

I'm terrified of goblins and, by proxy, horticulturalists.

Whenever I go through my memories of fear (a particularly masochistic scrapbook exercise) there's one that stands out. It's a picture of a beautiful late-summer garden in the sunshine, focusing on a yellow flower whose insides are stained with blood. The petals are ruffled, as if torn. Butterflies (the craven creatures) are drawn to it.

It's called the Goblin Gaillardia.

I am not a gardener. I pay Carmelo, a neighborhood kid (and have kept him in \$10s [and now \$20s - inflation, right?]) to mow the tufts of grass that are determined to grow around my home. He has his own mower and set of half-buttoned plaid shirts he's made into a recognizable uniform throughout the neighborhood. Melo's pretty self-sufficient, and I expect a knock on the door about every week or two in the summer, depending on the weather.

He talks the talk, though. His mom, Beatriz, is out there in a hat and gloves every day ruining our lack of interest in the overall property values. She has brought order to the neighborhood, bright coloured petals, and a lawn too green and pristine for any runaway dog to consider desecrating. That or it has a laser fence with anti-dog mines or somesuch. "Butt nuggets approaching, let loose the anti-canine cavalry!" and the flowers attack!

Maybe not. Maybe not funny.

"Dandelions are up," Melo says. He's pretty laconic with me. It's always, "Lots of pollen," or "Too much moisture brings mushrooms," or "Nothing today, come back next week."

*Dracaena* is Romanized from the Ancient Greek "drakaina," or "female dragon," as you can find on Wikipedia. I know this because I inherited some plants from a girlfriend, and they're going steady... even if we're not. There's power in names, and being on the good side of a young female dragon is a grand idea. Maybe it helps balance against the couple of ancient dragons I have mad at me.

Goblins don't actually care for the dark, however it goes against folklore. They prefer it hot and dry, although they're rugged little creatures, and the worst infestation I'd heard of was during a beach party. Luckily, you can prune them from a place pretty quickly. Shears work great, although it gets messy and ends up being fairly sadistic.

Gaillardias are commonly known as the blanket flowers. There are specialized caterpillars that eat them exclusively to turn into pixies. Painted Schinia Moths, if you must, but the difference between butterfly and pixie is remarkably slim. Both are attracted to sweets and have very little in the way of brains, and both masquerade as each other. I can't tell if that's intentional or luck. They're both harmless except to plants, I suppose.

Names have power. Wizards say this all the time, and I've never been able to find a good argument against it. *Caryopteris clandonensis* is known as the Dark Knight. It flowers heavily in the summer, spending little time with *Aster laterifolius*, the 'Lady in Black' who prefers the later summer and autumn. Both may be the darlings of so-called hedge wizards, but the magic of botanomancers isn't limited to turning thumbs green or black.

"Botanomancer" is a mouthful. Hortigicians? Black hearted and black thumbled thorns of the wretched villainy known as gardeners, his name was Dario, Dare to his friends.

My name is E.

I am what we call a Portal Doctor. I close the doors you've left open. I've only got the one trick, but I'm getting pretty good at it. Reality is a big place, and it bumps up against a lot of things Beyond the world we know. Luckily, those things Beyond don't belong here, and sometimes closing the door in their face gives them the right idea. It's a trick, but it requires proximity and a clear head, and enough knowledge to make sense of it all.

Ignorance is bliss. That's not anything you'd hear a wizard say.  
That's why they're trouble.

Dare lived in the big haunted house at the edge of some land claimed by the city. Yeah, it was near a graveyard, but that wasn't the problem. The grass is always so nice and orderly in a corporate cemetery; you could bring your morbid little picnic basket and have yourself a nice lunch in the quiet. I always found the similarity between them and golf courses to be a great opportunity to combine the two.

If you did an image search on haunted houses, you might see some creepy topiary, maybe even some gothic bonsai, but you expect chaos. You think of triffid-like clumps of bloodthirsty botanic secrets, hiding cabals under their suffocating miasma of organic chaos; a cancerous thicket of overgrowth where there is no peace, no succor; a place where nature has less mothering and more murder on her mind. Blood makes the grass grow.

Dario was Beatriz's cousin. I had invited Melo and his family to a neighborhood barbecue back in, oh, call it aught-eight. This was either their way of repaying the favour, or scaring me into landscaping compliance. The grass wasn't greener on the other side of this fence after all. It was raspy and Lovecraftian, with too many tendrils, and if it had a voice it spoke in mad tongues.

