

Madeline Trivitayakhun

Dr. Stephanie Weaver

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A Walk Through a Garden Dream

World-building Narrative: Draft

Preface

Mental health was a big inspiration for this story. I deal with severe chronic depression and anxiety, neither of which has responded well to any medication. Therapy has often been a very touch and go subject for me, and even with recent progress still is not something I trust. My own mental health and general ability to function has come in different forms over the years, mostly being in denial and ignoring my own mental state. Dreams began to take different meanings to me, they turned into playgrounds and most of the time war zones. These past dreams, have become stepping stones for this story idea. It also has come during a time when I am mentally unhinged despite how I may appear. My medications have stopped working almost overnight and finding new solutions have basically been my normal quagmire, with the co-requisite therapy turning into a familiar bramble. Dreams have once again turned into the war zones, and while inspirationally very valuable functionally may as well have been a full sized anvil dropped on a grandfather clock. A great exercise in learning to function within my own capabilities and also an experiment in how quickly a narrative can be developed under these internal circumstances.

Unlike a lot of my story ideas I only recently thought of this story and its pieces. The world itself is still a fledgling, unexplored in many places, still ambiguous in others, and most notably even those pieces that have been slightly tacked down are still influx waiting for many more once overs, second looks, and research. However since the story is primarily set within dream, being in a state of flux seems appropriate; sadly being a story may disagree with that idea. Thankfully, I have

quick access to a lot of what has inspired the settings of these dreams. *Inception* is streaming on one of the many platforms so referencing how they had shared and lucid dreaming work is as easy as figuring out which one it is on. I own many of the games that have inspired specific concepts for these, the Gothic and European architecture of Karjj's dreams is taken games like *Bloodborne (BB)*, *The Order: 1886 (O:1886)*, *Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom (NNK2)*, and the *Gravity Rush (GR)* series. The vast sprawling wilderness of Lyla's dreams coming from the vast open worlds of games like *Nier: Automata (N:A)*, *Horizon Zero Dawn (HZD)*, *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (LoZ:BotW)*, and also *NNK2*. The characters come directly from me, Karjj is the side of me that I have denied for years and years, while Lyla is the side of me that I have presented for the years I hid Karjj from the world. Both pieces of who I am, but also very separate entities within my mind. The story overall is a take on the way I became aware of these two pieces.

The segment of the story being presented below, is the moments that culminate in Karjj and Lyla meeting within their dreams. It follows the collision of two worlds. The colliding of cultures. The conflict and turmoil that come from a complete lose of control. This happens after a chance encounter between Lyla and Karjj, where they make eye contact and a link between their minds is formed; a common occurrence for those within their family. Karjj and Lyla are fraternal twin sisters separated due to circumstance, hence they are able to form a dream link which is further explored and explained by their biological mother later in the story.

## Dreams collide

After leaving the cafe, Karjj began to make their way back to their small downtown off campus apartment. It had been a while since they had experienced an interaction as awkward as they just had with that lady and her daughter, and they wanted to avoid seeing another human this evening. Thankfully, the fastest way back home was through streets they knew were empty before the nightlife started, which meant they could at least enjoy the stroll as the street lights started to turn on and bars began to flip their signs on and clubs had yet to start blaring loudly with pop and trap music. The weather was also nice, fall had just started and cooler weather was settling in so that helped make the evening even better. When they get home, Karjj goes about their normal nightly routine. They greet their overly plump ginger tabby cat, who has decided that the shoe rack is a cat bed and that shoes belong strewn about the floor and some how on the kitchen counters. “What made this seem like a good idea? Huh, Oliver,” they chide playfully at their cat. Oliver simply blinks at them, his usual response, and only getting up once the cat food comes out of hiding. They water their snapdragons and then set about catching up on daily news with broadcaster they enjoy listening to. “Nothing new has happened in the world. Still as crazy as usual, what a shock,” they rolled their eyes as a broadcaster regales the audience with news of another politician’s illicit affair being brought to light. After that, they switch over to an engineering channel and laugh as they witness the creation of an overly complicated mechanized solution to buttering toast “correctly” comes to life and destroy the poor bread it was meant to elevate.

After they’ve caught up on new releases and have finished up some of their homework, it seems to be time for bed. Putting on old videos they know will stop the cringey interaction they escaped from earlier from replaying in their head they begin to get ready for bed. They shed their baggy hoody, and jeans heading for the shower letting video after video play filling their apartment with the noise of power tools, cheesy voice over, and their own chuckles, as their shower comes to life and their night winds down.

