



Briar Rose

Lila Dubois

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## **Briar Rose**

Lila Dubois

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## Blurb

There once was a beautiful princess afflicted with a terrible curse. There once was a handsome prince, destined to break the curse.

*Hey wait, this sounds familiar...*

When the beautiful Princess Aurora was a baby, her parents brought the whole kingdom together to celebrate. Three gracious fairies attended, giving her wonderful gifts, as did the evil Maleficent.

*No seriously, I've heard this story.*

But the fairy godmothers didn't care about the princess; all they wanted was to impress the king. The final gift they granted was crippling obedience. Maleficent twisted their gift, changing it so that if Aurora pricked herself on a briar rose the obedience curse would be lifted.

*Oh. Wait, what? That's not how this goes.*

Aurora lived the first 11 years of her life as the perfect obedient princess until one day the teenage Prince Phillip gave her a mangy briar rose.

Freed from her obedience Aurora ran wild, sneaking into the woods and going by the name Rose. One day she met a very handsome hunter, named Hawk, who has a secret of his own. They fall in to bed, and then in love, but keep their secrets, and when Aurora returns to her father's castle to tell him about Hawk and to renounce her royal status, things go terribly wrong.

## Chapter One

The dust motes danced blue, green, and red in the glass tinted sunlight.

Those tiny specs were all that moved in the great hall, for though the rest of the kingdom, as many of them as could fit within the great stone walls, were in attendance, all were silent and still in a show of reverence.

Into this stillness four figures took shape, three appearing in sparkling clouds of mist, the fourth in a dark swirl of smoke. Refined, with skin that shown milk white in the light and garments only a shade less fine than those of the king and Queen, the Witches stood, unaffected by the murmurings of fear and astonishment that ran through the crowd.

Three stood together, their hands clasped, garments of light colors, evoking feelings of peace and calm, lightness and joy.

Carefully laced overdresses of spider-web white floated on heavy skirts of robin's egg blue, new leaf green, and buttercup yellow. Sleeves were lined with the same colors in darker hues and held in place by woven ribbons and strings of freshwater pearls. Hair, golden auburn and the palest white, hung in rainfall straight curtains, unadorned, giving the women an air of youth that hid the truth of their years.

The fourth woman was something else. She glittered with dark, from the wild fall of jet curls to the lush body wrapped in black on black brocade with gold and red accents. Her throat and the upper swell of her breasts were bare. Rubies, gems of passion and madness, dripped from her slender wrists and ears. The pale line of her throat was bereft of these gems, drawing attention to the nakedness of her flesh.

The rolling soft fabric of her skirts fell to the floor, but when she stepped forward those who knelt could see that, like a savage, she wore no shoes, only anklets of rubies.

"Welcome, honored guests. You grace us with your beauty and refinement." The king never looked at the dark one when he spoke. His steady, placid gaze remained on the three witches of light, and while the insult hidden in his words may have been beyond the understanding of the peasants, the king, Queen, and four witches, understood it well enough.

"Majesties." They spoke as one and then, like daises bobbing in the sun, dipped in curtsies.

The dark witch moved forward, deliberately placing herself at the same level as the others. Rather than perform some insipid curtsy she dipped her head and shoulders in a subtle bow.

The king paused for a moment, his lips pressing tight as he realized she would not grovel further.

"We have invited you here to celebrate with us the arrival of our long awaited daughter and heir."

Now the pastel witches spoke, each voice chiming on identical notes.

"We are honored at the invitation, and delight with Your Graces at this blessed event."

"To show our fealty and thanks, we have come to offer blessings over the child."

From the tightly wrapped bundle in the queen's arms a tiny whimper sounded.

"Your majesty, may we?" The witch in yellow held out her arms for the squirming

babe. With the quiet obedience that marked her life the queen handed the babe over.

As the people watched, the tiny princess disappeared into the arms of the witch. Her sisters crowded around her, cooing inanely at the babe who continued to fuss quietly.

When the witches stepped back their cheeks were pink with pleasure, and their eyes bright. The one in yellow now stood in the center, the babe still in her arms. To her left the titan haired witch, a smidgen taller than her sisters, reached into a pouch at her belt.

“Your majesties, by your leave we will grace your daughter with gifts, the first of which will be a symbol of the others, enchanted by the light to grow and change with her, its beauty increasing as she does.” She raised her hand high, the colored sunlight striking off a solid gold bracelet. Simple pure lines of gold, with subtle contouring, spoke of elegant wealth.

In the glittering light the bracelet glowed, reflecting beams of light to rival the streams pouring from the stained glass. Wrapped securely in her confining blankets the baby blinked large blue eyes, struggling to focus on the glittery thing. When one of the women, for the babe knew them to be female, though not her mother, gently freed her arm and placed a tiny fist against the gold bracelet, the baby’s fingers curled reflexively around it.

Smiling at this sign of obedient precociousness the witch in blue, the quietest of the three, took up her part of the ceremony.

“We three will grant you blessings. Features befitting a princess, as this bracelet of gold is a symbol of your royalty, so will you become a symbol of royalty to the people.

“The first gift is that of beauty.” The blue-garbed witch leaned low and pressed a lavender scented kiss to the babe’s brow. For a moment the wide blue eyes deepened to purple and then the babe let out a fitful cry.

On the throne the queen twitched forward, hearing fear and pain in her babe’s cries. The king placed a restraining hand against her forearm and with a quick glance at her husband the queen settled back, only the tight twists of her fingers showing her discomfort.

“The second gift is that of grace.” A second lavender kiss was pressed to the child’s brow and her small cries escalated to a high whimper. The queen bowed her head, starting at her clenched hands.

Finally the child was returned to the arms of the yellow-skirted woman. Murmuring to the fretful baby she raised her voice, placing her hand atop the golden bracelet still clenched in the child’s fist.

“The final gift is that of obedience, so you may always remember your place and carry the gifts of grace and beauty while being mindful of the will of your sovereign.” The witch smiled at the king, who gave her a regal smirk in response.

A thin sheen of pale gold enveloped the child, while a chorus of oohs and ahhs rose from the crowd. Utterly disgusted at the display the black witch curled her lip; repugnance and pity welled in her heart for the baby.

As the light grew to its zenith, the spell, for as much as those three might call this a gift, it was in truth a spell, sank into the baby’s skin and the fitful whimpers blossomed into a frightened baby’s endless wail.

On the throne the queen jerked, but stilled when the king’s hand fell against her shoulder once more. Pitiful woman, the dark witch thought. Had the child been hers nothing on this earth would have stopped her.

The yellow witch leaned down and whispered, "Hush."

The babe stilled, the small round face going smooth, eyes large and blue and passive, no longer alight with curiosity.

The black witch could bear to watch this no longer.

"Majesties, I too would like to bestow a gift upon your child." Horrified stares had no effect on her; she suffered through derision and fearful regard more times that she could count.

"A gift ... my lady?" The king's voice dripped with veiled scorn. How he hated that he could not cut her, could not have his knights hunt her down and burn her. She was too powerful, the most powerful, and so was tolerated.

"A gift, and one of great value." Skirts rustling she pressed close to the other witches, scooping up the baby and letting her rosewood scent settle over them, watching in petty pleasure as their noses wrinkled in disgust.

Backing away she looked down at the babe, stroking one plump little cheek as she murmured words to dampen the spell. There was no way to break it, for there was strength and old magic, a power she could not duplicate, in their trifecta, but she could change it, distort it enough that the child might have a chance.

She tugged the bracelet, plain cumbersome thing that it was, from the child's grasp, clucking as she did so, a watery grin and a spit bubble her reward. Charmed despite herself the witch gathered her skills, more determined than before, to right some of what they had done to the child.

Imitating the witch's movement she lifted the bracelet. From beneath her sleeve a twisting column of smoke, snakelike, wove up her arm, circling the bracelet. She pulled her hand away and it hung in mid air, supported by an ever twisting band of smoke. The crowd shrank back, fearful of her magic.

"Your beauty and grace are yours to keep, though neither will bring what others think they do. Your bracelet of gold, to which those gifts are bound, is now tempered. By blood its spell is broken, and by the briar rose it is remembered." Light flared around the bracelet, and on its inner surfaces a twisting pattern of thorn-studded roses appeared. "And now for my gift."

With great deliberation she plucked the bracelet from the air and offered it back to the baby, who was the only one not trembling in fear. Instead she began sucking intently on the precious gold, the tiny slurping noises audible only to the dark witch.

"My gift to you is something more precious than grace or beauty, more real than obedience. My gift to you is an awakening of the heart."

