

IN THEIR GARDEN

by Brenda Cooper

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I'm running back through the desiccated woods, going too fast to keep the sticks and branches that have fallen from the trees from cracking under my weight. My skin and mouth are dry. The afternoon sun has sucked all the water from me, and I haven't stopped to drink. The sole of my right boot is thin enough a stone bumps the ball of my foot, and I want to swear, but I keep going even though I don't hear anyone behind me. Not anymore.

I realize I haven't for awhile; I got away again. I saw ten friendly travelers this time before I met one who meant me trouble. I know better than to go out alone, and if I get back in one piece, Kelley is gonna kill me.

It's not far now, I can see the wall rising up like a cracked egg, dirty white with grey, the top edges jagged.

I trip over a log, going down sharp on my right knee and catch myself on my hands, scraping my palms. I can see the black soil line from the fire ten years ago, the one that saved us from burning up when everything else around caught fire. The dry trees around me are saplings that tried to grow back, and made it for three or four years before they died of thirst. They're as tall as I am.

My breath breaks the silence, and I sound like a rabbit before a thin coyote kills it, scared and breathing too hard. I make myself slow down, try to remember what Oskar taught me. Breathe through your nose. Breathe deep in your belly, so you can feel it going out and in.

Slowly.

S l o w l y .

I'm getting there. A hot breeze blows back my hair and helps me feel better.

"Paulie."

I hate it when Kelley calls me that. My name's Paulette. I hate it that she moves so quiet and I'm so loud and clumsy.

She extends her left hand, but doesn't help me up. There's dirt ground into the creases of her hand and stuck under her nails, and it smells wetter and stronger than the dry, cracked earth under my hands. A year or two ago, I would have apologized first, but I manage not to do that this time. I'm almost as tall as her now, and I can look down on the graying dark hair she's pulled back and tied with a strip of bark, as if we didn't have anything better. She holds her taser in her right hand, a black oblong that she protects as if it means her life. She leaves the gun out as we walk back, swinging in her hand, the arc of its movement precise.

My knee is bleeding, but we both ignore that.

Between here and the wall, all the dead woods have been cleared, and we walk on grey and green grass, stuff Kelley had us plant in the moat of cleared ground around our walled garden. The grass thrives in spite of the dry, thirsty ground. I don't like to admit it, but she picked well; the spiky, low growth has been alive for two years, and it creeps back into the forest as we clear it further away.

She doesn't say anything, but I make up her feelings and words in my head anyway. *The walls are safe. You aren't old enough to leave them yet; you might bring people here. You might get hurt, or raped, and die all by yourself. There's men that would take you in and make you trade your body for water and food. It only takes three days without water.* If she were lecturing me instead of staring off, lost in her head, she'd look down at that point and see I have a small canteen clipped to my belt, one of the old ones where the metal's all banged up. *Well, maybe you'd live a week.* She'd look disgusted. *We have all the people we can water now. You might get lost and not come back, and then what? We'd lose all the training we spent on you.*

The only problem with a lecture in your head is you can't fight it. Kelley knows that, and it makes me even madder, but it's not like I'm going to be able to explain to the others why I picked a fight with someone who didn't say anything to me. The other problem is that she's right. I shouldn't want to argue with her in the first place. But I hate living like the world isn't all screwed up when it really is, or maybe we're living like it is all screwed up, and it's starting not to be some. That's what I'm beginning to believe. Whichever it is, I'll never amount to anything if I stay inside my whole life and work on little things that don't matter with little people who will die behind a wall. The wet, verdant world we live in is a bubble, and I want the real world.

Right before we get to the wall, she turns and looks at me. I expect her to be yelling angry, but what I see in her dark blue eyes is just sadness.

I wonder which one of her plants died this time.

I'm sorry she's sad, but I don't tell her that; I can't show weakness.

The door in the wall is big enough for an army and there's a whiter spot on the wall where Kelley's old boss, James, ripped the sign off during the second year of the drought, and also the second year after I was born. The door opens to let us in, and we are much smaller than an army even though there's a war between us.

Inside, it smells like home and it smells like jail. Like dirt and water and frogs, and, faintly, of flowers. Later, in the summer, it will smell more like flowers, but the spring is showier than it is smelly. We pass magenta azaleas whose bloom is just starting to wilt, and in spite of myself I smile when I see three bees on the one plant. Kelley and Oskar both taught me to see the little things, and I can't help but watch out for the plants.

