

I was both stunned and confused. A homely old cottage, waist-high wooden fence and large, colorful garden were not exactly what I had expected. Looking around, I noticed that the path I was on was gone, replaced by a well-maintained stone walkway leading to a door in the fence before me. The rows of evergreens that flanked me previously became great green plains filled with grass that swayed with the winds. I thought hard about the moments leading to this sight since this couldn't be my destination.

“You know, just about everyone who visits me has the same look on their face.”

My thoughts were disrupted by a voice coming from the garden. The voice was old but certainly not frail; it drew attention but did not demand it. From some large and oddly shaped leaves rose a woman. She wore a sun-bleached wide-brimmed hat, distressed leather gloves, and an earth-stained apron that covered a long crimson dress. She looked my way and I could feel her gaze see through me to my marrow; my very core being studied by her. She broke into a smile as she removed her gloves. “Everyone is always so surprised when they get here, which is strange. You would think that they would know where they are going enough to know when they've arrived.”

“Well, I...” My deep confusion hadn't abated at all. Surely she couldn't mean that I had found it, that this is where I would be seeking the blessing. “Where am I exactly?” I meekly asked.

“I'm fairly certain you know exactly where you are, or, at least, you know why you have come to this place.” The woman walked toward the door in the fence and unlatched it. The worn hinges creaked as a gesture of invitation was issued. Hesitation held me. I had traveled all this way seeking someone who would help me right the wrongs done against my family and I, to dole out punishment to those who evaded it, to those who deserved it.

“I told you, you are exactly where you need to be.” As if reading my mind, the woman reissued her invitation. Something spoke up from the back of my mind, a passage I had read as I prepared for my journey, “For those who seek the wisdom and blessing of Vengeance, it is a long journey both in

mind and body. Remember that only those who truly seek what is offered there can find it but steel yourself: it may not be what one thought they would find.” I had readied myself for a place of horrors, for blood and fire, not greenery and peace. Maybe the book was wrong? Maybe I was wrong? There was really only one way to find out. I walked toward the gate. As I approached, the woman smiled, “Come with me.”

When I passed the threshold of the gate, I felt my anxiety ebb as my thoughts became clearer. Taking another look at the woman, I noticed something: never before had I seem someone move with such a grand determination. Every movement was so meaningfully placed, even down to the way she moved large leaves out of her way as she led me into the garden. I took a closer look at the various plant life around me and was surprised at how meticulously planned it was. It seemed as if everything in the garden was arranged in the way that the universe needed it to, like it had to be based off of some rule of existence. It was this neatness that made some plants look strange, out of order even. It was as if there were some that would deviate from their paths and go where they pleased. These were very few, but jarring in a place like this.

I looked back to the woman, the idea that she was the Spirit of Vengeance started to seem more plausible somehow, like I was understanding something new, even if I didn't know what I was learning.

She led the way down the walk through the garden, most of the plants being of a type I had never seen before. So many of them were strange shapes with alien geometries, true wonders to see. We soon reached the edge of the garden where a small round table sat with two chairs pulled up to it. Atop the table sat a glass vessel containing a clear liquid. It was flanked by two worn wooden cups with a fine etching decorating the sides. “Were you expecting someone?” I asked.

The woman sat at the table, “I am always expecting someone.” She gestured to the seat opposite her. I sat down as she reached for one of the cups. Looking down at the cup, I noticed that it was full of what seemed to be the same liquid as the vessel; a clear, scentless drink. She raised her cup

to her mouth as she gave me a nod of approval. I followed the instruction and drank; the beverage was warm and sweet, refreshing me with each taste. After a few sips, I spoke, "I don't mean to sound rude, but I would like a true confirmation of where I am."

"As I said before, I am fairly certain you know what place this is," the woman retorted.

"But I was looking for the domain of Vengeance, I was sure that-"

"Everyone seems so sure of what they seek. It's quite entertaining; so many people journeying to find something and then not believing it when they find it." She downed what remained in her cup and filled it once more from the vessel.

I drank from my cup again, the drink had become less sweet as a bitter taste lingered in my mouth. I set the cup down, frustration creeping up. "I'm sorry, but I feel you are wasting my time. I am not asking for cryptic hints, I am-"

The woman met my gaze, her eyes silencing me mid-sentence. There was a fury that rose from her for a split-second, like a field emanating from her that suddenly held everything in her grasp and then, just as quickly as it came, it released. She smiled gently as if nothing happened as she spoke, "Don't worry, you found what you sought."

I sat in wonder for a moment, fear lingering in the back of my mind. Surely I would not doubt her again. I meekly spoke, "So you...you're Vengeance. This isn't...I had imagined something..." My voice had trailed off, but the woman picked up right where I had left off, "different, yes. I am aware. But don't worry yourself, you are not the first person to make that mistake and surely you won't be the last." She motioned toward my cup, "Please, drink up. I imagine you are thirsty from your journey here."

