

Once upon a time, in a land of wind and grain, there was a witch.

Belonging to a world terrorized by demons, Adair was its main protector: a warrior of magic only she was capable of. With her magical blue crystal and her knowledge of flora and fauna, she vanquished anything and everything that even dared to bother the people-- illnesses, monsters, and everything in between.

The people adored her. The whole land adored her. She was their savior, their angel. Because of her, the demons did not dare try to cross the people. Because of her, they were safer than ever before. For could a hero ever die? Could a hero ever know mortality?

After centuries of fighting his underlings, she finally faced off against the Demon King-- Magoth, a knobbled, ugly beast of a thousand xanthous toadstools. They quarreled for many days on the land's outskirts-- even in the darkest hour, they did not rest. As the battle reached its end, she swung her blade. Magoth let out a guttural roar, and she could smell his mouldering, malodorous breath. Her aim was true-- she pierced the pulsing golden orb that was his heart.

Magoth fell to the ground, sending tremors through the earth. Suddenly, he exploded into a flurry of bright yellow pollen. Adair, still gasping from their fight, inhaled it. It felt like little needles working their way down her nose, causing her to cough, and cough, and cough. As she continued to wheeze, she ignorantly thought that perhaps, the pollen was nothing, really. Perhaps, it was just a minor irritant.

But she thought wrong.

After the death of the Demon King, the demons hid away. They appeared less and less, until it was as if they did not exist. They were afraid of the one who drew his blood, Adair herself, and they dared not tread on the land where it was spilled. Her fame only grew and grew, word of her victory flooding like a swollen stream. But as the days passed, Adair noticed that her chest felt tighter than usual. The bright street lights hurt her eyes more than they should have, and as she tried to worm her way through the crowd of people around her, she suddenly stumbled. She saw rings of gold dancing in her field of vision, and as she marveled at their beauty, she collapsed.

Soon, she regained consciousness in the street, aware of the people's panicked chatter all about. As she tried to sit up, overwhelming dizziness and nausea gripped her like a vise, and she vomited. The people gasped, all shying away from the sight as she hacked and sputtered. With blurry eyes, she saw the pool of her own blood, burbling ominously. Wiping her eyes, she saw...

Flecks of gold. Oh, gods-- the pollen was... a *spore*. She had been so careless! How could she have let this happen? Spores were incredibly dangerous-- they could and would feed on their victim's air, nesting and breeding in their lungs, seeping and spreading through their blood, gnawing away until it consumed them inside out. And there was no cure. There was no stopping it.

How ironic! The greatest magic user of all time, conquered by a simple spore! No other human or supernatural creature could defeat her, but a plant could.

A low chuckle tickled at the back of her throat. Then that chuckle became a giggle, then that giggle a laugh so dragged out it sounded like she was dying. Confused and disturbed, the people who once flocked near her fled, abandoning Adair in the middle of the town square. Now alone, Adair laughed and laughed, crumpled into herself until she could not help but cough,

and cough,

and cough.

The ugly sound echoed through the emptiness for no one to hear.

But then reality hit her. She was never meant to taste death. And once she did, the demons would know, and they would lose their fear. Her death meant death for the people, for those she was supposed to guard with her life. If only there were another like her, one that would continue to live on forever and do what Adair could not do when she lay ill.

The thought would not leave her. It gnawed at her mind as she tried to focus on other things, more realistic things. But then she thought to herself-- why couldn't she just make another version of herself? Her better half-- using her magic, she could create an apprentice, a helper out of clay and breathe life into it. The apprentice could then take her place when Adair fell, never to feel the embrace of death. Her mind wrapped around the idea, as if nurturing a seedling of what would soon grow into fruition.

But what would the vessel of her helper look like? This proved to be a harder challenge than Adair first anticipated. The first difficulty was that there was a limit to the size of a model Adair could possibly enchant. The being could be no taller than a large sunflower-- a child. At first, she groaned, but then she decided that it would not be too inconvenient. After all, a child has natural obedience, and an adult does not.

Hundreds of messy sketches cluttered her desk as if a swarm of paper swans had attacked it. The sun and moon chased each other for countless cycles until Adair feared they would collide.

But finally... she settled on an idea. A girl. A girl with the grace of a minnow, the instinct of a rabbit, and the eyes of a doe. She would be perfect. And she would be hers.

So marked the beginning of a tedious process-- molding a figure out of a glob of mud proved difficult, and translating the child from imagination to reality was no simple feat. Tweaks had to be made throughout the whole process, and regrettably, she did have to substitute her fish tail for legs... Practicality could be such a nuisance sometimes.

Once the vessel was molded and painted to every fine detail, Adair took a deep breath and, with her crystal glowing fiercely azure, touched the chest of the clay doll. There was a puff of powder blue smoke, and...