With a long hard glance and the king, Queen, and three witches, she lifted the child, pressing blood red lips to the small downy head. There she whispered the words, the truth of her spell kept between them.

"Be not who they want you to be, but who you are."

## Chapter Two

“Aurora, offer the prince a goblet of wine.”

“Prince Phillip, would you care for another goblet of wine?” Like the dutiful daughter she was known to be, Princess Aurora responded instantly to her father’s command.

Seated beside her Prince Phillip rolled his eyes. The girl would not see him do it, indeed, in the entire time he’d know her, from their betrothal when he was four and she one, the girl had never looked him in the eye.

The quiet thing rarely ever looked up. She kept her chin tilted demurely down, her eyes lowered. There was no doubt that she was lovely, her face a perfect oval, tinted pink at cheek and lips, and her long lashes, darker than the pure gold of her hair, were all that he knew of her eyes.

Once a year his father dragged Phillip on a week-long journey to the castle of the neighboring kingdom. The marriage had been arranged to further political gains on both sides. His father’s kingdom possessed a fine and well trained army, and they often came to the aid of this kingdom, for though rich in growing things, they had no strong military. The marriage would cement the informal protection arrangement.

At fourteen Phillip had a budding interest in girls, and he was already dreading marriage to the boring blonde seated next to him.

She never spoke unless asked a direct question. Never looked up. She was about as lively as the straw-stuffed dummies he used for target practice.

“No, thank you Princess, I would not care for any more wine.” His slightly mocking tone earned him a stern glare from his father. Phillip repeated his eye roll and his father grimaced at him.

Aurora had extended her hand, reaching for the jug, but now she slowly drew it back in, and the gold bangle on her wrist, too large for her skinny arm, flashed in the light.

Everyone knew the story of the bracelet, that it was a gift of three witches, a beautiful symbol of the blessings the princess would bring. It was only in the dark of night that tales of a black witch, who’d cursed the bracelet, were told.

Phillip thought the girl would be infinitely more interesting if she were cursed.

“Phillip, why don’t you take the princess for a walk? The king and I have a few business matters to discuss and they are best if not discussed in front of a lady of the princess’s refinement.”

Aurora’s father managed to both preen at the compliment and look stern. “Really, is that a good idea?”

“Can her maids not accompany them? They will be more than properly chaperoned, and my Phillip is a good a fighter as some of my senior guard; he can protect her.”

Phillip widened his eyes at his father. He didn’t want to take her for a walk. Why couldn’t they just send her away? He wanted to hear the discussion. Besides, his father always spoke of business in front of his mother. Often, Mother’s words were the deciding factor.

“If you insist,” the king said. “Aurora, behave yourself with the prince.”

The girl’s chin dipped even further.



With a disgusted sigh he did not bother to hide, Phillip stood, grabbed the back of her chair and jerked it out.

“Phillip!”

“Sorry Father, sometimes I don’t know my own strength. Princess, would you care to accompany me on a walk?”

Placing her hand in his outstretched one Aurora rose. “Yes Prince Phillip, it would be my delight.”

Dropping her hand—there were simply some things he wouldn’t do—he started walking, hoping she was behind him.

She was walking to his side, just slightly behind him. As they exited the great hall two older women, both wearing ugly blue veils, moved to follow them.

“Great, just great,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry Prince Phillip, I did not hear you.”

“Nothing Princess. I simply remarked on how fine your father’s castle is.”

“Thank you for your interest, Prince Phillip. Would you care for an architectural tour?”

“You know much about the architecture, Princess?”

“Not I, but I would be delighted to arrange for and accompany you on one, if that is your desire.”

“No, thank you Princess; a walk outside should be fine.”

They exited the castle through the family’s private door, small but more heavily adorned than the great front doors. Phillip took a deep breath, feeling contentment flow through him. He loved the outdoors, loved to run through the woods, ride his stallion over fields, and practice archery in the massive training arena his father had built in the lower bailey.

“It is a beautiful day, is it not Princess?”

“It is.”

They walked on, through the small graveled courtyards and down a manicured path. He preferred wild nature, not this manicured perfection, but if he had to walk with the girl, outside was better than in.

Soon her small controlled steps began to irk him. Speeding up the pace he was mildly surprised when her gait lengthened. Casting his gaze askance he was struck by how smoothly she moved. The shorter steps made her seem tentative and awkward, but the long strides made her more graceful.

They’d reached the end of the formal gardens, where manicured shrubs fell away into wild grasses and flowers. Phillip started off the path and with only a slight hesitation Aurora followed him. The ladies in waiting stopped on the path, leaving them to traverse the uneven ground alone.

Beside him Aurora lifted her skirts, ever so slightly, and continued to keep pace with him.

“Are you always so quiet?”

“What would you like to speak on, Prince Phillip?”

“You may call me simply Phillip.”

“My father wishes me to call you Prince Phillip.”

“Well I wish for you to call me Phillip.” She stopped and he could see her fingers twisting nervously in her skirts. “Never mind.” He kept walking, rolling his eyes.

Soon the maids were smudges of blue behind them. Phillip was surprised she had not asked him to turn back, then again she never seemed to ask for anything.

With a fourteen-year-old boy's tactlessness he finally broke and asked, "Do you always do what you are told?"

"I do my best to be pleasing at all times."

"What has that to do with anything?"

"Obedience is pleasing, and is a sign of diligence and good character."

"Don't you ever want to do things, or say things, just because you want to?"

"My wants are secondary. I am a princess and as such I am held to a higher standard. My behavior must be above reproach."

Muttering, "Glad I'm not a princess," Phillip turned back, Aurora mimicking the movement. "So you really don't ever just do things you want?"

"What I want is to be pleasing."

"Then call me Phillip."

"Yes ... Phillip."

"That wasn't so hard."

"I am glad it pleased you."

"Ugh, never mind. What if you hadn't wanted to go on a walk with me?"

"Why would I not want to? You are my betrothed and as such I greatly value any time spent in your company."

Phillip shook his head. The girl was ridiculous. She sounded like a nursemaid he'd had who liked to lecture, but she had been an old wrinkled lady (and one who quickly left when he filled her bed with tadpoles.) The prim tone sounded preposterous coming from the lips of the young girl.

In silence they made their way back toward the path. Out of the corner of his eye Phillip saw something pink. Jogging a few steps he pushed aside the grass and saw a small rose bush. It was thorny and wild, the stalk brown, but with a single lush rose blooming from it.

Pulling a jeweled dagger from his belt, Phillip sawed through the stalk, plucking the rose. As boring as he might find her, she was his betrothed, and he was, after all, a prince.

Carefully lifting the pink blossom, he offered it to her.

"Beware the thorns."

She took it, cradling it loosely until her fingers could find a bit of stem without barbs.

She carefully twisted the blossom, looking at it from every angle before lifting it to her nose.

"Thank you, Phillip."

"You're welcome, Aurora."

He saw the pink in her cheeks blossom, but still she would not look up.

They started back to the path, the maids smiling at the oh-so-appropriate show of courtly love. When they reached the castle doors a messenger was waiting.

"Prince Phillip, your father bids you return to the great hall. Princess Aurora, you may go to your rooms."

She dipped a curtsy to Phillip and nodded at the messenger before turning and making her way to her room, leaving her betrothed staring gloomily after her.

\* \* \* \*

Alone in her chamber Aurora let the maids undress her, stripping her court garments and redressing her in plain pink muslin.

“Is there anything else you need, Princess?”

“Might you bring me a vase of water, Maria?”

“Of course Princess, and might I say Princess, Prince Phillip will be a very handsome man one day. You are very lucky.”

“Indeed, the king and queen honor me greatly by entrusting me with the duty of marriage to so noble a prince.”

When the maids left, Aurora hesitantly lifted the blossom to her nose once again. She was not sure how much enthusiasm or excitement was seemly, for she had never received a gift before.

Had she allowed herself to think about her own wishes, she would have wished for a better idea of what he looked like. Keeping one’s eyes demurely lowered often led to an incomplete picture of what people looked like. But her tutors told her that was a good trait in a princess, for it taught her humility and to never judge another person by their looks.

Maria returned, setting a thin vase of water on the table before her, and then retreating.

Aurora carefully lifted the blossom and started to slip it into the vase. Some of the thorns were too long for the narrow neck of the vase. Frowning, Aurora began pushing at them, attempting to break them off.

Her thumb, pressed against the edge of the thickest thorn, slipped, the sharp barb sliding deep into her flesh.