Lyla and her mother continued sitting in the cafe as they watch the person her mother was starring at intermittently the entire time leaves to go home. Lyla was hiding her beet red face after making eye contact with and waving at the person who just left since she turned to see who her mother was looking at.

“Mom...” she groaned, “why the hell were you staring at that person all night?”

“They reminded me of someone.” her mother replied.

“Who? Uncle Dan or Gran-Dad? I don’t think I know anyone else with hair that crazy and eyes that color.” Lyla is shaking her head, her face still beet red as she looks at her mother “You could literally see their hair jumping out from under their hood once they put it on.” She chuckles as she mimes hair springing in all different directions from her head.

“Actually, yeah she did remind me of Dan and Gran-Dad...” her mother says trailing off. She perks up and says, “It’s been great seeing you honey we need to do this more often. I know why don’t you come home one weekend all of us would be so happy to see you. I should probably start heading home its getting late.”

Lyla is a little suspicious at this sudden change and decides to prod her mother, her face is also starting to return to its normal tone. “Mom, it’s like 5:30, you live 20 minutes out of town. What’s up?” she says with eyebrows cocked. “Wait how did you know that they were –”

“Oh its nothing hun, I just remembered your Dad is probably going to want me to cook him something for dinner.” Her mother interrupts before she can finish her thought, and gets up heading to the door. “Love you, text me when you get back to your apartment.”

Lyla just waves not even trying to remind her mother to take her decaf latte and bagel with her, “more food for me” she thinks smiling. With that she shrugs and gets up herself and packs the coffee and bagel up and puts it in her bag. She says bye to the barista and makes for her uptown apartment. When she gets home, she finishes off the bagel her mother left behind and checks her

news feeds to see what madness has occurred today. “Oh so that’s who they were banging,” she laughs to herself seeing the news of the politician and his affair. She decides to hop onto her work VPN and check on the simulation she left running after work. “Still running, whew, looks like it hasn’t found any weaknesses in the security groups encryption algorithms yet,” she thinks to herself “that’s good, means I get to actually sleep tonight instead of spend it sending emails.” She sighs, relieved, getting up and stretches, “Guess, I’ll head to bed before anything happens.” She heads to her bathroom to brush her teeth and take a shower.

Karjj comes to seated in their dream studio’s wing chair, the space is conspicuously free of a bed. Some how there is a full steaming claw foot tub, with a hand shower attached to the brass faucet and a yellow sunglasses wearing rubber duck floating about. Karjj gets up and pondering to themselves whether or not they should indulge themselves.

“You know what today was annoying I think a soak would be nice, especially since here the water can’t get cold,” they chuckled, and disrobed before hopping into the bath. “Why hello there Dave, anything new happen while I was gone?” they nodded to the duck as they got in and relaxed, it simply bobbed in the warm water. A few moments passed and a loud knock came from the door.

Karjj lulled their head back and let out a soft groan mumbling under their breath, “C’mon I just wanna stay here and relax, hasn’t today been weird enough some strange lady literally stared at me the entire time I was eating dinner, and then her daughter tried to be nice. C’mon I just wanna stay in.” They pretend to not be home, hoping that it would work. Sadly, it didn’t and another loud knock comes from the door. Karjj remained silent in the tub. A few moments more, and this time a loud banging begins.

A few voices piped up, “Karjj we know you’re in their.”

Karjj groans and got out, “I’m coming give me a second.” After they exited the tub, they walked over to a clothes rack and water dripping from them. “I guess it’ll just be the usual,” they

thought to themselves. Instantly, they are dried and dressed in their usual dream attire. Hair taking on a burnt brass color instead of its normal jet black and slicked back and under control, dreams are the only place their hair seems to behave. Their eyes uncharacteristically dark green. Their skin is a sun-kissed tan just as in the waking world thanks to summer only recently ending. A loose white button up shirt, with the top few buttons undone, is hanging to them underneath a more form fitting tailed vest and tucked into ankle length dark burgundy fitted slacks. The whole ensemble completed by a pair of tan wingtip boots. They march to the door to see what problems they have to deal with this time. Opening the door, they are greeted by a few of the townspeople, all dressed in late Edwardian fashion and looking concerned holding a strange glowing plant.

“Um, what the hell is that and why is it glowing?” Karjj says vexed at this strange plant that clearly does not belong within their dream. They reach for the plant and it is handed over.

As they are inspecting it, one of the women at their door pipes up, “we thought you would know.” Karjj looks up and shakes their head. Another one of the group at the door chimed in, “It was at the central park. The whole park has changed, we don’t know what’s happening.”

