

The Rose Hedgewitch



My name is Margaret, Maggie to my friends. I spend most of my days tending to the Empress's Rose Gardens in the northern courtyards and –

Maggie paused writing and lifted her quill in the air to gently bite down on the tip. It was an annoying habit that she'd had from childhood that her mother was constantly on her to break. Pursing her lips in concentration as she looked back down at the letter, she continued writing.

...I would be...

Her green eyes squinted and she scowled. "No, that's not right," Maggie muttered while scratching a line through the last three words. The words weren't assertive enough. If this was going to be sent to the Head Gardener she had to be forthright.

I am a great gardener. Better. As such I am applying for the new position of Assistant Gardener to the Imperial greenhouse.

She looked down at the half-full sheet of paper filled with blotted out lines and unfinished sentences, and sighed. Worst of all it was due *today*. But she would get it done and perfect. There was one coveted position to tend to exotic magical plants in the greenhouse and she wanted it to be *hers*. Determined to finish that letter, she bent back down over the scarce piece of paper she'd found for the

purpose.

The next minute a knock sounded on the door of the small, cramped shed she sat in. The echoes vibrated through the wood shed like the pounding of horses racing through the cobblestone streets of the city. It didn't help that the stool she sat on was close enough to the door that she felt like a drum had been beat an inch from her head.

Scrambling up from the overturned bucket that acted as her desk, she grabbed the edge of the wall in front of her in haste, pushing the makeshift door back to see who was there. Staring up in dread she almost shut the door right back in the person's face. Maggie's worst nightmare stood scowling down at her.

Hadiene, the gardener for the Empress's kitchens, glared at her, cheeks flushed red in anger and sweat beading on her brow even though a cool summer breeze was wafting in the air. Nervously Maggie tried to keep a grimace off her face. Instead her mouth froze in a gaping smile and she looked pained.

"Hadiene, how are you?"

"How am I?" came the spluttered reply, "You sit here on your rump doodling away the days while your blasted roses encroach once more onto my gardens."

"Hadiene, I just clipped them yesterday, they can't be," protested Maggie.

Poking her finger into Maggie's chest in accusation, "Don't you tell me what they can and can't be, missy. The fact of the matter is – *they are.*" The woman stood over her breathing heavily as she practically snorted like a boar in anger.

"I'll take care of it, Hadiene, I promise."

When the woman's glare only intensified, Maggie hastened to add, "today."
When Hadiene didn't move, "Now?"

At that the large woman shuffled aside and Maggie grabbed her letter and satchel

of tools and hastily beat a fast retreat back to her gardens. Rushing away from the tool supply area, which included sheds for seeds and fertilizer, she headed off to the offending patch of gardens. Maggie was sure there was nothing to worry about. She kept a firm eye on her plants, checking and snipping them every day.

Maggie was relieved to see that the entrance was empty. Sometimes people came for liaisons since the gardens were abandoned. She tried to keep them out of the area as much as she could, but it was hard. The area was called the 'Rose Gardens' but a name like the 'Endless Rose Maze' would have been equally accurate. First grown twenty-five years ago as a haven during the reign of Prince Sebastian's mother, the Empress, may she rest in peace, the rose gardens remained, ignored by the gardeners except for the maintenance of the hedges. The Empress had loved the colors and smells of blooming roses and had become fixated on them after her miscarriages.

The Emperor had done his best to appease his wife's longing for the flowers and ordered a year round garden laid out, with roses that would bloom in all seasons and attendants to care for them as needed. For a time the Rose Gardens had been the prized possession of the Empress and visiting them was an envied treat she bestowed on her friends and well-connected courtiers of the Imperial Court. After the Empress was murdered in the very place she found peace, the Rose Gardens were abandoned and their allure had faded.

As Maggie put aside her letter in the small cubby at the base of the entrance, she kept her satchel of tools with her. Maggie supposed that the gardeners had been lucky that the Emperor hadn't decided to burn the Rose Gardens to the ground. In his anguish he'd made it clear that the place reminded him strongly of the memories that he shared with his late wife. That's why he kept them around. He wouldn't come near the Rose Gardens but he didn't want his memories to perish with it either. And so an official decree had been passed. The Rose Gardens were to be closed and the Emperor didn't want to see another rose anywhere near him. Initially it was an almost impossible feat for the gardeners to cull all of the thousands of roses which blossomed. Due to the magic that sustained the Rose Gardens the roses grew and bloomed in all four seasons. The mages had been forced to drain the magic reservoirs completely before it resumed a more normal

growth cycle. Still the roses appeared year round; just without the overwhelming number of blossoms that had come before.