Starting in horror at the embedded thorn and welling blood, she did not notice the silver smoke seeping from her bracelet.

*By blood its spell is broken, by the briar rose it is remembered.*

Aurora blink, then slowly looked up, and for the first time in eleven years, she saw.

## Chapter Three

### Seven years later

“Let go of me, you great smelly oafs!”

Two burly guards, their faces impassive from years of practice, dragged a struggling tousled young woman before the king. Dressed in plain brown and white, a skirt and vest of mud colored cloth worn over an off-the-shoulder loose blouse, and with a long sweep of honey gold hair falling down her back, the woman looked like a beautiful peasant girl.

“I said let go! That is a royal order!”

“I’m sorry Princess, your father has ordered us to return you.”

“No!”

Grasping her firmly by the upper arms, the soldiers continued dragging her through the castle.

When they entered the great hall, Aurora tossed her head, golden hair flying. Standing straight she walked sedately between the guards, no longer struggling. In a thick silence she strode the length of the great hall, headed toward the dual throne at the far end.

The queen’s throne was empty. These “episodes” were distressing for her.

“Your Majesty.” The guards released her arms and Aurora sketched a mocking bow.

“Aurora. I grow weary of this disobedience.” The king, head high, crown heavy on his brow, stared at her from his perch on the throne.

“I grow weary of your rules and notions of duty, your constant confinement.”

“You will be a queen some day. How will you rule unless you learn?”

“I would venture to say, *Your Majesty*, that I know more about the people than you.”

“Enough of your insolence.”

“Did you know that a sickness in one of the far villages killed many of the elderly?”

“That is not my concern, I have governors and overlords who are to watch over the people. Besides, to sicken and die is the nature of the peasants.”

“Your noble and generous nature is amazing to behold.”

“Do not forget that you are mine to do with as I will,” the king threatened.

“Beat me, starve me! You have tried both and it has gotten you nothing.”

“Do you have any idea of what day it is?”

“A lovely sunny day, one I was quite enjoying before you kidnapped me.”

“It is the first day of the sixth month. Do you know who should be here today?”

The princess cocked her head to the side and then let out a loud peal of laughter.

“My betrothed! It is the Phillip should be here!”

“This is no matter to laugh about. Prince Phillip and his father have been more than understanding these past seven years.”

“Of course they have been understanding. They still want your gold, do they not? And you are still willing to sell me for an army.”

“You have been betrothed since you were one year old. You are eighteen this year, two years past the time you should have wed.”

“I’m so sorry that my behavior and longing for freedom has inconvenienced you.”

“This has gone on long enough Aurora. In six months the prince will arrive and at that time you will be married.”

“I will not.”

Turning smoothly on her heel, Aurora headed for the doors.

“Make sure she does not leave the palace grounds.”

Smirking at the order Aurora veered left, heading for an alcove, which led to stairs. The poor guards had probably had enough of chasing her around; it seemed only fair that she give them some peace and go to her room.

Up several levels, down tapestry-hung corridors, and through winding towers, Aurora strolled, guards trailing her. Her chambers were in one of the towers. After they’d discovered the secret corridors a smitten mason had dug into her old room, she’d been moved to the tower.

Aurora opened the door and stepped in, turning to face the guards.

“I will be staying in for the rest of the day gentlemen. There is no need to remain.”

“Yes, Princess,” they murmured obediently. Aurora closed the door and sighed, knowing that despite her words they would remain on guard until others came to relieve them.

With a ‘humph’ of frustration she plopped down on the bed, her hair puddling around her. It truly was a lovely day outside, and she wanted nothing to do with the interior of the castle.

Though she would never admit it to her father, Aurora loved the castle, with its elegant turrets and buttresses, tall arches and time-worn steps. If she were ever to say so to her father it would be taken as a sign of weakening, of acceptance of the shackles they so desperately wanted her to wear, but within her own mind she could admit she loved it.

Thoughts of shackles lead to thoughts of her marriage, and of her father’s latest pronouncement. Since she was eleven her father had been putting off Phillip and his father, telling them she was in poor health as a way to keep them from arriving on the first day of the sixth month, their annual meeting date.

Just before her sixteenth birthday she and her father had gone to war. The original date of the wedding had been the day after her birthday, but no matter what her father did to her, or had others do to her, Aurora had refused to be the meek princess he wanted her to be.

Turning her head she looked at the bracelet, which sat in a glass case atop its own table.

Her father and mother still didn’t know what had changed in her, what had happened in her eleventh year, but Aurora did, for she had met the witch.

Thinking of Millie, Aurora rose and went to the vanity. Slipping down onto the stool she worried her lower lip with her teeth.

Should she do it? Was now a good time?

Letting impulse dictate, she grabbed the decorative dagger off the dresser and used it to slice thin bloody lines in each palm and then pressed her blooded hands to the mirror.

“Millie, I need you. Please.”

Pulling her hands away, leaving smeared bloody trails in her wake, Aurora went to pack.

It was late that night, when the white moon hung low in the sky, its pale light illuminating Aurora’s sleeping figure, that the mirror started to glow, a dark fog slipping

from the corners to creep over the vanity top, tumbling to the floor and then slithering for the bed.

The blooded hand prints slowly sank into the mirror, the magic soaking up the power rich royal blood.

Ribbons of smoke slid along the folds of the blanket, moving slowly over the sleeping figure, circling around her neck, whispering over cheeks and eyelids.

Aurora blinked herself awake and the fog retreated. Heavy eyed with sleep she slid from the bed, dressed in an embroidered nightgown. The fog curled around her ankles, like pleasant shackles, coaxing her on. As she approached the mirror it lengthened, the vanity it had rested on melting away, until a floor length mirror, its surface rippling like black currents, reflected her darkly.

At the last moment Aurora remembered to grab the bag from the floor, clutching it as she stepped up to the mirror, and then stepped through it.

\* \* \* \*

“I left them a note.”

“You know that will not stop them.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well you should. Your actions and how they influence other people should be of concern to you.”

Aurora hung her head at the rebuke, true regret, the kind her father’s scoldings never brought on, welling in her heart.

A pale hand cupped her face, tilting it up. “Never hang your head.”

“Yes, Millie.”

The dark haired witch leaned forward, pressing an open mouthed kiss to Aurora’s lips. A little trill of arousal slid through her belly and Aurora eagerly slipped her arms around the older woman’s waist.

“Enough, you little tramp.” Aurora grinned at the insult, which sounded like praise from Millie’s lips, “I haven’t even had my breakfast yet.”

“I know, but I am needy.”

“Ahh to be young again. Have you met any new boys?”

“Nay, just the Blacksmith of Nioneen’s son. Ohhh, last time I visited him he fucked me while I sat on his father’s anvil. It was delicious.”

“You were careful?”

“Yes, I didn’t let him spill inside me.”

“Good. And he does not know you are the princess?”

“No.”

At her dejected tone Millie leaned in for another kiss, stroking the smooth fall of Aurora’s hair. “I know it is hard for you to conceal who you are, but you must.”

“Why Millie? Why can’t I tell them? Tell every boy I touch the truth. My father would die from horror.”

“You know why.”

Aurora pushed away from the table, moving to stand by the divided door of the cottage, leaning on the closed lower half. Her body, quite beyond her control, made a graceful line, her hair spilling around her in golden glory.

“What if you are wrong Millie? What if I would make a terrible Queen?”

“You see the people, understand them in a way your own parents never could.”

“But what if Phillip is like Father, and I become like Mother?”

“He is not, and you will not.”

“I wish I had your faith.”

“What you need is breakfast. Come and sit.”

Millie, dressed in a finely cut, if simple, black dress, slid onto a stool at the small table in the cabin’s kitchen. Over a meal of bacon and fresh bread drenched in honey Aurora once again explained the letter she’d left for her parents.

“I told them that I would not return until control of my marriage, both who and where, was given to me.”

“You know they will never agree to it.”

“I am aware, but I also said that if they did not agree I would never return.”

“Rose! You should know better.”

“It is the only threat I have.”

“You forget that they truly care for you.”

“No, they care for *Princess Aurora*, not Rose.”

“Your nickname is apt my pet, for you are both beautiful as a rose and prickly as its thorns.” Millie rose, her dark hair spilling over them as she leaned to kiss the crown of Aurora’s head. “Why do you not take advantage of the sunshine, go and pick us some flowers?”

“If I pick berries will you make tarts?”

“I will teach you to make tarts.”

“Why should I have to make tarts? I’m the princess, aren’t I?” Aurora rose to her full height, a full head taller than the shorter, curvier Millie. Grabbing a spoon the witch gave her a good hard smack on the bottom.

