

ONCE UPON A PLANET

“What troubles you, my love?” the queen asked her husband, King Malik.

It was a beautiful night on the planet of Xistance, and their majesties were strolling in the palace gardens.

“I wish I knew my people better,” said the king. “And I am trying to think of a way in which I can see things as they do, so that I can improve their lives.”

“And do you have an idea?”

“You know how we’ve been discussing Tiernan’s birthday next year, and how we’d like to find him a wife?”

“Yes, I certainly remember,” Queen Arienne said.

“I believe this might be one way to learn more about our people. If Tiernan were to marry a lady not of noble birth, he would learn to better understand our people, and he would be a wiser king when he takes my place.”

“What a fine thought!” Queen Arienne replied. “Indeed, it would be a wonderful way to learn more about our people.”

But King Malik faced a dilemma.

Not just any wife will do, King Malik thought. How do I go about choosing the right wife for Tiernan, and the right princess for Xistance? This is a tough nut to crack. ... A tough nut? ... Nut? Oh, splendid, that gives me an idea!

Dong!

The king rang the heavy gong that called his few most trusted servants.

“I have a special assignment for you,” said the king to the servants who had rushed to his throne room upon hearing the gong. “I wish for you to help me find Prince Tiernan’s wife and Xistance’s princess-to-be. Search Xistance for women of beauty and excellence in character, and bring them to me, so that I may choose from among them the best wife for my son.”

King Malik’s servants did not leave a corner of Xistance unexplored, after which a great number of women were invited to King Malik’s large palace. Some of the women were as beautiful as the precious stones that glittered on the walls of King Malik’s palace, and others seemed plain. The servants had chosen each of the women for various reasons—their intelligence, fine manners, skill in crafts and trades, while others had been chosen because of their simplicity and humility.



When the women arrived, the king ordered that they be taken to an enormous, plush chamber to wait until he came to speak to them.

King Malik thought to himself. "I must devise a test to determine which one should be my son's bride. I must be certain of the kind of wife the woman will make. She must be wise, compassionate, patient, and most importantly, have integrity of character."

"Darling Queen," King Malik said, with a confident smile, "I have a good feeling about this. We are going to find the right match for our son. I have a plan that I'm sure will work."



Tum ta ta tum!

The trumpet sounded as the doors to the great chamber opened. "King Malik the Great, the most powerful and grand majesty on the face of Xistance, Queen Arienne, and their beloved and only son, Prince Tiernan, will now honor you with their presence," said the herald.

The women, anxious to see who would be chosen, hurried over to the full-length mirrors in the room, fixing their dresses, arranging their curls, puckering their lips and pinching their cheeks to make them rosier.

When their majesties entered the room, the ladies sank down into deep curtsies.

"Arise," King Malik said. "As you know, you are here today in the hopes that one of you will become my

son's wife." King Malik gave a smile to Prince Tiernan, who stood at his side. "We've been told you are all fine and charming young women," King Malik continued. "Therefore, to choose which of you will be the next princess of Xistance is no easy task. I have decided to leave it up to each of you to decide who will be my son's wife, and I have a unique way to do this.

"I will give you each a magical seed. You must care for this seed—water it, nourish it, and see that this seed is well cared for. In just under one year, on my son's birthday, you must return to this room, as will I. When you return, you will show me what has become of the seed. The lady who has best tended to the magical seed will marry my son and become princess of Xistance."



King Malik then dug his hand into the large satchel that a servant had brought into the room and pulled out a handful of magical-looking seeds to show to everyone present.

“Give one seed to each woman,” King Malik told Prince Tiernan, handing him the satchel of seeds.

Prince Tiernan went around the room, from woman to woman, handing each a single seed. The seeds were very different from each other, some of bright colors, still others of softer shades, but all shone with a special and unique beauty.

When Prince Tiernan handed a seed to the last woman in the room, he noticed that the seed he gave her was fairly plain compared to the rest of the

seeds he had been handing out: it was a dull brown, with a white highlight. Frantically he dug around in the bag for another seed to give her, but there were none left. There was just enough for one seed per woman with none to spare.

