It was a land desolated by famine and disease. There was once a time when it was a paradise on Earth. But that was years ago. All that remained were memories of grandeur, of power, of luxury.

There supposedly was a way to fix this. Every year, a plant called the moonflower would bloom on a certain day. The people of the town boiled it into a tea and everyone over the age of fifteen had to drink it. Then, one person would collapse. He or she would go to the spirit world to try to fix the land’s curse. But no one had succeeded for years.

And if they did not succeed, they did not come back.

It would be Seth’s first year drinking the moonflower tea. Yet he was familiar to its power already. It had taken his father away ten years ago. Seth could remember the day clearly: he had come home in the evening and saw his mother alone in the house. “Where’s Dad?” he had said.

His mother turned. “Dad won’t be coming back anymore,” she managed to say before she ended up sobbing in his arms. Something broke in his mother then, and it was all Seth could do to make her happy now.

Everyone gathered around the town square. The mayor began pouring tea from the large cauldron into cups, and the city council passed them around. Seth could hear his mother praying softly to the gods to protect him. He was all that she had left.

The cups were all passed out. There was an awkward silence, and it seemed that the entire world had stopped but for the fire that was flickering in the center of the town square.

“May our savior come forth today,” the mayor said, as he said every year.

“May our savior come forth today,” said the townspeople, and they all drank.

Seth sipped the tea. Was it supposed to be this strong and bitter? It ignited all of his taste buds on fire even though it was merely a sip. Then his other senses began to overload: his ears began ringing, his sight flashed black and white, a sickly smell wafted through the air.

Then everything turned black, and the last thing he remembered was his mother’s screams.

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Seth opened his eyes, and he saw the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Plants of every color surrounded a delicately carved fountain. They bloomed wildly, as if saying, “This is what it is to be free”. The flowers ranged from small to spotted to multicolor, and a pleasant fragrance came from them. He walked over to the fountain and was amazed by the water. In the village, the water would be almost murky, and tasted metallic. But this, this was pure, clear water. What would it taste like?

“Go ahead and try it,” a voice said from behind him. Seth turned, and he saw a lady emanating a crystal blue aura in a white dress. Her blue eyes and brown hair complemented her fair face. In her right hand she held a wooden staff.

“Uh, is th-this your fountain?” he stuttered.

The lady smiled. “Yes; but you can try it,” she replied in a melodious voice.

He cautiously cupped water in a little gourd by the fountain and drank it. Soon his cup was back in the fountain for more. He had never tasted something as wonderful as this!

“Wow…” he said, “this is a marvelous place. This is the best tasting water I have ever had! And the plants… Are they all yours?”

The woman nodded. “Would you like to live here?” she asked. “I know it’s rather abrupt, but…”

“Absolutely!” Seth answered. He was about to dip his gourd in for some more water, but his mind flashed back to the village. “But…” he started, but the lady interrupted him.

“I see you have some doubt,” she said. “I can grant you immortality here, Seth. You could live here, in this perfect world, forever, without any worries. You would soon forget your horrible past in the village. And I know you tire of caring for your scarred mother day after day. Would it not be better to stay with me?”

Seth immediately replied, “No, that’s not true!” but he knew that he was lying. He was at times tired of taking care of his mother, of staying at home when his friends would be hanging out, of being the responsible one in the house.

The woman smiled again, but this time it seemed scary instead of kind. “I know you are lying, Seth. If you accept my gift, you would never have to see your broken mother again. You would never have to feed her every single meal, you would never have to suffer, to feel pain. You would never have to see her struggle to live every single day; you would never have to sacrifice your precious time for her!” The lady was yelling now, and her face was flushed red. “You would never have to hear HER CRY THE NIGHT AWAY, DO YOU HEAR ME!”

But Seth did not hear her. He heard his mother, on the day his father left, the day he accepted the lady’s gift. Part of her died that day, and he knew that the other part would die too, if he became immortal.

“I apologize, but I cannot take your offer,” Seth said.

“Then die!” the lady screamed, and her face transformed into a mask of swamp green skin. Her eyes became blood red, and her brown hair became jet black. The wooden staff became an obsidian spear. She rushed toward him, and the moment the spear touched him, it felt as if his soul was drained away.

Then he felt nothing else.

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It was dark when he woke up, so Seth could not tell if he was dead or not. However, Seth soon realized that he could move his arms and legs again. “Did I not die?” he thought. His eyes began to focus and he realized that he was in his room in his house, except everything had been taken away. He walked to the window and brushed away the curtains.

What he saw almost convinced him that he truly was dead. For this was not the village that he had lived in before. Seth saw a crisp blue sky lined with fluffy white clouds and green grass gently swaying from the wind. He saw so many colors and things that were alive in what used to be a barren and desolate field that it seemed impossible. Maybe this was what they called the afterlife.

But then he heard the door creak open.

His mother’s eyes were wide open. She tried to speak, but he was already in her arms, just like the day ten years ago, except this time, her tears were not of sorrow but of joy.

And he knew then that he had made the right choice.