had to do with timing. Perhaps if he had met her first ...

He just didn't understand it. He could never compete with a ghost. The William of yesteryear.

"Why did I have to fall in love with her?" he muttered to himself.

Up ahead he saw the fauns searching for her. He also saw a milky white creature among the bushes. A familiar creature.

A Paler.

The fauns were startled to see the unusual looking being, and Hathor tensed.

Leo growled.

"Hathor, I'm glad I found you," Seta stated, ignoring the fauns and lion. She had business to take care of, and the sooner she got the message to him, the better their chances were of defeating Omin once and for all.

"Do you know where Ann is?" he asked, trying to remain calm.

"That I do," she replied. "Let's not waste a moment. I have something important to tell you about Ann."

Planet: Olympia

Paff, Cem, and Halima looked anxiously at the Olympians. Cem had finished relating their dilemma. Now the question was simple: would the Olympians help?

The Sphinx finally broke the silence. "I will go to Earth and bring her to Raz."

"I could use a spaceship," Jupiter argued. "She's been in it before."

"I can travel much faster," the Sphinx replied. "Besides, you've already come to her aid. She did me a great favor while she was here. If she had not spoken on my behalf, Vulcan would not be building the new palace for me. I have yet to repay her."

"She must get that diamond crown. Raz's future depends on it."

"Why do you care about Raz so much?" Apollo asked the visitors. "You are Palers, after all."

Cem spoke up. "We are part of the Laxy Rebellion. We oppose Seta, and we're trying to establish a new system on Pale where Palers do not feed on Laxes anymore. Also, we would like to make Raz our ally."

The Olympians looked at Apollo who nodded. "They speak the truth," Apollo stated.

The Olympians relaxed, for Apollo was the god of truth.

"I'll go to Earth immediately," the Sphinx said. "There's not a moment to lose."

"Will you let me go with you?" Cem requested. "I met Ann once. She should remember me."

Into Her Own

The Sphinx nodded. Jupiter and Apollo helped Cem climb on the Sphinx's back. Athene took a magic ruby tied to a rope and put it around the Sphinx's neck.

"The ruby will tell the Sphinx of Ann's location," Athene explained to a confused Paff and Halima.

Cem looked at his companions. "I urge you to return to Zak and relate all that's happened here. Let him know that the Laxes' suffering is almost over."

"Will I see you again, Cem?" Paff wondered.

Cem smiled. "Zak's work has just begun, but mine is at an end. We'll cross paths again. Once I see that Ann is safely on the Sphinx, I shall go home. The Sphinx will drop me off. Then I shall torment the bull some more. Zak knows this. Until our destinies cross again, I wish you both the best of luck."

The Olympians, Paff, and Halima wished the Sphinx and Cem luck as the Sphinx flew into the night sky.

William's house

Planet: Earth

Ann sighed. She was vaguely aware that it was mid-afternoon as she glanced at the movie on William's TV set. They were sitting on an old couch in his bedroom, watching a movie that bored her to tears. She had no way of returning to Raz and just wishing to return to Raz wasn't working like it had before.

Finally, she said, "I can't believe you think I made Raz up."

He grinned and took her hand in his. "Please, let's not go over that again. We're having such a pleasant day."

Funny, she didn't think it was pleasant. Last time it had been, but this time it wasn't. Then her mind shifted back to planet Olympia where a nymph named Joy combed her hair. What had

Joy said? Something about if Ann went back in time to the William she loved, then she would have changed but he would be the same person he was at eighteen.

Four years. Ann had four extra years of growth and experience than he did. She had changed, and she changed a lot more than she'd realized.

Last time she watched this movie, she had enjoyed it. Now she couldn't stand it. Last time she had laughed at his jokes. Now she forced herself to smile. Last time he listened to anything she had to say, or had he? Because right now he was blowing the whole Raz issue off as if she was crazy. But Raz was real. Then she remembered how he seemed to neglect his listening skills once they had broken up. Did he ever truly listen to her, or had she been too blind to notice the difference?