“Wait, what do you mean changed?” Karjj asks, unsure of what to make of the plant, other than the glowing it seems be just an ordinary flower with an elongated top petal and four smaller downward pointing petals, albeit one that they had never seen before. [In truth it is wolf’s bane, a common occurrence within Lyla’s forest, but something that Karjj has never seen. This is something that would be explained when Lyla’s dream world is first introduced earlier in the story.]

“Show me,” Karjj says grabbing their dueling pistol and saber, making for the door.

Despite it clearly being nighttime, the world is brightly lit by the flora and fauna of the forest and the gleaming stars above. Lyla is walking through a wild row of trees, whispering to the plants that seem dim causing their light to grow bright again as if she were turning on a lamp inside each plant. Lyla is in most respects naked, covered only by the curly mass that is her knee length

hair. From within her curls right in the center of her chest, slivers of a warm golden light spilled out. She paused at a clump flowers that was almost entirely dark, reached out her dark tan hand freckless dotted her upper arm, the same warm light of her chest illuminated these spots. As she touched the dark flowers a vein of light flows from a finger into the flower. As the light entered the plant, the plant shredded its old petals and new buds shining as bright as a star took their place and open, pouring a cool silvery light into the forest. Lyla got up and continued on her way, waving as she passes a few flower covered creatures that had stopped to watch her revive the dying flowers. As she walked towards the next clump of dim flowers, she is stopped by a small flitting fairy, carrying a clump of flowers, roots and all.

“Hello, what do you have there?” she said as she reached out her hand for the flowers.

“Wakey, wakey, little flowers,” she said to the clump, but nothing happens despite the forest around her growing a bit brighter. She then sends a vein of light out to the flowers but again nothing happens. “Huh,” she sighs. “Where did you find these?” she asks as she turned back to the fairy who brought her the flowers. The fairy chirped in response and began to fly away followed quickly by a sprinting Lyla.

Karjj follows the group that came to show him the strange glowing flower as they lead them through the town towards the central park. Trying to keep the group calm and get more information as they are lead they begin to notice patches of glowing flowers in bushes and garden boxes throughout the town. Becoming more and more frequent as they get closer to the park. When they arrive Karjj immediately knows something is wrong.

“What happened to the trees? They used to be in neat rows.” they comment. The once perfectly kempt foliage now wild, tangled, and overgrown covering parts and places of the paths. The entire park now glowed eerie greens and blues. Karjj looks up at some of the trees and surprised finds that not only has the park changed but the sky above was no longer blue, but twilit,

purples and deep pinks dotted with stars. “When did night roll in?” they thought to themselves.

“Karjj, what’s goin’ on?” one of the group asked in a hushed tone. Everyone clearly a little on edge at the strangeness of their surroundings.

“I don’t know, but everyone stay here. I’m going to take a look.” They say as they set off down one of the overgrown paths. After turning a corner and losing sight of the group, Karjj felt that they are being watched and look up into the glowing trees. Their gaze is met by dozens of small creatures looking down at them. Quickly they returned their gaze to the path ahead of them.

“Okay... that’s totally not creepy at all,” they sighed and walked on. They reach a crossroads the sign that is normally there has been consumed by plants and despite being completely illuminated its placards are covered in roots and leaves. “What the hell happened to the sign?!” they exclaim.

“Guess I’ll just go to the fountain, hopefully its still there” they shrug taking the left fork. The fountain lies at the center of the park and they hope that there will be some answers there. As they go deeper into the park, the creatures in the trees become a bit more daring. The smaller flying creatures begin flitting about like annoying mosquitoes and the larger creatures trailing behind Karjj by a few strides seeming to stalk them as a cat would prey. The sky darkening the stars, plants, and creature becoming brighter the closer to the fountain they get.

The fairy Lyla followed began to slow down, and Lyla noticed that they were approaching the edge of the forest, and that there are houses out past the tree line. “That’s not normal,” she says,

The fairy responded with rapid and intense chirping.

“Calm down, its okay, just stay hidden. I’ll check it out.” At that she jumped lithely up into the branches, landing on a twig without it even wavering under her barefeet. She continues towards the tree line walking deftly from tree to tree as if she were a squirrel. A few trees back from the edge she can see out and sees what looks to be a town walling in the forest roads and alleyways leading deeper into the town and away from the forest. Flickering lights can be seen in windows.

She looks up at the sky and notices that as it recedes from the forest it turns blue and gets brighter as if it were midday. "Strange," she thinks to herself.

