

## Gardenias

The Kingdom of Gardenia had never fallen so silent before. All the children who would play out in the long narrow streets close to their friend's homes became hidden within the depths of their own rooms. Merchants had all closed down their shops and the maidens had given themselves house chores to fulfill while they had all prevented from going outside to run their errands. Today marked the second year from the passing of Aliana's father. Her father, King Neil, died due to chronic illness. Her mother had taken months to regain her own strength and everyone within the castle had done their best to avoid the obvious topic. Death was never an easy topic, she had learned. Everyone's chests would tighten and expand while their eyes gawked a little from sheer panic every time her father's name was mentioned after he had passed.

Aliana laid there in the bed, the same as she did in the first year of his death, eyes closed and taking a deep breath in of the crisp air. She was never close to her father. He had always been running his royal King duties and skipping dinners. He had assigned different handmaidens to play her mother figure to make up for the immense amount of time Aliana's mother was never with her. Aliana's mother had always made more of an attempt to be with Aliana throughout her growth than her father, though. She acknowledged that around the age of 8 and had always treasured her efforts deeply.

She kicked her legs off the side of the bed, finally getting up for the first time of that day. Aliana didn't know what time it was, nor did she really care. The sun was out, shining brightly through her windows and drawing an allurements for her to start her day. Her feet touched the cold wooden floor, creaking as she gently placed her weight down onto it. She wondered whether the castle would ever get a renovation or not. Her handmaiden explained to her once that the castle was a historic relic of the previous generations of the royal family. In short: it can never change.

Elyse, her handmaiden, came into her room to chirp Aliana awake. Her eyes slightly gawked at the sight of her already out of bed, surprised at the change of routine.

"You're up!" she sang happily, not having to deal with her sloth.

"Shocking, I know," Aliana panned in response, stretching her arms out to loosen her tense limbs. Elyse walked deeper into her room, placing down a wooden basket of her laundered clothes that were folded perfectly before being brought to her room.

She began to place them down onto Aliana's bed. "It's a mournful day today," she hummed with sorrow in her eyes. Elyse had been a handmaiden for the royal family for longer than Aliana had been alive. Elyse dedicated her life to the royal family and now dedicated it to being Aliana's second mother.

"Your father should be special to you. He was the reason why you were born, sweetheart," she softly stated as her hands worked away, placing the folded laundry

into its designated locations. Aliana scoffed, making her way to the washroom to freshen up.

“He wanted the best for you and did so much for you when you were born. It’s just a shame he didn’t have any time to spend with you when you were growing up,” she said, raising her voice in order for it to be heard over the running sink.

“Did he? It seems ironic I have to mourn the death of someone that I barely knew growing up,” Aliana mumbled. Elyse placed her task aside and walked into Aliana’s washroom, leaning against the doorframe as Aliana brushed her teeth.

Aliana stared at her through the mirror as Elyse spoke, “He wanted to be there for you Aliana - he just didn’t have the time.” Her voice was more audible in contrast to earlier. An odd feeling engulfed her heart for the rest of the morning. She couldn’t decide whether it was because she was sentimental towards the lack of connection she had with her father or if it was out of pain over their distance.

Typically, she’d ignore these prevailing thoughts by distracting herself with any duties she had to fulfill that day. Last year, she was stuck in isolation in her room accompanied by Elyse to watch over her. The intention was to give Aliana the space she needed, but to be frank, she did not want space. She wanted to surround herself with her friends and continue on with her princess duties as though her father never existed. She wanted to act as though he never played a role in her life. Through her eyes, his lack of appearance made her feel that way.

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The large walls to the castle towered over Aliana’s height as she stared down the hallway filled with hustle and bustle. The red and gold accents of the castle complimented the white uniforms of the staff that rushed white bouquets of flowers to the memorial as the kitchen in the right corner would be busy preparing her father’s favourite food to honour his death. Aliana had a feeling of guilt for not being able to assist with their tasks. The King’s memorial would only consist of members of the royal family, including those who lived in different kingdoms. Though it wasn’t an awfully large group, the expectation to impress them was high, placing large stress onto the staff’s shoulders even if the event was to mourn a death.

The kingdom’s noblemen began to make their way to the memorial that had taken place at the gardens of the castle. They assisted with lending a hand with any heavy lifting or simply ensuring that everything would go smoothly when Aliana’s relatives would arrive from their different kingdoms. She found herself getting lost in the busy rush everyone seemed to be in. As though Aliana was invisible, no one fawned over her standing in the middle of the chaos. It was like they had all collectively agreed in silence that no one shall question her actions on that day, giving her the space that they thought she needed.

Aliana used that opportunity to explore the depths of the castle. Despite her large craving for the castle to have renovations to fit with the modern generation, Aliana still admired the architecture of the castle. There were tall chandeliers placed in every large room that sparkled as they hung down from the dark ceiling and cobblestone pathways that'd blend alongside the dark oak wood of the floor.