And something else new occurred this time around. She was disappointed. She thought everything would be as wonderful as before, but it wasn't. He was acting the same way. He was sweet, like he used to be. However, she noted that he was also pessimistic. He thought their situation was doomed to end. She realized that he had set up a self-filling prophecy. He was so sure that they were going to break up, it ended up happening.

He kept talking about how miserable everything was because she was moving to Florida. She had believed they would make it, that they would end up together. As a result, she held on and he let go. It all seemed so simple when she analyzed it objectively.

He was a wonderful person, but he wasn't the one for her. And she didn't love him as she thought she did. Her mother had been right. She grinned. When was her mother ever wrong?

"Did you see that?" William asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"No. I missed it," she replied absentmindedly.

"You just missed the meaning to the whole movie."

She didn't see what was so great about it. So what if a man tore apart his room and yelled something about freedom? Freedom. She was finally free from William. What a relief!

She looked at the TV. Wasn't the movie over yet? She knew she was growing more and more restless by the minute. "Can't we do something?"

"We are doing something," he replied, pointing to the TV.

"No. I mean, can't we do something fun and exciting?"

"I thought we were."

"If we were on Red, we could try to outwit the cave of opposites. On Forestaria, we could fight a dragon and explore the forest. On Pale, we could escape the evil Leader's death sentence. On Raz, we could meet fauns and fairies!"

"Oh! That was a good line." He clapped his hands, his attention fully on the movie.

She frowned. Hadn't he heard a word she said? She hoped that someone would rescue her from this planet soon because she was starting to dislike William.

She stood up and walked out of the bedroom. Then she walked out of his house.

"Ann! Where are you going?" he asked, running after her. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong. You don't believe me." She stopped walking and turned to face him. "What proof do you need?"

As if to answer her question, the Sphinx with a Lax on her back appeared in the sky. Ann smiled at the familiar Olympian.

"There's the Sphinx I told you about," she told him.

He could only stare in amazement.

The Sphinx landed gracefully on the ground. Fortunately, no one was in sight. The Sphinx bowed before her. "I have come to rescue you, Queen."

Cem waved to her. "Do you remember me? I was in the Great Prison with you, and you prevented me from getting the injection."

Ann laughed. It was so good to see them! "Yes, I remember you."

"We owe you a favor," Cem said. "So we're here to take you to Raz."

"Where's Hathor?" she asked.

"He could not rescue you from this boring planet a second time. First Commander Jaz, under Leader Seta's orders, put a spell on him so he wouldn't be able to help you. But fear not. The Olympians and members of the Laxy Rebellion are on your side and will not fail you."

"I've got to be dreaming," William whispered, staring at the two creatures in front of him.

Ann turned to William. Now he believes me, she thought. Seeing was believing. Wasn't that how the saying went?

"Can I have a moment with William?" she requested.

"The Queen can do whatever she desires," the Sphinx replied.

Ann took William's hand in hers and led him to the steps of his front porch where they sat down.

"You really are from Raz," he said.

"Yes," she said. "At one time I did go out with you. We were a couple. Then I moved. You found someone else to love four months later, and you broke up with me. From that point on, you only wanted my friendship, and I haven't been able to return it until now. It's been four years since I moved to Florida. I am now twenty-one. I have a destiny that lies in another galaxy."

"Take me with you," he pleaded.

She smiled sadly. "Had this happened to me four years ago, I wouldn't have hesitated. But I changed. I know how our future on Earth is, and I don't like it although now I can see that it was

necessary. You once said that I would find my true love and he wasn't you."

"When did I say that?"

"About four years from now. You'll fall in love again at least five times. You won't love me anymore because you didn't the first time around. You belong here on Earth. You have other girlfriends to wait for, your family, and a career you'll enjoy. You love computers and cars. Neither one are on Raz."

"What about you? Don't you have anything to stay for?"

She shook her head. "No. My parents died two years ago in my time. I had distanced myself from the friends I made in Florida, and I was living a non-existent life in North Dakota for a few weeks before I left for Raz."

"So much has happened since you came back here, but nothing has happened to me."

"When I leave, you will not remember me this way. You will live in the past that I lived in."

"No. I want to remember this. I want to know that you were indeed a Queen. Can I have one last kiss before you leave?"