“Off with you, Princess.”

Wiggling her spanked bottom Aurora grabbed a basket and headed out the door. She wore a blue gown, the laced bodice embroidered with brown and pink roses. Millie had made her the dress the first time she’d come here. When the fighting with her father had reached its worst, and Aurora had lain, weeping, her back bruised by the whip and ankles and wrists marked by shackles, Millie had come to her.

First it was a voice in the night, coaxing the troubled young girl to speak of her plight. Lacking any confidant she’d whispered of her need for freedom, her fear of her father, and love and hatred of her mother, the longing of her body which had led her into the arms of a rough handed farmer boy, who taught her body of sweet things, but whom she’d never been able to see again for fear of him discovering her identity.

After weeks of these midnight chats Millie had appeared in the mirror.

Aurora sat, her young face a study in shock, as Millie quietly told her the true story of her christening. The next night Millie had opened the mirror, inviting Aurora to her sanctuary in the woods. Even now the princess did not know exactly where it was, for Millie would not tell her, but on that first visit she’d allowed Aurora to stay a week, giving her the simple dress with its pretty flowers, and healing wounds—both physical and emotional.

Before sending her back Millie had told Aurora that once a year, for a single week, she could find sanctuary in the cottage.

Aurora wandered farther than she thought, distracted by her reminiscences, and had

already reached the river.

A huge oak lay across the river, stretched over a place where water had carved deep banks. The oak was not so thick as to make crossing easy, but Aurora stepped out without fear. Though the blood spilled by the briar rose had broken the spell, it was only to obedience that Millie had tied the counter spell, leaving Aurora with her grace and beauty.

Humming an off-key tune she danced across the log, following the smell of ripe summer berries traveling on the wind. Farther and deeper into the forest she wandered, until a thicket of black berries, growing in a sunny patch near the edge of a meandering stream, made her stop.

Once both belly and basket were full, Aurora knelt to wash her hands in the stream. Hooking her basket over a tree branch and knotting a scarf around it to keep any woodland thieves out, she wandered along the bank of the stream, content to simply be.

Into her peace the sound of hooves intruded.

Aurora darted behind a large tree, the sound making her think of soldiers. Millie'd told her the cottage was far from the castle; indeed Millie'd said it wasn't even in her father's kingdom, but the fear remained.

The hooves stopped and Aurora pressed herself back against the tree, hand over her heart in the hope that its too loud beating would not give her away.

Hooves stomped in a restless pattern and then there were the sounds of a man's low murmurs.

"...warm today, we've come far. Time for a rest, get that saddle off you, take a quick dip..."

Hmm ... not a soldier.

There was the sound of slapping leather and a horse's low whinnies. A few more moments past and then there was the unmistakable sound of rustling cloth, followed by splashing.

Aurora snuck around the tree. Waist deep, in a little pool made by a bend in the stream, was a naked man.

A young, golden skinned, muscled, naked man.

Yum.

Aurora was suddenly hungry for something besides berry tarts. Gathering up her skirts she slipped out from behind her tree, quickly gathering up his discarded clothes, which were hung over a low vertical branch along with the horse's saddle and bridle. The horse, tethered to a tree by a rope attached to his halter, was much more interested in munching grass than warning his master of the girl's approach.

Aurora hid his clothes in the roots of the tree her basket hung in, and then made her way back to the man. Quietly as she could, though the man continued to splash obliviously, Aurora climbed the tree, seating herself where the man's clothes had been.

Leaning on one arm she ogled him, her body slowly heating in anticipation.

\* \* \* \*

Climbing out of the small pool, which had been pleasantly warm, Hawk shook himself, bending forward and scrubbing his hands through his hair to help remove the water. It had been a hot, miserable ride today. It hadn't helped that this was the tenth day of his journey and that his body had been sticky with many days' sweat. He was clean



now, and this forest seemed worth some exploration.

It was a very pleasant surprise to see a peasant maid seated on the branch in place of his clothes. They stared at one another for a moment, her eyes leisurely taking in his naked body, lingering in the interesting places, biting her lip in a way that told him she knew exactly what to do with everything I saw.

“Hello, fair maid. Tell me, have you seen my garments?”

“Well sir, I’m afraid they have been carried off.”

“Really? By whom?”

“Some woodland creatures I fear, fierce beasties.”

“Would this woodland creature have hair of gold and truly delectable breasts?”

The girl glanced down at her own breasts, lifted by the tight lacing of her dress.

“Why yes sir, how did you know?”

Hawk moved forward, his cock swelling with each step.

“Perhaps if I reward this ‘fierce beast’ she might return my clothing.”

“It would have to be a very pleasant reward.”

Hawk reached the girl, sliding his hands around her waist. “Hopefully she can see that a reward of mine is a very large reward indeed.”

She laughed and it was so merry that the air around her seemed to sparkle. Hawk was enchanted.

“It is, indeed, a very fine reward, but it is the implementation of the reward that counts.”

Hawk grasped the girl’s ankle and slowly ran his hand up to her knee, dragging her skirts with it. The other hand grasped her other knee, forcing it wide so he could step between her legs.

The hand beneath her skirts continued its journey, rising ever higher, slipping to the inside of her thigh. The girl’s hands slid along the swelled muscles of his shoulders, fingertips pressing in, testing his strength. One hand traveled down the planes of his chest to flick a flat male nipple.

Hawk jerked at the touch, so she did it again. Turning the flick into a pinch.

“A pinch will earn you the same, wench.”

“I certainly hope so.”

Long fingered delicate hands slid around his neck and the girl pulled him in for a kiss. Her mouth opened against his, her tongue the first to explore outside its home confines. She tasted of blackberries and sunlight and woman. As the kiss grew and deepened he draped her skirt back over her thighs, and then went to work on the lacing of her dress.

When the laces gave way he pulled his mouth from hers, jerked the bodice down, and feasted on her breasts, taking first one and then the other nipple into his mouth. Her hands fisted in his hair and Hawk returned the pinch, gently clasping her nipple with his teeth.

One hand supporting the small of her back, he slid the other between her legs, nearly weeping with joy to find her so wet and ready. He slid in one finger, and she was tight, gloriously so. Her hips rocked as he fucked her with first one and then two fingers.

The branch she sat on was too high for him to fuck her while she sat upon it, so he freed her breasts, whispering, “Hold on” as he slid the hand at her back beneath her skirt to grasp her hip.

When her arms were securely laced around his neck and her legs hooked together at his back, he lifted her, arms flexing as he slid her down onto his cock. He let her own body weight force her down, and she wiggled her hips, situating herself more firmly.

Once she was settled he pressed her back against the tree, the branch matching the curvature of her lower back. She unlaced her hands and braced them on the branch behind her.

Hawk slid his hands to her thighs, lifting and separating them, allowing his cock a half inch farther inside her warm body.

He wanted to say something, but he could not think, so instead he pulled back, then thrust forward. She cried out in pleasure, her head falling back, her hair spilling over her breasts and onto the branch beneath her. Her breasts, delicious, bared and plumped by the half on bodice, jiggled with each thrust.

With her body braced as it was she could not thrust back against him, but her moans and cries told him what she wanted and needed.

It was going to be quick, the very suddenness of the encounter serving to drain his stamina. Hawk lifted her left leg, laying it along his chest, ankle near his ear. The change freed up his hand to slip between her legs and stroke her clit.

He timed the stroking of her clit to the thrusts, rubbing hard on the bud as he pulled out and pressing firmly as he stroked in.

Her cries of pleasure rose in volume and frequency, her cheeks and lips flushing a dark rose.

He felt her orgasm in the tightening of her belly, a moment before she screamed her pleasure to the sky. Hawk gathered himself, his thrusts increasing in tempo, his own climax only a stroke away. Just before he came she moved, dropping her hips as he pulled out, so that his cock slid along her belly beneath her skirts, his seed spilling there.

Gasping, Hawk leaned into her, pinning them both upright to the tree.

Her arms came forward, sliding around his neck, her breath panting in his ear.

Hawk considered himself a skilled lover, and had done his share of truly interesting sexual things, but this lightning-fast woodland encounter had shaken him in a way nothing else had.

Kissing her shoulder he whispered, "What's your name?"

\*

"What's your name?"

Still panting from the liquid lightening orgasm she'd just had, Aurora almost gave her true name. Swallowing back the deadly admission she gave the name Millie used.

"Briar Rose."

"That is an odd name."

"What is your name?"

"Hawk."

