

Flourishings

by Stefdarin

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N & Disclaimer: This fic is a twist on *The Secret Garden*. It also has some infusion of Jane Austen and other classics. However, the characters belong to JKR with the exception of a few, and I am not getting paid for this in any way. Last, Filius is a bit out of character, but you will understand why when you read it, as it was needed.

And a very large thank you to MMADfan for holding my hand, you always will be 'DA BOMBE' to me!

"Mona, dearest, can't you sleep, my dear?" Filius sat up and sighed, almost in frustration. With a wave of his hand, the torches turned up on the walls of their bedchamber.

"I'm sorry, love. I know you have to be up early, but I just can't seem to fall asleep tonight. I'm too nervous about Harry Potter's arrival at the school tomorrow. Could you tell me a story? You make up such wonderful tales, and they always make me relax."

Pomona stared at him with such adoration, he couldn't help but give in. "Oh, all right. Hm, now let me see, what kind of story can I weave for you tonight? Oh! I know... Picture this, won't you? There is a door... a door well hidden by time and vegetation. A door, which, when opened, holds the most beautiful garden anyone has ever seen. And that garden holds the remedy to a young woman's cause for despair. All she has to do is find the key to open it, and the pain she bears will be no more. But there are others who are counting on her... counting on her to find the key and save not only herself, but them as well, only they do not realize it."

"Oh, Fil, that sounds so intriguing!" Pomona exclaimed, and her light brown eyes beamed up at Filius.

He chuckled and placed a light kiss on her nose. "Are you going to listen?"

"Oh, yes! Please continue! I am sorry for interrupting, my love." Her eyes pleaded with him to go on.

"Very well." He resigned and settled back to continue. "As I said, this young woman, her name was Pomona, she had recently found herself without a home. She had been away at school and was then summoned home because of the death of her parents..."

Pomona sat up and gasped, "Oh, no! How very tragic! How did they die? The poor thing..."

Filius gazed at his bride with a disapproving look and cleared his throat.

Pomona blushed and replied, "Oops! Sorry, dear. Please continue . . . I want to know what happens next." With that, she settled back again and he told her his story.

Pomona soon found that her parents' home had burned to the ground, and they had perished along with it. Because she was fifteen and not of legal age, she was considered a ward of the state until it became known that her welfare was mentioned in someone's will. That was the will of the Grand Lady Flitwick.

Some years before, Pomona's mother had befriended Felicia Flitwick, and from that kindness, the Lady had vowed that Persephone Sprout would never need to worry over her finances or the care of her child. Years passed, and Lady Flitwick passed away. She left behind a large estate and a very heartbroken son. And little did he know, however, that it was the secret wish of Lady Flitwick that the daughter of the Sprouts meet her son. Therefore, she left a stipulation in her will that Pomona be placed at the Flitwick estate in the event that anything happened to her parents.

The executor of the will was Lady Flitwick's nephew, Albus Dumbledore. Albus took his appointment very seriously, often to the irritation of his cousin. However, he was much older than Filius and looked on him as a much younger brother. He also tried, when he could, to ease the pain he saw in Filius every day. Albus and Filius had been cared for and raised by Lady Flitwick, and even though they were grown men, they had loved her very dearly. She had brought a certain joy to their lives that, it seemed, could only be provided by the Lady herself. Since her death five years before, both men had grieved in their own ways. Albus, comical and quiet, had come to terms with the loss, but Filius seemed more bitter from the loss with each passing year.

Filius never left the estate if he could help it, and he had closed the grand garden his mother had taken so much pride in when she was alive. Filius wanted to barricade himself, and his heart, from the world. Albus knew he was afraid to care for anyone again, and he worried about him. From a letter his aunt had left him along with her will, he knew the secret wish of Lady Flitwick about the young Miss Sprout. He was amazed at Felicia's insight into the heart of her son. Knowing how he might react to her death and planning his care in such a covert way. Therefore, Albus had been watching over the Sprouts for some time. He had even met with Pomona's parents once or twice and liked them very much. He was saddened by their deaths and was grateful it was in his power to ensure the care of their young daughter.

Pomona stood in front of the charred remains of what was once her home. Grief-stricken and forlorn, she looked over the ruins that held so many happy memories from her childhood. Now she didn't know what would happen to her as a ward of the state. Some of the mean girls at school told her how dreadful it would be, and how she would be placed as a lowly servant for one of them. Madilyn, a girl in her year who had always disliked her, said she would be covered with soot from dawn 'til dusk and never have even a scrap of bread to eat. Pomona's friend Poppy had assured her that was not true, well, at least she didn't think so. Poppy had also conveyed her deepest sympathies for Pomona's loss and begged her to write as soon as she was settled.

Before she was whisked away to some orphanage, Pomona had begged the social worker to let her see the house, or what was left of it, one last time. And that was where Albus found her finally, tears streaming, heart aching, and sinking to her knees in despair. Her thoughts ran rampant at what would happen, where would she live now? Pomona's thoughts and sobs were interrupted as a shadow fell over her.

As she looked up, her vision took in a man in a white leisure suit and hat. His chin was adorned with an auburn beard, and his blue eyes held a warmth that reminded Pomona of her parents.

"My dear Miss Sprout, let me help you up." He moved forward, grasped her hand and gently lifted her.

Pomona looked around in befuddlement. "W-Where's the s-social..."

"Ah, it would seem you are no longer in need of their assistance, my dear," Albus explained. "You are now a ward of the Flitwick Estate, and since I am the executor, I believe you are now under my care."

Pomona looked up at him in puzzlement. "Y-your, but... how..."