Returning her gaze to the buildings and town she sees little faces pressed against some of the windows, children are gawking at the forest. "There are people here?" she started making her way along the tree line. As she went, she looked down and noticed an overgrown walking paths. "What the hell is going on?" she said under her breath. At that she noticed a deep red light dimming in front of her. "Uh-oh," she rushed towards the light finding its sources. A small sloth like creature covered in closed blood red flower buds sat perturbed, growling and faint snarls audible under its breath. Lyla approached the creature slowly. Out of the corner of her eye she notices a flash of white inside a shadow, but the snarling intensifies and she focuses on the issue at hand.

"Hey, hey, calm down," she cooed, "Whats wrong?"

The creature looked up at her, its eyes wide with fear, and snarled at her.

"You're okay, I'm here, nothing is gonna get you." she says in a reassuring voice.

The creature snarled again.

"Hey no need for that tone of voice," she quipped back. It whines in response. She reaches the small creature and picked it up saying, "I know, I'm confused too. But that doesn't give you the right to act like that." Cradling the little sloth creature, its flowers opened and their color softened from a blood red to a delicate hibiscus red and their light became brighter. "Now what seems to have you gotten you so upset, huh?" she asked petting the creatures head.

It grunts and caws, pointing out away from the forest.

"You got scared by weird things and hid, huh? Lets go see how scary they are." as she said this she tucked the creature into the hair resting on her shoulders and made sure it had found a good grip. "Now where were those scary creatures, huh?" she asks looking down and see that something had disturbed the overgrowth on the path leaving a clear trail of dimmed foliage. "Guess we should follow that, hey?" she teased to the creature on her shoulder.

An indignant grunt is all she got in response.

Despite every sign now being almost entirely hidden by glowing foliage and glowing creatures. The creatures climbed up the poles and across vines that spanned to and from the poles and trees. The only hint that they were on a path was the solid thump each footfall made. “Okay, I’m getting tired of all of this stupid wild glowing plant and animal shit. Can the park go back to being clean and organized this is not how I wanted to spend my night hiking through some stupid enchanted forest.” Karjj stopped in their tracks, their hand swiftly met their face as they shook their head disappointed in themselves. “Wait, why the hell haven’t I just tried imagining shit back to normal.” At that they decided to try reverting the dream back to its usual state of clean European gardens, the paved paths swept clear, the trees pruned and back to non-glowing normalcy, no more be-flowered rodents and flitting things. At first they just tried imagining things in their head, like how they dried off or got dressed here, but nothing happened. Next, they tried waving their hands at individual things, made long encompassing waves, pointed at things with finger guns. Nothing changed. In defeat, they decide to slumped under one of the glowing trees leaning their backs on its trunk. “Ugh,” they groan, leaning their head back against the tree and looking up and closing their eyes. At that, a few of the smaller creatures decided that this was their cue to come closer.

After a moment, Karjj reopened their eyes. To their surprise, one of the creatures was staring right back at them with large round glowing eyes. Karjj jumped up startling the creature that instead of scurrying back up the tree, jumped off of it on to Karjj’s head. After a few moments of scrambling to remove the little flower covered fur-ball, Karjj held it at arms length and noticed that it resembled a sugar glider, just one that’s glowing and seemed to have an equally bright spidery flower cape the long tendrils draped over their hands. Taking a moment to look at the other creatures, they noticed that most of the glowing little monsters were quite cute. Except for some of the big ones they were just intimidating, especially when the creatures were taller and thicker than

them, despite being covered in weird flowers and glowing and acting as a perch for smaller creatures. They chuckled, “Heh, and here I thought all of you were new nightmares. Guess not, huh,” turning back to the little creature that is still in their hands. “Well, lets see whats at the fountain since I can’t think you all away.” As they left, they failed to notice a thin fog rolling in and the forest that they came from began to lose its brightness.

Lyla and the creature that had taken shelter in her hair followed the trail of dimmed plants back to a path that was clear. Still in the trees they followed the path back to its origin where a group of people were standing. A thick, sickly colored fog had begun to roll in. “Yuck, that fog looks disgusting. Doesn’t it?” she said glancing to the little flowery sloth in her hair, who chirps back. She laughs, “what do you mean it smells like rotten fish mixed with a septic tank,” she caught a whiff of the air. “Oh gods!” she gagged, “why do I have to have a sense of smell in my dreams?” She caught her breath through her mouth and glances at the crowd. She saw a shadowy figure receding into the fog, “Did you see that?” she said out loud, the creature in her hair shook its head.

The sickly sound of a joints popping rang out from the crowd. The people in the crowd began twitching, some of them had changed shape, no longer proportional but elongated and spidery taking on a menacing air, inhuman groans softly left their mouths.

