



PROMPT #1: The garden is being infested by a particularly troublesome family of gnomes.

What Helps Flowers Grow

by **Grace Bass**

Lina slid the door to their back porch open as quietly as she could and stepped out into the thick heat of a June evening. The family of gnomes had not yet begun their chaos tonight, and everything was still peaceful in her family's garden. A handful of fairies lazed on the edge of the birdbath, their wings stretched out behind them so that the porchlight shone through the thin gossamer, creating a kaleidoscope of colors on the ground beneath them.

They waved to Lina as she heaved the large basket out the door behind her and began to take out all of the materials she would need and spread them on the back porch. She waved back at them but did not go over to greet them as she usually did. Tonight, she could not be distracted. It had been two weeks since the family of gnomes made their home under the butterfly bush. Two weeks and no one had slept a wink.

No sooner had thought crossed her mind, than the first beat of drums echoed across the garden.

The supine fairies shot upright, their wings perking to attention. Lina sucked in a breath, her gaze darting to the butterfly bush, which had just lit up with a flurry of pink and yellow disco lights that flickered across the stone pathway laid across the garden. She cursed under her breath.

They were starting early tonight.

Her hands were frantic as she finished unpacking the contents of the basket: two of her brother's squirt guns, a bottle of Cran Cherry that had been sitting in the back of the refrigerator for the better part of a year, a tiny plastic funnel, and a pair of rubbery blue earplugs. The items were laid out in a row on the small back porch, and Lina's hands trembled as she began to assemble them.

Beneath her knees, the floorboard was still damp from the afternoon thunderstorm, and she could feel the moisture slowly soaking into the cotton leggings beneath her dress as she started to fill the squirt guns. She wedged the neon yellow toy between her legs and placed the funnel in the tiny opening. Just as she was pouring out the Cran Cherry into it, she heard the sliding glass door open and close.

“Don’t move,” she warned. She had suspected her brother would follow her out here, but she didn’t want to break her concentration.

She heard the sound of something being dragged across the wooden planks of the porch, and soon the tips of her brother’s favorite pair of spiderman tennis shoes were within her sight. “What are you doing?” he asked just as Lina finished filling up the second one.

Placing the plastic cap back in its place, she rescrewed the lid on the almost empty bottle of juice and looked up. Her brother was in his pajamas already, the thin polyester material sporting a picture of the Justice League in faded primary colors. The scraping sound she had heard was a green, plastic lightsaber that he had dragged across the ground on his way to her.

Lina pointed to the butterfly bush, where the drums were growing louder. “I’m stopping them. Tonight.”

Benji bent down so he was at eye level with her. “But mama said not to do anything. She said they’d leave soon if we just let them be.”

“Maybe.” Lina shot a suspicious glance into the garden again. “But the ghoul in the attic hasn’t slept a wink in weeks, and he lives right above my room. He howls all night, so I haven’t slept either. And the fairies hate them.” She gestured to the birdbath, where every fairy had made a hasty disappearance.

The sun had just set, and the garden was lit only by the feeble back porch light and dancing lights from the bush the gnomes had made their home in. It gave ample room for shadows to stretch across the stone pathways that led from the porch to the edges of the garden. An eerie stillness had fallen upon the garden that only heightened as the sound of the drums picked up.

Benji picked up one of the squirt guns in his free hand and examined it. “What are you going to do?” he asked.

Lina snatched the toy from his hands and plucked the other from the ground, holding them out before her as if she were examining prize weapons before a battle. “When they come

out,” she paused to squirt a single stream of red liquid into the azaleas that grew around the rim of the porch. “there will be war.”

To her left, her brother lifted his lightsaber. “War.” His voice echoed against the side of the house, and it was as if a switch had been flicked.

The first gnome appeared.

The butterfly bush was about a stone’s throw from the porch, so all Lina could see was the tip of his tall yellow hat that came maybe halfway to her knees. He stopped in the middle of the path and addressed that garden as if it were an audience of adoring fans. “We are gathered here tonight to witness the greatness of the Battle Gnomes—the first and only all-gnomes death metal rock band. Tonight, they will be performing their working album, titled, “Gmonenclature and Necromancy. Please give us a round of applause as I present the legends themselves!”

Although his microphone was tiny, Lina heard his words as though they were spoken from someone mere feet away. Her grip tightened on the squirt gun. “Come on.” She grabbed her brother’s hand, and together, they marched along the stone path until they were towering over the yellow-hatted gnome.