Aurora leaned back far enough to look at him and lifted a brow. "You call my name odd?"

"Very well then, we are named for plants and beasts, neither one of us human."

Aurora flexed her hips, his softened cock, which had slid down between her thighs to nestle against her well used sex, rubbing against her. "What we just did feels all too human to me."

"Or perhaps it is animalistic in its ferocity."

“I did warn you of the ferocity of the woodland creatures.”

“You did.” Hawk leaned back, his hands on her hips to steady her, as he lifted her away from the trunk and then set her down on unsteady legs.

“So, Briar Rose, what are you doing out here in the middle of the day, stealing the clothes of strange men and letting them have their wicked way with you?”

“You are mistaken, sir. It is I who had my wicked way with you.”

“Pardon me.”

“And my reasons for being here are my own.”

Something in her voice must have alerted him, for he spoke softly. “I mean no criticism.”

Aurora stepped away, headed for the stream. “Very well.”

Kneeling by the stream she cupped some water and gently washed her belly, though it felt that most of his seed had seeped into her dress.

“Will you return my clothes now?”

She looked over her shoulder, frowning at his soft cock. “Can you not go again?”

“Peace lady, I need some time.”

“You look young; you should be able to go again soon.”

“You know much about this?”

“Apparently more than you.” That startled a laugh from him, and the pleasant low masculine sound skittered up her back.

“Well, Briar Rose, might I redeem myself in your eyes?”

“As soon as your ‘reward’ rises once more.”

“There are other things I might do to help ... pass the time.”

Hawk assisted her to rise and then finished loosening her laces, slipping the dress up and off.

Aurora stood, unashamedly naked, the sunlight hallowing her hair and highlighting the pink of her lips and nipples.

“Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are, Briar Rose?”

“Beauty is a trick, a spell.”

“Then I am enchanted.”

Dropping to one knee Hawk spread out her dress and then held out his arms to her. When she stepped into them he grabbed her waist, assisting her down.

Aurora ran her hands under her hair, spreading it on the grass above her head, not wanting it trapped under her body.

Hawk lay in his side, propped on one elbow. “What good deed did I do that I would find such a beautiful creature in the woods?”

She did not answer, for his hand began to skim over her, fingertips brushing, palm smoothing, over every bit of skin. He touched her collarbones and pressed a finger into her belly button. Her traced the indents of her waist with the backs of his fingers and pinched the base of her breast, plumping it so that his tongue could lap at the pink tip.

Aurora’s legs began to move restlessly, her thighs sliding together, creating friction along the lips of her sex.

His hands moved to her restless legs, stroking her, calming her as he might a skittish horse, his strokes easing her legs apart, until they lay open, her swollen sex, once more moist with arousal, open to the air and sun.

Slowly, teasingly, he stroked the very edges of the outer lips, running his fingers

through the blonde curls. When she began to make small needy noises he leaned down to kiss her, drinking in the little sounds.

His fingers continued their too gentle assault on her sex and soon she was lifting her hips against his hand, begging for a deeper touch. With a long smooth stroke he slid two fingers inside her.

Aurora brought her hips up, inviting him deeper. Hawk curled his fingers inside her and rubbed her clit with his thumb, all while continuing to nibble at her breasts.

This orgasm came on easily, building quickly and cresting so that her toes curled, her breasts thrust up into his mouth, sex pressed into his hand.

When her body relaxed down Hawk wiggled his fingers within her, thrusting languidly, extending the pleasant post-orgasm flutters.

“Did you enjoy that Rose?”

Aurora opened one eye and smiled sleepily, “Very much so.”

“I am glad, but I hope you don’t think that we’re done.” He rolled between her thighs and then slid down her body, his lightly furred chest scrapping against her breasts and belly.

“What are you—”

Hawk settled himself between her legs, his hands on her inner thighs, keeping them spread. His thumbs stretched, hooking the lips of her sex and spreading them.

“—doing?”

He bit her clit. The small stab of pain in her already orgasm-sensitive vagina was too much, her body was forced into another deep, muscle trembling orgasm. Aurora’s back arched as she screamed, the sensations so strong that light danced behind her closed eyes.

With her clit trapped by his teeth Hawk began to lick. As her slender fingers knotted in his hair, he forced her body to dance on the knife’s edge, giving her a rich depth of pleasure that her previous lovers never had.

When his lips and teeth left her she let out a sob, one of both relief and disappointment, but then his body slid along hers once more, and his cock glided smoothly into her orgasm-tightened body.

Aurora arched her back, the fullness a sweet, deep pleasure, and Hawk bent his head, pressing his lips to her throat as he thrust into her. His strokes were long and hard, her wet passage eager for him. When she lifted her legs, wrapping them over his back, they groaned in unison as the new position allow him to enter her deeper.

Again and again he thrust, his thick cock sliding deep, pressing against the walls of her vagina, opening her and filling her.

The orgasms and the attention of his hands and mouth had driven the blood to the surface of her skin. Each touch, from the brush of his chest against her nipples, to his breath against her neck, sent pleasure coursing through her body. The taste of his kiss and his smell, sweat and man, was thick and pleasing in her nose.

“Rose,” he said, panting, “you have enchanted me and I can hold on no longer.”

Their lips sealed together, bodies rocking, as he came, spilling inside her.

Aurora languidly trailed her fingertips over the muscles of Hawk’s back.

It was rare that she indulged herself by lying with a man after he had pleased her. Caution always bid her kiss him quickly and leave. Drawing a breath, as deep as she could with his muscled torso lying across her, Aurora breathed him in.

Hawk’s head turned, lips grazing her jaw. “Am I too heavy?”

“Nay.”

But still he shifted, moving to lie beside her as he had before, but this time he kept one leg over hers, weaving their lower limbs together. His gaze focused on her breasts and Aurora tensed slightly. She was tender now, and had known men who liked to play with nipples as if they were toys, disregarding their post-sex tenderness.

Hawk’s head bent, Aurora tensed, but he kissed her breasts, oh so sweetly, oh so softly, and she relaxed down, feeling worshiped instead of fondled.

Aurora’s belly began to flutter, not with arousal, but with something else, something new. When he shifted so that he could look down at her, the backs of his fingers stroking her face, Aurora felt her heart beat quicken, her soul sinking into the blue of his eyes.

He looked at her, and it was no heavy lidded gaze of arousal, but an open eyed stare of awakening.

“Why do you look at me so?” she asked.

“I cannot help but look at you; I am quite enchanted.”

“Nay, your cock is well pleased; there is a difference.”

“I know the difference, and though my cock is pleased, you are enchanting, and this...” he took her hand and pressed it over his heart, “...is very different.”

“You say that only because I was a wet and willing woman.”

“And a clever one. I have never heard a peasant speak so wittily.”

“Your speech is not that of a peasant either.”

“True.”

“Why?”

“You first.”

“I cannot tell you.”

“Then I...” he lifted the hand he still held to his lips and kissed her palm, “...cannot tell you.”

Aurora curled her fingers around his jaw, loving the sturdy and steady feel of his face in her head. His features were very fine, thin straight nose, smooth jaw and eyebrows that arched, like brown wings, over steady blue eyes.

His hair was cut short, an easy style for a man who knew he did not need to work at his appearance.

Aurora finished her survey of his features and returned her gaze to his. Her heart gave a traitorous thump and the knot in her belly wound tighter. Inexplicably her eyes began to fill with tears.

“Beautiful Rose, why do you weep?”

“My heart, it hurts.”

“As does mine,” Hawk said with a smile.

“Why? I don’t understand!”

“Because, you have just fallen in love with me.”

“That—I cannot—”

“As I have with you.”

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye to trail into her hair. “It cannot be.”

“Why do you deny true love?”

“There is no love, only duty.”

“Has no one ever loved you before my beautiful Rose?”

“My ... my godmother.”

“But no man.”

“Nay.”

“Well I have never loved a woman. For many years I kept myself away from women, thinking that I must marry out of duty, but no more. But I have known love, from my parents and subje—friends. And I know that this is love.”

“I cannot love you.”

“Why?”

“I have ... I must...”

“You must nothing.”

“Oh please stop! You make me long for things I cannot have.” But rather than push at him she buried her face against his bare chest. Hugging her to him, Hawk rolled until she lay across him, her blonde hair falling in golden glory around their bodies, her cries of distress heartbreaking in a forest that had gone quiet.

“Sweet Rose,” he murmured, voice rich and smooth.

“Hawk,” she whimpered. She needed him, needed his touch once more, and, for the first time, she wanted sex to be soft and slow, with long glances and slow touches, not the fire and flash she had known.