"Oh, I am so sorry! I am Albus Dumbledore." He held out his hand in greeting to her and pumped her hand vigorously. "I am... was... the nephew of Lady Felicia Flitwick, who has stipulated in her will that, in the event anything ever happened to your parents, you would become an heir and ward of the estate she left behind." He eyed her with a confidence that that explained everything.

Pomona got a faraway look, her thoughts taken, for the moment, to another time and place, and her tears began to dry. "I remember my mother talking about a Lady Flitwick some years ago. She said she worked for her as a governess before she met my father. They traveled quite a bit before I was born, so the ties were distant, but she did say they still communicated from time to time to maintain the link. She spoke very fondly of your aunt," Pomona finished and looked up at the tall gentleman, her sadness returning.

"Ah, there, my dear, I know it is hard now. The pain still raw, but we have to remember, the ones we love are always with us. Right here," he explained, placing a hand over his heart in demonstration.

Pomona thought he also looked a little sad, but he covered it well. And he was right: her parents could never be gone while she still held them in her heart and in her memory. She smiled wistfully and remembered what her mother always said, "Life seems always wasted on the living, so let's not waste it and show those old souls how to live!" and she would run out into the rain and dance with her husband and Pomona or do some other outrageous thing.

"I have brought a memory to the surface, have I not?" Albus looked down at her and smiled gently as he offered his arm and she took it. She nodded shyly and allowed him to escort her to the waiting car. The chauffeur, Thomas, opened the door with a click of his heels, and soon they were off.

The next few days were all a blur to Pomona as she was taken to the State office and read her rights under the law and then the stipulations of the will. Albus was steadfast and helped explain away any questions she had. She learned that the Flitwick Estate, Flourishings, was in England and she would have to leave France and all her friends behind. Albus explained they would find a suitable governess to attend to her remaining school needs, and he also described Flourishings as well as Lady Flitwick's son, Filius.

As he spoke, Pomona became eager to meet Albus' cousin and her new guardian. Albus spoke of a kind man with a jovial spirit who had loved his mother and life very much. The car quickly whisked Pomona away from France and on to the new life before her. And even though she was still sad, she decided to take her mother's saying to heart. Life would never be wasted on her.

Filius was in a rage. When he had asked, the cook had informed him where Albus had gone. And since Albus had neglected to tell him his mission, he was now in a fit state of anger. Filius did not want some meddlesome teenager at Flourishings. Let alone one that his mother deemed to add to her list of beneficiaries. It was just one more person who could bring people to the Estate by right, and he didn't want anyone there. He just wanted to be left alone. It was bad enough having to deal with the people Albus surrounded himself with. Having to... smile... every so often to appease him and anyone he brought with him, and now he was bringing someone else to *live* here. He sniffed in outrage.

Filius' eyes fell on the portrait of his mother above the fireplace. "Why... why did you have to leave? Surely you knew the hardship I would face once you were gone? That no one would accept me for the person I am? They only see a monster! Not the son who loved you!" His words had been a broken whisper at first, but they ended in a shout as he balled his hands into fists.

The gentle image of his mother looked down on the distraught form of her son and spoke to him softly, "My son, you must realize, your life may not always be easy... I could not always be there to shield you. Not everyone thinks of you as a monster. Albus..."

"Albus! Albus! He is my cousin; he has no choice but to accept me..."

"He may be family, but family can sometimes be more cruel even than strangers, Filius. Albus loves you for you, and others will if you let them. But you have to let go of your anger. Until you do, it will be hard for anyone to see the person I love so much. But, Filius, know that you are worth loving and not just by your mother or Albus..."

Filius stiffened his shoulders and looked bitterly at the painting. "Since when do you speak, anyway? Five years and nothing! Now this, this girl is coming and you find your tongue? You're just a painting! Leave me be!"

He turned his back on the portrait, and a sad look crossed his mother's face, but she went back to her position in the frame and spoke no more. Filius left the study, slamming the door, and went up to his room. Once there, his eyes rested on an old brass key with a yellow ribbon tied to it, lying on the table by his bed. Crossing the

room, Filius picked up the key and looked out the window at a mass of vegetation in the center of the grounds. His hand closed tightly over the key, then loosened. He shoved it back on the table and sat on the bed, covering his face with his hands, as tears welled in his eyes and sobs erupted from his throat in an effort to release the pain in his chest.

It was late when Pomona arrived at Flourishings. Albus ushered her in and showed her up to her room. Pomona gasped when she entered the room. It was furnished with deep mahogany furniture and a high four-poster bed. The heavy draperies were cream, and the heavy chairs had patterned cream upholstery with raspberry dots. The floor held a complementing tile-patterned carpet and looked very plush. A fire was lit in the grate to take the chill off the air in the room, and it was very inviting. Pomona felt surrounded with warmth, and a feeling of home entered her heart. The pain of losing her parents was being eased with every passing hour. Albus told her to make herself at home, and he would come retrieve her for breakfast in the morning at eight.

"My room is the second on the left from this one. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask." His eyes sparkled with warmth, and he took his leave from her. "Goodnight, my dear. Tomorrow we shall begin looking for a governess and you shall meet Filius and the staff. Sleep well." He turned and closed the door behind him.

Pomona looked around and hugged herself. She moved to the wardrobe and quickly unpacked her clothes. This was definitely going to be different from what she was used to. She sighed and began to envision how her meeting with Filius would proceed in the morning. Albus was so very kind and, from his description, Filius was too. As she sank into the down mattress that night, missing her parents, she felt a pang in her heart when she looked around. She hoped Filius liked her. What if he didn't? Would it be as Madilyn said and she would be a servant and covered in soot? She fell into an exhausted sleep with that thought.

