

In the city of Beztsvetok, there are no flowers. They are absent from photographs, drawings, paintings, clothing prints. Gardens are sparse and widely uncommon, often traded for neatly manicured lawns and extra hours behind a desk. History wrote that at first, the people of Beztsvetok had not noticed the gradual removal of flora. There is, after all, little place for natural blooms in a city. But at the first public concern, a wave of hasty charts and posters overtook the streets. *Roses Ruin Relationships!* shrieked a sign sporting an enormous broken heart. *Snowdrops Sink Stocks!* announced a flyer pasted to a bank. *Magnolias Malfunction Minds!* crowed another in bold red letters. One could say it was propaganda at its most evident, yet there was no denying the economic growth and overall increased output from the city afterwards. Productivity soared, numbers skyrocketed, and surrounding towns marvelled at the incredible transformation.

Before, the books said, Beztsvetok had been colorful, yet distracted. Children braided daisy chains in place of code. People would stop to wonder at cherry blossoms instead of the new constructions cutting up the horizon. Husbands spent too much time selecting carnations for their wives and not enough time selecting lucrative ventures for their corporations. But after the reduction, new rituals assembled themselves across each household. Now, children weave elaborate simulations designed to sell. People gather over wine to discuss the efficiency of commercial expansion. Husbands order packaged chocolates and keep their office doors closed. It has become a gray city, yes, but a safe one. Here, contentment is synonymous with success, and Beztsvetok has no shortage of remarkable achievements. Nearly everyone has made some monumental, memorable contribution to society. Nearly.

Alyona Nikolaeva is a terribly curious girl. She is fond of asking more questions than can be reasonably answered, of wearing her hair loose and tangled, of roaming well past the marked boundaries of her neighborhood in the quieter hours of night. Her parents have long given up on smothering their daughter's peculiar whims — to them, she is an anomaly better left unaddressed. As a cause of Alyona's particular "affliction," she finds herself drawn to the unusual, the extraordinary, the bizarre. An astonishing collection of oddities fills her room: jars crammed with old pen nibs and loose typewriter keys, albums containing pressed leaves and dried insects, dozens of shoeboxes full of lost movie ticket stubs and postcards she'd found scattered about parking lots. This accumulation of strange knick-knacks and baubles only grows with each nightly exploration as Alyona sets out in search of a new treasure to add to her shelves.

One such expedition sees her to the outskirts of the city — further than she has ever been before. Here, buildings sit shorter, coated in a thick layer of grime and neglect. Few people live this far out, opting instead for tiny apartments among the bustle. Alyona prefers the quiet. It coaxes mysteries from their hiding places into her pockets. She has always known where to look, and tonight her wandering leads her to a narrow alley tucked behind an abandoned housing complex. Shadows thrown by street lamps wind around her ankles like stray cats; she attracts darkness, as if the spirit of adventure itself has deemed her worthy of a cloak for mischief-making.

“Come out, little secrets,” she whispers, skimming the brick wall extending on her right, the rusty chain-link fence on her left. Often, she is inclined to rely exclusively on tactile sense, to stumble blindly into her next discovery. But this time she simply traces her way through the alley until she reaches a particularly difficult obstacle: a dead end. Alyona frowns. Her intuition is rarely mistaken. There must be something buried here, perhaps so well that even she is unable to spot it at first glance. Dropping to her knees, she scours the debris-choked earth, pushing aside wide sheets of beaten metal, discarded kitchen appliances, long wooden beams sharp with crooked nails.

Nearly an hour later, she pauses, wiping the sweat from the back of her neck with a dirt-crusting hand. The moon has risen overhead and broken the clouds to observe the peculiar girl sifting through rubbish in the dark. A breeze sweeps by, and she stands to let the air better cool her face. *Perhaps, she thinks, there is nothing here, after all.* Alyona presses her lips together. *Perhaps I have finally grown up and lost my sense for adventure.* Brushing the dust from her palms, she surveys the gloomy alley once more. Nothing, of course. She curses the day’s luck and with a great sigh turns to make her way back home, where the pipes clang and her father snores and there is absolutely nothing adventurous at all.

*But look!* Yes, just there. A warm smudge of yellow, just above the rust-stained refrigerator. It is small, so easy to miss. If Alyona’s sharp eyes were not attuned to the tells of covert wonders, she may not have noticed it at all. She skirts around an overturned desk, clambers over a tower of burnt-out microwaves, slides past half a deserted rowboat. The fridge is hard to budge. It takes several painful rams of her shoulder to knock it aside, and there is a loud clang when it finally topples. For a long moment, she is silent. Even the stars hold their breath at her newest discovery.