Throat now too tight to speak Aurora sat up, astride his belly, and then lowered herself to lie on his chest. Whisper-soft and tentative, like a kitten, she scattered tiny kisses over his face, pleasing herself, the pleasure rolling when the way his lips moved to seek hers told her that he found her touch pleasurable too. The tip of her tongue, delicately extended, traced over his closed eyes and the swell of each cheekbone. As she moved back to his ear he rubbed his cheek against hers.

“You are so handsome, my darling Hawk.”

“And you so sweet my beautiful Rose. I cannot wait to be inside you again, my body pumping slowly within you.” Aurora bit her lip as his words fueled the fire in her belly. “Can you feel it, do you ache for it? My body thrusting into you, over and again.” His hips moved under hers, pantomiming the rhythm he spoke of. “Again and again until I spill inside you, filling you, as you clench around me.”

Aurora sat up, her face ashen. “Spill inside me?”

“Aye, are you ready Beautiful Ro—”

She rolled off, nearly doing him an injury in the process. “The last time, you ... you...”

“What’s wrong?”

Aurora climbed off him and yanked her dress on.

“Rose, what are you doing?”

“I must go.”

“Why?”

“This was a mistake, a terrible mistake. I should have been more careful.”

“Careful about what?” Hawk, more than a little exasperated, grabbed her arms, holding her still.

“I ... I should not have let you spill inside me.”

“Ah, yes, well, it’s no matter if you are with child my love. I can take care of you. Now just calm yourself and let’s get that dress back off.”

“You don’t understand! I shouldn’t have done this. I should have been more careful.” Aurora jerked the laces of her bodice closed. “I must go.”

“Don’t go.”

“I must!”

“When will I see you again?”

The correct answer—never—sprang to her lips, but what came out was: “Tonight.”

“Where?”

“Here. Now please... I must go.”

“Rose if you are in danger, if your father or brother will hurt you for what we did...”

“I will be safe. There is only my godmother.”

“I still do not understand what’s wrong.”

Aurora grabbed his face, pressing a fervent kiss to his lips. “Tonight.”

Snatching up handfuls of skirt Aurora turned and ran. Naked, confused, and half aroused, with the only chance of relief darting away, Prince Phillip watched his love run through the trees.

## Chapter Four

“Millie! Millie!” Aurora dashed through the door of the cottage, her hair settling against her back in a wild tangle.

Millie, one half of her face smeared with powdered herbs, a pentagram sketched into the powder, came out of the cottage’s back room. “What is it Rose?”

Aurora’s mouth opened and closed, opened again. And she burst into tears.

“Rose!” The shorter woman pulled her close and Aurora buried her head against her mentor’s shoulder. “What happened? Your dress is on wrong, your hair tangled. Were you attacked? Was it a man? Were you forced?”

“No, no, he was wonderful! Oh Millie.”

“Enough of this weeping, tell me.”

“I let him spill inside me.”

Millie pushed her to sit in a chair. “Rose,” she chided softly, “that was careless of you.”

“I know! But he was so perfect, so wonderful...”

Millie moved away and began pulling jars of herbs off the shelf.

“The need to pleasure yourself should never overwhelm your senses to the point that you do something so foolish.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“Prince Phillip’s kingdom needs the alliance enough that he will overlook your lack of virginity, but he will not overlook a bastard child growing in your belly.”

Aurora bent her head, miserable. She wanted to talk back, tell Millie that she knew the rules, but she deserved the scolding. Though she fought for her freedom, she had to return, had to become queen so she could use that power to right wrongs.

But Hawk... Hawk had said he would take her, care for her. He said he loved her, and that this pain in her heart meant she loved him too. Aurora believed him. She was in love.

“Millie I cannot do it. I cannot be queen. I love him.” She whispered the words, and Millie, stretched to reach something on a high shelf, the bottles clinking together, did not hear.

When the witch turned Aurora did not repeat her comment. Though Millie never spoke of them Aurora knew that there were things that had happened to Millie, hurts dealt her, which had driven her to dark witchery. In Aurora she saw the chance to change that. When the sister of her heart ascended to the throne Millie would use Aurora’s power to strike out against those who hurt her, and even the balance of power. Aurora knew Millie had some selfish motivations, but without her, without the spell she worked so long ago, Aurora would have been trapped in the haze of obedience she’d known for her first eleven years. And without her protection and love Aurora would have crumbled under the punishments and disdain she’d known since then.

Perhaps in that way she owed Millie her life, and should repay that debt but taking on the role of Queen. But the very spell Millie had used to free her, the gift of self, bid her follow her heart.



\* \* \* \*

“You’re here.”

“Of course. I was not sure you would come.”

“Why are you wearing *clothes!*”

“Give me a second—don’t rip—ah well. Sweet heavens! Do that again.”

“You like that,” Aurora whispered, the shreds of his breeches in her hands.

“Yes.”

Aurora might have wanted to comment again, or smile, but she couldn’t as Hawk’s thick cock was occupying her mouth. Teeth carefully covered by her lips, Aurora bobbed her head, then took him deep, the cock touching her throat at which point Aurora carefully pulled back before she started gagging.

She’d pushed him up against the trunk of the tree she’d perched in yesterday. From her position on her knees Aurora couldn’t see his face, but she could see his hands. They were pressed palm down against the tree, his fingers flexing, the tips pressing into the bark until they turned white.

Mouth tiring she wrapped a fist around the base of his cock, bobbing her head in shorter bursts as she squeezed gently.

“Rose,” he moaned, and his voice was almost pleading.

Again and again she brought his thick length into her mouth, hand working him, tongue stroking his crown on the backstroke.

His fingers pressed rhythmically against the tree trunk, in sync with the movement of her head.

“Rose!”

Aurora released his cock and slid her mouth down as far as she could, sucking hard. His seed hit the back of her mouth and she swallowed him down, sucking until he brought his hands forward, brushing them through her hair, easing her, gently but insistently, off his well used cock.

Aurora knelt back and looked up at him. His gaze went to her mouth and Aurora slowly licked her lower lip.

“Rose,” he said, panting. “What you do to me...”

Aurora’s stomach lurched and she scrambled to her feet, running from him. She didn’t make it far before she fell to her knees, one hand scrambling to hold back her tumbling hair as she threw up the contents of her stomach.

Hawk knelt beside her, taking her hair and holding it out of her face.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“Rose, love, please don’t apologize, but ... what happened? Are you all right?”

“No,” she whispered. Hawk picked her up, cradling her against his chest and carrying her to the stream. Kneeling with her on his lap, he cupped water in his palm and brought it to her lips. Aurora accepted his aid, rinsing her mouth and swallowing a few mouthfuls of water.

When she swallowed her stomach rolled and she whimpered, desperately trying to keep it down.

“You are ill, so ill that you would vomit water. Rose, we must take you to a healer.”

“Nay.”

“Yes.”

“Please, I know why I am ill, and I will tell you, but for now would you just ... hold

me?”

Once again he rose with her, moving back to the tree, sitting and leaning against it. Aurora snuggled against him and relaxed.

Had they only met yesterday? Could that be true? Her heart took solace at his presence as if he'd always been a part of her, and always would be.

“My godmother is a healer ... a witch.” Hawk let her speak, resting his cheek on her head and stroking her leg over her skirts. “I am—was—meant for something different. I fought to have my freedom, but am not totally free. I was never to let a man spill himself within me, for I was never to be pregnant. Last night my godmother gave me a potion to be sure there was no child. I have been ill since.”

“That is why you ran yesterday, because I spilled inside you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry Rose. I would not have done it had I known.”

“I know.”

“What is this fate you were meant for, that you could never be with child?”

“Please, I do not wish to speak of it.”

“I will not push you now, but you will tell me.” Hawk shifted her, moving her so he could look into her face. “What I said yesterday is true. I love you.”

“And I you.”

“I too was given a fate I did not want, and fought to change it.”

“Freedom is a hard fight. I am not free yet.”

“Then you will tell me what chains bind you, that I might break them. You will tell me who keeps you prisoner, that I might fight them.”

“Are we selfish for doing this? Selfish for turning our back on the lives we were given, simply for knowing the pleasure of love?”

“There is more to love than pleasure. Now that I have found you I will never be whole again unless you are by my side. I want to see your belly round with my child, and your face when it is wrinkled and old.”

A crystal tear slipped down her cheek, “I want that too. I want the child that could have been yesterday.”

“You’ll come with me. I’ll take you to my home.” He half smiled, “I can more than care for you my love.”