I circulated with a large glass of orchata, trying to keep up with the rapid bilingual patter of knowing exactly what was happening amongst some twenty-odd cousins and their extended families. I had a couple hundred words of street Spanish. I could string them together into "sentences I'm not sure I could repeat in any circumstance," and "words that were probably safe," and I was able to recognize a little bit of both. I've been in cities where the architecture zones out "undesirables" and Denver doesn't do so much of that. ("Undesirables" are always, "people who don't look and speak the way we do," under this definition. Alas, I have had to add things such as, "Vampires," and "Dragons," onto my list.)

I'll be honest. I sometimes worried that they were talking about me, and not in flattering terms. I think anyone in a group of people who don't speak the same language probably has that same latent paranoia. I tried to smile, not stare at anyone, and act friendly. I can't help but be white and generally nerdy. I managed to strike up a conversation about the food (don't ask how the menudo is made) and then my conversational partner was called over by a small child to hit a piñata. I took his spot in a lawn chair at the edge of the gathering.

I leaned back, balancing my plate of chips and salsa on my lap, when I heard it. It was a thin thrumming noise, a small but active gate, the sound of strumming a six-string guitar but somehow holding the strings so they can barely vibrate. I felt it in my tongue more than my teeth. I opened my eyes and scanned across the yard.

That's when I saw them.

Before I panicked, I brought out my cellphone and tried to translate "goblin" into Spanish. Neither of the words fit what I was looking for, so I moved closer to the clump of flowers. I pretended to be walking with my crispy tortilla pieces and dip. A nest of goblins can take down a grown man, given every advantage. Only a few goblins would be needed to grab a child. There were too many to not take the chance.

They drag you into the darkness.

I dropped the first chip next to the edge, waited for the goblin to grab it, and then aimed at the malignant sprite with my boot. I could feel its stem cracking as I ground it into the lawn. It felt like crushing one of those boxy cartons of milk with a water balloon full of water and cheap matchsticks inside it. The shooting pain of a fang in my calf, sharp enough that I hopped away and dropped my chips all over the ground was my reward. Good thing I was wearing jeans, as the thorn left in my leg was about three inches long, if only a quarter inch penetrated the denim. I pulled back, and saw the goblins take the crushed body under into the root system.

Into the darkness.

"I will return with flamethrowers," I hissed.

I heard a chittering that might replicate a bunch of birds in a bush. They understood me. I had no doubt. And they were saying, "Bring it."

I took my plate to the table, hoping not to limp. "Who does the gardening here?" I asked, making the effort to not put too much strain in my voice.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" Dare asked me, lazily.

Beatriz's face puckered, like she was biting into a lemon. Carmelo shrugged, but his dark eyes focused on us.

"I was wondering about the flowers," I pointed to the suspect bush. I didn't expect anyone else to see the goblins. No one ever does. "They're a bold statement in the overall color scheme," I said, trying to bluff my way through the discussion.

"Ah. Have you seen my larkspur?" he asked. "They're beautiful, but they poison cattle. Come, let me show you my garden."

I knew then. I knew what he was. All I had was that he didn't know what I was. While he suspected I was some sort of practitioner (my term; my ex- prefers the words of artistry, but the wizards I've met have had their own nomenclature), he had to figure if I was sympathetic or an enemy.

"May I?" Carmelo asked, getting up from where he had been sitting.

Did I see a flash of anger in Dare's eyes? "Of course. I would love opinions from a fellow gardener." He packed scorn into that last word, but so smoothly that Melo didn't have a good chance to say anything.

He showed me his Yellow Salsify, or the Goat's Beard. Some prickly roses. Yucca, plenty of yucca. Beehive cactus. There was no sagebrush. No traveller's joy. Baneberry at the edges, bindweed in the neighbor's yard. That means something. I knew a little, and my cellphone told me a lot more. What I had seen as chaos had pattern to it, which was even more disturbing. Letting entropy take over is a sin against humanity, but the deliberate design to invite the Beyond is where I draw the line.

We were rushed whenever Carmelo went to look at a flower, or underneath a bush. I was getting nervous as the sun passed over the mountains and the ambient glow began to fade. We circled around the house, and I was glad that Melo accompanied me, because I could have been lost. I could have been hit over the head and buried somewhere. Carmelo just made his casual shrugs and kept his eyes on me, doing this careful dance where he occasionally moved between Dario and me.

Beatriz excused us when we came to the front again, and stuffed me into the car for the drive home. "Needs more irrigation near the deck," Melo said. "Some cut back," he decided.

"Yeah," I told myself. "Irrigation with gasoline." I didn't say anything aloud, but I nodded. It bothered me. It bothered me like a bug bite, an itch you're not supposed to scratch. I did not know what kinds of things a garden would summon, but whatever it was, it wasn't supposed to be in this world. My world, my rules.