I had better trust my father, thought Prince Tiernan. I am sure his plan is a wise one. And even though it seems the seeds given to some are lovelier than what were given to others, it is likely that the magic of the seed has nothing to do with the beauty of the seed itself but with the care it receives.

Lowlilya, the woman who had received the last and plain seed, thankfully received what she had been given. She gave a little curtsy and a cheerful smile. Prince Tiernan returned the smile, and

then joined his father and mother.

“Remember to care for your gift,” were King Malik’s parting words as their majesties and all their servants departed from the room, leaving the women alone once again.

“How unfair, Bratineice!” Concealia, one of the ladies, cried. “Why, your seed is lovelier than the one I was given. Surely it will grow into a flower that is more beautiful than mine. But I am lovelier than you are, so my seed should be prettier than yours.”

“I was given the larger, lovelier seed,” Bratineice replied. “Perhaps the prince feels I’m lovelier than you.” Vainly gazing at her reflection in the mirror she repeated to herself, “Much lovelier.”



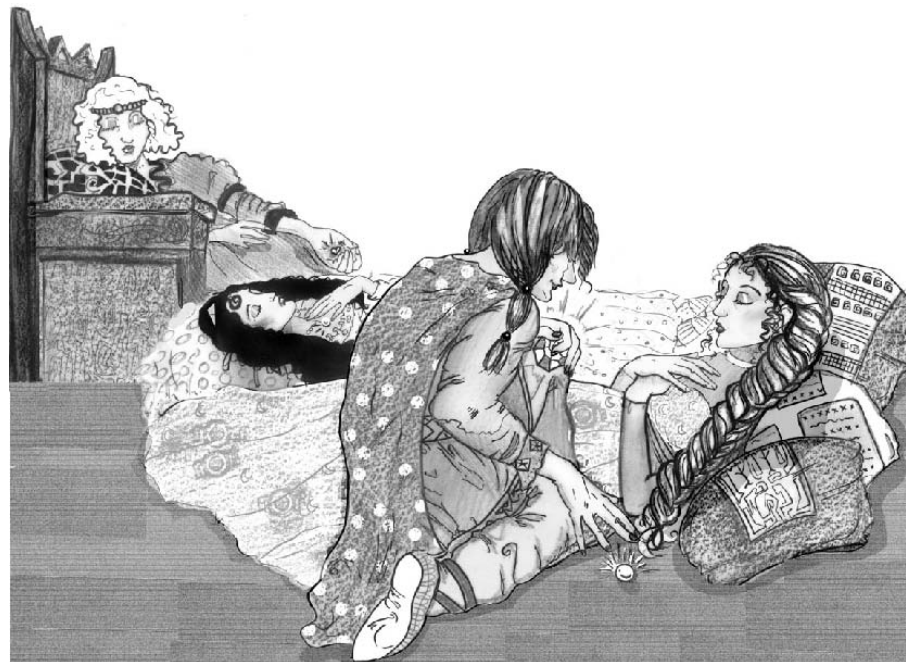
Concealia, overcome by fear and jealousy, got together a group of like-minded ladies. In the middle of the night, the jealous women crept around stealing seeds they thought were more exquisite than the ones they had been given, and replaced those exquisite seeds with their own seeds, hoping the other women wouldn't notice the difference.

"Eeeek! There's been a theft in the night!" one of the women cried out early the next morning, when she discovered that her seed, which was a deep crimson shade, had been replaced with a pale pink one. "Which of you was it?" she demanded, as she began searching the beds of those nearest to her. The ado alarmed some of the other ladies, who also checked if their seeds had been replaced. Many more seeds had been exchanged, and the women began squabbling and fighting to find the seeds that had originally been given to them by the prince.

As each woman searched for her tiny gift, she found that her seed had a unique magnetic pull to its original owner, and it would draw her to wherever the magical seed had been hidden. Although it seemed

some of the seeds were lovelier to look at than others, when another woman took a seed that was not hers, she soon realized that the one Prince Tiernan had given was better for her, and that the stolen seed had transformed into a plain-looking seed in the thief's hand.

