

THE KEEPER OF THE GARDEN OF SECRETS

By Y. Alcazaren

The Keeper tended to the Garden. Perhaps she always had.

There was a time when her memories had been sharp as edged stone. At least, she thought there had been. Days blurred into weeks blurred into months. Now, her previous life was fuzzy. Indistinct. Details and faces dribbled together like raindrops fusing on a windowpane.

Once, she'd had a name, a family, a different life. At least, she thought she had. One did not miss what one could not remember.

Either way: the Keeper tended to the Garden. She always would.

It wasn't so much a garden, however, as it was a bamboo forest. Stalks taller than trees towered on either side of the Keeper's only path through them: a narrow, winding trail that led from her house to the glade.

From the edge of the forest to her home, to there and back again. No forks in the road. No need to choose her path. She either walked forward or backward. The path was winding enough that she could see enough of the Garden along the way.

In the end, however, it wasn't the single path nor the uniformity of the foliage that distinguished the Garden. It was the multitude of Secrets that hid within.

It was the birds.

A less patient person would have been driven mad by the relative peace of the Garden. Not so the Keeper. She had been born—at least, she thought she had—with a superior resistance to boredom.

And she loved it here. Here, the bamboo whispered with the wind's voice. They swayed and clacked, rattled in particularly strong gusts, and bent toward her as she walked. They knew her—but of course they did. She was their Keeper.

At midday, the sun peered down the tunnel of bamboo stems, its rays melting onto her path like golden syrup. It only stayed for an hour or two before sinking

from its zenith and allowing the stalks to cast their striped shadows. In a way, she and the sun were identical. They could only walk one path. There and back, there and back. And they were equally content with it.

When the night fell, the Garden was no less silent. Darkness deepened, movement scuttled beyond the path, and yet from above, the Keeper saw the stars. Silver jewels, not as ostentatious as the sun, sprinkling light onto her footprints.

And then, of course, there were the birds. The Secrets, the fragments of memory and regret that she had been sworn to protect. The sole purpose of the Garden.

They were everywhere. Perched on bamboo stalks, flitting through the dappled shadows beyond the path, hopping and foraging on the forest floor. Some took the form of sparrows, tiny and innocuous. Others were woodpeckers, tap-tap-tapping away. Others chose ravens and crows, all glossy black plumage and raucous caws. Others chose kingfishers, vibrant yet elusive.

The Keeper knew most of them by name. The ones she didn't know she eventually found. She had all the time in the world. Here in this Garden of Secrets, she could live separate from the place beyond. If there was a place beyond. She couldn't confirm if there was.

Something was following her.

The thought occurred to her as she walked on the path back to her house. The sun had begun to sink—it no longer shone onto her trail, and the bamboo now cast shadows.

Twice on her way, the Keeper experienced a tingling sensation on the back of her head and turned. Every time, however, only shadows and Secrets greeted her.

She forced down her disquiet and focused on the rhythm of her footsteps, which usually worked whenever she began to sense a change in her surroundings. After so long in the Garden, any deviance to her routine or experiences unnerved her. Everything here was predictable—unless it wasn't.

It came again. The urge to scan the path behind her itched at the back of her neck, but she shoved it aside. *Eyes on the trail ahead. There and back. From the glade to the house, from the house to the glade. As it should be.*

She at last caught a glimpse of her house through the stands of bamboo, a hut with a thatched roof and open windows that welcomed the sunlight. It lay within a small clearing and, in many ways, was much like the Keeper herself. Small, simple, and devoted to its task of providing her with a ceiling for shelter and a surface to sleep on.

The Keeper followed the rest of the trail till she came to her front door, which she had left unlocked and wide open. (Why would she not? She never kept anything out.) A tiny songbird with a yellow belly perched on the knob, shrieking at her with its wheezing call. She waved it away, and the Secret flitted back into its forest home.

The Keeper stood in the doorway, eyes roving her home of countless years. Tidy—she left not a single speck of dust on any corner or surface—and yet she had made it her own. She had hung birdhouses from the rafters, and some of the friendliest Secrets made their homes there—a few swifts and a songbird or two, who awoke early in the morning to sing her to wakefulness. A cot lay by the opposite wall, the sheets neatly folded, and in the far corner lay the chest that contained several clothes to change into (all the same, mind you).