Pomona mumbled in her sleep. She tossed and turned and dreamed of a dark figure. Something scraped the window and lightening flashed. A clap of thunder woke Pomona from her fitful sleep, and she gasped. She looked around, did not recognize where she was, and began to panic. Her breathing was short and labored as she tried to calm herself. "Mother!" she called in desperation, "Mother!" But her mother did not come.

Lightening flashed again, lighting the room, and she slowly began to remember where she was. She remembered why she was here, and she began to sob. Great, deep, wrenching sobs at the loss of her parents. She had been too busy to let it settle before and then too tired. And now she felt so alone, surrounded by people she didn't know, and wondered how she would get through the pain. But then she remembered Albus and what he had said. Her tears didn't cease, she cried harder, and the door to her room opened. A short dark figure came in and turned up the torches on the walls. Pomona blinked as her eyes adjusted to the brightness, and she heard a voice tinged with annoyance.

"What is the meaning of this, girl? Don't you know people are trying to sleep?"

As Pomona attempted to focus her vision and stem her tears, another voice reached her. "For Merlin's sake, Filius, she just lost her parents, and she is in odd surroundings. There's a storm... she is probably frightened," Albus finished, and Pomona felt the bed dip under his weight when he sat beside her and gathered her in his arms. She hugged him back, grateful for the contact and comfort. Across the room, she heard a sniff and the door close. "There, there, my dear. No need to fret. Filius' bark is worse than his bite. He isn't much for having his sleep interrupted, but it will be better in the morning."

After a moment, he leaned back and looked at her face. "T-Thank you," she sniffed. "I'm so sorry... I don't..."

"Oh, shush... it has been a trying week for you, and you are dealing with a loss, which takes time for anyone, especially when it is not expected. These feelings are to be expected. Remember, we are here for you. I want to make this as easy for you as I can." His eyes twinkled, and she gave him a watery smile in return.

"Alright," she told him and lay back against the pillows. She closed her eyes as he began to hum softly, and before she knew it, she was sound asleep once more.

Albus rose and returned to his room. As he passed Filius' room, the door opened.

"Please try to have a little more decorum when dealing with Miss Sprout, Filius. I'm sure you remember what it was like when we first lost Felicia, and Pomona is even younger than we were then." His blue eyes landed on brown.

Filius frowned and a flicker of concern crossed his face, but soon he was scowling once more. "Don't tell me how to act, Albus. Had you told me about her before, I would have told you that I didn't want her here. Why must you always stick your nose where it doesn't belong?"

"If you recall, Filius, Felicia left me in charge. I realize you are the heir of Flourishings, but her will still takes precedence. And as long as I am executor, Felicia's wishes shall be carried out."

"And how does this *girl* enter into the equation? Oh, I see. She's Persephone's daughter. How silly of me to forget our last governess..." he began with sarcasm.

"And she did wonders for all of us... she brought joy to this house after your father died, when it seemed nothing could lift Felicia from the dark place she had descended to."

"And she left! She met that man and she left us, just like my father... just like my mother! Why should I want anyone near me when all they do is leave... one way or another... they leave, Albus? And then what am I left with, nothing but memories I DON'T WANT BECAUSE ALL THEY DO IS CAUSE PAIN!"

"Filius..." Albus began, sadness crossing his face at the pain Filius must be feeling. Pomona brought a new possibility for healing to Flourishings, but she also brought about a reopening of the unhealed wound in Filius' heart.

"Leave me alone, Albus." Filius shut the door in Albus' face with a snap, and Albus looked down, sighing heavily. Shaking his head in defeat, Albus made his way back to his room.

The next morning, Pomona had just finished dressing when there was a light tap on her door. Quickly, she studied her reflection in the standing mirror. Her chestnut locks curled haphazardly, but she had managed to pull them into an untidy bun. She had on white robes with a small blue cornflower print on them. As she moved, they flowed freely around her legs. Her eyes were a bit shadowed, but she still had the light of life in them. She decided her mother would be proud, and when she heard the tap again, made her way to the door. When she opened it, she found Albus standing there. His eyes held the same twinkle from the day before, and he had on another leisure suit, but this time it was light blue.

"Ah, my dear, you look delightful. Fitting robes for your first day here at Flourishings." He held out his arm to her, and she took it. Pomona colored a little at the formality between them but was thankful for his closeness as they made their way to the dining room for breakfast.

The dining room was just as ornate, if not more so, than her room. The large oak table shone with care, and the silver service had a patina from years of use. Albus escorted Pomona to her seat at the table, and then took the seat directly across from her. As soon as he sat down, a plump woman in a maid's uniform bustled into the room. She had short blonde hair, bright blue eyes and a very cheerful smile.

"Good morning, Betsy. Beautiful day, isn't it?" Albus stared out the gleaming window onto the courtyard beyond. Pomona followed his gaze and saw a lush lawn with shrubbery on either side. Not far from the house, she saw a towering wall of foliage. It looked like a mass of Devil's Snare but did not shrink from the sunlight. Pomona frowned as she wondered what it was. It was so very large.

"Good mornin' t'you, sir." Betsy curtseyed. "Dody has prepared a lovely Eggs Benedict and fruit salad to offer you all this morning. We also have some croissants, baked fresh this morning."

"Ah, that sounds delightful. I would like for you to meet Miss Pomona Sprout." Albus gestured to Pomona, and Betsy approached her. "This is now her home."

"Oh, yes! So glad to meet you, miss. I'm so sorry about your parents, love, terrible, terrible. We'll take good care o' yeh here at Flourishings. I remember your mum, lovely woman. She was a great comfort to Lady Flitwick, God rest her soul, and Master Filius after Master Phillip passed on, a great comfort to us all." Betsy patted Pomona's

shoulder in reassurance. "Now, you make sure you tell ol' Betsy if you need anything. How about some breakfast for starters?" she asked with a comforting hand on Pomona's back.

