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## Coreopsis

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IT wasn't the case that Zanarkand had no flowers at all. There were beds here and there in old ladies' front gardens, self-consciously decked out with the brightest and most clashing blooms, little gnomes nestled among them in exactly the right places to cheekily catch the eye of whoever might be passing and provoke them into mild annoyance at the implication that they shared a neighbourhood with anyone so flagrantly tasteless. There were the public parks, too: the places where youths took refuge when they wanted to avoid their families – so Tidus had heard. He'd hardly ever needed to stay away from his houseboat: the lack of adults in the vicinity brought some unexpected advantages. Auron, who was away more often than not and was decidedly odd anyway, didn't count.

The flowers that were planted in these spaces were always carefully chosen so as to provide maximum aesthetic benefit. The cultivars came from who knew where, and then the

seedlings were selected and placed deliberately, and fed on a diet with a particular percentage of ammonia, and then they would provide the optimum backdrop for a certain type of tree or spell out a friendly message, like WELCOME TO ZANARKAND in purple and yellow letters – as if anyone ever visited from outside. Most of the flowers, in fact, were different varieties of the same, inoffensive and low to the ground in a range of colours, easy to maintain, not quite perennial but hardy nonetheless, readily propagated but considerate enough not to spread beyond their municipally determined boundaries.



Arriving in Spira changed all that. In fact, the plant life was one of the most difficult things to adjust to: the lack of technology and the fancy way everyone spoke just made Tidus feel like he'd fallen into some kids' book about olden times, but none of those stories had ever gone into what it might be like to find oneself in a completely foreign ecosystem. It hadn't quite struck him in Baaj, where greenery was almost comically sparse and the need to escape from certain large fiends had been more pressing; it was only when he arrived on Besaid, and made his way with Wakka to the village, that he began to notice just how diverse the flowers were.

After some thought, he concluded that it was difficult not to be astonished. There were flowers as tall as he was, flowers where contrasting colours alternated from one petal to the next; flowers that looked almost like the hats that certain Zarkand women would wear to weddings, or like sweets, or, if you squinted, like the heads of rare and obscure animals. There were flowers that always seemed to be on the brink of drooping and rotting, but somehow held on; there were flowers whose smell was so pungent that it was almost nauseating to get within two metres of them. (*Six feet*, Tidus would later remind himself, after a couple of days of bemusement; they did measurements differently here.) It was impossible not to come to a standstill a couple of times on the journey, just to marvel at the unbelievable multiplicity of species that the island-dwellers took for granted. Jecht would have laughed at him for doing it, called him names for stopping to look at the pretty flowers like a girl; Wakka clearly thought he wasn't quite right in the head, but he was patient enough to let Tidus indulge.

And even after all that, it turned out that Besaid's loveliest flower was the young summoner. She was the one who really indulged Tidus in his interest in the landscape, telling him the names of each plant with a smile, never impatient at his ignorance of even the most common varieties, or at the fact that there were so many new names to learn that he invariably forgot them within moments and had to ask again the next time he saw another of the same kind. They weren't quite

alike, Tidus and Yuna; she was unfailingly polite, clearly worried about overstepping the boundaries that her culture and her role had imposed – he, the blitzball star son of a blitzball star, had never cared very much about that sort of thing and had never been expected to. But the two of them had something in common, he quickly realised, being reasonably perceptive in the way he understood people (another trait that he tried to deny he inherited from his father). Wakka was friendly, but strangely devout and prone to moments of seriousness; in Lulu’s case, that seriousness was persistent; and Kimahri – well, there was no need to say more. Maybe it was because they were both younger than their companions, at least in the first stages of the journey; but they shared a light spirit, a constant cheerfulness that marked them out and made the two of them the ones that strangers would naturally approach if they needed to speak to anyone in the group. It was they who jointly brought optimism to the pilgrimage, planting the seed of hope that Yuna’s journey would be a success in each place they visited, and trusting that the rumour would bloom once they had moved on: and even after Tidus learnt the awful truth of a summoner’s fate, it was the thought of her joyful nature that helped him regain that positivity once again.



Weeks later, the pilgrimage would end; Yuna would return

to Besaid, and would try not to remember too clearly the last time she had seen those flowers, but the thought of it would remain strong and sharp in her heart as much as she resisted. It would be the yellow flowers<sup>1</sup> that stayed with her the longest; inevitably, she would come to see them as the most beautiful. They would remind her, each time, of a certain member of her since disbanded entourage: a young man who had brightened her world as soon as he stepped into it.

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<sup>1</sup>The prompt for this story: “Your flower is: *Coreopsis*. The plant, in general, symbolizes ‘always cheerful’, while *Coreopsis arkansa*, in particular, stands for ‘love at first sight’.”