Something was different.

Something had *changed*.

She couldn't put a finger on it. She had been confident that she would return to the same place she had left. After years of tending to the Garden and living in this house, she had come to know every facet, every aspect of it like she knew the curve of the trail and the calls of the birds.

But this wasn't the same.

Something. Had. *Changed*.

The Keeper swept in, breathing deeply, scanning the walls, then the ceiling, then her scant furniture. The birdhouses hanging above were empty; at this time

of day, most of the Secrets were out and about. The bedsheets were folded. The chest was locked.

Or was it?

She crouched before the chest and felt the lock. She took the key from her pocket, twisted it into the keyhole, and flipped open the lid.

Her two other outfits lay inside. Both were robes—dark and enveloping, with wide sleeves and gold trim. She changed clothes every morning and washed them all every seventh day.

Creases. Faint wrinkles that should not have been there. She had fallen into a repetitive, predictable routine, and knew that she would never have left any sort of imperfection on any robe she folded.

The Keeper locked the chest once more and stood, unnerved. She didn't check what lay underneath the clothing—the true treasure she kept there. That would have cost too much of herself.

It's just a mistake. It doesn't mean anything.

The thought rang false even to herself.

The peculiar sensation overtook her once again. Every scrap of instinct inside her told her she was being watched.

Birdsong awoke her, as usual. Some from inside her hut, some from outside. The songbirds' melodious trilling. The crows' rowdy cawing. The screech of raptors circling high above the Garden.

I wonder if anyone has managed to escape the Garden.

The thought came unbidden to her. New. Tentative.

In a word, terrifying.

The Keeper sat up in bed. Faint daylight shone through the window. The night had come and gone, but the sun was still yawning and stretching in preparation for the day. Like always, she got up right after dawn.

Today would be perfect. She would make it so. She would walk her path, checking to ensure that everything was in order, then walk back. Her duty as Keeper was to keep every Secret safe inside the Garden.

Safe from what?

Once again, the unfamiliar thought—the unfamiliar emotion—plagued her. There had been a word for this. But it, like so many other details, had vanished into the haze of her past.

She concentrated with all her might on her routine. Washing her face in the small basin of water which refilled itself every night. Changing into a new set of robes. Whistling to the songbirds as she stepped outside her door and breathed the milky-pale dawn air.

She still couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed.

There and back. For now, she would head *there*. To the glade, the farthest point on the trail. There, the path abruptly ended, and she would have no choice but to turn back. She couldn't walk through the bamboo, after all.

Why can't I?

One step. Another step. Another.

Multicolored wings flitted above her and to both sides. Secrets of every shape and shade, all taking the form of the freest of creatures.

She could do this. This was her life; this was her duty.

Why is it?

She stopped.

Why?

She turned.

Shadows swayed on the path. She hadn't received her first taste of today's sunlight. She examined her surroundings, tenser than she had been in so, so long.

Movement. The barest hint of movement, like hummingbird wings. Deeper into the bamboo, something large stirred. Then flicked away.

And, like a snap of lightning, she knew what had gone wrong. Something not unlike a bell rang through her mind, and her hands closed to fists.

Someone else was in the Garden.

Not another Secret. A person.

A trespasser. The very thing she had been entrusted to guard against.

That night, the Keeper tried and failed to fall asleep.

That had never happened before. Any other evening, she could have simply closed her eyes and entered the void of deep sleep until morning came. Now, she lay and stared at the ceiling, unable—or unwilling—to do so.

A trespasser in the Garden. That had never happened before. At least, if it had, she didn't remember it.

How had they gotten in? Was that why everything seemed out of place?

I'll make this right. Somehow.

I am the Keeper. I tend to the Garden.

After another half hour of silent contemplation, she began to slip away.

And for the first time in her recent memory, she dreamed.

Slanted daylight that died as the sun sank. Shadows that swayed into the corners of her vision.

A small box that she held in her hands. A box that contained everything, that quavered and trembled by the weight of what it kept within.

"Do you accept this duty?"

This was a voice she knew. Blunt and perhaps a tad belligerent, yet honest all the same.

"The Garden must be tended," she replied. Strange how her hands shook. How her voice shook. How her eyes wavered, clouding, blurring, tilting. "And if it means I can forget..."