“I ... I cannot leave today.”

“You can.”

“Nay. My actions will hurt my godmother. I must make my peace with her before I go.”

“How long?”

“On Sunday I was to return to my parents’ home.”

“Then we will leave before Sunday.”

“I must—I feel I must return to my parents’ house, I must make peace with them. For many years we have been uneasy together. I left them abruptly to come to my godmother. If I were to never return they would search for me, and it would hurt my godmother.”

“I see fear in your eyes, fear of them, fear of returning. Yet you ask me to watch you return to these people who frighten you.”

“Yes.”

Hawk bowed his head, then leaned into her, pressing his forehead to hers. "I cannot do it Rose."

"Please."

"I will not leave you. I'll come with you, I will travel with you, stay close to you."

"I would be safe," she said in wonder.

"I would never be further than a thought away."

"But, if they discovered you—"

"I am silent as a hawk. No one will catch me."

"Hold me."

Hawk pulled her back against his chest. He wanted to force her to come with him, take her to his father's home and watch the shock and joy fill her face when she realized her humble hunter was a prince. He'd spoken the truth when he said she was well spoken, and from what she said he thought perhaps she was a merchant's daughter, well educated and taken care of. Either they promised her to the church or to another man in marriage, but clearly she was unwilling, yet dutiful.

"My beautiful Briar Rose," he whispered. As much as he might want to force her to leave with him, and easy as it would be to do so, he could not, would not, do that to her. He valued her more than that.

"My Hawk," she sighed.

Hawk's hand, resting on her knee over her skirts, slid down to her ankle and then beneath her skirts. "Are you ready to be pleased my love? Do you need to wait?"

"I am ready for you. I always will be."

"Good, for I am of a mind to tease you."

"Tease? I want pleasure."

"There will be pleasure, but first I will tease you. Shall we play a game?"

"Shall we fuck?"

"Tsk, ts, don't make me discipline you."

Her breath caught and for a moment he feared he'd gone too far, but her legs moved restlessly, and it was with arousal not fear. Hawk grinned. She was perfect.

"You'd like that wouldn't you? To be disciplined."

"Yes," she admitted, looking at him through her lashes.

"Have you been spanked before?"

"Nay."

"Why not?"

"I could not risk it. It is dangerous to give over so much control, plus" she smiled wickedly, "someone might see."

"The marks?" he asked.

"A red bottom would be a dead giveaway that I was having sex."

"When we are married, there will be none save me to see the marks."

"Married? I don't remember you asking for my hand."

"I'm waiting. I want it to be perfect when I do." He grinned and Rose giggled.

Hawk's hand made its way up the inside of her leg. Tickling the back of her knee, gently easing her thighs apart to make his way closer to her sex.

"So you have never been disciplined. What naughty things have you done?" he asked, voice husky as his fingers played over her smooth legs.

"Are you sure you wish to hear?"

"I would tell you about my past sex partners if you wish it."

"I would like that."

"But I asked first, so now it is your turn to speak of your wicked past." Hawk pinched her thigh and Rose gasped.

"The ... the blacksmith's son."

"Yes?" Hawk ran a fingertip along the seam of her sex.

"We went to his father's shop, and there were gloves, thick leather, very stiff, rough." Her voice was breathy, phrases escaping as puffs as he toyed with her.

"What did he do with the gloves?" Hawk brought a second finger into play.

"He put the gloves on and then he held them by the furnace, let them get hot, so hot that he could barely stand to wear them."

"And then he touched you?" Hawk wiggled his finger between the lips of her sex and then began the up and down stroking again, this time caressing the inner edges of her sex, his fingers not deep enough to touch her clit.

"Yes, he put those hot rough gloves on my breasts, squeezing them, and it was so warm, and the cracks in the leather raking my nipples."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes."

"Keep talking," he prompted when her eyes fluttered closed and she seemed to lose herself to the mounting pleasure.

"He pinched my nipples, pinched them with the hot rough leather."

"Show me."

Rose pulled at her bodice, impatient, not bothering to unlace the green dress, merely yanking it down far enough that her breasts were exposed and compressed. Taking her nipples between finger and thumb she pinched them, pinched and twisted, bringing small cries of distress to her own lips.

"Then what happened?" Hawk's voice lowered, roughened, the sweep of his fingers less controlled. A finger brushed her clit, his nail grazing in a sensation so exquisite that Aurora's toes curled.

"He heated the gloves up again, warmed them once more by the fire."

"Where did he put them?"

"Inside me."

"Here?" Hawk swept his fingers down to the entrance of her body and drilled two inside, pushing hard, wanting her to feel it, feel him. When her lips brighten to a firm pink with arousal, parted, head arching back, soft lashes flickering against her cheeks, Hawk knew her to be the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

He pumped his fingers into her, bringing a sigh of pleasure to her lips when he brought his thumb into play on her clit.

"What did it feel like?"

"It was hot."

"Painful?"

"Nay, but almost frightening, his fingers inside the hard hot leather were so thick, so rough, so wide."

Hawk separated his fingers inside her, stretching her.

"Oh yes, just like that."

"Continue playing with your nipples," he ordered, and her fingers, which had fallen

still as she concentrated on the feel of his fingers inside her, once more took up the pinching twists.

"I want you inside me," Rose panted.

"Nay."

"You would deny me?"

"I would."

"Why?"

"For the pleasure of watching you. I want to see you as your body rocks with satisfaction." His thumb began rubbing in tight circles over her clit. "I want to feel you come apart in my arms."

Her skin flushed with arousal and her twitching fingers fell still on her breasts. Hawk captured the closest nipple and began working it, watching a bead of sweat slip from between her breasts, roll along her breastbone, and then trail off the side of her neck.

Deep in her sex his fingers curled, rubbing and massaging her inner walls, his thumb swooping down to gather up more wetness to rub against her clit. Rose, protected and freed by his touch, splintered apart. The orgasm swept through her, from her curled toes, trembling thighs, and fluttering belly to her clenched teeth and tightly fisted hands.

As her body calmed and he eased his hand from inside her Aurora curled toward him. Hawk wrapped his arms around her, holding her there, the fierce pleasure they had shared stripped away to reveal that which had prompted their actions, a deep need to hold and be held by the one they loved.

"Wake, my Briar Rose."

The moment of wakefulness was filled with joy as her lover's voice filled her ears, the warmth of his arms cradling her as she woke.

She blinked awake and looked up into his eyes. "I had a beautiful dream," she whispered with a smile, reaching up to cup his jaw.

"Will you tell me this dream?" he asked, rubbing his stubbly chin against her palm.

"I dreamed that a handsome hunter came to me, took me in his arms, kissed me, and pleased me until it felt like the stars fell from the heavens. Then the handsome hunter carried me away."

"Where did he take you?"

"It did not matter, for as long as we were together I was home."

"That is a sweet dream, and very similar to one I had."

"Oh?"

"I dreamed I found a beautiful flower in the middle of a dark forest. My beautiful flower was strong and proud, despite the creeping darkness surrounding her. I plucked this flower and took her away, took her away from the dark, to a place where she would know nothing but my love for her."

"And what of the flower's thorns?"

"Their pain was sweet."

"I love you."

"I love you also, my Rose."

"No one has ever seen me as you do. For my parents I was a tool, a thing to be used. My godmother loves me truly, and without her, without the help she gave me when I was a babe, I would never have truly known life, but she too sees me as a tool, a thing."

"I see you as no more, and no less, than the woman I love."

They kissed, and it was innocent, and all the more beautiful in its innocence considering the dark pleasure they gave each other.

Hawk's stomach rumbled and Aurora giggled against his lips.

"As much as I love you, my Rose, I'm in sore need of some food."

"Then we must feed you," Aurora pressed her lips against his ear, "for I plan to ride you long and hard."

Hawk's hands crept to her breasts, his hunger submerged by lust brought on by her dark honey words.

Aurora peeled his hands away and sprang to her feet. "I thought you were hungry."

"I am, but no longer for food." Hawk leaned forward, grabbing for her legs, but Aurora danced out of reach.

"If you want me, hunter, then you'll have to catch me."

Aurora dashed off, looking over her shoulder in time to see Hawk leap to his feet and quickly try to fasten what was left of his breeches. She turned and skipped backward, taunting him.

"Hunter, your pants look a bit frayed."

"Aye lady, I was attacked by a wild beast."

"I warned you yesterday. These woods are full of fierce beasts."

"You did, and today I will make sure the naughty beast that did this pays."