Nothing. The doll remained close eyed, a soft, etched-on smile gracing her face. Wisps of blue fluttered around her the way butterflies would to flowers. And yet she did not breathe.

Adair gently leaned back, crumpling in her chair with a *poomf* in sudden exhaustion.

So many times in the past she had failed, but never had it hurt like this. When she needed success the most, it slipped away from her.

She sat there in self-pitying silence, not sure what she was waiting for. Something, anything.

Suddenly, she felt two small hands grasping hers. When she lifted her head, they drew away, revealing a young girl with doe-like, charcoal eyes gazing into hers.

They stared and stared at each other, until the girl broke into a wide smile.

"Hello-- My name is Anuri! And you are my Gardener. How are you?"

After so much gardening, the flower had burst into bloom. And now, there was life, breathing, speaking, looking at her.

Adair just sobbed, tears rolling down her cheeks as she buried her face in her hands. The vessel-- no, Anuri, began to panic, desperately looking for a handkerchief, a way to calm Adair down. It was so embarrassing, reassuring this child as an adult that no, she was not playing peek-a-boo, and no, she did not stub her toe-- and yet she could not

have been happier. For a child was brought into the world. Could anything have been more beautiful? Could anything have been more wonderful?

...

Adair took her sentiment back. Perhaps Anuri wasn't fully blooming yet. A fully bloomed flower would not frustrate her like this.

For example, Anuri's knowledge of simple tasks was limited. Her vocabulary was limited. Her physical strength was *extremely* limited. It was almost pathetic.

But she knew about flowers. She knew the sun and love and how to tuck the covers of Adair's bed so nicely when she went to sleep. She knew how to wake her in the morning so gently Adair actually wanted to face the day, and how to make Adair smile even when she felt the throb of fever. The little things like this were what kept Adair's hopes high for her.

So gradually, she taught Anuri everything she herself knew. At first, it was the little things-- how to use a broom, what kind of kindling was best for keeping the hearth alive, and what to look for in a fish ("No, a large stomach does not mean he is an unfortunate fellow, my flower-- it just means that he is more delicious.") Anuri absorbed it all like a sponge, to Adair's great relief, and soon, Anuri was doing bigger and even more challenging things-- weaving snares, mopping efficiently-- and reading.

Adair was surprised at first, when Anuri first asked her to teach her. The only reason Adair even obliged was because she had nothing better to do. It took a while, with Anuri constantly wanting to rush ahead to more complex things, but despite their rocky start, Anuri was doing relatively well, even able to write fluently—though perhaps not in the best penmanship...

Anuri was constantly learning new words, new phrases, new ideas from the books Adair would have her read. Some words, like "veil" and "smoke" were easy to describe and explain. Others... required some creativity.

"Miss Gardener?"

"Yes, my flower?"

"What is... 'death?'"

Adair pondered how she should respond, weaving the perfect answer in her mind before even considering speaking.

"Death is when a person's time in this world has been consumed. When their time runs out, they... move to a different world. We have no clue what this world is like, or if it even exists-- we just hope that it is beautiful."

"That sounds interesting," Anuri murmured. "I think one day, I'll experience death too."

Adair hesitated, but simply remained silent as Anuri continued to talk.

"This world has so much to offer... so many flowers, so many animals, so many rivers to explore."

Adair stood from her stool at the table, slipping out the door.

"You can do so many things. You can do almost anything you want..."

A faint rustling noise tickled Anuri's ears, worming its way from around the corridor.

"But once you've seen everything... well, it's only natural that we would move on to the next place to see, right?"

Adair came back with a quilt of mismatch patches, folded neatly in her arms.

"But you and me, Miss Gardener--"

"You and I."

"You and I, Miss Gardener, we're not done seeing everything. There is still so much to see. There is still so much to do. There are still so many flowers we still have to plant together!"

Adair just draped the blanket over Anuri, swaddling her like an infant.

"Just... us... together..."

Anuri sighed deeply, her lids drooping. She snuggled into the enveloping warmth and fell asleep.

The flickering of dripping candles was the only light in the dark night, the moon did not dare to shine. Adair blew each glittering taper out, hot wax spattering against the floor like tears. Soon the kitchen was engulfed in darkness, save for the shimmer of Adair's blue crystal necklace, a faint beacon in a room of black.

Anuri hardly stirred when Adair lifted her out of her seat. Together, while the little girl dreamed, they teetered back to the bedroom that they shared. Gently, Anuri was placed on her cot. She remained unperturbed, snoring ever so softly. She looked so peaceful.

