

The Garden Without Thorns

There was once a land
where every burden had been lifted.

It was called
the Garden Without Thorns.

The fruit fell ripe.
The sun was warm,
but never hot.

No one ached.
No one aged.
The people were kind,
but not close;
content,
but not alive.

Joy was expected.
Grief was unknown.
Growth was unknown.
Change was unknown.

Every day was like the last —
the same bland indolence
drifting on forever,
as far as anyone knew —
If they troubled themselves
to think about
it.
Which they didn't.

However, one young woman did think about it.
Her name was Maelin.

Everyone else
reclined in meadows of forgetfulness,
lulled by the lullaby wind.

But Maelin paced the edge,
night after night,
barefoot in the grass,
listening for a sound
that was never sung.

Something in her longed —
not for comfort,
but for *the real*.

Then one dusk,
beneath a vine
she had never seen,
she found a thorn.

A single one.
Black and curved like a question.

It pricked her finger,
and for the first time,
she *bled*.

And for the first time,
she felt *awake*.

She hid the thorn.
The Elders told her to discard it:

“It carries the poison of the Old World.
Struggle leads to nothing but sorrow.
Best to stay away.”

But the wound stayed.
And it itched with memory —
not hers,
but something deeper.
Some ancestral ache.
A whisper of a story
the Garden could not hold.

Soon, the vine with the thorn split open,
revealing a narrow tunnel
beyond the Garden’s edge.

No one else saw it.
Or chose not to.

She stepped through.

Outside.

The world beyond was vast,
jagged and raw.

Thorns were everywhere.
She stumbled on stones,
tore her hands on bark,
shivered beneath storm clouds.

She nearly turned back
a dozen times.

But something kept her moving —
a fire that had never been lit
in the Garden.

She built her first shelter
from branches
with frostbitten fingers.
Learned to shape fire from friction.
Foraged roots.

Her skin grew rough.
Her muscles sore.
She cried sometimes.
Laughed too —
but now the laughter had texture,
like bread with crust.

She met others.
People who had never heard of the Garden.
Scarred and singing.

They welcomed her awkwardly,
unsure what to make
of a girl with soft hands
and haunted eyes.

She watched them argue and embrace,
fail and rise again.

And she learned
the sacredness
of the *attempt*.

Once, in a bitter winter,
she lost everything
to a fire sparked by her own carelessness.

She sobbed in the snow.

But when she rose the next morning,
hungry and ash-covered,
she caught her reflection
in a pool of ice.

There was grief in her face.
And strength.
And *life*.

Much later, in the Garden,
someone found another thorn.

The vine was spreading.

The Elders gathered.

“What is happening?” they asked.

And far beyond the wall,
Maelin sat beside a fire,
telling a story
to children gathered close.

Not a sermon,
not a warning —
just a *tale*.

Of a place where nothing ever hurt.
And how,
without hurt,
nothing could ever matter.

She held up a thorn,
now polished and silver,
worn on a cord
around her neck.

“Ease,” she said,
“has a cost —
a price I won’t pay.”

— *William Zeitler*
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