"That would be lovely, thank you," Pomona told her quietly.

Pomona's head snapped up when the side door was thrown back and smacked the wall from the force. As she watched, a small man, a little over three feet tall with dark hair and a mustache, appeared in the doorway. He wore a dark suit, tailored just for his frame, which was cut to emphasize the broadness of his shoulders. Several thoughts rushed through Pomona's head at that moment. The first was that this must be Filius Flitwick. And though she had never met him, her mother had described him once. The next to follow was, even though he was scowling, he had one of the most handsome and kindest faces she had ever seen. And last, Pomona had never suffered a teenage crush before, but she felt a certain pull toward this man and was not sure how she was going to live near him everyday.

"Good morning, Filius," Albus greeted from behind the newspaper he had picked up and was reading, never looking at the smaller man.

"Albus," Filius replied, turning his scowl over to Pomona as he made his way to the head of the table.

"Oh, Master Filius, will it be the usual this mornin', sir?" Betsy asked and curtsied again.

"Yes, that will be all, thank you, Betsy." Filius sat down at the table and picked up another newspaper that was lying next to his place. Not once did he say anything to Pomona or try to greet her in any way. She felt his cold indifference toward her as plainly as if he had asked her to leave. Pomona looked at the back of his newspaper dejectedly.

Suddenly, it was all too much. He was the rightful heir to Flourishings, and if he didn't want her here then she didn't want to stay. But where would she go? The only options open to her were to be a runaway or a ward of the state, neither of which were appealing. She felt a sinking feeling in her stomach, and she immediately felt ill.

"Please excuse me. I am afraid I have lost my appetite. Thank you for your hospitality this morning, gentlemen." Pomona rose quickly and made her way out of the dining room.

As the door closed behind her, she heard Albus call her name pleadingly. But before he could come through the door to catch her, she ducked out a door to her right and found herself in the courtyard. Pomona's eyes fell on the tower of shrubbery she had seen before. She had always been fond of plants, and she felt drawn to the foliage as if it had called her name. Forgotten was her heartache over the wretchedness of the Master of this estate; it was now replaced with a fascination to find out what the green monstrosity was. As she drew near, the tentacles of the mass seemed to caress her neck and chin. When she got closer, she felt the tendrils picking at her curls and shivering, drawing a smile to her mouth. And when she drew close enough to see through the leaves, she saw the outline of gray brick behind them. Tentatively, she put out her hand and touched the stone. It felt warm, and a pleasing sensation flowed through her fingers.

Pomona made her way around the edges of the stone walls. She was looking for the door or opening. Surely this thing had an opening. She wondered what would be inside the walls. It was a mystery to her, and she dearly loved an intrigue. Her mind was taken from her worries and her heartache as she searched. The tendrils continued to play with her hair, and she thought it might even be singing a song to her. She shook her head. Surely that was a silly thought. She had never heard of a singing plant, but then she had only begun studying plants the year before. They fascinated her and charmed her with their intricacies and how they flourished under some of the most desolate conditions. Suddenly, the curtain of vines lifted, and Pomona found herself being pulled into a dark archway.

Inside, Albus looked out the dining room door, and when he didn't see Pomona anywhere in sight, he turned on Filius. His face, for once, was showing outright anger. "Filius, how could you be so cold to our guest?"

"According to you, she isn't a guest. So why should I treat her any better than I treat any of you?" Filius continued to look at his paper while he responded to Albus' outraged remarks. Albus moved to his side and pressed the paper down onto the table, causing Filius to raise angry brown eyes to his.

"Any better? Dear fellow, you have treated her far worse than you have ever treated us! We have known you, and here is a girl who has lost everything dear to her in her life. She has had to uproot herself and leave her home, her friends and her childhood behind. Surely you can identify with her, somehow? What would Felicia think of your actions?"

Albus looked at his cousin sadly. Filius frowned up at him and tried to pull the newspaper out from under Albus' hands.

"That is striking below the belt, Albus," Filius stated, and a pained look crossed his face.

"I realize that, but you must realize you are striking out at someone who does not know you and how you deal with things. She doesn't know how to defend herself, man. And I am sure your mother would be appalled at how you have treated her. You need to apologize and introduce yourself. Please, just do that. I ask nothing more. Then you can lock yourself in your room or whatever you like. Just do this small thing. Let her know it is fine that she is here. The consequences could be detrimental."

Filius closed his eyes, nodded and acquiesced to his request. "Fine. But that is all I'm doing."

Albus nodded and removed his hands from the paper. He knew how far he could push, and he was satisfied for now. Filius pulled the paper back up and continued reading. Albus shook his head, and a flash of white at the corner of the window caught his eye. When he moved to look out the window, he saw the tower of vines pulling Pomona toward the old garden door.

"Great Gods!" he exclaimed, causing Filius to look up in alert.

Filius followed Albus' gaze and saw the vines drawing Pomona into the archway where the door to the old garden was. His heart spun in his chest for the first time in years. Quickly, he rose from the table and followed Albus out the door into the courtyard. They made their way to where Pomona was, and Filius took out his wand. He used a severing spell to slice away the vines, while Albus pulled them away.

"No, no!" Pomona cried. "You're hurting her, stop that this instant!" Pomona exclaimed, and both men look up at her with astonishment on their faces. "She wasn't hurting me...."

"She!" they both exclaimed.

Pomona sighed, regained her wits, and replied breathlessly, "Yes, she was trying to show me something." She looked at the opening the vines had been pulling her toward and saw a door there. It was old and worn, but the brass key housing looked polished and new. Pomona swiped a hand over her brow, looked up in awe and continued, "This," she spread her arms wide, encompassing the mass of shrubbery, "is a Chanting Clematis. It was singing to me just now, and it was trying to show me this door, I think."

