

The Queen's Garden

"Where did you put my gardening gloves?"

"Mom," Avery sighed, "you're supposed to be in bed."

"I'm not that sick," Avery's mom said as a coughing fit took the next words from her mouth. Avery came over with a glass of water, but her mother waved her off. She cleared her throat and regained her composure. "See? I'm fine..."

"If you're fine," Avery said, "then I'm a millionaire. Get back into bed."

"I can get back to bed after I take care of the weeds! They're going to overgrow the carrots."

"You get winded going up and down stairs," Avery said, leading her mom back to the bedroom. "Not to mention it's a billion degrees outside...you'll get heat stroke out there."

"I need to—"

"You need to get well again," Avery said, firm.

"No, the garden—"

"Can go a few days without weeding," Avery said, sitting her mother on the side of the bed. "I'll set up the sprinkler and you can—"

"I need to tend the petunias."

"Alright, I will go out there and take care of the garden for you. You can watch me from the window if you like."

"Avery—"

"I can take care of the worst of the weeds. I'm not six anymore, I know the difference between a dandelion and a tulip."

"I can go outside for ten minutes."

"I know how you get out there. Ten minutes becomes five hours and you could barely stand up in the shower this morning. You get some rest and I'll take care of the garden. You can see me right out the window."

Avery's mother looked out the window at her garden. Bright, colorful flowers lined the edges of a flourishing vegetable garden and a simple stone bench had been set up under the apple tree. Her mom would spend all day out in her garden, meticulously caring for her plants and then spending hours under the apple tree. The pneumonia was already clearing up, but a week away from the garden had caused more fret than the actual illness. Still, Avery could see the resolve waning in her mother's eyes as a night of coughing had kept her awake. The garden needed tending, but so did her mom.

"Fine, you can tend the garden, but be careful, please?"

“I will. You can watch me from the window, I promise.”

Moving her mom over to a chair by the window, Avery relaxed a little as she made her way downstairs. It wasn't sleep, but at least Avery didn't have to worry about her collapsing in the dirt. With her mom tucked away, Avery took the gardening gloves out from the chest in the mudroom. She grabbed the wide-brimmed hat off the hook by the door and walked out to the garden.

It was sweltering for May, with insects buzzing like the static of summer. Avery put on as much sunscreen as she could stand and armed herself with a small trowel. “Alright weeds, prepare to meet your doom!”

Avery had never been a proficient gardener, but she knew how to put in a hard day's work. She started with the squash her mom was growing for soup, picking through the roots and leaves to rip out the invasive weeds. A path of loose stone separated the garden beds, but Avery used kneepads to protect herself from the sharp rocks. It wasn't how she would spend her weekends, but Avery kept her head down and worked hard for her mother's peace of mind.

While she was working on picking out what was a carrot and what was an invader, Avery heard something rustling in the brush. It was still early, but the heat must have brought the pests out early. Thoughts of rats and rabbits in the garden already were unsettling, but Avery had promised to take care of the garden.

“Hey!” Avery snapped. “Go on, get!”

The rustling stopped for a minute but then continued. Avery clapped her hands and hissed, trying to spook the pest. The rustling didn't stop this time and Avery cringed as she knew she'd have to chase the critter out of the greens. She set the trowel down and Avery stepped gingerly towards the rustling. She was nearly on top of the creature and it still refused to leave. If the creature would bite, Avery hoped that the gloves would protect her hands.

Avery reached in and felt her hand touch something. She squealed and jumped backward, tripping over her feet. The creature jumped out as well, falling backward and mimicking Avery's position. The creature looked like a stout little man with a round belly and stubby fingers. Smears of dirt covered his face and he was wearing an old towel like a toga. The creature had a round nose and a bald head with a large, sloped forehead. Pebble-like teeth stuck out of his mouth as he rubbed his lower back with his stubby hand.

“What're you doing that for?” The creature snapped. “I was working on pruning the

cucumbers! Queen Anne has been looking forward to that harvest since she planted them in pots in the basement!”

“What are you?”