I close doors, but that doesn't mean I don't know how to use a knob. The invitation to his place would expire once the sun came up again, and the "new day was begun." It's not a hard and fast rule, but it works. There are things that care not for sunlight, either way you want to parse the sentence. Myself, I like to be able to see, but that's what flashlights are for... we harnessed fire, and electricity, and let there be batteries.

I parked about two blocks from the house, using some complicated intuition equation, where you don't have the exact variables and math, but it takes into account how far I'd have to run if there was an explosion, how close I'd want to be to make my getaway, and odds and ends about my general fitness level and laziness.

I wore a black jacket with that soft finish, maybe suede, over a black t-shirt (in white letters "SIDEKICK IN TRAINING,") because it was chilly, not because it's cool to wear black. An old pair of jeans and black sneakers completed the outfit. I had to think about it before I got in, afraid that at just the wrong moment I'd be halfway over a gate and the jeans would rip. If you've ever had to complete an adventure with your rear hanging out where a pair of pockets used to be, you would understand why it was on my mind.

I went around the wall and, after enough grunting and pulling and heaving to remind myself that that much effort should have warranted a call to the police by any good neighbor (by which I meant an actual concerned citizen, not a fairy) it appeared that Dare's neighborhood was either used to nightly intruders, or unobservant past their windows. Either was possible and about as fair. I took a moment while catching my breath before popping over the side with a thud into some grass.

On my sightseeing tour earlier, I had been on the lookout for an important clue: there were no signs of dogs. Not that dogs particularly enjoyed a lot of magic; there were plenty of exceptions, but it was an easy rule of thumb and seemed true in this case. That didn't mean there weren't other guardians, but I didn't have to worry about a rottweiler eating my face. Demons I can handle. Rotties are a pain.

"Alright," I said. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

I am not quite in my forties, and saying that out loud was probably one of the scariest things I've ever done. Well, staring a dragon in the face was pretty scary, but there gets to be this point where you're so scared you can no longer feel it consciously. There are all sorts of fear, and anticipatory fear is what I'm trained towards from all the horror movies I watch. (Strictly for research purposes, of course.) I guess people who study fear talk about the difference between it and anxiety, phobias, and the rationality of the fear. (I read too much.) It was being five again, though, staring into the darkest blackness of the closet and asking for the bogeyman to show himself.

What do you do when he does?

The difference between an almost-forty year old man, and a five year old boy is that I've real weapons to support me. So when I saw the first thing lumbering towards me, I raised my left hand in a warding gesture my last girlfriend taught me, and spread out the salt packet from my box lunch in a spray of tiny white crystals. I like to think I struck an awesome pose, which is why the vines on my unprotected right hand side slammed me against the wall.

I'm a practical guy. If I had a flamethrower, I'd be more likely to roast myself than do anything useful. As I felt the wall crunch into my ear and nose, and the blood start to flow, I still wanted the flamethrower. You want to make a final stand, to convince the universe that it all had a point, that you did not accept defeat.

"This," I said aloud, "would be a terrible day to die." I ground myself back against the wall and flung out more salt at where I figured the vines were. I managed not to do the involuntary rubbing of my jaw that I wanted, and instead faced the movement again. Anger comes from fear; some of the wisest folk I hang out with say that, and I believe it to be true.

Anger is also just fine for replacing the paralysis fear often brings.

The plants tittered, the fluttering of leaves on the pavement after a heavy rain, crossed with some 80's electronica. I felt an opening, and I shut it down with a heavy thump. My blood dripped from my chin in a no-doubt appealing fashion, and I grabbed at one of the little beasts, pulling it up from its roots.

Pistil, stamen, I didn't know anything about flowers. I wanted to be cruel enough, hard enough to pull a petal off it, but since the petals were its face I couldn't torture it. The vine snaked at me again, thorns scratching across my cheek and attempting to wrap around my neck, while the sleepy flower turned and bit my hand. I pushed the vine away, weakly, and smeared the goblin I was holding against the wall with a sickening wet crunch.

The salt was working - plants don't like it. I should have brought a bunch of prairie dogs, too. I would have to learn their chattering language for, "Arise my army!" That was long term planning, of course. I was glad that most of the night-blooming flowers were on my side. Well, Fairy Lily was fairly neutral, but also not hardy given Colorado temperatures. I was hoping that I could hear the call of Angel's Trumpet, and as it was poisonous there might have been some method for Dare to have it, but alas, this was a garden specifically built for the other side.