Her heart ached as she kissed him. It was incredibly sweet but very final.

"Goodbye, Ann," he whispered.

"Goodbye, William," she responded.

She climbed on the Sphinx's back with Cem's help. She waved to William as the Sphinx flew into the sky. Finally, she felt the story between her and William come to a close. And if she was lucky, she would find the story with her and Hathor begin.

CHAPTER 15



Enchanted Galaxy

"So you see, the Laxy Rebellion is on your side," Cem concluded as the Sphinx landed on his planet. "Zak would like to be Raz's ally."

She tried to absorb all the information he just gave her. "So some Palers have sided with Laxes, and they want to help me get to the throne," she summarized.

"Precisely," he said as he slid off the Sphinx. "I hope you will accept Zak's friendship when he comes to you."

"Well, seeing you before me is proof enough that the Laxes are on my side, but I feel uneasy about the Palers."

"Not all Palers are like Seta and Omin." Cem changed into his proper scorpion form. "My job is done, but if you should require my assistance, I will rush to your aid. I am Scorpio and am loyal to my allies. Good luck in retrieving the diamond crown."

"Thank you," she replied, feeling bewildered by the sudden change in events. She had a hard time believing some Palers could be trusted.

Then the Sphinx flew away from the planet, which forced her to concentrate on the matter at hand: finding the crown.

"Do you know where the Dark Castle is?" she asked the Sphinx.

"Yes, I do," the Sphinx replied.

"I'm glad you showed up. I'm actually glad to be far from Earth. Isn't that funny?"

"I don't think so," she said. "Raz is a hundred times more exciting."

"Yes, that it is." She sighed sadly. "It's too bad I couldn't take my parents with me. It was good to see them again." She stopped talking and wiped the tears from her eyes. "But I must focus on the matter at hand. Tell me, are you getting a better palace?"

"Oh yes! Thanks to you. Vulcan should be done with it in a month. You must be my guest of honor and stay the night there when it's completed."

"I'll be delighted, if I become Queen."

"If? There's no ifs about it."

"I'm scared of Seta. What if she kills me? What if I don't get the crown?"

"You must not let doubts plague your mind. A real Queen refuses to allow the negative to interfere with her duty."

"Of course." She must be strong, brave, and focused. So why did she feel like a coward?

"If you should feel like you're failing, remember the things that mean the most to you. Remind yourself why you're pursuing the crown." The Sphinx landed on Raz, right in front of the Dark Castle.

Ann jumped off her back. "I wonder if Seta has gotten this far."

"Try not to think of Seta. Instead, concentrate on what you must do. Good luck, Queen Ann. I will wait for you to return here with the crown. Then I will take you to your new home."

Taking a deep breath, Ann turned to the Dark Castle. It was massive and imposing. And it was black. A shiver raced up her spine. Raz. She had to do this for Raz.

Gulping, she stepped up to the door. "Here goes nothing," she whispered nervously as she opened the door and entered the place.

Planet: Pale

"This is a day of great celebration!" Zak shouted victoriously. "Soon Ann will be declared Queen of Raz."

Everyone cheered.

Paff glanced at Halima. He wasn't so sure that Zak should be making Ann's victory announcement so soon. Ann hadn't gotten the crown yet and Seta was a powerful opponent. Still, he hated to intrude on such a joyous atmosphere.

"Zak is amazing," he whispered to Halima.

"He is an excellent leader," she agreed.

"You're pretty amazing yourself," he added.

She blushed.

Then everyone grew silent.

Startled, they looked at what had caused the change. Paff couldn't believe his eyes. Jaz stood before Zak. He held his breath. The air was thick with tension.

"Are you the leader of the Laxy Rebellion?" Jaz asked, ignoring the uneasy and angry stares.

"Yes," Zak replied.

"I have some information which I'm sure we can all profit from," she stated.

All eyes shifted to Zak. What would he do? What would he say? Could she be trusted?

She extended her hand to him.

The Palers and Laxes held their breath.

Finally, he nodded and shook her hand. Then he said, "Please, tell us why you switched to our side. What is your motive?"

"Actually, both Seta and I choose your side, and when you hear what I'm about to reveal, you'll understand why Pale is the way it is and how Palers and Laxes can peaceably co-exist."

