

The Garden of Queen Aersea

In a desert kingdom, not even a leaf would grow. There were no trees. No plants. No flowers. Just sand and rocks. Although the villagers could not produce any food for themselves, they never knew hunger. Provisions were gifted to them by their benevolent King.

The King was known throughout the land. He and his Queen lived inside the towering walls of a majestic compound. Their sprawling enclave was built to surround the only fertile land that existed within the kingdom. Crops were processed day and night to ensure everyone's share in the largesse. As the workers toiled, royal inhabitants meandered along stone paths underneath a green canopy and took in the fragrance of endless fields of flowers.

With each new season came lavish harvests. Supplies were loaded into wagons. Rich abundance made its way to even the remotest, sandswept villages. Sometimes, the King and Queen would accompany a delivery. When they made an appearance, their subjects would stop everything, swarming the streets in a frenzy, hoping to get a glimpse.

For as long as a grandmother's grandmother could remember, this was the way it had been.

But one day something most unusual happened in a town near the farthest edge of the kingdom after a frightful sandstorm. Out back behind the shoemaker's shop, a single green bud emerged through cracks in the sand.

The tiny leaf was discovered by a little girl. The leaf was subsequently monitored by a group of children. They watched as it came to life. The leaf became a stem and the stem became a beautiful flower. One cool evening, the children arrived but the plant was no longer there. They found a baby instead. She had blossomed from the flower. Their innocent secret had resulted in a miracle. The children brought her to the town where she would live. She was named Aersea.

Aersea's beginnings were a mystery and no one quite believed the tale the children told. Wilma, the town's stern and quiet innkeeper, volunteered to take her in. Since Aersea was a rather undemanding baby, the two got along very well. Wilma provided the little girl with hot meals but Aersea was a wanderer.

Although Aersea was raised by Wilma, she was known by everyone. As she grew older, the villagers said the curious girl who had arrived without explanation was as beautiful as a flower. Her hair was of many colors, her eyes green, and her skin kissed by the sun. In a certain light, her form took on an otherworldly quality. She appeared to be illuminated from within.

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One day, Aersea was eating an apple with one of her friends. As they were finishing, Aersea bit into something hard and small that did not taste like apple. She pulled it out of her mouth and held it in front of her. A seed. She dropped the seed into the pocket of her skirt.

"Aersea, that's a seed," her friend said. "You know we're supposed to send those back to the King."

"Yes I know," Aersea said. "But I want to try planting it."

"Why? Seeds won't grow in this soil."

"Please don't tell anyone," Aersea begged. "I just want to try it. Just one time."

She knew that she should put it back but the seed stayed in her pocket. That evening in the courtyard, she planted it gently in a small hole in the ground.

The next morning, she woke up to the sound of voices. She pulled open the curtain to find that her view was blocked by the shade of a tree. She ran down the hall and into the courtyard. There it was. A tree. It was a small tree but it had somehow grown overnight and was stretching

out toward the sun. Green waxy leaves and tiny, shiny apples were bursting on its branches.

Wilma stood in front of it.

“How did this get here?” Wilma asked, incredulously. “This isn’t possible! We’ve never had so much as a blade of grass here!”

“Uh, well, I just planted an apple seed and...” Aersea said softly.

Wilma spun around.

“You planted a what?” she asked, confused. “What? When did you do that?”

“Yesterday,” Aersea said. “I wanted to see if it would grow. I didn’t know it would grow this quickly.”

Wilma ran down the hall out the front door and into the street, grabbing people by the arm. She dragged them through the inn toward the tree. Once they arrived and witnessed the strong branches and green leaves their mouths dropped open; a growing tree pushing up from barren dirt. They had no words. They ran to get neighbors and friends. The town forgot its usual schedule and spent the day collecting all of the seeds they could find, planting them in vacant courtyards all over the village.

They went to sleep with hope in their hearts.

Meanwhile, Aersea remained busy. She found more seeds from the inn’s kitchen and buried them as she had before. She went to sleep dreaming of flowers and berries.

She awoke to a dream come true.

Elsewhere in town, there were no such awakenings. The puzzling fact was that Aersea’s seeds were thriving. She brought seeds with her to plant all over town. Aersea sang to the plants. She talked to them as she would her friends. She began to spend more time with them than she did with people. The plants were the best listeners, she would say. So long as she tended to them

her gardens thrived. She picked pears the size of melons and fresh pea pods that could feed entire families. And feed them they did.