Thorns lashed against me, and yucca sawed faint furrows into my arms. I pushed through towards the house, thinking to at least break through some of the designs, prevent them from being used for summoning until I could come up with a better plan. I pulled at things that pulled at me, my hands bloody and smelling of grass. Moths harassed me, and crickets complained as I pushed through their comfort zones. I thought I heard the hoot of an owl.

I saw the flash of light from the porch before I heard the sound of the gate. The flash of light came with a chuckle. Dare held the glow of sunshine in his hands. Sunshine isn't the panacea it always seems to be in the movies; it only means we can see what horrific thing is coming for us.

In this case, he was waking the goblins.

Bushes thrashed, and the horrific little creatures woke to the illumination Dario held, the secret green thumb of his black hortician's trade. An army of them, goblins, bog orchids, ("bog" backwards is "gob" if you had any doubt), the creeping death camas, the lilykind. If I hadn't been terrified, I would have been flattered. No one's drawn up an army against me, before. Mark that one off the bucket list.

If Carmelo had been an action hero, he would have said, "Sorry to rain on your parade," as the first drops of the weedkiller sprayed across the bushes. Instead, it was a manly grunt and a hissing sound as the acidic drops touched the quivering plant army.

He looked up at me. Dare's cousin had come in the gate, no crawling over the wall, no concern over the strange light emanating from his cousin. Just a bunch of chemicals and a hose, and, well, a grin.

"Some cut back," he pointed out.

"Yeah," I responded.

It's the little mundane, everyday bits you forget when working the magic angle. The gun Dare waved brought it to mind. See, Dragons, and vampires, and wizards, I've gotten too used to those. I still had money from a bunch of Russian sorcerers paying my bills, so I was thinking about hexes and death curses, not about metal and bullets, and the fact that Colorado has this "Make My Day" law that meant while Dare couldn't quite shoot us with full impunity, no one was likely to ask too many questions.

He couldn't hold the gun and the sunlight, though. It had gone dark, and the scattering creatures began to grow quiescent once more. I waited for someone to move.

He said something in Spanish that I recognized a rude word from, and Carmelo grunted.

"Who are you?" he asked me. "What are you?"

"I'm no one, really." I shrugged, unable to help myself. He didn't take the movement well, but I'll be honest, he also didn't hold the gun the way my friends with experience did.

Being shot by someone inept was still going to get holes in my hide, but it meant more of a chance of his missing, or being talked down, or anything but having him shoot, right? "Just your friendly neighborhood Portal Doctor."

"What does that mean? What do you want with my garden?"

Melo said another thing I didn't understand, but Dare ignored him. He gestured with the gun as if I was supposed to answer.

"I close doors," I said. I watched as flowers wilted in front of me, as the acidic rain of whatever it was Carmelo used melted bits of my adversaries. As they lay down, sleepy, in the moon's silvery light, the world seemed to turn from color to black and white.

"I do not understand," he says. "I should shoot you. Many things grow well in the blood of wizards."

"I'm not one of those," I caught myself before I laughed. "You'd be disappointed."

"A... dryad? Venganza de... espíritus de los arboles?"

Carmelo actually chuckled. "He is no spirit of the trees. Why, Dario?" he rolled the 'r' almost sarcastically. "Are you afraid?"

"You carry herbicide. You are not from them." He looked away to talk to Carmelo, which gave me a moment to step closer. I didn't know what to do, but it seemed to be what everyone in the movies did. Dare noticed and pointed the gun at me.

Melo sprayed his cousin with the nozzle, and Dare screamed. The sound of the shot was louder than I expected, and it missed widely. Before Dario could get off another round, I did the only thing that made sense - I closed my eyes and ran into him with my right shoulder, getting a good whiff of the chemicals and knocking us both over into a stone planter. I'm glad my eyes were closed because the impact was enough to see a flash of light.

A flash of light that doesn't fade isn't properly indicated as a flash. My neck hurt and I rolled off Dare while seeing that Carmelo had dropped the spray and instead stood in a circle of sunlight. A circle that slowly expanded to fill the design Dare's garden had been built to summon.

"Wait, no!" I shouted.

Carmelo smiled at me the way he did when he said, "Rain tomorrow."

Dare was struggling while I tried to pick myself up using the edge of the planter. I hurt in places I forgot I had, well, except whenever they hurt. I wiped off some blood that had pooled on my neck with unpleasant surprise. Yeah, yuck. Or at least, yucca.

Dare had been pinned by some no-longer somnolent goblins. His gun rested in the grass, where he had managed to drop it in my surprise rush. Well, it surprised me, although it shouldn't have surprised anybody who had ever seen a film. I was guessing he didn't understand what was happening. Probably was expecting espíritus de los arboles, whatever those were. Or nymphs. He seemed the kind who enjoyed a diversion of nymphs. (That may be the official vengery.)