It was Maggie's sole task and had been for the past two years to cut the roses away and dispose of them. Not to prune. Not to enhance their beauty. No, she was sent to destroy every bloom that appeared. As she went from hedge to hedge with her clipping shears, she hummed along to herself. She didn't like that her sole task was to kill the beautiful blooms. More than anything she wanted to be a *true* gardener. One who cared for the plants and brought out their very best. Not kill them in the prime of their lives.

But at least her role was something. Inside an actual *garden*. But sometimes she got the weirdest feeling, as if the garden was watching her. She would see branches move out of the corner of her eye. Or whispers of rustling leaves around the corner that looked undisturbed when she ventured there.

As she clipped the few blooms that had appeared, she noted that most were just buds. They hadn't even opened their petals.

"So why was Hadiene so upset?" she wondered.

She *knew* Maggie worked hard to get to every bud before it opened and so far she'd achieved that in a garden the size of a city block with the twists and turns of a maze. She would have gotten to those small buds by the week's end.

Maggie carefully put each bud in a pouch at her waist to be burned. As she walked in the maze, the twists and turns etched in her mind, she turned towards the edge of the Rose Gardens that bordered the kitchen gardens. It was around a sharp corner so she could be forgiven for being so startled that she dropped her clipping shears in surprise. The falling clippers almost took off her big toe as she hopped back hastily.

Eyes large and wide in gaping disbelief, Maggie stared at the fully blooming wall of roses before her. They had grown so much on the hedge that marked the border that she saw more rose-red, the vibrant deep red color of a rooster's tail

feathers, than the deep green of the surrounding leaves. It was impossible. She'd just trimmed that particular hedge two days ago. She had a schedule to prove it. She went to specific parts of the maze on specific days of the week and kept the rose buds culled in an orderly fashion.

Biting her lip anxiously, she rushed forward with her clipping shears as if she was going into battle and attacked the hedges with a ferocity that held a twinge of fear. It had been twenty-five years but the Emperor's displeasure with the Rose Gardens was still well known. If word got out that she had let the rose buds *grow* the whole of the gardening community would be furious with her because the Emperor would be furious with *them*. She moved at a steady pace along the hedge clipping the bottom row with angry strokes. She felt a minute twinge. A feeling as if a spark of energy was jumping to her fingertips.

It wasn't very big and it took her awhile to notice. But with every clip of her shears and the fall of a rose she felt the spark again. Resolutely she ignored it and kept going until she had cleared all of the roses from the bottom and middle of the hedges. For the top she had to make a trip back to the tool supply shed for a ladder and then bag up the fallen rose blooms hours later.

She'd just been lucky that the blooming hedges hadn't extended to the other side and into the kitchen gardens. Thank goodness there was a spell that kept all of the roses confined to the inside – for the viewing pleasure of only the Empress and those to whom she extended the favor. Hadiene had probably seen the tips peeking over from her domain. Wiping a sweaty brow, careless of the green smell and dew on her gardening gloves, Maggie sighed in relief. They were all gone. Every single bloom sat in three bags at her feet. She just had to haul the bags to the fire pit now, one by one.

They may be light flowers but getting each bag to the fire pit, on the other side of the kitchen gardens which she couldn't go *through* only around, would take forever. It had been the early morning when she'd begun. And the sun had already risen at the peak of noonday. She had other areas of the garden to tend. This one hadn't even been on the day's list. She needed help. Hoping the hawker was nearby she let out a piercing whistle. And let it out again. She heard his call

back.

She peered up and saw a hawk winging over the Rose Gardens. Quickly she started jumping up and down to get its attention. It had to be his hawk. As if it were recognizing and acknowledging her, the hawk screeched and dipped low nearby. Minutes later the boy appeared. She called him Hawkboy because she had yet to learn his name. He didn't speak. *Ever*. She'd thought he was creepy when they'd first met. He made no effort to communicate through letters or miming; he had just stared. Eventually she'd gotten used to him and over time a trust had grown. He helped her dispose of rose buds in the garden and she paid him in vegetables that she scavenged from the kitchen garden when Hadiene wasn't looking.