"After you take this oath, nothing will be the same. Everything will change for you."

Her posture straightened. A newfound strength flooded through her, mending her, steadying her. "But with this duty, nothing would. Never again."

The Voice She Knew spoke, saying her name, yet the sounds slipped away from her. She slid away from her dream, and faces melted together like wax. She grasped at the memories; they crumbled, leaving her unmoored, falling.

Deeper.

Deeper.

Deeper, into—

The Keeper awoke doused with sweat, gripping her sheets like they were the cliff's edge and nothing but emptiness lay below.

She remembered. She *remembered*.

It wasn't much. But she now knew she'd had a life.

And a name.

The new emotion welled up within her again. The desire to keep discovering. Keep remembering.

The other half of her rebelled against it.

She had a duty. She tended to the Garden. That was all she needed.

Dawn broke through the windows, and the birds sang. Yet for once she was immersed in her mind rather than her surroundings. She went through the motions of her everyday routine and found them...lacking. Plain.

Had her world always been so plain?

I must find the trespasser. Somehow. And get them to leave the Garden before harming the Secrets.

She set out on her daily path, more uncertain than she had ever been. Two days ago, she had known exactly who she was and what she did. Now...

What use is a Keeper who cannot keep herself in check?

Her walk calmed her. So did the birds. After all the changes that had occurred recently, everything familiar brought back a rush of relief and euphoria. The knowledge that, at least, some things were still right in the world.

At least, her walk calmed her until she reached the glade at around midafternoon.

There, she found another person.

The sight was so incongruous, so *wrong*, that the Keeper froze. A deer caught beneath torchlight. A flake of frost crystallized on a window.

Another person.

Well. A child, really. Ten or eleven years old, with a drawstring bag over one shoulder, dark hair, and a knowing smile. He sat cross-legged in the center of the clearing, at the end of the Keeper's path. Quiet and serene.

But still.

The Keeper had forgotten other people existed.

"I like it here," the child said. "Lots of birds. And it's so peaceful..."

Spots appeared in the Keeper's vision. Her hand flew to her forehead, and she stared, uncomprehending. The words registered, but their meaning didn't. She hadn't spoken in so, so long. Longer than she could remember.

But I want to remember.

"I think I'm lost, though," the child said. "I was told to wait for someone. I wasn't told where. This is as good a place as any. So I'll wait here." He cocked his head. "Who are you?"

Somehow, the Keeper found her voice. Somehow, it hadn't gone rusty and hoarse from disuse.

"I am the Keeper," she whispered. "I tend to the Garden of Secrets."

Her first words to an outsider.

Her facade cracked, and the world spun, and she blacked out.

When the Keeper awoke, the child was still there, still seated, and—somehow—still calm.

The sun had begun to sink from its zenith, though its rays continued to shine through the bamboo stands. She sat up, blinking, and noticed with irritation that she had gotten dust on her robe.

“How did you get in?” the Keeper demanded.

“I...walked in?”

“From where?”

“From the place I lived in before I came here.”

The Keeper rubbed her forehead, then stood. The child tipped his head backward.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” the Keeper said. “You’re putting the Garden in danger. The Secrets—”

“My name is Soot,” the child said. “I’m waiting for someone, but I don’t know who or where. So I’m waiting here.”

“Go away!” the Keeper said, volume rising.

“There might be a problem with that.”

“And that is?”

Soot looked at her directly in the eye. “I...don’t really know how to.”

Her world had been upended on its head, so why did she fix up a spare mattress and pillow outside the door of her hut?

Why did words return to her so quickly? Why hadn’t her voice rotted away during the years it had spent out of use?

She knew now what she had felt over the past few days. The new emotion, the one she could not rid herself of.

Curiosity.

“I sure hope whoever I’m waiting for finds me,” Soot said, his tone light and conversational as he stretched out on his outdoor cot.

The Keeper watched him from her open window. Another person. A child, no less. What had happened? How had he gotten in? Was he who he said he was?

“You don’t know?” the Keeper asked.

“I feel like I should. But I don’t.”

The Keeper frowned.

“When I got here, I remembered everything,” Soot continued. “My memory—it was as sharp as—as—”

“Edged stone,” the Keeper whispered.

