

And so it begins

'I will not go!' Kora folded her arms and looked away from her father.

'It is not a choice, Kora.' The Emperor placed a hand on her shoulder. 'All genies of royal birth must go.'

She shrugged off his hand. 'I know that, but why now?' Amurru stood quietly by Kora's globe. She strode over to him. 'Tell them, Amurru,' she said, jabbing a finger in the air towards her parents. 'It is madness to send me away now.'

Amurru's yellow eyes blinked slowly. 'To learn how to rule you must first learn how to serve.'

She stomped her foot. This was ridiculous.

Her gaze rested briefly on her younger brother, Atym. They weren't sending him away!

'Please, Mother?'

'You know you have to go sometime,' said her mother.

‘It makes sense to go now, to keep you safe while we deal with Vennum.’

‘No, it does not make any sense at all. We have been at war with Vennum for eight years.’

‘You well know that the situation has changed,’ said her mother. ‘Vennum’s army has grown over the last few months. He has become exceedingly powerful.’

‘That is why I should remain here. I am your most powerful genie.’

Her mother’s shoulders stiffened. ‘I am the Imperial Empress of Genesisia, and I have made my decision.’

Kora whirled back to face her father. ‘Tell her,’ she demanded. ‘Tell her that you need me here to help defeat him.’

‘It is true that you are the most powerful genie to be born in centuries.’ Her father’s eyes were gentle. ‘But that is why you must go. Vennum wants you more than any other genie. Imagine how it would feel, Kora, if he was to harness you, and force you to destroy Genesisia.’

‘I do not want to be banished.’

‘It will not be forever. Earth duty for you is a requirement under Genesisian law. The High Council of Genesisia demands it.’

‘Please, father. I do not want to go now. You need me.’

‘Enough. I will argue with you no more.’ The Emperor

signalled to Amurru. ‘You will leave immediately, Kora. I command it.’

The air around her began to stir. Her father’s command had activated her globe and she was being pulled in against her will. She took one last look around at her home and then glared at her parents.

‘I hate you,’ she spat. ‘I hate you both!’

Arrival

Kora felt the power course through her veins, pumping and tingling until it built to a level far greater than she needed. She gloried in the surge of power, an act of defiance against her father and the rest of the High Council.

‘Empress?’ Amurru’s wheezing voice distracted Kora and the magic exploded from her chest, transforming her glamorous globe so that it would appear to the outside world as just an ordinary rock. The inside, of course, stayed the same — an extravagant mix of Genesia’s finest creations designed for an empress, shrunk down along with her by the magic of the globe.

She turned to Amurru, delighted with the disapproval in his eyes.

‘Your father would not condone camouflage.’ He shuffled towards her, his bad leg dragging on the ground like a forgotten shoelace. ‘You must be found.’

The air in her globe still sizzled with the heat of her excessive power. She stared down at him. ‘I do not care what you, my father, or the Council think. If I am to be banished to Earth then I shall do as I please.’

Amurru flexed his long, amber wings. ‘An empress puts her own interests aside and does what is best for her people.’

‘I can do nothing from here,’ she spat. ‘What is best for my people is for me to be there, fighting with them.’

‘No.’ He adjusted the wide black belt on his silver suit. ‘It was the right decision, for everybody, to send you here.’

‘I will find a way to defeat Vennum,’ she hissed. ‘Even from here.’

‘No, Empress. The danger is too great. If Vennum should find you ...’

‘I am not afraid.’

‘Well, you should be, Empress.’ Amurru shook his round head. ‘You should be!’

She looked away from him in disgust. ‘I will not be harnessed.’

Kora stormed around her globe, the loud jingle of her jewellery filling the space, when she felt, rather than saw, Amurru’s mood lighten. She slid her eyes in his direction but did not turn her head. His fox-like ears twitched and she knew he had heard something. Armourowls had

notoriously exceptional hearing and Amurru's ability had not diminished with age.

The temptation to peek was too strong. Kora lit up the screens that revealed the world outside her globe. A 360-degree panoramic view of this place they called Earth — or more specifically, Panda Rock, Western Australia. Her first look at what was supposed to be her home for who knew how long. Years? Decades?

The view directly in front of her was hot, hard and unwelcoming. Flat grey rocks lay sprawled in the summer sun. They stretched across the land until they reached patches of green scrub. It was hard for her to imagine where the pandas lived.

'This land is barren,' she said, smugly. 'I cannot see any humans.'