Zak listened carefully as she relayed her memories about Omin, Pale's devastation, and Laxes' arrival on Pale. She then discussed her findings when she examined Omin's information that was captured when he was stuck with the Great Prison's needle.

"As I told you, Pale was once full of vegetation, and Palers could eat fruits and vegetables. I found some specimens beneath the old Great Prison's floor." She showed him the dead grass and flowers. "Apparently, Omin used the element Xynon-TA to destroy the vegetation on this planet. Now, the element Nonxy-TA will kill all the Xynon-TAs in the atmosphere, and vegetation will be fully restored to Pale in two years. In addition to vegetation, Palers must be injected with a litho-inhibitor in order to enable them to digest vegetation again. The Great Prison should continue to be rebuilt, but this time, the prison will be used for its original purpose, which is to protect the peace.

"Then Palers and Laxes will be able to live together as friends. If a Paler tries to eat a Lax, the Great Prison will be used to reform that individual. Of course, this will take time and patience. This transition cannot occur without opposition, but if we stick together, then we will succeed in producing a new Pale.

"In the meantime, Palers will need a food source. The litho-inhibitor will take six months to reverse what the litho has done to their bodies. That's why Omin kept all the Palers and Laxes in the Great Prison for so long. He needed time for everything to take effect, and in Palers' desperation for food, they started eating the Laxes," Jaz concluded and then waited for Zak's reaction.

"Put your hand on the magic star," he softly commanded.

Of all possible reactions, she hadn't expected this, but she put her hand on the star. She smiled in delight. She didn't feel hungry anymore, and her heart felt calm and at peace. She laughed. She couldn't help it. It was wonderful.

"The star can feed Palers and make them less violent. A friend of mine, Cem, brought it from his planet. However, it was the only one he had. It will only last one more month. If we could find more of these stars, we would get all Palers through the six months necessary for feeding. After that, I propose we find a planet with vegetation until Pale is strong enough to produce food."

"Maybe Raz ... " Jaz began hopefully.

"That's what I was thinking."

"Seta is at the Dark Castle, and so is Omin. She plans to defeat him once and for all. I'm going to wait for the news outside the Dark Castle. I'll come here as soon as I find out who will get the diamond crown. If Seta gets it, she will hand the crown to Ann."

Paff glanced at Halima. "Can you take me and Halima along? We want to be there to experience Ann's victory."

"Sure." Jaz pressed a few buttons and the three appeared on Raz, right in front of the Dark Castle. She smiled when she saw Hathor, a lion, a couple of fauns, a fairy, and a Sphinx. "Hello, I'm Jaz. This is Paff and Halima," she introduced. "We came to congratulate the new Queen on her victory when she emerges from the castle with the crown."

Everyone welcomed them.

But she noticed Hathor was distracted. She knew he loved Ann. "She'll be a fool if she doesn't choose you," she told Hathor, but he was too nervous to notice.

She understood. She looked hopefully at the Dark Castle. All they could do was wait. Now it was up to Ann, Seta and Omin.

Inside the Dark Castle

Ann bit her lower lip apprehensively. She wondered which room contained the diamond crown. She anticipated some type of obstacle to pop up and try to kill her, but so far nothing had happened. Every room must be empty, she thought as she entered another room. Was she even going in the right direction?

"Beware, visitor," a female voice boomed in her ears.

Of course, she saw nobody, as was typical in old, creepy houses. "Who ... Who are you?" she sputtered, her palms sweating.

"I am Kathz. My spirit lives even though my body does not. You have entered my grand home. State your business here."

Taking a deep breath to calm her pounding heart, she replied, "I'm here to get the diamond crown. The Queen sent me." If she could only see the spirit she was talking to, then maybe she could relax.

"There is another in this castle with the same story. Beware. You may not survive the obstacles. I will let you leave in peace if you turn back now."

"But I am to be Queen," she insisted, suddenly forgetting her fears.

"Others have claimed that before. Very well. You were warned. The crown is on the Queen's chair in the throne room. Tread carefully, for I will set obstacles before your path."