“I’m Roob,” the creature said, dusting himself off. “I’m the Garden Fairy.”

“You’re...a fairy?”

“What were you expecting?” Roob said, standing up only about as high as Avery’s knee. “A little woman with butterfly wings who wiggled her fingers and grows a whole field of flowers? I don’t think so! This is tough work and it takes someone a bird won’t gobble up! And you’re not Queen Anne, so what are you doing out here?”

“Queen...my mom?”

“Your...? Wait, you’re Avery!” Roob gasped. “You’re Queen Anne’s daughter, of course! Right, you handle the carrots patch and I’ll get to work on the perimeter! We can reconvene by the apple tree. There’s a caterpillar infestation and I’ll get rid of it if I have to eat them all myself!”

“Wait, are you being serious right now?”

“No time! Get back to the carrots! We’ll talk later! Chop chop!”

The stout man ran off, diving into the rows of brightly colored flowers with a delighted cry. Avery watched the movement of the strange creature, tracking him through the movement around the garden. Too stunned to think of anything else, Avery went back to the carrots as suggested and continued to weed.

Roob would exclaim once in a while and Avery saw him munching on caterpillars and worms with delight. When she finished the carrot patch, Avery moved on to the peas so she could look up at her mother’s window. The older woman looked down and gave Avery a smile from her perch. Avery would be sure to ask a lot of questions later.

A few hours into the work, Avery was sweating and warm. Roob was careful not to startle her, but Avery always made sure that the garden fairy was never behind her. When she finished a patch of the garden, Roob would appear and—if her work met his critical eye—give her a new job to work with. She weeded all the vegetables, pruned the dying vines in the pumpkin patch, and even picked some flowers to bring in for her mother’s bedside.

“That should do it for today,” Roob said, slapping his hands together and waddling over to sit on the bench beneath the apple tree. “If nothing else, we’ll keep the garden looking well enough for the queen’s return.”

“She’s not...really a queen, right? Like, she’s not from a fantasy world or

something?”

“Well, a queen is a matter of perspective, right? At her job, she’s a realtor, but in the garden, she’s a queen. Everything bends to her will out here: the plants grow in her care, the weeds are cast out, and she tasks me with eating all the little pests that dare to invade!”

“She’s...never mentioned you before.”

“And why should she? Outside of the garden, she couldn’t speak of me. It lets me hide here as her humble servant. A bit of labor each day to keep the garden fresh and the queen lets me eat all the grubs and weeds I could ever want! It’s perfect.”

“So, does this mean I’ll forget about you outside of the garden?”

“No, you just can’t speak of me. And you won’t see me until you come back to the garden again. You will come back, won’t you? I worry about Queen Anne sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Avery nodded. “I do, too. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to come back.”

“I agree!” Roob said. He extended a hand and an apple dropped into his hand. He passed it over to Avery with a crooked smile. “For the queen...so she may have her health. An apple a day and all that.”

“Thank you,” Avery said. “I guess I’ll see you next time I’m here. Take care, Roob.”

“Take care, Princess Avery,” Roob said, bowing at the waist. With a running start, the garden fairy jumped and disappeared into a hedge of berry bushes. He chuckled to himself as he pursued more pests to fill his stomach. Avery took the small bundle of flowers and the apple from the stone bench. She walked back to the house and slowly walked upstairs. Her mom was still sitting by the window with an easy grin.

“How was your visit to the garden?”

Avery tried to ask all the questions that coursed through her mind, but the words wouldn’t come. It felt like she was trying to remember exactly what the question was when it would disappear in her mind. Even the name was a challenge to remember. After a moment, Avery only smiled and set the flowers in the vase by the bed. “It was nice. I see why you enjoy spending so much time out there. I’ll have to come back sometime.”

“We’ll get you back out there when it’s time to harvest all the vegetables. It’ll be hard work, but I think we both know where we can get some extra help.”

Avery sat in the window seat and looked down at the garden. She held out the apple and grinned back at her mother. “A gift from our mutual, little friend...your majesty.”