Albus shook his head and exclaimed, "Unbelievable! Have you been studying Herbology long, Miss Sprout?"

Pomona colored prettily and shook her head. "No, I'm afraid I just got interested last year. But I think I like it well enough to consider a career in the field at some point."

"I dare say, I think that is an area where you would excel."

"Chanting Clematis... but Clem hasn't sung for anyone since...", Filius whispered brokenly, and the other two looked over at him. For a moment, pain crossed his face, but he soon covered it with his angry mask again. He cleared his throat and went in a different direction. "Miss Sprout, I believe I owe you an apology for my manners at breakfast. Please forgive me for being rude as I did not realize you were there, you were so quiet. I am Filius Flitwick. It is very good to meet you." Filius stuck his hand out, and Pomona, eyeing him warily but shyly, took his hand and let him give hers a gentle shake.

"It's very good to meet you too," she told him quietly and was baffled when he rapidly dropped her hand, spun on his heel and made his way toward the house as quickly as he could go.

Pomona looked over at Albus when he sighed heavily.

"Please do not hold his actions against him, my dear. He has been hurting for a very long time. Clementine here has sung for no other since his mother passed away. I imagine he was startled by her willingness to sing for you," Albus explained.

Pomona looked up at the large green mound once more, and then her gaze settled on the door once more. "What is behind that door, if I may ask?"

Albus continued to look at Clementine. "You may. It is Lady Flitwick's garden. And no one has been in there since she died. Filius will not allow it. I am afraid it has fallen into disrepair because of it, but he still is unable to enter it and, since he has the only key, no one else can either. I keep hoping something will happen to make him realize that he is needed here. That Felicia, that is Lady Flitwick's given name, would not want him to close himself off from the world. I just don't understand. The old Filius would never have behaved as he did at breakfast. It's as if some part of him went with her when she passed." Albus looked at Pomona and shook his head again. "It was sudden, I know, unexpected... but then some of us have to go on, it's the way of life. We still have our memories and feelings. Somehow, I think those that really love us would want us to live. Wouldn't you say, Miss Sprout?"

Pomona suddenly felt a lump in her throat and found herself unable to reply, so she simply nodded her agreement in return. Tears rose in her eyes, and she turned her head so Albus wouldn't see them. However, he knew they were there, but instead of mentioning them, he cleared his throat and again offered her his arm.

"Won't you allow me to escort you back inside, Miss Sprout? I think it would be lovely to have a spot of tea and get started looking for a governess. What do you think?"

"Y-Yes, that sounds like a good idea," Pomona replied and let him lead her back into the manor.

The following week passed quickly. Albus and Pomona were busy finding a suitable governess who could focus on Pomona's weak points in learning, such as Transfiguration, and also indulge her enthrallment with Herbology. Each day, one of them found fault with each applicant, and Betsy was getting rather tired of showing hopefuls in only to see them leave angry, or worse, in tears. Finally, when they both seemed to be losing hope they would find a suitable candidate, a very prim, green-eyed, raven-haired witch, wearing emerald robes, was shown in by Betsy.

Pomona had been looking back over all the applications when she heard Albus draw in a sharp breath, which caused her to look up at him. The expression on his face was majestic. The parchment in his hand almost slipped to the floor, but he recovered in time to reclaim it. Pomona looked over to the doorway where the woman was standing, and a small smile of understanding crossed her face.

Albus seemed to lose his place a little but then recovered enough to greet her. "You must be..."

"Miss Minerva McGonagall, at your service," she told them and thrust her hand out in greeting. Albus took her hand gently, shook it a couple of times, and then stopped, still holding her hand. "And you are?" she asked, gently prying her hand from his.

A pink tinge added color to Albus' cheeks, and he replied, "My apologies, I am Albus Dumbledore, and this is Miss Pomona Sprout." He gestured to Pomona, and she stood, shaking Miss McGonagall's hand politely.

"I think you will see I am very accomplished in Transfiguration...", she began.

Meanwhile, as Albus and Pomona did all the research, Filius hovered in doorways or on the stairway landing. He watched each interview and thought Miss Sprout conducted herself very well. He had been amazed when Clementine had actually sung to her, and to say he was baffled was almost an understatement. As the week went by, he kept to himself, but in the evenings after Miss Sprout went to bed, he spoke to Albus about all the applicants. He wanted to be included, but was too prideful to ask her after the dreadful way he had treated her when she had first come. He also wasn't ready to let anyone else in. He knew Albus realized how different he was since his mother's death, but, despite how he acted on the outside, Filius was terrified of losing Albus, too. He was diligently trying to build a wall around himself for protection, but Albus continued to chip away at it, not allowing him to completely withdraw into himself. Now Albus had brought Miss Sprout into the mix. And, try as he might, Filius continued to teeter on the edge between wanting death to take away his pain and wanting to live to see what Miss Sprout and Albus would do next. Frankly, he was torn, and an inner battle was waging.

Over the following months, Filius observed as Pomona turned sixteen. Albus threw her a little party, which included the new governess, Miss McGonagall, Betsy, and Dody, the cook. Filius was included as well, but while he was there, he simply brooded in a corner. And when Albus saw fit to put on some music and ask the birthday girl for a dance, then broke off and engaged Miss McGonagall in a dance, Filius left the room. He had eyes; he could see Albus was falling in love with Miss McGonagall, and soon, he too would leave Filius behind, forgotten and alone.

Filius had gone to the study, his favorite room in the house, to speak to his mother's portrait again. As he was about to strike up a conversation, he heard the door open. When he turned, his brows shot up in surprise.