As more plants grew the people felt a sense of pride in providing for themselves. Aersea spent all of her days encouraging the crops so the people who had raised her could enjoy them as they pleased. Everything was so fresh. They had never tasted food like this before.

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With no knowledge of Aersea's wondrous achievements, the King sent wagons full of provisions as usual. Not wanting to waste food that could be needed by others in the kingdom, the villagers declined the delivery. They thanked the drivers for their generosity and instructed them to bring supplies elsewhere. The wagons were returned to the castle completely full for redirection. The King and the Queen were mystified. How were these villagers getting food?

They decided to take a tour out to the village.

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The people stopped and stared as six white horses pulled an impressive golden coach onto the bumpy, dirt road of their humble town center. Their rulers were draped in velvet and silk as they stepped out smiling and waving. The queen's attendants lifted the train of her flowing gown carefully so as not to allow it to drag in the dust.

The town's overseer stepped forward.

"Your Grace. What an honor! What brings you to our town?"

"News about your miracle," the Queen said. "Somehow, you are supplying food for your village. How have you done it?"

"*We* don't do it," he said. "Aersea does. She is the one who grows our food."

"Aersea?"

“She came to us as a little girl. The children always said that she was born of a flower. We never did believe them but now we’re all wondering.”

The Queen stepped back and looked at the crowd. She turned and spoke privately with the King.

The royals requested a meeting with this special girl. The entourage carried on, making its way toward the inn. Aersea, now fifteen years old, was summoned by Wilma to return immediately. She appeared before them.

The King and Queen were quite surprised at her appearance. They had never seen a girl like her. Her hair came to her knees twisting and spiraling ringlets. Daisies burst from the pockets of her muddied dress. Her delicate frame stood straight and tall, rising out of her rugged work boots. She bowed before her rulers, curtsying politely, then straightened.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “This is an honor.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” the Queen said. “We’re here because we’ve heard a bit about your skills. You are growing things!”

“Yes,” she smiled. “The garden is my home.”

“And what a beautiful home it is,” the King said in disbelief. He scanned the lush vegetation. Some of the flowers that lined the yards were not even in his royal garden.

“You’re growing all this food for your village?” he asked.

“Yes,” Aersea said.

The King leaned in. “Where do you find the soil?”

Aersea’s spring green eyes met his. “I don’t. I just do it.”

The King and Queen looked at each other, knowingly. Then, the King smiled down at the girl in front of him.

“Aersea, would you like to help more than just the people here?” he asked. “As you know, we try to grow what we can to feed the kingdom. Although it is an overwhelming task, we do everything we can to provide for our villages.”

He looked out at the townspeople with a sugary smile.

“We’ve been seeking a wife for our son,” the King said. “He is heir to the throne and his wife will be a princess, someday a queen. But who is worthy of such an honor? And now we meet you. You are simply astounding. Your beauty, your generosity, and your incredible abilities. You are good. You help others. You must come with us and take your place where you belong.”

“You want me to marry...” Aersea sputtered.

“We do,” the Queen said. “You will come and live in our castle. We have rolling fields of land for you to use with the very best soil in the kingdom. With your special talents you will be a princess like no other.”

The people knew better than to question the wisdom of their giving rulers, so when the King and Queen departed, Aersea bid her townspeople farewell. The villagers sent her off with tears of joy, hope, and pride. She was sad to leave her town but excited that she would soon be living as royalty.

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Silver gates opened to a smooth, stone road. The magnificent white castles ahead of her were so much bigger than anything she’d ever seen. Everything looked so different from her village which was always covered in a layer of sand and dust. Aersea was in awe.

“This is your home?” she asked, her eyes fixed on the castles. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Thank you, dear,” the Queen said. “It will be your home too.”

Huge, stone walls surrounded the compound. Watchtowers and guards stood dressed in silver armor. Crowds of courtesans buzzed with news about the princess-to-be. They craned their necks as she passed by them. The King and Queen stopped to address the crowd while Aersea was swept away by attendants who led her up marble stairs. She scanned the vast halls imagining that soon she would be at home there, dancing in ballrooms and sleeping in silk.

Aersea was brought to the dining room. She sat at a long table with her feet bare. The Queen had given her a pair of satin slippers to wear, but they were much too large for her tiny feet.