Once the thieves saw how the magic seed seemed different now that it was in their possession and not in the hands of its rightful owner, they ashamedly returned the stolen seed and re-embraced the seed that was originally given to them.



And so, all the seeds were reunited with their owners, all but one.

"Please, ladies, have any of you seen my seed?" Lowlilya asked as she began searching around her bed.

"It's an ordinary looking seed. There's no glitter on it, it's plain brown. I do so want to grow it."

"None of *us* have it," Bratineice said. "You must have it someplace. You should check your belongings once again."

"Yes, I'll check again," Lowlilya said.





Lowlilya checked in the many pockets on her dress, and in the small bag she'd brought with her. Sure enough, she found her precious seed. In Lowlilya's hustle in the morning to inspect whether her seed had been stolen or not, it had dropped out of her pocket and onto the floor.

"All along you hadn't any need to worry, Lowlilya," Whirl d'Alene said. "No one would ever have stolen your seed. It is so ordinary. Of all the seeds we were given, yours is the smallest and the plainest," she said with a giggle.

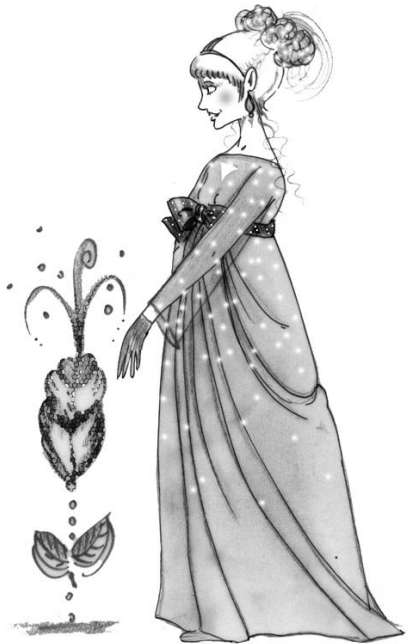
"I thought my sapphire seed was plain and small until I saw yours," Primtrim said. "Ha, ha, ha!" And many of the other ladies joined in mocking Lowlilya.

The ladies were right; Lowlilya's seed was quite plain. Inspecting her seed closely, Lowlilya realized that hers looked like an ordinary clover seed.

"I suppose all I can do is be faithful with my seed and care for it diligently," said Lowlilya to herself.



All over Xistance, in the homes of the women who had been picked by the king's servants, lovely plants with exquisite blossoms began springing up from the magical seeds. Some plants looked delicate and as if they needed to be tended constantly. Others seemed to be sturdier, more durable plants. The flowers the plants bore were of many different colors, from pure white to royal blue and vibrant violet. Some of the plants that were springing up were lush bushes with flowers, and others of the bushes were without blossoms. Daily, each lady could be found in her garden tending to her plant that would determine whether or not she would become princess of Xistance.



For nearly a year, when the star Shimmer rose in the early morning sky, Lowlilya would run into her small garden and tend to her precious seed. But unlike the magical seeds that had been given to the others, her seed seemed little inclined to sprout.

Now, with only two weeks remaining until the prince's birthday celebration, Lowlilya let out a great sob. Her seed had still not sprouted!

There is so little time for it to flower, even if it did sprout today, Lowlilya thought.

She knelt next to the well-tended plot where the seed was planted, and though she hardly felt joyous, she put on a brave smile despite the tears that filled her eyes.

"I don't understand it," she whispered. "I had hoped that

you would grow for me and bring forth a rare and beautiful flower. In my dreams you were the grandest plant of them all. But you are still as much a seed today as the day you were given to me." Lowlilya rose to her feet, and as she stood up, one of her teardrops fell to the ground and soaked into the seed. "But I will continue to care for you with all my heart."

Having made that resolution, she walked into her home to get her watering can, and when she returned to her seed only a minute later, to her great delight, she saw that it had sprouted.

"You are indeed a magical seed!" Lowlilya exclaimed, upon seeing the tiny sprout. "Was it my tear that brought you to life?"

By the end of the two weeks, the little

sprout had matured and sent forth a full-blossomed white clover.