Adair sunk into her bed and wept. She sobbed, for she could not keep this child happy forever. Her little, never-changing, immortal flower. Anuri would never taste death—but Adair would. She would leave too fast, too soon-- not long enough to satisfy Anuri's hungry curiosity.

When Adair left, both of them would have to explore their worlds alone.

...

Once upon a time, in a room so dark and quiet, there was a witch.

She was not so much of a witch than she used to be, but she still kept the title. Though the decades crawled forward, and the demons grew restless, she was still the people's savior, she reassured herself. Though she was feeble, she was still... strong.

But she wasn't. She coughed more often than she used to. Her knees would give out at any and every moment. Her vision would fog up, clouded by those gold rings, those flecks of yellow that taunted her as she vomited blood. Teasing her, mocking her for her weakness. She had never known weakness before.

But Anuri remained the same. She was still so young and joyous, so gaily bounding in the fields. Her perfect, round baby face remained unchanged even after many years. If anything, Anuri had only gotten stronger. She could now fight with a sword with such swiftness that it was almost impossible to keep track of its movement. She could identify even the most uncommon herbs, and she could flick the scales off of a fish one by one without nicking it or herself even once.

She could even do the things Adair could never do. She could sing. She could laugh. She frolicked with the townspeople, who now knew her by name. Anuri, Girl of Impossible Feats, they chanted. Anuri, the Protector. Anuri, the Wonderful. And soon, she would be known as the Conqueror of Demons.

For on a day so joyous and bright, Adair was roused from her sleep by a hullabaloo outside her window. She sat up from her bed, afternoon sun streaming in through the window. Adair peeked behind the curtain and--

"All hail Anuri! Blood has been drawn for the first time in years-- the demons naught to dare trespassing now that we have our Protector!"

Adair could only watch. What was this feeling? This... *deja vu*? This...

Her trail of thought was cut off as she suddenly began to cough violently again. Blood dripped from her mouth as she shivered from the pain. Despite herself, Adair looked outside again, at the crowd around the child who

knew not of Adair's troubles and never would. Once, she reminisced, those people sang of her feats, her greatness and strength. Once, they worshiped her for her protection, and once, they had no fear because of her. But now... they didn't need her.

Time moves on. And maybe, it's time that Adair moved along with it.

It had seemed so far away, but now it was closer than ever before. She felt its presence every day, trying to take her, but she pushed it out. She needed to stay. She *thought* she needed to stay... for her little flower.

For she found her importance to the world in being a creator, in being a mentor, in being a... mother. But was there ever any importance? For would the world feel it too when Adair died? Would it crumble and shake, shudder and fall apart? Or would it just move on, not caring for a person who is just one wilted leaf in a whole forest?

Adair decided that... she didn't care anymore. She didn't care if she wouldn't be remembered by anyone. She didn't care if she had to die alone. She didn't even care if she was forgotten by time itself. All that mattered... was that she loved Anuri.

And even if love dies with the person itself, Anuri would always be her little flower. She would always be Adair's greatest pride and joy, even if Anuri never knew it.

She was the beautiful tangle of roots that kept Adair grounded to the Earth. But now... now they're both flying free. Now they're both traveling solo.

As she lay down for the last time, she simply sighed,
and slowly

drifted

away

into the air.

...

The chatter outside the door died down, sputtering away. The people that swarmed in the town square dissipated as quickly as they came. The day, once so clear and shiny, now felt so... dull.

A lonely girl stood there, a girl once surrounded by music and light. She looked to the sky, blue like the crystal on a woman's neck. Suddenly, clouds that were not there before billowed inwards, casting shadows on the cobbled ground.

A sudden chill crept up the girl's spine, and she felt an odd tingle. It was a strange feeling, boiling in her gut as she celebrated with the people. But now, it was so strong. It felt like something was wrong.

Stumbling, she desperately ran to the home she called her own and slammed the door open. The bed was empty-- no one was inside. The house had never felt so quiet. Only the staccato of her breath pierced the thick silence, until she spoke.

"Miss Gardener?"

There was no response.

She gazed around the scene with bated breath. The house wasn't this... dusty before she left. And why was it so... yellow?

Golden powder danced in the air, drifting down like fireflies, settling on whatever surface it could-- including Anuri. It was almost like pollen, the way it coated her skin. Its faint, almost floral odor stung Anuri's nose as she tried to breathe, feeling like icicles penetrating her lungs.

Although intrusive, it looked almost beautiful. Its sheen as it twirled through the air was dazzling, completely enrapturing Anuri. She stood at the door in awe, watching as it fell like snow kissing the ground--

Then she coughed.

A simple, innocent cough. It could have been a hitch in her breath. Maybe it was just a cold. But she continued to cough,

and cough,

and cough.

The ugly sound echoed through the emptiness for no one to hear.