'We have landed in a national park for the safety of everybody. But I assure you, Empress, there are many people in the small town nearby.'

'I do not think any human will find me here.'

'We shall see,' murmured Amurru.

His ears twitched and swivelled until they were both straining forwards, his attention completely focused on a tiny patch of shade at the edge of the clearing. The first stirrings of fear snaked through her. A human had emerged and was striding towards them. His heavy

footsteps disturbed a lizard basking in the midday sun and she watched in fascination as it darted under a rock to hide.

'All that human will see is a rock.' She forced confidence into her voice. 'He will not be interested in that.'

She held her breath as he neared. Her first sighting of a human boy! She waited for him to simply walk past, but he did not. Was it possible he had seen them land?

Amurru smiled, revealing a row of large, yellowed teeth. 'Curious creatures, humans.'

She watched, horrified, as the human stopped right next to her globe and stared intently down at it from underneath a mop of long, shaggy, dark blond hair. He was not what she had expected. Humans were weaker than genies, they had no power, and she had expected to see that reflected in their build. But this human was tall and strong, with lean muscles that had rippled as he swaggered towards them. She supposed their lack of power meant they needed stronger bodies. His colouring was different to hers as well. Where her skin was a smooth olive brown, his was brown with an underlying fairness — like it was meant to be paler, but life had changed it.

She was jolted out of her musings as her globe was thrust up into the air only to be tossed straight back down again. She immediately used her magic to ensure that they

were kept unharmed in the process. She was angry with Amurru, but she would not allow some loathsome human to hurt him.

Her globe was still scorching hot from when she had camouflaged it. She smirked, watching the human dance around shaking his hand. A baboon in a tutu would have more dignity.

‘He is hurt.’ Amurru’s words carried his disapproval.

‘Then maybe he should not pick up things that do not belong to him.’

The human squatted down next to her globe. She gasped and stepped back as a pair of piercing blue eyes stared at her. She had never seen eyes like them before in her life. Genies all had brown eyes. They varied from dark to light, but never were they blue, never ever.

For a moment she thought he could see her, but then he looked from his hands to her globe and she realised he was just trying to figure out how a rock had burnt him.

‘Curious and persistent,’ said Amurru as they watched the human reach out a finger to touch her globe.

The human jerked his finger back as once again her globe seared his skin. Kora sniggered. ‘What fool would keep touching something that hurt him?’

The human bent even closer to her globe. This time, he tucked his hand safely beneath his T-shirt and picked

it up. Her globe was small and fit easily in the palm of his hand. He was gentler this time and she did not require magic to keep them from being thrown around.

Fear clutched her stomach. She had hoped to have time to figure out a plan to find a way home. To be harnessed so soon would be unbearable.

The human lifted the globe nearer to his face. She could not understand his fascination. Surely to him it was just a rock, a rock like any other rock to be found here on this uninteresting land.

She felt his other hand, also securely beneath his T-shirt, begin to rub her globe and all the air drained from her lungs. She could feel the harnessing begin. With each rub she was being pulled, drawn against her will.

She held on, clawing at the heavy gold bands that had materialised on her wrists and ankles. They tightened and began to glow a deep golden colour, visible evidence that this nightmare was very real.

She reached for Amurru, feeling helpless for the first time in her life. ‘Help me,’ she pleaded.

She thought she saw compassion in his eyes. ‘It is too late,’ he answered.

She knew he was right. Pain splintered out from her chest as she resisted the pull of her new master dragging her from her globe.

Amurru's words reached her tormented ears. 'It will be easier if you do not fight it.'

She lifted her chin. She was Kora Archein. Empress. Heir to the Genesian Empire and she would not give in. Who was this human to inflict this on her?

Rub by painful rub her body shattered, not into the usual joyful power rush of shimmering, but into a golden mist of pain, sucking her particle by particle from her temporary home. She tried to focus, to resist the force that was overwhelming her. The boy was a magnet pulling her to him. She could taste his power over her and she hated him for it. With every scrap of power and determination within her she fought him. But it was not enough. She felt herself shimmer. Exhausted, her knees scraped the rocky ground of this place called Earth.

A new master

The boy gaped stupidly at her as she sprang to her feet. Never would she allow herself to grovel on her hands and knees in front of a worthless human!