"Miss Sprout, hadn't you better get back to your party?" he questioned, his brows drawing back together at being disturbed.

"I know, and I will, but they won't miss me for a moment. Mister Dumbledore is quite taken with Miss McGonagall at the moment." She blushed prettily and moved further into the room. "I... I just wanted to thank you for coming... and for the lily. I am rather fond of them, and my mother was also. I find so much, even here, reminds me of her, and I thank you for allowing me to share your home. You have no idea what you saved me from, and I am eternally grateful."

Filius felt the familiar lump form in his throat but swallowed to keep his emotions in check. "Really, it was nothing, Miss Sprout." He moved to start a fire in the grate to occupy his hands in order to keep them from balling into fists.

"Albus told me you have the only key to the garden... and I was wondering..."

"What is it you were wondering, Miss Sprout? I hope you were not going to ask me to borrow the key? Because that is one thing not in my power to do," Filius told her through clenched teeth.

Pomona drew in a sharp breath at his tone. "I'm sorry... I thought... I just..." Pomona swallowed hard. "I want to go into the field of Herbology, and I simply thought that..."

Filius spun around, his anger evident. "You simply thought a few kind words would get you what you want, didn't you?"

Pomona swallowed hard again and stood up straighter, trying to add height, which seemed lost on her small frame of four foot ten. "They weren't kind words, sir. I did appreciate the gift. However, I do not appreciate your tone, and I do not think your mother would appreciate your selfish manner involving the garden."

"And what, pray tell, do you think the late Lady Flitwick would want, since you are such an expert into her wants?" he asked coldly.

"For you to *live*... for you to stop hiding away from the world and share the garden and its wonders; plants, like people, need nurturing and care. They like us and want to be with us... Clementine has told me so. She misses Lady Flitwick, but she told me she misses you more. Why can't you see that life is for the living?" Pomona clenched her hands and wanted to make him see.

"Because we are all dying, Miss Sprout," he told her quietly and sadly.

"Well, maybe you are, but I'm not. I want to live," she told him defiantly and spun on her heel, slamming the door behind her.

As the walls reverberated from the force, Filius looked up at Lady Flitwick, and her portrait looked back at him sadly, but she didn't say a word. Filius took his leave and went back to his room. That night, Pomona's words echoed over and over in his head. And slowly, his healing process began.

The following month, Pomona showed progress in her Transfiguration, and at Albus' request, Governess McGonagall took her to a local nursery where they purchased several plants to deposit in the courtyard. Pomona didn't ask if they had Filius' permission, as she was still angry with him from his treatment of her the night of her birthday. Often, she felt like she was being watched, but when she would look to the window of the study or the dining room, he wasn't there. During this month, Pomona also met Betsy's son, Severus. He had been away at school, and he lived in the manor during the summer. He was twelve, and a very odd little boy. He had black hair and a tall, lanky build which made him look older than he actually was. He loved Potions and shared an interest in plants with Pomona. They became friends almost instantly.

Daily, Pomona would take her lessons from Miss McGonagall, and then go outside with Severus to study the plants in the courtyard. One day, after they had studied all the plants in the courtyard at least a half a dozen times, Severus asked her about Clementine.

"Did she really sing to you?"

"Oh, yes! She does all the time. She tells me of all the wonders on the other side of the wall, and it makes me sad that Master Flitwick can't be bothered to open the garden again. Albus told me that witches and wizards once came from all over the world to see the garden at Flourishings. It is filled with hundreds of magical plants." Pomona looked over at the green mound with a faraway look.

"Wow! I wish we could get in there. Just think how many plants are there that I can use in my potions!" Severus exclaimed wondrously.

Pomona sighed in defeat, but then a gleam came into her eyes. "Maybe we can."

"What do you mean? How? You said the Master had the only key."

"And so he does, but what if I made a copy?"

"A copy, how?"

"Governess McGonagall showed me a copying spell today. She made me practice until I got it right. Copying a key should be easy," Pomona told him and got up to make her way into the house with Severus right behind.

That evening, Pomona excused herself from dinner a little early. She hated to do so, as they were having pasta, one of her favorites, but getting into the garden was too important to her. She was sure if she opened the garden, Filius would see things differently, and she just had to show him. She believed if she brought the garden back to life, the magic she found might help heal him in some way. She was no longer angry with him. After remembering one of her first conversations with Albus, she began to see Filius differently. She noticed how he seemed to hover, just at the edge of the room, but never enter it. He seemed to be lingering on the edge between wanting to be alone and wanting to be part of what went on around him. To Pomona, this seemed as good a sign as any. After excusing herself, Pomona made her way to Filius' room and performed the copying spell perfectly, or so she thought. She took the extra key and left the original laying just as it was.

The next morning, she and Severus met near the hidden door before the rest of the house rose for the day. As Pomona approached, Clementine sang to her gently, and Severus gasped when he heard the lovely music of the plant. It was enchanting. The vines danced along and lifted away from the door so they could approach, and, with shaking hands, Pomona inserted the key. When she tried to turn it, the lock wouldn't budge. She tried again, jiggling it a little, but the key simply would not turn. She let Severus try, but he was also unsuccessful.

Pomona slid down to the ground in defeat. She was so sure of her plan, and now it seemed she would never be able to follow through with it. "Oh, all I want is to tend the plants and help them thrive! I just want into the garden... Won't you please let me into the garden?" she wailed in exasperation.

Then, behind her, Pomona heard a shifting of locks, and the door silently swung open. Pomona and Severus stood there for a moment, staring in astonishment at the open door. "But... how?" Pomona asked no one in particular, and she heard a whispering in her ear.

"To get into the garden, all you have to do is ask," Clementine whispered to her.

"But why didn't you just tell me that?"