Ann didn't like the sound of that. How was she going to make it? If only Hathor was here to help her ...

"No!" she told herself. "I must do this by myself. Raz deserves a brave Queen."

She closed her eyes and thought of Hathor with his positive attitude, Inno with his trusting eyes, and everyone else she had met on her peculiar journey here.

She began to calm down. Opening her eyes, she walked out of the room and into the hallway. Where would the throne room be? It suddenly occurred to her that the Royal Palace was a duplicate of this castle. She thought back to the Royal Palace. Unfortunately, she wasn't given a tour of it, but she did remember the rooms she had been in. She would have to map out where she had been and retreat her steps. She made it to the front entrance without any difficulties, surprisingly enough. She held her breath and slowly exhaled.

Hathor and his mother led her to the front entrance. Which way had they turned? She concentrated. Right. They turned right.

So instead of going straight like she did before, she walked to the hallway on the right. She forced her mind off the shadows surrounding her on the walls, for many candles lit her way and it was becoming dark outside.

Her first stop in the other palace had been in the den. She found her way to that room, and she was shocked to see that the furniture looked exactly like the furniture in the Royal Palace. Before she tried to leave the room, something pushed her into a chair. She tried to scream, but she couldn't make a sound. Whatever had pushed her was no longer there. When she attempted to stand up, the chair's arms wrapped around her waist and held her tightly.

This time she could scream. She struggled to push the chair's arms away from her. Unfortunately, their hold only became tighter. She desperately looked around the room. How could she free herself from a chair?

Her eyes fell on a spear that glowed on the floor beside the chair. A memory came to her mind. She was on Olympia, and an awful fury was attacking her. The fury had dropped her spear by accident when the lion jumped on her. She should have grabbed the spear when she had the chance.

Into Her Own

Suddenly she knew what she had to do to. She would get that spear.

Oh no! It was slightly out of her reach. She proceeded to rock the chair from side to side. If she could just reach that spear ...

She fell over, the chair still clinging to her. Dismissing the pain in her side, she snatched the spear.

"You have to let me go now," she triumphantly cried as she stuck the spear into one of the chair's arms.

She expected a fight, but the chair disappeared. In fact, all the furniture disappeared. She held the spear firmly in her hand. She decided to hang onto it, just in case.

She easily found the bedroom she slept in. Again, she saw the same furniture in this room that had been in her bedroom. She gripped the spear. What was going to attack her next?

"Ann, I've been waiting for you," a familiar voice greeted her from the shadows of the closet.

"Hathor?" she asked, her spirits lifted.

"Yes, it's me. I found the perfect dress for you to wear on our wedding day," he replied.

"Wedding? Do you mean you still want to marry me, even after I chose William?"

"I love you. I would wait an eternity for you if I could have you in the end."

"Show me the dress!"

"Come in here and see it," he called out.

She didn't hesitate. Gripping the spear in her hand subconsciously, she ran into the closet. One minute she was running on the floor and the next she was falling. She immediately dropped the spear and flung her arms out in front of her, trying to hold on to anything that might stop her from falling.

Fortunately, she managed to grab a skinny tree. She gasped, her heart pounding. She should have known it was a trick!

She quickly surveyed her surroundings. She was in the cave, and there was a great hole beneath her, ready to swallow her up. She cringed. What should she do? What should she do?

She blinked. Something in the back of her mind presented her with another memory. A time when she was in a cave on another planet and everything was deception. The cave of illusions! Then she recalled her spear. She forced her uneasiness aside as she glanced down. To her surprise, the spear was not even two inches from her dangling feet.

She let go of the tree and landed on a solid floor. She noticed a change in the environment right away. She was back in the bedroom, which was empty except for the spear at her feet. Feeling proud of her latest accomplishment, she grabbed the spear and left the room.

Her next stop was the throne room where she would have been declared Queen before Seta showed up as her duplicate. She paused and frowned at the closed doors. She hated closed doors. One could never tell what was behind them.

"I've passed through two rooms so far," she reminded herself. "This is the room I need. I can do it. I have to save Raz."

She turned the doorknobs and opened the doors. Before her was a large, pleasant forest with enchanting music playing in the background. "Forestaria," she whispered. It was as beautiful as she remembered.