I stop smiling when I notice that the Board of Directors is waiting. All of them. They're sitting in their formal place, on benches in a circle under the sign that used to be above the doors. "Oregon Botanical Gardens." The Board has run us since the first years of climate change, and the half who are still the original members are gray and wrinkled.

There's four Board members, and Kelley makes five. She says, "Paulie, please sit,"

and gestures to the hot seat—the one for people who are in trouble. I've been here before. The Board's all as old as Kelley; they all remember the world I only see in movies, and they all remember my dad, who's dead now, and they all remember they're the ones who make all the rules and I'm the girl who keeps breaking them.

I wait for them to ask me questions.

They don't. Kelley clears her throat and keeps her chin up and her voice is as sad as her eyes. "Paulie, we've done everything we know how to do to keep you in here. I can't keep putting us at risk by letting you in and out the door. I've told it not to open for you anymore. So if you sneak out again, you will never be allowed back in."

She can't mean it. She's the one had the most hand in raising me, teaching me. I'm her hope for the future. She wouldn't kick me out.

Tim and Li are the two old men of the Board. Li nods, telling me he supports Kelley. Tim is impassive, but he would miss me. We play chess sometimes in the hour between dawn and breakfast. Sometimes I win, and he likes that. He would never kick me out.

Kay and Shell are the other two women on the Board. They're both stone-faced, too, but they might mean it. They're scarier than Tim and Li.

Kelley holds my eyes, and she still looks sad. Usually when she's getting me in trouble she just looks frustrated. "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what will happen if you leave again without permission."

"The door will not let me back in."

"And we will not let you back in," she adds.

Maybe she does mean it. Now her eyes are all wet, even though she isn't really crying yet. Kelley isn't done. I know because no one is moving, and I feel like they're all watching me, probably because they are. Kelley says, "Just so you don't do anything rash, you're confined to the Japanese Garden for a week. Report to Oskar in ten minutes."

She does mean this, except maybe the ten minutes part.

I nod at them all and walk away, keeping my head up. I hate it that they've made me feel small again. In my room, I sweep my journal and two changes of clothes into an old bag, and I brush my hair and my teeth, and put those brushes in the bag, too. I sit on the bed and wait, determined not to be early or even on time.

But Oskar doesn't notice. I walk in the glass box and close the outer door, and wait a moment, then open the inner door. I wonder if these doors are now locked electronically, too, but I don't test them to find out how strict my sentence is. I am inside walls, some glass, and under a plastic sheet roof. The air is heavy with water, although cool. Oskar is nowhere to be seen. When it was finished, the Japanese garden was billed as one of the largest on the west coast. Then the roof was there to keep it from getting too wet, instead of too dry.

I negotiate the stepping-stone path, walking through pillows of pearlwort. The

cinnamon fern that lines the right wall still has some tender, brownish fiddleheads so I pick them. Maybe it's a form of penance.

The very first of the wisteria blooms are showing purple. Oskar is on the other side of the flowers, between me and the waterfall.

He doesn't turn around for the space of two breaths. He's squatting, bent over, clipping the leaves of a Japanese holly. He is a small man, his skin pallid from the damp air he lives in, his long red hair caught back in a braid that falls down a freckled, white back. The top of his braid is grey. He is only wearing shorts; he likes to garden as naked as the Board will let him. Even his feet are bare. I have always suspected that at night, he goes out with his flashlight and gardens more naked than that. Even though he is almost sixty years old, I think I would garden beside him, with my nipples exposed to the cool night air.

He wouldn't let me, of course. They all treat me like glass.

He stands up and turns toward me. Even though the light is starting to grey to dusk, I can see that his eyes look like Kelley's did. "Why do you run away?"

I lean back against the big cedar column that holds up the wisteria arbor, breathing in the sweet air. "Why don't you ever leave this garden?"

I've never asked him this. Instead of looking startled, he smiles. "Because I am saving the world."

He is lying. He is, at best, saving a tiny part of the world that I can walk across in five minutes. Everyone here thinks small.

I hold out my hand, the one with the fiddleheads in it, and he takes them and says, "See?"

I don't see at all.

He leads me to the kitchen, which is the only room here with walls that aren't made of waxed paper or bamboo. When we get in, he hands me back the fiddleheads, and I wash them in a bowl full of water and then pour the water into a bin so it can go into the waterfall, where it will be scrubbed clean by the filter plants.