As her shadow fell across his tiny figure, he started, glancing up with tiny, round eyes in surprised delight. “Oh! We have a real audience tonight!” He gave them a slight bow. “Hello! My name is—”

Lina interrupted. “We are not here to listen to your performance.” She held up the squirt gun and tightened her hand on the trigger. “We’re here to tell you to leave.”

Disappointment flickered across the gnome’s face. “Leave? But...” His gaze trailed to the small opening he had made in the butterfly bush. “We’re about to have a performance.”

Lina squirted some of the liquid onto the path. “If you don’t leave, we’ll soak you,” she warned. She had hoped that it would convey an air of dramatics, but the gnome just looked up at her with wide, sad eyes.

“Do you not like our music?”

A prickle of guilt unsettled Lina’s stomach. “I mean—well—”

The gnome hung his head. “It’s all right. This is the tenth garden we’ve been to. Everyone kicks us out. I appreciate all the effort you put into it though.” He gestured at Lina’s squirt guns and her brother’s lightsaber. “It makes us feel a bit more important.”

Slowly, he began to trudge back into the bush. “Fellow members of Gnomenculture and Necromancy, I have some bad news. We’ve been...”

He trailed off as another gnome came running out of the bush, a tiny guitar clutched in his hands. “Jared is running a sound check. I think a garden spider started weaving webs around some of the wirings, so we might have to sort that out before we can go on.” It took him a moment to realize that Lina and Benji were staring at them.

“Good god of gnomes. We have an audience?” he squeaked. He bowed to them as well, the stage lights creating a frenzy of color across his shiny red hat. “We are honored! And we hope you enjoy this special early performance.”

Turning to the announcer, he sang, “I’ll go tell the others!”

Throughout the encounter, Lina was too stunned to speak. Her squirt guns hung uselessly at her side as she watched the tiny rockstar dart back into their bush. The yellow-hatted gnome stared solemnly after his companion. “Do you think...” he began. “Do you think maybe we could just have one more performance here?”

Without thinking, Lina nodded. “Sure,” she heard herself say.

Behind her, Benji shifted from foot to foot. When the announcer gnome had rushed back inside the bush to tell his companions that the show was still on, her brother whispered in her ear. “So, we’re going to stay to watch?”

Lina shrugged and sank down to the stone pathway. “I guess so.”

Her brother joined her on the ground, his lightsaber clattering to the pavement beside them. They waited a while, the summer air like a warm blanket around their shoulders. “Do you think— do you think maybe we shouldn’t kick them out?” Benji asked finally.

Lina fiddled with the band of her shorts. “I don’t know. I don’t want them to keep us awake every night but...”

They both looked at the butterfly bush and the murmur of voices coming from within. Seconds later, four gnomes marched out onto the garden path with instruments in hand. There was a tiny guitar made of a small magnolia leaf with the hair of what might have been a rabbit for strings. A bass made from an old chipped log. Two gnomes carried out a small piano—Lina was truly baffled as to how they managed to create it. They set the piano down, and a gnome with a squatty purple hat moved in front of the rest so he was only a foot or so from the seated children.

“It is our great pleasure to perform our set list for tonight,” he announced with glee. He couldn’t have been more than a foot tall, but his chest was puffed out with the pride of someone ten times his size. “Our first song is called, ‘Death by Lawnmower.’ We hope you like it!”

As the song began, the light show coming from the butterfly bush increased, sending beams of blue, green, and pink light swinging across the garden to the music. Lina found herself sinking into it, even though the music still made her wish she had thought to put in the earplugs earlier. The moon and the tiny band and the lights crisscrossed across the sky, it was almost magical.

She turned to her brother and whispered, “Ok. We’ll let them stay. But we’ll have to get the fairies some earplugs. And the ghoul. Or maybe noise-canceling headphones?”

Her brother nodded. “I’m glad we didn’t have to go to war with the rock gnomes.”

Lina watched the pianist grin from ear to ear as he played a chaotic run and couldn’t help the matching smile that played across her face. Maybe this would be the great birthplace of the first all-gnome death metal band after all. She doubted it, especially as their guitarist wailed so hard that a mosquito fell from the sky.

But still, she was glad that she had not decided to use the garden hose on them before she had ever heard the little gnome with the little yellow hat who was so excited. Who knew? Perhaps death metal would help the flowers grow.