Without notice, the massive carved doors to the dining room began to open. An attendant entered and motioned for her to stand. She got up, hands neatly in front of her, and remembered to put the slippers back on her feet. She was careful not to move in them.

The King and Queen entered ceremoniously. Behind them came an older boy flanked by two servants. He was tall. His hair was a warm color that matched his kind brown eyes. He was as formally dressed as his mother and father but Aersea noticed his hands tugging at the fabric of his shirt, angrily, as if it was fighting him.

“Aersea from the village, this is our son, Prince Blaise,” the Queen said.

Aersea greeted him with a curtsy.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Grace,” she said.

Prince Blaise spoke quietly, with a small smile. Like his eyes, his smile was warm and gentle. Aersea forgot about the slippers.

“Soon there will be no need for such formality between us,” he laughed. “We’re to be married, I hear.”

He led her by the hand out of the dining room. When they reached the other end of the hallway, he whispered to her.

“Allow me to show you around your new home. You can take those slippers off. I won’t tell anyone.”

“That sounds just wonderful, Your Grace... Blaise,” she said, in a voice she’d never used before.

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At an extravagant wedding, Aersea was married to Blaise. The ceremony and the celebration were very exclusive. Dozens of artists were in attendance to paint pictures of the festivities. Their work would be displayed on tour throughout the kingdom in the coming year so everyone throughout the land could experience the historic event. Draped in flowers from the royal garden, Aersea walked down the aisle past new family members who also lived in the compound. She was dressed in a white wedding dress and pearls. Beautiful, but very uncomfortable.

After the ceremony, the prince and princess went out on the balcony to wave to their public. Aersea wished that she could have invited the people of her town. The balcony was too high for her to see anyone. All of the people looked like specks of dust. So, she pretended the people of her village were there. In her heart, she could hear their cheers.

When the ceremony ended, a reception was held in the most magnificent garden Aersea had ever seen. She tried to stay close to Blaise, the only person who knew her. When he left to greet the other guests, the dancing, drinking and laughter turned empty. Soon, she was sitting on a terrace, sharing her thoughts with tall flowers and ripening fruit.

When the day was over, Aersea and her prince watched from above as the carriages took guests back to their own castles. The newlyweds were escorted to their living quarters by the King and Queen.

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Life as a princess was charmed. Castle staff brought Aersea whatever she asked for on silver trays. She wore beautiful clothing. She enjoyed art, music, and food created by the best in the land. She made a home for herself in the gardens. That home she shared with Blaise. One day when he came to see her, she took his hand and they watched the flowers dance in the cool breeze.

“You must like coming out here,” she said.

Blaise looked down at the flowers.

“I’m supposed to stay out of the way while the crops are being tended to. But I wanted to see you.”

Aersea raised an eyebrow.

“Do you know nothing about what grows on this land?”

Blaise sighed, shifting his glance back to the flowers. He pulled at his shirt collar.

Aersea leaned over and kissed him.

Although the royal family had grown everything for the kingdom for generations, Aersea was shocked to find that Blaise knew nothing at all. But she enjoyed sharing her passion with him.

Aersea tried to find happiness with life inside the castle. There was much to like. She had fallen in love with Blaise and her gardens. Still, her humble beginnings were a part of her.

One afternoon, Aersea approached the Queen.

“Excuse me?” she said. “I have an important question with your permission.

“Of course, Princess. You are like a daughter to me. You can ask me anything.”

“Well, I’ve been wanting to ask you. I’ve been afraid to offend you and I know that we are family now. I’m grateful for everything you have given me and I am very happy in my new home. But it has been a long time since I have seen my village and I miss it. I would like to visit soon. When can I do that?”

The Queen didn’t respond. She only laughed.

“You cannot leave, Princess Aersea,” she said. “You are part of the royal family.”

“I just thought I could-”

“You cannot,” the Queen said. “Besides, why would you want to? You don’t live there anymore. You live here. We are your family. This is your home.”

Aersea saw the castle guards take notice of the situation. The queen gave her a firm stare.

Aersea curtsied and stepped back toward her quarters.

“Are you okay, my flower?” Blaise asked as Aersea returned.

“I am,” she said. She did not know how to tell him what happened.

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Day after day, Aersea was brought to empty fields. She had exceeded what was expected of her.