We have everything ready, but before we start to cook, Oskar takes me up to the top of the rock wall that's in the center of the stroll garden, and we look out toward the ocean. It's too far away to see or hear, but the sun will set over it. He has made a hole in the roof by overlapping the layers of water-capturing plastic so we can see the sunset directly. There are enough clouds to catch the gold and orange a little, but most of the last rays leak up like spilled paint and fade into the blackening sky.

I try to decide whether or not I can use the hole in the roof to climb out of.

After the color starts to fade, there is a hole in time between night and day. Oskar speaks quietly. "I answered you. Will you answer me?"

So that's what he has been waiting for. I guess when you are sixty you have a lot of patience. "We live in a bubble."

He laughs and pokes the plastic, which he can just barely reach from up here. It answers him by rippling, as if it were upside-down water.

I frown. “We do!” I wave my hand at all the roads and people we can’t see from here. “In the real world out there, people are travelling and learning and meeting each other. They’re struggling. They’re taking back the world. This time...” I haven’t really told anyone about this trip yet—I mean, no one had asked. Should I? “I walked the interstate and talked to people on it. Like always. I have my escape routes. They work.”

He cocks an eyebrow at me but doesn’t say anything.

“Eugene’s coming back. There’s five thousand people there now—they dug a well deep enough for water and they think they can irrigate. I met two families who were on their way there.”

He clears his throat. “A year ago, you told me it had all gone to desert. Not even any grass.”

“That’s what I heard. But this time I heard different.” I paused. “I don’t *know* anything. How could I?”

When he doesn’t say anything else, I just keep talking. “A band of singing priests went through last night. They saw five jet airplanes in a day over Portland.”

He can’t say anything to that. We saw a plane fly over the gardens a few weeks ago, and everybody came out and watched. We hadn’t been able to hear its engines, and Kelley had told me it was shaped different than the old jets. What Oskar does say is, “They don’t have the right plants. That’s what I’m saving for your generation. The bamboo and the bearberry, the astilbe and the peony.” He says the names of plants like a prayer, and I imagine him naming the others in his head. “The wisteria and the wild fuchsia, the fiddlehead and the mountain fern....”

“I know what you’re saving. You keep telling me about it.” It’s an old story, how we’re saving the genome of the native plants in case the weather ever goes native again. “It’s good. I’m glad you’re saving it. But that’s your dream.”

He pretends not to notice my tone of voice. “What your travelers see is the Mediterranean weeds that killed the right plants in California when Father Serra brought them on his donkey. Now that it’s warm enough, dry enough, they come here and invade Oregon like they invaded California a long time ago.” His face wears a stubborn look that makes him more handsome, wiping some of the wrinkles away with anger. He starts down the rock face as all of the colors of the garden began to fade, and I hear him tell me, “It is your duty to the planet to help.”

I sit on the stone until stars swim above the plastic roof, diffused by the beads of water that start gathering there as the evening cools. After my eyes adjust enough to the dark, I come carefully to ground and Oskar and I share cinnamon fern fiddleheads and cattail roots and some jerky from a thin bobcat that had the good grace to jump into our garden before it died of starvation and fed us.

That night, I lie in my bed, separated from Oskar by waxy paper and bamboo, and listen to the roof crinkle in the wind. I’m too young to save the lives of doomed plants for a people that might be doomed, too. The world has changed, and we’ll all die if we try to stand

still in its current. We have to adapt to the new climate and the new ways, or die here in Oskar's Japanese stroll garden, walking the stone paths until there's not enough water left for the wisteria.

They've taught me the things I need to know to help them survive, and now they want to keep me in a box. But I don't hate them. Oskar's breathing gets even and deep, and it's a comfort.

But not enough. I toss and turn. I can't sleep. I pack up everything I brought and wrap it in a blanket so I can swing it over my shoulder. I write Oskar and Kelley a note. I tell them I love them and I'm going to go save the world, and I'm sorry they won't ever let me back in.

I find Kelley waiting by the door, a thin stick of a shadow that only moves when I open the door, like she's been waiting for that one moment. I'm caught.

Oskar comes up behind me.

He leans forward and gives me a hug and he whispers in my ear. "Good luck," he says.

I blink at them both, stupid with surprise.

He says, "Kelley and I both knew you'd go. It's time. The Board told us to keep you, because we need young backs and young eyes. But you don't need us. Go find out what they fly those planes with and where they go."

I feel thick in the throat and watery. I say, "I'll come back someday."

Kelley says, "If you take long enough, we'll even let you back in."

I go before we all cry and wake the Board up. The stars look clearer out beyond the wall, and the moat of grass muffles my footsteps.