Together they got the bags of roses to the other side of the gardens and Maggie handed him her last stash of carrots. She didn't wait to see the roses burn. She never did. The only time she had stayed to watch it felt like darkness was engulfing her body. The boy's hawk swooped down when they were coming back around the kitchen gardens to grab an errant hare running through the patches. Hadiene would be pleased. She'd set out traps for that pesky rascal day after day with no luck. Grinning, the boy grabbed the hare from where his hawk had deposited the bleeding corpse at his feet and cheerfully waved goodbye. Maggie went back to her gardens. She had two more areas to check and clear before the day was up. But before then she would break for a snack.

As she sat on the edge of an old water fountain that had long ago been turned off she finished her letter. By the end of the hour it was ready to be sent to the Head Gardener. She munched on a crisp apple as she looked it over once more. Tracing each word with her fingertip she hoped the Head Gardener would consider her service in the Rose Gardens positively. It was hard work with very little reward.

Letter stowed safely in her apron pocket, she paused, when she heard a faint rustle behind her. Frowning she didn't turn around – she figured it was just the rattle of dry leaves on the ground. She stood and grabbed her tool satchel and headed back into the maze. Tools in hand again, she went to a different part of the maze. The reflecting pool; a giant triangular-shaped depression in the ground

which had long ago been drained of water, rested forlorn-looking before her.

As she clipped the buds of the surrounding yellow roses that were trying their very best to bloom, she hummed along to herself. It was a ballad she'd heard at festival the year before that helped her get a clipping rhythm going. And then she heard the rustle of dry leaves again, behind her. She whirled around to see a small amount of leaves twirling on the wind in the dry pool bed. Shrugging at the sight she went back to clipping. Soon she moved on to the area of the gardens known for the Tree of Many Blooms. It was her last stop of the day. As she walked the maze she reflected on what was coming ahead.

The tree had three special blooms of roses grafted onto it with looping vines and trellises to keep it well-shaped. Purple of the midnight moon, red of the darkest blood, and orange of the brilliant sun were all together on one root stock. Three of the Empress's favorite colors. As she walked into the area where the giant tree stood, its branches arcing to the sky, Maggie would have given a lot to see the blooming tree in its glory.

Today it stood dry and barren with desiccated vines looping all around it and a stone bench placed before it. The Tree of Many Blooms had been among the hardest to keep from blooming. The gardeners had finally deprived it of all water and depleted the nutrients in its soil. They were not allowed by decree to chop it down. So instead they had doomed it to a slow death.

Trailing her fingers over its dried vines Maggie spoke to it, "I wish I could have seen you in your prime." She continued talking to it as she walked up the path of stairs carved into the trunk. The tree was so huge that it took up the space of a small castle tower. Over the years it had grown so much that the four walls of hedges encasing it looked like they were going to crumble under the push of its roots.

"But you won't last forever will you?" Maggie asked softly as she went in and clipped the rare rose buds that she saw, distracting the tree with words and murmurs as she went. Pursing her lips she wondered aloud, "It's been fifteen years since they drained the magic from you and halted the water flowing to your

roots. How much more water do you have stored in there?" Teasingly she knocked her hand on the bark of its trunk and stuck her ear close. She heard the hollow ring of its empty interior ringing back at her. "Not much left," she murmured knowing that the louder ring meant less water. Back at her tasks she occasionally felt the wind push against the tree – making even its mighty limbs shudder as if it were trying to shake off the cold. "There," she said in a satisfied tone once she had climbed over, on and under all of the branches with peeking blooms. She began to move backward on the last branch in order to climb down and get back on the looping stairs.

And then she saw it. A bloom – a bright, orange bloom nestled in a hole in a far-off branch. It must have escaped her notice before, being practically hidden in the folds of the branch. Maggie edged back out on the limb on her hands and knees. Carefully she stood up on the tree limb that was no bigger than a plank of wood and reached with her hands for the bloom in the branch hole. If she could just clip it then she could go on with her evening, deliver the letter, and get *out* of this blasted service in the Rose Gardens.

Straining with her limited reach, even *with* the clipping shears, she felt the muscles in her shoulders and back begin to pain. Still she reached some more, trying to stretch out her long limbs. She barely brushed the petals of the rose, but this time it was too much. She felt herself begin to fall and there was nothing but air and dying vines and branches to stop her descent. Dropping the clipping shears as she fell screaming, she desperately reached for the surrounding branches, hoping to grip onto something strong, anything that would stop her fall. Time stood still and she was curiously aware of the air around her, the sun shining down and the smell of the dried out bark as she fell down.