The best crops went to the inner circle. The rest was provided to the people. Bountiful harvests were loaded into wagons and delivered by knights loyal to the kingdom. The people responded with deep gratitude. They toiled in their villages and sent back offerings to demonstrate their appreciation.

Each day, Aersea turned the fields for the king and queen. Each evening, the royal family toasted Aersea at well-appointed tables. Each night she would sit in her window staring up at the night sky, knowing she was sharing it with the rest of the world.

One night, Aersea became overwhelmed. She put her hands into her face and cried. As she wept she felt arms encircling her. It was Blaise.

“What’s wrong, my flower?” he asked.

“I am unhappy,” she said. “I miss the world outside these walls. You are a good husband, Blaise, but I cannot live inside this place forever. I am wilting.”

He brought her closer to him.

“When you first came here, I was happy. I knew that you would bring goodness to our kingdom. But you know a life beyond mine.”

Blaise stared out at the wall in front of them.

“My family controls everything. I must remain inside because I’m heir to the throne. You long to be reunited with your world, a world I’ve never known. Someday I will be asked to rule a land I’ve never seen.”

They stood holding each other’s hands.

“What if we left?” Aersea suddenly said.

“What?”

“What if we left? We could go to a place that’s far from here and live together. I’ll grow a garden and we can live on our own.”

It felt like the sun was returning after a freezing snow. Blaise smiled.

“That is a perfect idea,” he said. “You are perfect.”

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The prince and princess began their planning. Supplies were hidden in secret locations. At night, they studied maps and selected a route. Soon, they had all sorts of ideas as to what their new home would look like.

“A cottage,” Aersea would say. “Near a big field. I can fill it with flowers.”

“And none of them will be as beautiful as you are,” Blaise would add.

One evening, it was announced that the King and Queen were embarking on a journey that would take several months. They had business in another kingdom.

Aersea and Blaise were ready to begin their new life together and began the final stages of their preparations.

However, one morning they were alerted that the royal caravan was caught up in a powerful sandstorm.

“I’m worried, my flower,” Blaise whispered. “If they do not come back I don’t know what I will do.”

“They will come back,” Aersea said.

The next day, a senior advisor called the prince and princess to a meeting. She brought them into a small room and closed the doors.

“Your Grace,” she said to Blaise. “This is the most difficult thing I’ve ever had to do. It is my duty to inform you that your mother and father lost their lives in the storms that took place yesterday.”

Blaise took a step backward, looking as if he might collapse.

“I know that you are in shock but we have prepared for this and we are here to help and serve you. You have a duty to the people. We must begin preparations to plan your coronation.”

“Coronation...” he said, tears coming. “What... They aren’t coming back?”

“Yes,” she said, somberly. “Every effort was made to save them but they will not return from their trip. I am deeply sorry for your loss.”

Aersea reached for Blaise’s hand. As her fingers entwined with his, he seemed to gain strength. His body straightened and he ordered the staff to leave the room. They fell together and wept for their loss.

“I am right here,” Aersea said. “I will not leave your side, Blaise.”

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Throughout the kingdom, there was great sorrow. In every village, there was mourning. A ceremonial procession canvassed the land. Ceremonies and tributes honoring the beloved King and Queen lasted for days. Blaise stayed behind the walls of the compound preparing for ascension.

Within the week, advisors and statesmen assembled to crown their new king. Following the coronation, Blaise set off immediately thereafter to present himself as King, traveling to every village in the land. Aersea, now queen, was still needed in the fields. It was her duty to the people.

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The tour was a whirlwind, Blaise greeted his distant subjects warmly but longed to return to his familiar life. As a new king he took his responsibility to heart.

Aersea dug her feet into the soil. She channeled her special gifts, creating unprecedented fertility and growth. As queen she could travel across the kingdom and deliver crops herself, finally connecting with those she cared for. She would plant seeds in backyards, in courtyards, in villages near and far.

When her husband was finally home, she came to him.

“Blaise,” she said, curtsying.

When Blaise saw her he broke out in laughter, something he had not done in such a while.

“My flower!” he said, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her from the ground.

“How I have missed you! These past weeks have been the hardest I have ever endured. I am still grieving the loss of my parents, but I have been counting down the days until I could awake and see you beside me again.”

Aersea was kissed, loved, given a feeling of hope.

“Let’s spend the afternoon with your flowers,” Blaise said. “I’ll have the kitchen staff send out lunch for us. Now that I am home we can spend every day in your garden.”