The glow continued, the warm gold of a summer's day. I needed to try these guys against vampires and trolls, if I could be sure they'd be on my side. It felt like I was getting a dose of vitamin D. Altogether, that's not all that difficult to produce, and in fact, I knew more than one brewer who could bottle it up as a liquid, but this was still pretty amazing.



Choices, choices. Help Dare, a known bad guy, or stop Melo, possibly a bad guy. Dario was being dragged along the ground by the goblins, a mass of them gnawing and sliding and enough of them that having been pushed prone (by me), they overwhelmed him.

Melo was drawn into the center of the summoning design, the design that from this vantage looked completely in place despite my inept bumbling through the bushes of earlier. If I'd had more time, maybe, or that flamethrower, I could have done more. Of course, I hadn't thought of the weed-killer, or of going through the gate instead of climbing the wall. I never finished college, either.

Dare started to scream, or yowl, which decided me. I heard the low thrumming of the gate, the taste of fresh-mown grass on the back of my teeth, and pine sap on my tongue while I started pulling the goblins off Dare. Blood was everywhere, and thorns pierced my hands. I remember yelling, "No!" several times as my hands grew numb and I started trying to kick them from me, petals and leaves everywhere as my carnage against the goblins matched what they did to Dare. They ripped bits of flesh with curved claws of thorns.

Dare rose up, pulling from the vines and fragrant perfumes with a roar, his face a mess of blood and fury. Some of the goblins had smaller clubs made of roots and spines that they used to beat and bruise against him. A word, a motion, and the plants in the area withered, as if water was drained from them, as if the force of the sun blighted them from the roots out.

The kind of thing you'd use against mushrooms, I suppose. Caught in the edge of the magic, I felt dizzy, as if I had been crossing a desert.

Melo countered with the song of the gate drowning out the strange almost-silence of the night, and the fight wordless except for grunts and moans from the combatants. Burrs attached themselves to Dare, a flood wiped away the drought, and the scent of evergreen filled the air.

The sunshine relented somewhat, and I was deafened by sudden creaks and pops of tree limbs cracking and changing, as wood bent as part of Melo's invocation. I took a moment to glance at him, and saw in his hand a rod of living wood.

Dare wiped blood onto his shirt and dove for his gun. I moved to get to it first, and the grasses beat us both, rippling the gun from us stalk by stalk. Melo raised the rod, and the younger man called out.

Dare threw a gesture at Melo, a word, a curse, and the darkness was absolute. For a moment all there was were the trees, giant sentinels transported into the occasional bursts of my eyes trying to make sense of what the streetlight and pale moon gave. Dare lunged at me, and I ducked, and I heard the sound of "huge" (that's a note that has its own orchestral section) behind me. I felt the wind as it passed. I felt the thump as it hit Dare, hard, and the sudden crashes, a fall of logs instead of a pile of bricks.

There were words I couldn't make out, a curse broken as a stream of goblins followed the revived sunshine, slipping into the cracks where a tree fell down and broke through the brick wall, onto what was left of a twitching, murmuring Dare. I stared, listening to the birds sing their pre-dawn songs over the sounds of Dare's slow descent to silence.

The sudden dawn burst, showing the ruin of the backyard. It looked as if hit multiple times by lightning, trees and shrubs split, and everywhere the movement of a quiet mass of small creatures as they harvested the night's work and took him into the darkness.

I was exhausted, but I looked for Melo. I saw that he had fallen as well. A ring of mushrooms surrounded him. I couldn't help myself; I hesitated for a moment. I read too much. I moved towards him.

I was pulled away by soft grasses, and the smell of fresh apples. "Shhh," said the creature, green and brown and growing. A creature of this place and Beyond. "Shhh," it repeated, the sound of wind through the meadows, and the first brush of a cool breeze on a hot day as it rattles the leaves. I was pushed down to the ground, sobbing, I think. Manly tears, of course. Very manly.

I woke up on a cushion near a window. I recognized the backyard from occasional glimpses I have had when Beatriz went from front to get something out of her shed. My hands were washed, and there were bandaids carefully applied. My jacket, full of blood and green stains hung neatly on a chair. I could hear someone singing mournfully in Spanish from a radio somewhere deeper in the house.

I saw flowers, a late summer garden awash in yellow. Sunflowers, amber primroses, hollygrapes, golden corydalis, and in the corner yet another cluster of pretty yellow flowers: a spray of cheery, carefree, Goblin Gaillardia.