"Ann," a voice called.

Her parents appeared before her, smiling and holding their arms out to hug her. Yet she knew it was a trap, an illusion. Just like Hathor had been.

Tears fell from her eyes. To see her parents standing in front of her was torture because she couldn't do anything about it. She had to wait for the next obstacle to appear.

She didn't have to wait long. Her parents melded together and became a white dragon with red eyes. She froze. Hathor! Why

wasn't he here to protect her? Because she had to fight the dragon by herself, she realized.

She raised her spear. Where was a good place to stab a dragon? Luckily, she darted and missed the dragon's fire. She ran under its legs in order to confuse it. It worked. She raced up to its chest and threw the spear straight in its heart. The spear hit the spot. The dragon roared and disappeared. The spear fell to the floor. The forest disappeared too. Now she stood in the throne room. Immediately, she spotted the diamond crown. It sparkled in the candlelight on the royal purple chair—the Queen's seat. The rest of the room was empty.

Relieved, she headed for the crown.

"Not so fast," a cold voice spoke from behind her.

She stopped and turned. She didn't recognize the disfigured Paler.

"Allow me to introduce your destroyer. I am Omin, and I am here to terminate you," he sneered.

Ann gulped nervously. She certainly could have done without that threat.

Seta raced into the room, out of breath from her last obstacle. "It is I who will terminate you, Omin."

Then Kathz's spirit appeared. Ann stood speechless as the woman took shape. Her long blond hair flowed gently as if caught in a gentle breeze only she could feel. Her pale blue eyes held wisdom. Her ice blue dress sparkled in a supernatural silvery light. She was beautiful.

"Kathz," Ann whispered. She had expected a witch to be ugly and wrinkled, not young and beautiful.

"The three of you have passed your obstacles, but who will take the crown?" Kathz asked.

"I will," Omin gruffly responded as he stepped towards the chair.

"No. Ann will," Seta demanded, grabbing his arm and roughly pushing him away from the chair.

Ann's eyebrows lifted in surprise. Wasn't Seta against Raz?

The next thing occurred so fast that Ann wasn't sure how it happened. The three rushed for the crown at once. Ann was in the lead, but Omin jumped on her back and knocked her to the ground. She groaned in pain before she stuck her leg out so he tripped and fell too. Seta, intent on killing Omin, pounced on him and wrapped her hands around his throat.

At that point, it became clear to Ann that for some strange reason, Seta had decided to help Raz out, and that being the case, she knew she couldn't let Omin hurt Seta.

Omin pushed Seta off of him. Seta reacted instantly and grabbed his hand as he tried to stand up. She bit as hard as she could into his flesh. He screamed and kicked her so hard she flew through the air and hit the wall.

Since he was preoccupied with her, he didn't notice that Ann was slowly coming up behind him, the spear carefully angled for a perfect piercing through his back and into his heart. At least, Ann assumed he had a heart located in the same place humans did.

Seta, taking note of Ann, rushed towards him, shrieking as loud as she could in order to keep his attention on her. Ann plunged the spear through his heart, and Seta knocked him down.

Omin hardly noticed the pain. "If I die, I'm taking you with me," he hissed as he wrapped his hands around Seta's neck.

Ann ran up to them and tried to pull Omin off of Seta, but Omin was too strong. He took out his gun and shot Seta in the side. When Omin finally breathed his last breath, Ann managed to get Seta away from him.

"Seta?" Ann cried, shaking the Paler.

Seta's eyelashes fluttered, and she weakly looked up at Ann. "Queen Ann, please talk to First Commander Jaz. She will tell you

everything." She gasped. "Have mercy on the Palers ... Please ... " Seta closed her eyes and gave herself up to death.

Ann didn't understand what had just transpired between Omin and Seta, but she did understand why she suddenly felt a deep sense of loss over the death of the Paler in her arms.

"I believe the crown goes to you," Kathz informed her. Kathz lifted Seta's dead body in a blue cloud.

Ann looked at Kathz curiously.

"I transformed her soul into a star directly over her beloved Pale so she will be able to watch over Pale forever. Her body will return to Pale for a proper burial," Kathz explained.