“I’d like to speak with you about that, Blaise,” she said. “The people have accepted you as their king but they still don’t know their queen. I think it’s time for me to set out beyond the walls. I can distribute the harvest across the land.”

“You?” Blaise asked, as if this was the first he’d heard of this idea.

“And I can finally show the people how to make a garden grow,” she said. “I will finally meet our people and-”

“You cannot do that,” he said, before she could finish. He stood over her.

Aersea stared up at him and felt herself closing in.

“Your talent is too important,” he said. “This is your home. You live here, my flower. If you leave our home, you’ll run into danger. You’ll end up like my parents. We just can’t take that chance.”

“Blaise,” she begged. “I thought that’s what we always wanted to do.”

He adjusted his shirt collar, which no longer seemed to fight him, and took both of her hands. He placed them tightly against her chest as if to keep her heart contained.

“When we talked about such things, our situation was different,” he said. “We could not have imagined that I would be king now. Now, please. You must allow me to do my work.”

As he looked at her, he broke into a smile. Aersea tried to find the warmth she once saw his eyes.

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Aersea’s songs were drowned in sorrow. Inside, she withered. There was light and life all around the queen but she was beginning to fade.

Gathering berries one afternoon she sliced her hand open on a sharp thorn. She winced as blood spurted from a deep gash.

She wrapped her hand in a handkerchief and sat down in the dirt.

“I wish somebody would take away this pain,” she said quietly, her head hanging low in the thicket.

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Dark, luscious fruit was served at dinner. Conversation buzzed at the king’s table. Aersea’s name was in the air yet no one spoke directly to her. Not even a question about the shocking cut across her hand. The king’s successful tour was all anyone could think about. Villagers across the land were clamoring for more contact with their widely popular new leader.

Aersea spent another night lying awake beside a man she no longer knew. The light of the moon, shining through the window, reflected against her outstretched hand. What she saw was astonishing. The large gash across her hand had completely disappeared. The wound was healed.

Aersea's mind began to race. Wide awake now, she recalled what she'd said in the thicket.

"This is my only home, here with you," she had said in the shelter of the intricate intermingling that was growing around her. Her voice was an anguished whisper. "But we don't belong here inside these walls. We are trapped here in a prison."

She looked out her window at shadowy shapes. They were her solace. Backlit in the dark of night but they promised to burst in vibrant color with each morning sunrise.

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Day after day, Aersea worked the garden. That which possessed her during the day sustained and nourished her keepers. She existed among baskets of vegetables, cartons of fruit, and fragrant flowers. Each night, there was a beautiful display on the long table of the royal family.

"To our kingdom," King Blaise would say, motioning around the table at his loyal entourage.

"To our kingdom," the royals would say, toasting their king and queen.

"To our kingdom and for our kingdom," Aersea would say in the name of the abundance before her, with a steady hand on her goblet and a healthy glow from her hours in the garden.

They would eat, devouring the meals expertly prepared for them in the royal kitchen. Each night it was a feast.

Aersea began to notice that, despite her offerings, there were unsettling changes around the table. Something was happening. Faces looked paler than the day before. Eyes had dulled. Voices wavered as they spoke. Hands looked unsteady carving into their food.

Each morning, Aersea sprang up. She tended to her gardens throughout the day while others struggled to rise out of bed. She would return in the afternoon to find Blaise weak from the effort of living.

One afternoon, she found him in their quarters. His fingers, adorned in golden rings, were clenched around the bedpost. He was covered in sweat.

“Blaise,” Aersea asked. “What are you doing?”

“I am trying to stand...” he groaned. “I may collapse.”

“You are very ill,” she said, helping to steady him. “You need to go back to bed. I’ll get a doctor.”

“No...Not going back to bed,” he said. “My flower, I just need to...”

As he spoke, Blaise tried to balance himself on the nearby windowsill. He was falling forward. Aersea guided him and laid him down to rest.

The doctor came. Then more doctors. Apothecaries prescribed a myriad of medicines for the ailing king. But Blaise worsened. He was in a frail and fearful state, growing weaker by the hour, surrounded by despair.

The king only wanted his queen beside him. He felt his wife’s strength in the void of his own. Guards stood just outside the door. Aersea was separated from her gardens. High above them in a castle made of stone, she looked out longingly from its balconies. She expertly tended to her king’s needs as she tended to all living things.