Soot blinked. “Well, yeah. But now everything’s sort of...melting together.”

The Keeper stood, heart racing. “Like wax on a candle. Like raindrops on a windowpane.”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

An owl hooted from somewhere distant. The moon had risen to depose the sun; its silvery smile hung far above.

Who is this child?

And why is he beginning to forget like I did?

Slowly, ponderously, the Keeper eased herself onto her own cot. She closed her eyes, preparing to slip into deep sleep, when a small voice cut through the white noise.

“Thank you, miss.”

Caught off-guard, the Keeper stared at the ceiling.

“Thank you,” Soot said, “for letting me stay. I don’t think you want me here.”

I don’t, the Keeper thought. Everything is changing. You changed everything.

In my dream, I thought nothing would, never again. But that wasn’t true.

The Keeper’s days were often turgid. Languored. But now, she discovered that something kept them distinct.

For conversation, even with a child who shouldn’t be in the Garden in the first place, was absolutely *invigorating*.

Soot asked questions she never would have been able to answer. Why couldn’t she step off the path into the bamboo? (She tried it after he asked; it turned out she couldn’t possibly maneuver between the thick stalks. Besides, if she lost the trail, she lost the path home.) Why was there only one path? (She couldn’t remember the answer to that, and was left fumbling for words.)

Words. She had not known them for so long. But now they returned to her in a flood. She spoke like she had been speaking for a lifetime, even when the opposite—tenfold—was true.

Changes. Things she had once been terrified of losing now seemed inconsequential. She caught herself staying up a little later every night—simply to keep talking, keep immersing herself in the world that was the small traveler’s mind.

Curiosity. First beginning with a slight stir, then unfurling its wings and leaping into the sky as the days ticked past.

Every time she asked Soot what he was waiting for, he answered simply that he would know when the time came.

She began to dread that time with every fiber of her being. When Soot’s goal was fulfilled, did that mean he would leave the Garden?

What would the hut, the bamboo forest, seem like without the constant chatter?

How much plainer would her predictable routine seem by contrast?

“You keep something in the box,” Soot said, poking his head in through the window, startling away a pair of woodswallows.

The Keeper glanced up from the basin before splashing her face with the cool water. “Of course I do.”

“Something more important than your change of clothes.”

The Keeper stilled, disturbed. She’d tried to avoid the subject of the wooden chest for days now. But such was the downside of an inquisitive guest.

Inside the box...is something more important than your change of clothes...

No. *Change the subject. Steer it away. Segue into something harmless. Like...like the birds...*

“Do you wonder where the Secrets form?” the Keeper asked. “After you arrived, I began to. I never see them form. I only see the new ones.”

“I’m not asking about the Secrets,” Soot said frankly. “I’m asking about the box.”

Drat. The Keeper massaged her temples, heart and mind racing.

“It’s...it’s okay,” Soot eventually said after a tense minute. “I’m sorry to have asked. It’s just...there’s something about the way you treat the box...”

He had not asked a question. So she did not need to answer. She stood and made her way toward the door.

When she emerged, the Secrets greeted her. A gaudy peacock with a shimmering, multicolored tail squawked and strode before her, quickening its pace before disappearing into the trees.

“There’s so many of them,” Soot said, jogging to catch up as the Keeper began her walk. “So many birds. Why are they called Secrets?”

“You asked me that before.”

“I wasn’t listening the other time.”

“They’re called Secrets because they are,” the Keeper said. “That is what they are. Secrets. People’s Secrets, given life after they die...”

“So new birds form whenever people die?”

“The birds are people’s greatest Secrets,” the Keeper said, “snipped off and given avian form.”

“So...” Soot trailed off, taking on the expression the Keeper had come to recognize: that of formulating a new question.

She smiled as she walked. She...she had become *fond* of the trespasser. Not merely tolerant.

Was that wrong?

I am the Keeper. I tend to the Garden of Secrets...

The sense of wrongness descended upon the Keeper once again. She froze in her path.

Someone stood on the trail up ahead, blocking the way. *Another* person. Not a child.

This was a middle-aged woman, once-dark hair streaked with gray, though tied back into a tight bun. Her lips were drawn into a thin line, and she wore the same clothing the Keeper did—black robes, though her trim was silver rather than gold.