Caught in the crumbling mortar of the brick wall, there is a flower. It is buttery gold in color, with five round, glistening petals and a delicately textured center. A thin green stem

strains against the weight, clinging to the stone with a desperation Alyona has never seen before. *Beautiful*, she thinks. Then immediately, *I want it*. You see, to be a collector of any sort, one requires a certain amount of audacity and, frankly, greed. Alyona is no exception, and this treasure is certainly not one to leave behind.

In one easy motion, she plucks up the flower and examines it closely. This is her gravest mistake, for once her senses have tasted the seeds of vibrant color, sweet perfume, smooth petals, there will be no return. With a shiver, the blossom expands in her hands, unfolding until each petal is the size of a dinner plate. The center fills with dozens upon dozens of tiny white flowers, multiplying to overflow. Where each one flutters to the ground, a cluster of slender blooms spring up.

“Lilies,” Alyona says, then claps a hand to her mouth, dropping the yellow blossom. The word escapes her without any warning, yet she knows without a doubt it is the correct identification. “Heliotropes,” she gasps, this time falling to her knees in the garden growing around her. Fresh irises creep up her thighs with thread-thin fingers; lycorises loop her waist in a scarlet belt. Despite being so accustomed to the bizarre, Alyona scrubs her tired eyes to make certain her mind hasn’t begun to unravel at the seams from lack of sleep. But there is no doubt. How can there be, when the sensation of leaves brushing up her neck is so inexplicably true? Planting her hand in the center of a newly-sprung patch of pansies, Alyona struggles back to her feet, tearing up thick, emerald vines that had latched tightly over her shoulders. She must reassure her sanity — confirm this impossible fever-dream with another set of eyes, watch someone else’s expression match the pitch of wonder in her chest. Yet already, a newfound fear scrapes at the back of her skull: that all traces of this miracle will crumble at the doorstep of explanation.

Alyona sets her brows in a fierce scowl and shakes her head, daisies tumbling from her unruly curls. *I will feed this city magic, no matter the cost*, she vows, and filling her arms with flowers, she starts back the way she had come not so long ago. The scattered blooms spark to life with a quiver — eager to please — leaping ahead to paint the path with anemones and marigolds and great bunches of baby’s breath. Each imprint Alyona’s feet leave in the earth is immediately overrun with young buds and their nosy stems. They stretch themselves to snapping in their attempts to follow her, like just-hatched young yearning for their mother’s touch.

The journey back to the heart of the city is not an easy one; the blooms burst and tangle underfoot and Alyona winces as she crushes half a dozen rarities with each step. The flowers in her arms have multiplied once more, now pouring over in a waterfall of petals and pollen, the

delicate roots twining around her fingers to hold their place. As the buildings stretch higher and the roads thinner, the trail of flora widens behind her; frangipanis crowd the sidewalk cracks, sugarbushes surge from garbage bins with staggering force, rosemallows the size of automobiles tear through the asphalt. The flowers stain the muted streets with fuschia, turquoise, cobalt, coral — stark against the colorless night. It is at once both the most beautiful and the most terrible thing the city has ever seen, and somewhere deep beneath the earth, an ageless dread soaks into the bedrock, rumbling low and fearful. Perhaps if Alyona's sharp sight had not been shrouded by the petals gathered thickly on her lashes, she would have seen the tulips snaking steadily around the loftiest skyscrapers, their blooms swelling larger than the squat houses in the outskirts. Perhaps if Alyona's acute hearing had not been muffled by the rustle of velvety leaves, she would have heard the shattering of glass as great bunches of peonies broke savagely through storefronts and pulled shouts from silent bedrooms. Perhaps if Alyona's quick tongue had not been wrapped in rosy thorns, she would have cried out to the moon as the roots slid down her throat.

The city's pulse quickens as chaos unfolds. One girl has crumpled in its center, blossoms rolling off her in vibrant tides; a harbinger too weak to bear a hunger so timeless and raw. Blood seeps from her mouth where the brambles have torn flesh, smearing scarlet over the bone-white camellias at her breast. She reaches blindly into the dark, deaf to the groans of toppling buildings, the rising screams of terror, the gnashing of the earth as it splits and fractures any remnants of order. *I will feed this city to magic*, she thinks. The words wilt in her grasp, choked out by the urge to peel back her skin and loose the buds beneath it; they itch and creep and drag shivers down her spine. And suddenly, for the first time in her life, Alyona Nikolaeva finds herself afraid of knowing the truth.