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Each day, Aersea sat by the window watching the fiery orange sky slip behind the wall. Confined to his bed, Blaise would crane his neck toward the last remaining beam of sunlight. It had been so long since they left their room.

One night as Aersea was drifting into sleep, Blaise put his hand on hers. She opened her eyes to a startling sight.

“My flower,” his voice shook. “Quickly... Get a doctor... I need a doctor....Now...”

Aersea was looking at into the face of dying man.

“All of the doctors can come,” she said. “I will call them right away. What do you need?”

“Something is wrong,” he said, shaking, pushing himself out of their bed and onto the floor. “Something is wrong!”

He began to cough. A black mold came from his mouth. It sputtered out, hitting the rug. A dark stain soaked into the silky fibers.

“What is this?” he shrieked, falling onto the floor in the pile of black. “Aersea! Get the doctor! Please! Get the doctor!”

Blaise watched his gentle flower step over him. She raced to the window toward a noise. In her absence the crops were growing wildly. Tangled masses of weeds had overtaken. Roots of trees and flowers were crawling up the walls.

Something was breaking. Something was ending.

Aersea felt a surge within her. She turned to face her king.

“Since the day I was brought here to be your wife, I have not left this castle. I have not seen my village, my friends, or even the woman who raised me as a child. I dream about what lies outside these walls. There was a time when we shared this dream, but when you got the power you forgot the plans we made. I have been a captive within these walls and that is because of you.”

Blaise looked up at her with pain-filled eyes.

She continued, her voice gaining conviction. “Blaise, my king, I have been your wife, your nurse, and your loyal subject. While I kept you alive, I sat in the window and the breeze carried my voice.”

She stood before him remembering her plea.

“I was so desperate in my pain. In my loneliness, I asked to be cared for. To be protected.”

Blaise looked up. Aersea was standing over him. Rotten gurgling noises came from his lip and a black trail emerged. His face revealed grim acknowledgement.

Aersea watched in horror. Blaise could not ask for help. Any attempt resulted in thick, black mold. He was on the floor barely moving. Aersea felt tears well up. She only wanted it to end as quickly as possible. His pain did not take away hers.

The leaves outside their window rustled. Aersea knelt to the floor, where Blaise lay in his own black filth. She put her hand just in front of his. Afraid of what else might come, she did not chance touching it.

“Have I destroyed you?” she whispered.

Sputtering and coughing, Blaise struggled to speak. Aersea could not make out what he was saying, until he said her name for the last time.

“My flower.”

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King Blaise was gone. Sickness and death made its rounds until Aersea was the only remaining royal inhabitant.

Nature had its own way.

Cultivated but no longer confined, Aersea would be crowned queen.

The good people who cooked the meals and washed the clothes found the wilted corpses lying in each castle. They would have to turn to Aersea now for answers. The royal advisors would meet and plan her coronation. A heavy crown would be placed on her head.

Aersea was stunned by the condition of her gardens. Trees larger than she had ever seen had taken root overnight and stretched up into the clouds. Weeds had overtaken the castle walls. Most of her gardens had been invaded as well. They were overwhelmed, choking and suffocating.

“No!” she cried out.

She pulled at the weeds. For hours and hours she pulled until her fingers bled.

When she was exhausted, piles of inundation lay on the stone path, dead and no longer dangerous. Aersea could finally see the futility of her endless labor. Her gardens were still alive but they were no match. Flower petals fearfully curled themselves in and the verdant beds of grass faded to a murky brown. When she touched their blades they were sharp and dry.

“I’m sorry!” she cried out, again. “I can save you from all of this! I can guard you, now!”

There was nothing.

She spoke to them. She sang to them. Nothing.

Her head hung like a dead tree.

Still, nothing.

The sun was getting low in the sky and she heard a creaking noise. It was the sound of roots climbing up the walls. Long spiny branches twisting this way and that way. Tangled vines were turned to shreds, their remains strewn among the refuse. Reaching and ripping over the tall stone walls. They curled themselves around the structure like tree roots met with stubborn rocks. They pushed through the walls. It all began to crumble.

Aersea ran toward the light of the setting sun, a space between disarrayed rocks that were once an impermeable wall. Remnants fell around her. She had to move forward to keep clear of the devastation.

She made it to the light and bent down to touch the sand.

In the distance, there was a peaceful and familiar landscape. Aersea stepped toward the stark, desert horizon.