She exuded menace. And disapproval.

“Raisha,” the woman said. “You have been...insubordinate recently.”

Raisha.

The Keeper stumbled. Would she lose consciousness again? That would be...frankly, it would be embarrassing.

Raisha.

Was that her name?

Slanting daylight that died as the sun sank. The shadow of bamboo. A long, winding path.

“You must keep to your duty.” It was the Voice She Knew. Blunt and honest, yet this time terse. “Nothing else matters more.”

“And what if I do not wish to remain trapped?” she demanded. She was stronger in this memory. Taller, braver, bolder. Her hands clenched to fists as she confronted a person whose face remained shrouded in shadow. “What if I’m tired of...of forgetting?”

“Then you will have failed. You have already failed. You are on borrowed time now, Raisha. You must prove your worth to them.”

“To who? Who is controlling all this? Why do they wish to control me?”

The Voice She Knew softened. “I’m sorry, Raisha. You chose this. You chose to forget.

“You will always be the Keeper. You will always tend to the Garden.”

Soot gripped her arm, his hand clammy and tense.

“Who are you?” the Keeper demanded.

“Of course you don’t remember,” the woman said. “Within our own domains, I suppose we remember about as much as the rocks do their vendettas.”

Her way of speaking—so formal and refined—was a stark juxtaposition to Soot’s earnest rambling.

“Questioning the order?” the woman asked. “Questioning everything you stand for? Everything you were sworn to?”

Everything was changing. Everything was shifting around. The bamboo forest no longer seemed inviting.

“I don’t know what you mean,” the Keeper said.

The woman’s eyes gleamed. “You remember too much.” She cast a glance at Soot. “That is dangerous.”

The Keeper shoved Soot behind her. “What does this have to do with him?”

“Everything,” the woman said. “Everything.”

Her words hung in the morning air like poisonous fumes.

“My duty is to tend to the Garden,” the Keeper said. “Soot has done no harm.”

“The child that you call ‘Soot,’” the woman said, “is not what you think he is. You must relinquish him. For the good of all.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Because you’re a blithering fool. Hand him over.”

The Keeper tightened her grip on Soot’s shoulder. “I won’t.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“*I won’t*,” the Keeper said. “I have always held to my duty. Why must you doubt me now? The Secrets are all safe. Even though...even though I do not remember...why they are important...”

The woman hissed.

Was it just her, or had the sky darkened? Had the birds stopped singing?

“I want to know,” the Keeper said. “I want to know who I am and why I am like this. I want to know why I can’t remember my family’s faces and why there’s only one path and why *I’ve always held to my duty* despite not understanding.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. The Keeper met her gaze, unwavering.

“We are guarding something larger than ourselves,” the woman said. “We must be stronger than the rest. We must comply, and we must be empty of everything else.”

“Why?”

Why?

Why?

“You think Secrets can only take avian forms?” the woman whispered.

The Keeper faltered.

“Check your box,” the woman said. “You know that it is true.”

The Keeper ran. Stumbling along the path. Heedless to the birds that shrieked at her passing.

She didn’t stop until she reached her hut and threw open the lid of the wooden chest.

All her life’s Secrets. Everything she had ever known. All her memories.

She poured them into the box, relinquishing everything.

She locked it with a key made of the Garden’s bamboo and hid it away.

She had a duty now.

She, once named, was now the Keeper.

The Keeper searched the bottom of the chest, frantic. She found the hidden latch and flicked it, then tore the smaller box from the bottom.

Everything she had hated. All her Regrets, all her Secrets.

They had been with her all along, and yet she had rejected them. She had searched for something else. Her other memories. The ones that she had loved.

She tore open the box for the first time in countless years.

It was empty.

She had made a pact. In exchange for being given the ability to keep all the pain, all the Regret away, she had been given the duty of tending to a never-ending bamboo forest.

She looked up as Soot entered the room, quiet and serene.

Somehow, her memories had escaped the box.

Soot looked at her questioningly, and the Keeper nodded. He *became* light—like sunlight yet more concentrated.

Her memories returned. Everything.

She was the Keeper. She was destined to forget.

She was the Keeper, and she tended to the Garden.

But this time, she would remember.

At least, she hoped she would.