"And Omin?" Ann wondered.

"His soul remains in his dead body. And he deserves no burial."

His body disappeared.

Ann took a deep breath. Now it was time for her to become Queen of Raz.

She placed the crown on her head. Her Earth outfit changed into a royal blue silk gown and her hair was restored to its original length.

"Long live the Queen." Kathz bowed.

When Ann emerged from the Dark Castle, she smiled at those who anxiously waited for her. Seta's body floated behind her. Before she could say anything, they cheered. Raz was saved! They surrounded her, eager to hear all that had occurred while she was in the castle, and she told them.

She turned to Seta's body. "Seta is a hero," she concluded when she was done telling them all that happened in the Dark Castle.

Paff grinned. "I guess there was something beneath that cold exterior after all. She not only saved Raz, she also saved Pale."

"You're the new Queen?" Inno, Calhoun, and Erin gasped in surprise.

"Yes, I am. Come with me, Hathor and Leo, and I will change you, Calhoun, into a fairy after I am officially declared Queen."

She wanted to talk to Hathor who kept his distance so that she could talk to everyone. Once, his eyes met hers and he smiled a secret message: *I told you you'd win.*

For once, she was glad he was right.

The Sphinx flew them to the Royal Palace where Queen Basilia set up a room for everyone to stay for the night. The Sphinx returned to Olympia, eager to relay the victory to the gods and goddesses.

Once Ann was alone in her room, she sighed, tired. She put on her night clothes, which were more comfortable than her day outfits.

She sat before the large window, her thoughts on her parents. Seeing them again had been a shock, but it was wonderful to hug them again.

Then she wondered why she held onto William for so long. He hadn't been as perfect as she had remembered. For the first time, she could let go of his memory. She blew a kiss into the night. A kiss for all that could have been but never was. A kiss for the blessing in disguise her breakup with William had actually been.

Her thoughts settled on Hathor. It was up to her to make the move and let him know she wanted to marry him. She knew she wouldn't get any sleep until she confronted him, so she left her bedroom. If she remembered correctly, his bedroom was down the hallway. She headed in that direction.

"Ann, what are you doing up so late? You've got a busy day tomorrow," Hathor said from behind her.

Hathor! She turned around. He held a candle in one hand and a plate of cookies in the other. He looked adorable in pajamas.

"I'm sorry about our argument the other night," he quickly apologized. "I forgot my position in relation to your authority. I wish you and William happiness. I promise I won't stand in your way."

"Then you don't want me anymore?" She was surprised at how hurt she felt.

"I didn't say that," he softly replied. He glanced at her uncertainly. "I am wondering why William isn't here with you. He did want to come, didn't he?"

She nodded. "He did." She took a deep breath. It was now or never. "I realized that I no longer loved him, so I came back without him. I want you to be my king." There. She said it. Now she could breathe again.

He set the candle and plate of cookies on the floor, knelt before her, and kissed her hand. "I would be honored to be your king," he replied.

She smiled and knelt in front of him. No words were needed. Their kiss said it all.

Epilogue



And so it came to pass that Ann became Queen of Raz. She listened to Paff, the new Leader of Pale, and they became allies. Zak became First Commander, and Jaz became Second Commander. As luck would have it, Hathor recognized the special star that could feed Palers for two years. The rare star was also a natural resource on Raz, and it formed in great quantities in the valleys. In exchange for parts of the star, Paff promised Paler and Lax friendship to Raz.

As her second official act as Queen, Ann transformed Calhoun into a fairy. Ann and Hathor married the following day. Razians celebrated, for their future was secure because the new Queen and king were young and had many years to provide Raz with the next Queen.

And that is how Ann became Queen of Raz.

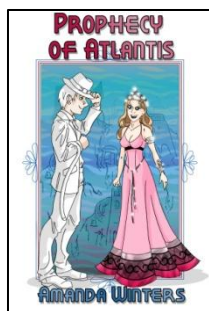
The Rest of the Series...



William's back, and this time he wants Ann for himself.



Ann travels to another world and ends up back on Earth to a place called Atlantis.



The new Queen assumes her throne, but is she ready?