Turning left, she held the fabric of her dress in a fist, allowing for it to hover over the floor and prevent it from dragging alongside the floor and collect dust at the ends. She allowed for her mind to shut down and for her feet to travel wherever they desired to go. The sun was beaming through the tall windows that complimented the height of the castle. Something had caught her eye as she continued walking down a hallway. Unconsciously, her footsteps died down as her eyes landed on a room she wasn't too familiar with growing up. It was her father's office that remained untouched after his death.

Through the glass door, his emerald velvet chair was tucked away behind the large, dark oak table. The majority of the walls were covered in bookshelves filled with books ranging from philosophy to his own personal notebooks. The room itself hasn't changed one bit from Aliana's faint memory of it. As a child, she'd despise this room, thinking that it was a jail cell that would lock her father away from her.

With slight hesitance, she entered his office, careful with her steps and alert of her curious hands. Simply just being in his office and seeing the books he had left scattered across his desk and small relics that belonged to her father made her feel as though she was close to him. It brought warmth to her heart, but also a bittersweet feeling that she didn't know him much before his death.

The more she thought about it, Aliana was struck by the fact her father had only known her for a portion of his life, whilst she knew him for her entire life. There was a feeling of guilt that laid deep in her, blaming herself for not making the effort to be closer to her father as a child. That feeling was brought to the surface as she learned more about her father from simply being in his workroom.

He seemed to be intelligent and gave off the feeling that he did want the best for everyone as Elyse would state. Perhaps he wanted the best for Aliana too, but she never felt that way growing up.

As her feet diligently walked behind his desk, the tips of her fingers touching the edges of his desk, her eyes wandered around the small details of the room. The sun beamed through the single window in the room and lightened the entire space. There was detailed trimming alongside the ceiling that complemented the colours of his pearl white window curtains. The window displayed the garden outside where gardenias were being aligned alongside the King's grave and people were slowly gathering around. The grass was the most beautiful shade of green and stood tall alongside the small flowers that were beginning to sprout from the ground. Aliana's eyes eventually landed onto his desk, carefully reading his cursive handwriting and things he had left behind before his passing.

His desk consisted of scattered papers and large scrolls, all layered on top of one another. Her fingers lightly grazed over them, eyes reading his handwriting and the random pieces and bits he had written down onto those sheets of paper. She shifted a piece of paper to the side when a regular lined sheet of paper had caught her attention. It was folded neatly and was near the edge of his desk by his inkwell that held his pen instead of it.

*"To: Aliana, my daughter"* she read.

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The garden was filled with familiar relatives Aliana had seen occasionally. They greeted her warmly, smiles across their faces, and would lightly pout whenever the main purpose of the occasion was reminded.

Aliana's heart thumped against her chest as her eyes grew darker by the moment. Her nose itched the slightest bit as she released small pants of air. Everyone had gathered around her father's gravestone, surrounded by white flowers that were beautifully arranged to honour him. The feeling of sadness filled her to the brim as she felt her eyes began to overflow with tears, quickly blinking as her mind recites word for word the letter he had left for her to read.

*"Born on the brightest day of spring, you had the biggest smile across your face the moment you were held in her mother's arms for the first time,"*

The King's closest noblemen began to give a eulogy after silence filled the air. Aliana's mind drifted off into space as she stared at the name of her father engraved onto the gravestone in front of her. Her chest heaved downwards as her heart felt like it sunk to the bottom of her stomach.

*"I remember carrying you in my arms for the first time bringing you back to the castle and you slept soundlessly. It brought my heart joy knowing that you were able to rest well in your new home,"*

As the nobleman continued to give his speech, relatives would nudge one another in the shoulder before lightly pointing towards Aliana, in shock at the tears that streamed down her face. Her heart was beating heavily as she was filled with a sudden sadness. This was an unusual sight for everyone that gathered. She did not cry in the year he had died. She had always despised and grew a hatred for the little time her father had given her.

*"By the time you read this, I hope you will forgive me for my lack of presence. I had tried everything within me to be with you but the workload was far too much. I'm sincerely regretful I could not be a father figure to you growing up. Regardless, I made it a task of mine every night to check up on you in your room while you were asleep. You slept as soundlessly as you did the day you were born."*

Her wrist went to her eyes, wiping away the tears that would fall as she'd attempt to silently sob, gathering more attention. She'd occasionally feel a hand or two rubbing her back to comfort her but the tears proceeded to rain down her face.

*"As I write this, I'm aware I do not have much time left, but your time has only started. From every inch of my heart, I hope you are able to shine brightly and continue to smile every single day."*

Aliana sniffled as she couldn't look up from the ground, watching the tears escape her eyes and fall to the grass below her. Some fell down on to the gardenias arranged for her father. Her emotions were a mix of gratefulness of his care for her and bitterness towards herself for being selfish all along. For the first time, she had felt as though he had truly cared about her and it saddened her even more that he could not be there for her to say that.

The sun shone brightly against the blue sky and without Aliana knowing, everyone had their attention on her as she wept over her father's death. She felt as though there was a warm blanket being thrown over her from the rays of light casting down onto her skin. She loved to think it was her father hugging her in comfort.

*"When I pass, I hope the sun still shines through the window to my office and you are able to see how beautiful the garden is. Though I have much more to say, my time is cut short."*

*Please never forget, I love you.*

*Sincerely,  
Your father who loves you dearly."*