"Tell you what?" Severus asked, still staring at the open door.

"Because sometimes, it's better for you to find the answers for yourself," Clementine told her.

"Oh great, a philosophical plant," Pomona muttered under her breath as she made her way through the door. As she looked, everything seemed wilted and dying from lack of care, but the plants weren't decaying yet. They simply appeared to be in a state of stasis.

Stepping through the door was like stepping into another world. Pomona and Severus both gasped as they saw plants, more plants than they could have ever imagined in one spot. The garden seemed to be enchanted, as it seemed to go on and on forever. There was a hedge maze with Honking Daffodils and Trumpeting Petunias in every color. On their right stood a weeping willow tree, and then further on, there were Fanged Geraniums and Laughing Lilies. Near the center, they found a swing and an herb garden, the tiny buds frozen in time before they had begun to release their subtle fragrance.

Then off to their left, they found a babbling brook, which was not in the same state as the plants. To Pomona, the brook represented the Earth and how it continued to turn, even when events, and people within it, stopped. Maybe Clementine was right, sometimes you needed to find the answers yourself. And it seemed she and Severus were going to have to do just that because, no matter how she worded it, Clementine wouldn't tell them how to revive the plants in the garden. So after lunch, they went back up to the library to see if they could find the answers.

As time moved on, as it often does, Pomona and Severus found the answers to revive most of the plants. Some answers, however, eluded them. Over the summer months, they were able to, covertly, bring most of the garden back to life. The weeping willow now had tears running freely down its trunk. The Fanged Geraniums took pride in giving Severus a nip every time he walked by, and the Laughing Lilies chuckled wholeheartedly at everything, even when it wasn't funny. But, try as she might, Pomona could not find the remedy for the Honking Daffodils or the Trumpeting Petunias.

During the summer, Pomona had also managed to engage Filius in several outings with them all. Albus and Minerva, Severus, Pomona, and Filius all picnicked in the courtyard, visited the nursery again, and traveled to a country fair on the other side of the hill from Flourishings. Pomona even convinced Filius to dance in the rain once, though he promptly turned and convinced her out of it, explaining she would catch a cold. She believed it was so that he would not have to stay out in it with his clothes stuck to him, but she had managed to persuade him, and her heart had spun in her chest.

Pomona learned from Albus that Filius was accomplished in Charms, so in the evenings, when Filius went to the study, Pomona followed him to ask him about the subject, as she was a little weak in that area. As he talked about something he held dear, she felt him become more at ease with her, and soon his anger seemed a thing of the past, or so she thought. One night, when she approached the study to try to speak with him again, she heard him talking to someone. She frowned; all the others were down stairs.

"Why don't you let the girl into the garden, dear? I have seen her work, and, I must say, it is exceptional. It would help her a great deal with her future and..."

"Do not ask what I cannot give, Mother," Filius whispered.

"And why do you think you can't give it?"

"Because, like everyone else, she is going to leave; she is only biding her time until she is of age...."

"That's not true, Filius. She cares for you. And if you can't see that, I do love you, but you are blind."

"And how do you know that? You are just a portrait!" Filius turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. Pomona barely had time to hide before he swept passed her.

Pomona stood there in shock. He thought she was just biding her time? That she didn't care for him? She frowned. It was going to take a miracle to get through to him, apparently. But she was more determined now than before. And again, she went to the library to look once more for a way to make the garden whole again.

As the days became shorter and fall approached, Severus returned to school, and Pomona now tended the garden by herself. How she and Severus had managed to keep it a secret this long was beyond her. But every once in a while, she thought she saw Albus and her governess exchange a knowing glance different from the ones they often shared. However, she was sure Filius didn't know. In fact, since his argument with the portrait, he had gone away on business and had not yet returned. And though Pomona missed him terribly, she hoped that some time away would work to soften him some.

As the fall months swiftly passed, Pomona had still not been able to revive the garden fully, but, with winter quickly approaching, she decided to wait until spring to try again. Clementine promised to tell her if any of the plants needed her during the winter months, and she cast a special spell she had learned to protect them from the cold. As Christmas approached, Pomona missed her parents more than before. Holidays with her family were among her happiest times as a child, and even the thought of Christmas without them caused her heart to ache. She also didn't know when Filius would return. The only bright thought was that Severus would be home during Christmas break.

To take her mind off missing her parents, Pomona made gifts for everyone, including Filius. During their many months of searching, Pomona had found a book on magical knitting and managed to cast it well enough to make small, whimsical gifts for everyone. She made Albus a pipe cosy and Miss McGonagall a hat. For Betsy, Dody, and Severus, she made scarves, and for Filius, she made a pair of mittens.

When Filius opened them on Christmas morning, he was speechless. No one, other than his family, had ever given him such a gift. No one else knew the size of his hands. As he put them on, they fit perfectly, and his hands shook a little when he looked at Pomona.

"Thank you," he whispered, and then he left the room.

At the acknowledgment of her gift, Pomona had smiled, happy he seemed to like the gift, but, as he left the room, her smile faded. She didn't understand what was wrong, and she was about to follow Filius to ask when Albus called her over to express his appreciation for his gift. Pomona cast a glance over her shoulder but heeded his call and left Filius to himself.

As winter turned into spring, Pomona began to tend the garden again. She missed Severus, but promised to cultivate the herbs he needed for his potions. She also still needed to find a way to revive the other plants. Desperate, she even asked Miss McGonagall about musical plants, but what they found did not answer her question. She contemplated asking Filius, but she was afraid he would figure out that she had entered the garden against his wishes before she had a chance to show him what she had done for him. Unfortunately, Filius discovered her secret anyway.