She knew she was going to die. She was too far up for the impact with the ground to be anything but deadly. What she didn't understand was the nature of the Tree of Many Blooms. It was more than a product of nature. It chose to act. A mighty branch swung around towards her body. With a twist and creaking wood that threatened to snap under the weight of the unnatural movement it caught her. Her breath whooshed out of her body as her chest impacted the wood. Her lungs caved inwards and her breasts felt like they'd been pushed into a vice. But she

was alive. She clung to the mighty branch, stunned, as it moved back into its original position. Minutes later when she finally felt well enough to release her clawed hold on the bark, she climbed down the tree uncertainly.

Backing away from it slowly she looked at it, waiting for another branch to move. Nothing happened. Then she went to grab her clipping shears and the earth around the Tree of Many Blooms swallowed them. That was it. She had had enough today. The rest of her tools, lying there in her satchel, were abandoned as she ran back to the garden's entrance.

Grabbing at the letter in her pocket to make sure it was still there, while ignoring her disheveled appearance, she raced to the Head Gardener's office. There was no way she didn't deserve a new placement after all of this. Rushing into the building and over to his office she was met by a closed door. Putting her ear to the door she listened for voices. Then she knocked, and knocked again. No answer. Practically jumping around in anxiety she looked out of the small window to the left and there he was, bending over to tend to some very large, and vicious, snapdragons. You couldn't go near those without thick gloves and a healthy dose of anti-venom. They were poisonous on top of being just plain mean. It was *those* types of plants that she was meant to work with. Not desiccated trees.

Once outside she edged forward until she was within hearing distance of the Head Gardener and well out of reach of the snapping plants. Glaring at the snapdragons as they hissed and lunged at him he muttered, "You'd think we didn't feed you with all that snapping."

To the rump dancing about in front of her, the owner's head leaning down at the base of the plants, she said, "Sir...Sir may we speak?" He stood up slowly and turned around, adjusting his goggles on his head. Then he removed them to adjust his glasses underneath the goggles.

"Margaret?" he said conversationally, "Lovely day isn't it?"

"Yes sir, it is," she said while fidgeting with nervousness until she finally thrust the letter into his hands. He raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“My application. You explained in the weekly meeting that all those that wanted to apply to the greenhouse needed to submit a letter.”

“Hmm, so I did,” he said as he unfolded the letter. As he read he mumbled along, “Yes, yes, very good, very good.” Finally he looked up, “Well then Miss Margaret. You’re hired.”

Maggie couldn’t believe her ears. “Really?” she said in disbelief.

He nodded, “I’ve seen your progress with the Rose Gardens and had hoped you would apply. It’s a good opportunity for you to gain more skills by serving in the greenhouse.”

“Yes it is,” she said, faintly still dazed.

“Well then,” he said while handing back her letter, “Turn your tools in and we’ll get you set up in the greenhouse tomorrow.”

As she turned away she hesitated thinking back on the Rose Gardens. “Who will take care of them, Sir?”

“Them?”

“The Rose Gardens?”

“Ah, not to worry. We’ve got a new recruit that will prune it.”

She almost flinched at the word *prune*. The description was nowhere near apt. But she wasn’t going to argue. Today was her last day. But she needed her tools. The tools she’d left at the base of that blasted tree. The tree that had saved her life.

As she walked through the maze she noticed a curious thing. Rose blooms. White ones where there had been none before. They left a beautiful trail straight back

to the Tree of Many Blooms.

When she got back to the tree it looked the same as it had before. Her clipping shears had magically appeared on the bench with the rest of the tools. And she suspected the orange rose bloom in the hidden hole was still up high. Walking forward she grabbed her satchel and her clipping shears. Then slowly dried leaves of the tree began to fall all around her. An invisible wind picked them up and they swirled softly around her – gently touching her skin in whispers of promises. Promises she couldn't accept. Hefting up the bag she felt like saying something. She felt like wishing the spirit of the tree - the last holdout in a dying garden - well. But she knew that even that would be giving it false hope. The new recruit was coming and it was doubtful they could stop the advent of death on the horizon.

Perhaps being *Sorry* was enough on both of their parts. She walked out of the maze without another word.

Terah Edun

Terah Edun lives in Georgia and enjoys traveling, writing, and music. She has published two series set in the Algardis Universe – Courtlight and Crown Service.

"The Rose Hedgewitch" blends Edun's interest in coming of age and women & girls with her love of fantasy.

Copyright © 2014, Terah Edun. All rights reserved. Do not redistribute.

Find Terah at www.facebook.com/TerahEdunAuthor.