

The black cat twitched its tail twice, hissed, then darted into the shadows. The groundskeeper, startled out of his wits, dropped his oil lantern, which broke. The dry brush quickly lit, and cursing, he stamped it out. *Darn old houses. Why do I have to take care of this old thing anyway? No one lives here, not for a long time.* Muttering to himself, he trudged up the overgrown path to the rickety Victorian house on the hill.

It was clear that the groundskeeper didn't care much for his job: the grasses and shrubbery were either dead or gone wild, the fencing around the house was rusted so badly that he could barely open the gate to even get into the house, and the house itself was so mildewed and dry-rotted that the groundskeeper was somewhat surprised it hadn't fallen down already. So what, then, did the groundskeeper do?

Once a fortnight, as per the instructions of the previous owner – the groundskeeper's father had done this very same job, and his father before him – he was to dust and clean the cellar – only the cellar – until it was spotless, and then leave a single amaranth flower in the center of the floor. The groundskeeper had learned long ago never to question the orders – he was paid well by a mysterious benefactor, and he was not about to change that.

But lately, things were changing. The groundskeeper was growing old. He had no children that could take over the job from him. Why, he figured, could he not at last discover the mystery of the amaranth? And so he resolved, one year, to finally find out the truth.

As he swept, the groundskeeper kept an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. His eyes calmly swept every shadow, every nook, every chink in the brick walls of the cellar. There was nothing, unless one counted spiders and their ilk that had set up temporary shop there.

Once all the cleaning was done, the groundskeeper bent over slowly – he was not aging gracefully; it was difficult for him to straighten up again – and placed the amaranth on the floor, in the exact center. Suddenly the cellar, which had seemed so vast just moments before, now felt like a tomb. *I must flee*, thought the groundskeeper, but his common sense ruled him over. He ducked behind a rotting shelf and waited.

It felt like he waited for hours. He nodded off, woke himself, nodded off again. He tried to watch for anything and anyone. The amaranth always remained where it lay in the center of the cellar. The groundskeeper had almost given up when his pocket watch chimed out a tinny midnight. A few seconds after the last chime had died away, a spectral light filled the cellar. The groundskeeper cowered behind the shelf, ice running through his veins.

A woman stepped out of the light – that is, she would be a woman if women were see-through. She didn't seem to see the groundskeeper behind the shelf, for which he was grateful. He had no idea what this thing was, but he knew it had something to do with the mystery of the amaranth. Indeed, the woman glided to the center of the room and stooped over the flower. The groundskeeper doubted her ability to pick up the amaranth, but she did so without any seeming

difficulty. The spectre – or whatever she was – turned to the stairs and slowly ascended, leaving the cellar.

The groundskeeper took a few moments to collect himself. What on earth had he just seen? His pulse was pounding with the fury of a thousand drum-beats. He took a deep breath to steady himself, then stepped out from behind the shelf and began to follow the spectre.

There was a full moon out, but even if there wasn't, the ghostly woman gave off her own light, making it easy for the groundskeeper to follow her over the rugged terrain. She led him in a direction from the house that he had never been before, past the fence, past the end of the property, into the woods. She seemed to be searching for something. *But what for?* thought the groundskeeper, mystified.

After a quarter hour of walking, they reached a large elm with thick, gnarled branches and knotted roots. An old, frayed rope was tied around one branch, and a human skeleton was splayed around the roots of the tree itself. From behind the tree a second spectre appeared, this time a man. He rushed up to the woman, joy on his face, as if greeting a long-lost lover. The woman handed him the flower, they embraced, and vanished.

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The next morning the groundskeeper went to the town records to look up the previous occupants of the Victorian house. In them, far back, he found the death certificates of a newly-married couple. The man, it seemed, had gone off for a fortnight to the nearest city on a business appointment. While he was away, a robber broke into their house and slew the woman in the cellar. When he returned, his neighbors, believing him guilty of the crime, hanged him in the nearby forest.

The groundskeeper, feeling pity for the couple whose spectres he saw, spent the rest of his life training his replacement. He passed on the story of the murdered couple and their haunted home, which, after the legend grew, became known as Amaranth House.