“Um, that’s not good.” She jumped from tree to tree back into the forest, “I think we should see whats on the other end of that trail...away from the monster people, don’t you?” she said.

The sloth on her shoulder chirped back fearfully and in agreement.

Taking a moment to look back during her flight she noticed that the forest was beginning to dim and colors became more and more saturated. “Oh great,” she rolls her eyes, “a nightmare is about to start just what we needed.” She glances at the creature in her hair and says, “you’re with me, so please don’t freak out.”

At this the little creature puffs its chest out and lets out a high pitched grunt.

“Exactly,” she replied with a smile.

“Shit. Shit. Shit!” Karjj yelled as they sprinted the last dozen yards into clearing surrounding the fountain. “Oh thank god, its clear here.” they said drawing their dueling pistol and saber. Turning back to the forest, which was now dimmed and had taken on an otherworldly amount of color. “I just said the damn things were cute, but NOOOO blam-oh all of a sudden someone hits the dimmer and they all turn into flowery demons that wanna kill me, and the fog had to roll in too!” they yelled in a sarcastic tone. “Even better, if the fogs here that means everyone’s a monster that’s going to try and rip me apart!” After this outburst, they began scanning their surroundings warily waiting for something to enter the clearing. Suddenly, there was a rustling close to where they entered the clearing. They pointed their pistol at the sound, cocked it, and fired.

Lyla heard a click come from up ahead, and what sounded like a firework and a branch in front of her exploded. All of a sudden, time slowed to a crawl as splinters slowly flew away, “Holy crap who the hell has a gun in my dream!” she exclaimed, and easily dodged around the slow shrapnel. Through the trees she saw a person near a fountain, an old dueling pistol in one hand a saber in the other. She looked at the sloth in her hair who was trembling with a death grip on her hair. “You’re fine,” she chides, “also they don’t seem to be turning into a monster. I wonder why.” She popped her head out from a bush greeting the person in the clearing, “Hey!” The pistol went off again, but when the bullet exited the barrel it slams to a snails pace. “Yeah, that’s not gonna work.” she says cheerily.

“What the hell!” yelled Karjj, watching their bullet slowly make its way across the clearing. Looking back towards the bush, Lyla was no longer there. “Wait, where did she go?” Karjj said under their breath.

“Oh, right here,” Lyla said as she appeared beside Karjj.

Karjj jumps back startled and swung their saber in defense.

“Hey, careful with that thing!” Lyla exclaims. “Why the hell do you even have those in my dream.”

“Wait, what do you mean your dream? This is my dream. This is the central park of the town.” Karjj retorted.

“So, you have glowing plants and flower animals in your dream too?” Lyla said playfully.

“NO! Why the hell would I have that?”

“It’s a dream. Why not and plus its pretty,” she laughed.

“Wait why are you in my tow-...!?”

At that, inhuman screeches followed by numerous roars, snarls, and howls are let out from the forest; Karjj and Lyla look at each other wide eyed.

“That sounds great,” Karjj groans not breaking eye contact with Lyla.

“Yup, sure does” she curtly replies.

Suddenly, an ear splitting alarm went off.

Lyla opened her eyes in bed groggily. “What the hell kind of dream was that,” she croaked, reaching for her alarm to stop it from deafening her. Once the alarm had been silenced, she sat up, stretched, and then reached for her dream journal and began to recount the events of that night’s dream. After she was happy with her entry, she got up and headed to her kitchen to make breakfast, and start her day. “I wonder if that simulation is done yet? God I hope it didn’t find any issues with the security teams algorithm, I’m so ready to move on to getting the next round of testing started.”

Karjj jolted up in their bed. It was completely silent in their still dark bedroom. Oliver was sleeping sprawled on his back completely unaware that his human just woke up unexpectedly. Karjj, groped for their phone in the dark to see what time it was. “It’s three AM, what the hell,” they

groan, “I’m going back to sleep, nightmare or not.” They flopped back down into their bed, tossed and turned a few times before getting comfortable, and finally with one long exhale began falling back asleep.

Before they knew it, they were awake within their dreams once more. This time instead of waking up in their dream studio, they were laying under a tree near the central fountain. The park had returned to being clean and organized, the paths were clear, the grass trimmed and soft, and the trees and hedges properly pruned. The sky was back to the clear blue of a clear spring day. No wild flowery creature or glowing plant within sight.

“I’m going back to my bath” they mumbled under their breath as they got up and finished inspecting the scenery for any anomalies. As they left to go back to their dream lodging, they passed a patch of wolf’s bane not noticing its faint blue glow in the bright light of their dream.

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