"You might be small, but you are so lovely," she told the little clover flower. Though perhaps ordinary in appearance, to Lowlilya, her plant was the loveliest of all flowers.

And so the days leading up to the prince's birthday passed quickly as preparations were made for the birthday celebration and wedding.

Finally, the grand day arrived. The women were dressed in their finest apparel and had their hair beautifully arranged with ribbons and ornaments. Each woman wanted to be noticed, even though each knew that it was the flower or the plant they possessed that would determine the outcome of this exhilarating day.





All the women gathered again in the large chamber where many months ago the king had given them their seed.

The room was crowded with the plants that each of the chosen women had grown. Some plants were large; others were not all that extraordinary in size or in color, yet their flowers had the most delightful fragrance. Each of the plants the ladies brought had some extraordinarily fascinating quality. Then Lowlilya entered the great room and many of the ladies were heard to gasp.

"What kind of plant is that?" one of the girls wondered aloud.

"Poor Lowlilya, the king will only laugh at her plant," whispered one woman to those nearest her.

Lowlilya paid no heed to the murmurings she heard, and she again studied her clover. *It's true, she thought. You are rather plain. And no matter how much I treasure you or the one who gave you to me, it does not make you the most extraordinary plant in the room. There are so many exotic, unusually beautiful plants here that I know I shall never marry Prince Tiernan. But at least I was faithful with what he gave me.*

Tum ta ta tum!

The sound of the trumpets blasted through the hall, and the herald

announced the royal arrivals to the room. All the ladies were lined up next to their plants as King Malik, Queen Arienne, and Prince Tiernan entered the crowded room.

"Lovely," King Malik said, as he passed from plant to plant. "Ah, and yours is quite extraordinary!" he exclaimed to several of the ladies, whose plants were indeed just that.

When King Malik saw Lowlilya's white clover, he told her, "Please stand over there, my dear."

She walked over to an empty spot in the room.

"Is Lowlilya to be punished for not having a beautiful plant like ours?" whispered one woman to another.

Lowlilya's eyes filled with tears. *The king must be displeased with my plant!* thought Lowlilya.

When King Malik had seen each plant, he walked to the corner of the room where Lowlilya waited.

"Why are you weeping, my dear?" the king asked Lowlilya.

"I weep, Your Majesty, because I fear my plant is hardly worth your slightest glance, even though I have cherished it since it was given to me by your son. I wished so much that my plant would not be a disappointment to you."





“Oh, but you are wrong!” King Malik joyfully exclaimed. “You *are* the one destined to marry my son!”

“But how is this possible?” Lowlilya asked. “You said that he would marry the woman with the most extraordinary plant from the seeds you gave us.”

“Yours, Lowlilya, is the most extraordinary bloom of all the seeds I gave out...” King Malik began, but was soon interrupted when several women shouted in protest.

“That’s not possible! Mine is the most beautiful!”

“No! My plant is more extraordinary than the rest,” others claimed.

“Ladies, allow me to explain!” King Malik lifted his hand to silence the women. “Your plants and flowers may be beautiful, but Lowlilya is the only one who actually grew the seed I gave her. The rest of you have brought before me a plant that did not grow from the seed I originally gave you. I know this because I gave each of you clover seeds, albeit elegantly disguised with sparkles and colors. And not only this, but I touched the seeds with magic so that they would not be able to grow unless a tear filled with love watered it.

“When your seed did not sprout in due time,” the king went on, “you must have rejected it and purchased another seed, resulting in the plant that you have brought here today. So, it is evident

that Lowlilya is the only one who tended her original seed faithfully. And now that the truth is known, Lowlilya will marry my son.”

None of the ladies could protest; it was as the king had said.

The tender, faithful, and loving care Lowlilya had given her simple gift put her in the place of highest honor—princess of Xistance! Lowlilya had proven her devotion, her loyalty, her love, and her honesty. She had simply done what she could very faithfully, even when it looked as if she would receive no reward.



Prince Tiernan and Lowlilya were perfectly suited for each other and were soon married. Prince Tiernan joined his father, King Malik, as a wise ruler of the people of Xistance with Lowlilya by his side.

The End