Pomona was desperately trying every new spell she had found to try to revive the daffodils and petunias before summer approached and had forgotten the hour. For once, remembering her thoughtful gift from Christmas, Filius had offered to find her and bring her to dinner. What he found was the door to the garden ajar with the copied key Pomona had forged still in the lock and Pomona in the garden. He did not see the progress she had made or know she had done it for him. All he knew was that she had asked his permission to enter, he had refused, and she had selfishly gone against his wishes anyway. He was beyond angry. He took the key she had forged, broke it in half, and told her she was never to enter the garden again.

"Filius, please..." was all she could manage before he cut her off.

"Miss Sprout, please leave my sight before I do something I will regret," he told her bitterly, and Pomona ran up to her room, slamming the door.

That night, as Pomona lay in her bed, she sobbed. Her heart was crushed. No matter what she had done, his anger had conquered her at every turn, and continuing her path seemed pointless. But it was at this moment, this moment of her burgeoning maturity, that she realized she loved Filius. And no matter how awfully he treated her, she would always love him. Therefore, when the time came, since he appeared to desire it, she would leave.

Albus noticed Pomona's absence at dinner and Filius' mood. He had known for some time that Pomona had found a way into the garden, but had said nothing. He knew that Filius would be furious, but in his heart, he hoped that a cultivation of the garden might bring about a change in Filius. However, he was sad to see it had done the opposite. Filius appeared angrier than before. But for now, Albus chose to ignore that fact.

"Didn't you say you were going to fetch Miss Sprout, Filius?"

"You knew where she was, and yet you did nothing to stop her!" he seethed.

"But did you see what she has accomplished?"

Filius looked taken aback and baffled by his question. "No. I didn't need to see anything to know she defied my wishes for her own selfishness."

"And you know this for a fact?"

"She asked for the key, and when I refused, she made her own copy." He threw the evidence on the table and crossed his arms.

"I see. So I take it she told you why she was in the garden?" Albus asked.

"She didn't have to. I already knew," Filius told him indignantly.

"Well, that's that. Goodnight, Filius." And Albus left Filius alone with a surprised look on his face.

The next two months were excruciating for Pomona. Though her heart wasn't in it, she did manage to finish the rest of her lessons with Miss McGonagall, obtaining a high enough score on her test to gain an apprenticeship with a magical greenhouse not far from Flourishings, which offered room and board for her work. Albus had tried to insist that she stay while she studied, but Pomona knew Filius didn't want her there. Since he had found her in the garden, he had barely said two words to her, and her heart simply couldn't take much more.

On her seventeenth birthday, she packed her bags and made her way to the drawing room. As she entered, she set down her bags and moved forward to hug Albus when he rose from his place on the settee next to Miss McGonagall. "I really wish you would reconsider...." His words were muffled by her shoulder.

"I need a change, and besides, I won't be far." Briefly, Pomona glanced out the window and saw Filius walking across the courtyard, and then she looked back at Albus. "I hope you will both come visit me."

Pomona glanced over at Minerva and noted the pretty color in her cheeks. She stood and hugged Pomona as well.

"You have made me so very proud, Pomona dear. Like Albus, I do wish you would stay."

Pomona glanced out the window again then back at her company. "Yes, but I... I can't. The Greenhouse Company has so nicely offered me room and board, and I have already accepted..." she trailed off, giving them a wavering smile with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Oh, there she is! Already leaving the nest, and it seems as if it was just yesterday you came here!" Betsy exclaimed, sobbing into a handkerchief and crossing the room quickly to envelop Pomona in a bear hug.

Pomona hugged her back and mumbled her thanks. She also told Betsy she would visit soon, even though she didn't believe it.

While Pomona hugged the exuberant maid half-heartedly, she caught sight of Filius entering the archway to the garden. With a final nod, she took her leave of everyone and made her way to the garden. She was terrified, but she at least wanted to tell Filius goodbye, even if he did not return her sentiment. As she rounded the corner to the archway, she noticed the garden door was ajar, but she couldn't see Filius. She approached the door and pushed it open. It swung back silently, and her gaze fell on Filius as he studied the wonder around him.

In his hand was a flute, and when he approached the daffodils and petunias, he raised it to his lips. As Pomona listened, he played a beautiful and harmonious tune. Pomona was spellbound as she watched his fingers dance over the keys, and the plants she had been unable to revive glimmered and stirred to life. Unaware, she gasped out loud. Filius heard her and turned around abruptly. Pomona steeled herself but soon relaxed as his face held no anger, only wonder and perhaps a little worry. Pomona put down her bags once more and faced him, her heart thundering in her chest so loudly that she was sure he could hear it.

She swallowed hard and said, "I've come to tell you goodbye."

Filius walked over to her and spoke quietly, "Before you leave, I have one question..."

"And what is that?" she asked, trying to keep her voice from wavering.

"Why did you bring the garden back to life?"

For a moment, Pomona seemed surprised at the question, but she decided to tell him the truth. "I did it for you."

Back at Hogwarts, Filius stopped at that point of his story and smiled deviously at his wife as she realized he was finished. "Oh, Fil, you cannot end it there!" Pomona yelped in exasperation. "I need to know what happened!"

Filius shifted to his side, tugged up Pomona's chin with one finger and held her gaze with his warm, brown one. "But, Mona my love, you already know how it ends," he told her with adoration in his voice. At that moment, he leaned down to plant his lips on hers tenderly and then pulled back to smile down at her.

Pomona colored prettily and giggled. "Oh, Fil, I do love you so!"

"I know. Goodnight, love, sweet dreams." Filius snuggled Pomona into the crook of his arm, and, yawning, she closed her eyes.

"Mm, night..." she mumbled as she began to drift off.

Filius kissed her forehead, then closed his eyes as well and muttered, "Nox."