Kora sucked a deep breath into her aching lungs, and stood as tall as she could, glaring up at him. Her chest still ached from her battle against the pull of the harnessing and the pain made her anger blaze wildly. She lifted her chin higher still, allowing the surge of power that flared in instant response to rumble in her chest, ready to use.

Seconds passed in silence as the boy gathered his wits. Such a slow thinker. But then, hadn't she been told that humans were known to be dimwitted? Her fingers itched to claw at the heavy gold bands that now encircled her wrists and ankles. Repulsive bands that harnessed her to this wretched boy for the rest of his life! But she focused on ignoring them for now, concentrating instead on her new human master standing before her. She had to stay

focused if she was to have any hope of tricking him into unharnessing her.

The boy was hunched over, his left hand pressed tightly over his right wrist. He had dropped her globe and it had rolled some distance from his feet. She thought about summoning it to her, but decided to wait. No point letting him know that she was a genie. If humans knew as little as she had been led to believe, then he probably didn't even know genies existed.

So she waited. And waited. Such slow reactions! While she waited she looked him over. He was much bigger than her. Almost impressive. But not with the strange, dull clothing he wore. Probably reflected his personality. Or his intelligence. That thought might have made her laugh if she hadn't been so filled with rage. He wore short, black pants that were loose and baggy. They stopped halfway down his legs, allowing his hairy, knobby knees to poke out from underneath. And his scruffy blue T-shirt was stained, loose and boring, too. It was so ... plain. Nothing like the glamorous, glittering clothes worn by Genesian men.

Finally the boy straightened, his hand still tightly gripping his right wrist. It probably hurt like mad. That thought cheered her up somewhat. She knew that the process of harnessing was not only painful for the genie.

Humans experienced an enormous rush of power at the moment of harnessing, usually entering their bodies through the arm that touched the globe, burning and blistering as it went. The burn eventually healed, fading into a long red welt, but they were scarred for life.

The severity of each human's burn varied, depending on the power of the genie being harnessed. A small, bitter smile tugged at one corner of Kora's mouth. Not only was she a very powerful genie, but because she had fought against the harnessing, this human's burn would be nasty in the extreme.

She lost track of how many long, tedious seconds she waited under the blazing heat of the Earth's sun before the human finally thought to close his mouth. He sucked in a long breath that sounded more like a hiss. Then his piercing blue eyes narrowed before they at last dropped away from hers to look down at the harnessing burn on his arm. He carefully lifted the edge of his hand to peek underneath. It was with some satisfaction that she saw the jolt of pain flash across his features when the hot, dry air came into contact with the raw, blistered skin. Why should she be the only one to suffer?

The fresh pain seemed to bring the boy to his senses. He abruptly let go of his arm and reached down to snatch up her globe, not bothering to check if it had cooled off

yet. How dare he touch her globe!

The boy turned to face her, the globe clutched in his hand. His mouth lifted in a slight smile. Or perhaps it was a grimace. 'Are you okay?' he asked.

Her anger seethed. Okay? She was stuck on this stupid planet, harnessed to a loathsome human boy, while the worst villain in Genesian history was intent on destroying her family, her people and her homeland. As if she could be okay! She could not answer such a stupid question. She stood glaring at him, inwardly struggling to contain her simmering, rumbling, angry power.

The boy waited for her to speak, and when she did not, asked another question. 'Where did you come from?' But he glanced down at her globe when he spoke, as if he already knew the answer.

'How dare you question me,' she hissed.

She could see she had taken the boy by surprise. He pulled back a little and studied her face for a moment.

She stood in stony silence. He may be her new master, but she was an empress. She did not explain herself to anybody. And he did not know that he was her master. At least, not yet. And if she had her way, not ever.

His eyes drifted to her long, dark hair that hung in a heavy curtain to her waist. Then they moved down to stare at the clothes she wore, made from the exotic Genesian

fabrics that she knew would be shimmering like spun gold under the Earth's sun. They took in the gold chains that swung from around her neck, and the jewels that glowed from each of her fingers. They dropped down to her soft, flowing pants, made from the finest silk, and to her bejewelled toes and brown, bare feet that stood planted in the hot, red dust of this wretched place. His eyes never stopped moving, except for once when they came to rest on the huge amber stone that glinted warmly from her exposed bellybutton.

When he finally lifted his eyes back to meet hers, she saw a new knowledge in them. A small twist of fear wound its way up her spine. Perhaps he wasn't as dimwitted as she had supposed.

His eyes widened in astonishment. 'Are you a genie?'