I ignore my drink and addressed her, "Since you are Vengeance, then you must know I've come to seek your blessing." I placed my hand upon the table as I leaned in toward her, "I need your blessing!"

The woman leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs as she closed her eyes and took a drink. She spoke between sips, “And you're sure of this?”

“Yes, of course!”

“As sure as you were of your journey here, or the place you would end up?”

“I...” my thoughts trailed off as I spoke. Doubt started to creep into my mind. Her eyes were closed but I still felt as if she was watching me. I needed to focus, regain some ground. “That's not the same, I knew where I was going, just not...look...” My frustration started to manifest in my voice, “I know I need your blessing. What happened and what I need it for aren't comparable to-”

The woman's eyes opened. I stopped speaking as she lowered her cup from her mouth, saying “The journey is just as important as the destination. The path that one follows could even alter the destination if one isn't careful. That very first step will determine where the last step will take you.”

I lifted my cup as she spoke, the drink had become tepid and sour.

She continued, “You say you knew where you were going, yet when you arrived, you didn't believe the outcome, correct?”

I responded, almost apologetically, “Yes, but this was not what I expected to find, which is different than my quest!”

She set her cup down and put her hands together before her as she leaned onto the table. “Am I to believe then that you know exactly where your quest would lead you? Are you as sure of that as you were of getting here?”

I went to respond, but realization stayed me. How could I have been so foolish, she practically had to spell it out for me. Silence stole me for a moment as I tried to gather my thoughts. The woman then broke the silence, “Do you know what you would do with my blessing?”

“Yes.”

“And what would that be?”

My thoughts began to race as I remembered back to what brought me here. My voice trembled as I spoke, “To punish. These men, they came and...” My fists clenched as I tried to steady my breathing. The image of fire danced inside my closed eyes as a scream echoed through my mind. I willed my mouth to speak, “They took so much from me and I aim to return the favor.”

The woman spoke, her voice calm, “And after that?”

“I...it doesn't...”

Matter? That is what I was thinking; it doesn't really matter what happens next. In fact, maybe I didn't really care what happened next. They would be dead, justice dealt. As those thoughts past through me, I realized they made me feel nothing. Those words were now hollow, ringing in the void created by the phrase 'It doesn't matter'. I didn't understand, why ask? Why does she care what happens after? I drank what was left in my cup, but tasted nothing.

I sat slumped in my chair in silence.

“Do you know why I love gardening?” The woman stared out to her garden as she spoke.

I raised my head and tried to speak, but nothing came out. She spoke again, “There are many reasons really. One of them being that it makes you think. Before you even put the first seed in the ground, a plan should be had.” The woman rose and walked to the nearest row of flora. She brushed her hands against the large, spade-shaped yellow leaves that branched from a dull green stem that rose proudly from the soil. “If you plant a flower that will have large, sprawling petals near a smaller, more fragile plant, the large one will kill the smaller one. Not through any fault of its own, but it will slowly starve the little one until it dies, if left to its own devices.” She knelt down to a smaller plant, one with a flower of small purple petals, “Unless that is, something intervenes.” With her bare hands, she scooped up the delicate flower, roots and all, and moved it to a small pot. “Every seed planted and petal moved affects everything around it and, if you're not careful, can cast ruin and you will be left with nothing.”

She looked back to me, her voice taking on a soothing tone, “I love my garden and every flower in it, as well as any flower that will be in it.” The woman placed the potted plant on the table, brushed her hands off on her apron and sat back down.

I looked once more at the small flower: its petals were a deep purple with an outline of a sky blue. They were dotted as well with white specks, all sprouting from a pure white disk. There was a small bud growing from the stalk as well that, as I noticed it, the woman grabbed and twisted it off the plant. “I do this knowing full well what might happen at the end,” the woman said as she looked long at the flower bud. “I know that this could kill the plant, or another flower will grow, or maybe nothing will happen at all and I accept these outcomes. It's another part I love: the chaos one must accept as nature.”

I stayed silent, not knowing what to say. The woman filled the silence, “I am not here to say if you are right or wrong, only that you should truly know and understand what it is that you seek. There is more than one way to plant a garden, and more than one way it could grow.” She extended her arm out toward me, bud in hand. I raised my hand and received the gift, surprised at how heavy it sat in my hand.

The woman rose from her seat again, “Well, I have much work to do but I am glad that you stopped by.” I turned to her, surprised, “Oh, yes, I'm sorry to have kept you.”

“Don't apologize, I enjoyed your company.” She grabbed the potted plant and walked over to a different part of the garden, planting it in a new plot with plenty of sun. She turned back to me, “I'll walk you out.”

We walked toward the gate in the fence and she opened it once more. She smiled as I crossed the threshold again, saying, “Take care.” I turned to reply, but the cottage was gone. There was no garden, no fence, no woman. I looked down at the flower bud in my hand and saw that it had started to open up into the deep purple I remember it was. I looked up to the road that stretched before me as it

winded deeper into the woods I started from and very carefully too my first step.