Aurora reached the end of the clearing and paused, watching as Hawk snatched up a quiver of arrows, slinging it and his bow over one shoulder. His movements were quick but not hurried, and Aurora was bit put out he wasn't chasing after her.

"You say so," she called across the clearing, "but at this speed I doubt you will ever catch your beast."

"Oh I will catch her, for there is no place on this earth that I would not be able to find her. No force that could keep me from her."

Aurora's heart stuttered, her body going soft as his perfect acceptance and love washed over her. She should tell him, tell him now who she was, what the consequences of their love would be, but he turned to look at her, a smile blossoming across his face, and started running.

He moved quickly for so large a man, and Aurora yelped and darted into the trees, laughing in delight, her need to confess forgotten.

Deeper and deeper into the woods she moved, the ground beneath her feet growing soft with spongy moss and a thick layer of fallen leaves. Streamers of dust speckled sunlight broke through the low canopy of braches, the rays of gold shot to earth like arrows from heaven.

Aurora skirted a thick trunk and paused. Her hair settled around her shoulders, gold as the streaming sunlight, as she paused to listen for her love, one hand pressed to her heaving chest.

There was no sound save her breathing, no movement save the dust specks that danced in the sunlight. She held her position, hoping she would hear him stalking through the trees, or see a flicker of movements.

The silence and dark began to eat at her, until her smile of pleasure at their teasing game fell away. The air grew thick, heavy, with more than the darkness of the forest. The leaves rustled overhead, and then wood creaked as the branches moved, bending and twisting to fill every space, closing off all the light, until the canopy over-head was a

solid roof.

Something, someone, had found her.

Aurora turned to dart out from under the menacing lid, but thick brambles of blackberry bushes filled the space between the trees, trapping her. Bushes filled the remaining gaps between the trees like large dark boulders, the creaking tear of the branches and stems as they were forced to move in such an unnatural manner raised the fine hairs along the back of Aurora's neck.

Pastel light, weaving in and around itself like spring flavored snakes, burst into the darkness.

Aurora pressed herself into a well made by two roots. Though the gentle creamy light seemed innocuous, it could do, or mean, almost anything. The light, spilling in pastel sweeps against the trunk of the tree, grew brighter, coming closer.

Deeper in the woods, beyond the ring of brambles, Aurora heard someone, something, moving through the underbrush.

"Aurora!"

"Hawk!"

"Where are you?"

"I'm here, but you mustn't come any closer! There is magic at work here, you must go." Her voice cracked on the last word, her fear leaking into her voice.

"I will not leave you." His voice was cool and calm. "I'm following your voice. Are you in this thicket?"

"Yes, but I can't get out for the plants have me trapped."

The ball of light inched toward the forest floor, illuminating Aurora. She screamed as the light washed over her and darted from between the roots, running to the far side of the magic-made cage.

"Rose! Are you all right? What is that light?"

"I don't know, but I think it's controlling the plants."

"Come toward the sound of my voice, beloved."

Aurora inched around the perimeter, stopping when she reached a patch of brambles.

"I'll never get through," she called out, voice high with fear and panic.

"Then don't go through." Hawk's voice did not come from the other side of the thorns, but rather from above. Aurora looked up. Balanced on a low branch, smiling, was Hawk.

He quickly undid the buckle on the strap of his quiver. Holding one end he lowered the other down, the tip dangled just above Aurora's head.

"Grab on love, take a firm grip."

Aurora wound the strap around one hand and held tight with both. In the next moment her feet left the ground. Hawk hauled her up with rapidity that spoke of great strength. As her waist cleared the branch he was crouched on Hawk grabbed her, hauling her up into his arms.

"That ball of light is following you. Do you know what it is?"

"Nay."

"You said your godmother is a witch. Are you sure it did not come from her?"

"I know the feel of Millie's magic, and this is not her."

"Then it is time for us to leave." Hawk kissed her quick and hard, then stepped to another branch. "We'll drop down on the other side and run."

Hawk crouched as if he were going to drop to the ground on the other side of the tree, and the ball of light slid through the bushes that pressed to the sides of the trunk and hovered just below Hawk. The magic cast shadows up through the branches, rising and falling a few feet but never coming higher off the ground than a man's height. Aurora stepped up to a higher branch. The magic strained upward, but did not rise higher.

"I have an idea," she said. Hawk turned, eyebrows raised in question. "I don't think it can reach us up here." Aurora stepped to the branch beside Hawk then reached up, wrapping her hands around another branch, but this one belonged to a different tree.

Aurora swung off, only to have Hawk grab her. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to move to that tree over there. The forest is so dense, the trees so close together, that we can travel above the forest floor."

"Let me carry you across."

"There is no need." Wiggling out of his grasp Aurora swung herself, hand over hand, to the other tree where she found a limb to stand on. Hawk rebuckled his quiver and followed her.

For a quarter hour they moved like that, from tree to tree above the forest floor. At first the ball of light followed them, but it faded the further they went, until the only light was that of the sun in the even thinning canopy of trees. When they finally reached a tree bereft of neighbors Hawk jumped down. Aurora moved to the lowest branch and then, smiling, jumped. For a moment, a dizzying dazzling moment, she was free, falling without weight or worry.

Hawk caught her, holding her high to his chest, smiling into her serene face.

"Next time please warn me that you plan to jump."

"Where is the fun in that?"

Hawk shook his head, slowly lowering her legs so they stood together, as close as possible. Aurora stroked his face. His brows were lowered, yet a small smile quirked his mouth, she did not know what to make of the expression.

"What is wrong, my love?"

"I thought my rescue quite dashing, but it is clear you did not need rescuing."

"I did!"

"Nay, you would have figured to climb the tree is another moment."

"Perhaps." Aurora pushed away from him, the exhilaration of their escape fading.

"You would prefer that I were helpless? Or that I never speak of my ideas?"

"Rose—" he reached for her, but Aurora jerked away.

"I've been helpless. There was a time when I knew no will of my own, would have waited a thousand years for rescue before having a thought of my own. I will not be that person again. If you want a woman who is obedient and helpless then you'd best leave now, for I will not be that, even for you, even for love."

"Rose, that is not what I want at all." Hawk laced his fingers behind his neck, head falling forward as he searched for the correct words. "I only mean that, well, I uh, wanted to rescue you." At the forlorn tone in his voice Aurora relaxed.

"My sweet Hawk, you did rescue me. Without you I might have found a way out, but it would have taken me longer, for it was upon hearing your voice that my courage returned." She slipped her arms around his waist, resting her cheek against his shoulder.

"Forgive my foolishness," he whispered as he wrapped his arms around her.

"There is nothing to forgive," she smiled against his chest and then nipped at his



collarbone. "Would you like me to find a bear or other wild beast, and put myself in danger so you can rescue me?"

Hawk's hand slid down from her back to ass, giving her a nice hard spank. Aurora yelped.

"Do not mock me, woman."

"I? Mock?" He spanked her again. Aurora giggled and pushed away, darting into the trees.

Like children they let the fear of what they had encountered blow away. Soon they were dashing through the trees, their smiling faces dappled with sunlight, the air sounding with Hawk's shouts, Aurora's high giggles, and the chirps and squawks of the animals they disturbed.

One hand to her mouth to muffle giggles Aurora circled a low bush, creeping up behind Hawk. When she was within reach she leaned over and gave his firm ass a hard pinch.

Hawk yelped and reached back, grabbing the abused cheek with one hand as the other snagged Aurora's wrist. She was pulled against his chest, their lips coming together, his hand finding her breast, taking possession of it, thumbnail scraping over the fabric atop her tight nipple.

Aurora sucked on his lower lip; shocks of pleasure ran between her legs, her sex filling with cream. She was ready for him.

"I want you, now."

"So demanding," he teased. Hawk lifted her, turning and settling on the ground with Aurora astride his lap. Her skirts pooled around them, covering his hands as he undid his belt and opened his tattered breeches. His cock was hot and hard as she closed her hands over him, working him closer to his release. The flush that rose to his cheeks, the way his jaw clenched and his breathing sped up, the look of him, lost and helpless in her touch, was more arousing than anything Aurora had known before.

Pushing her skirts out of the way Aurora moved up until she was astride his cock, sinking down onto him. Knees planted in the soft earth, their bodies sheltered by the high rising roots of the tree, Aurora rode him. It was a slow and intimate coupling, the mating of her sex and his cock covered by her skirts.

Hawk opened his eyes, and they met hers.

Lifting her hands from his shoulders Hawk laced them with his, the intimate intertwining of fingers that trembled with the power of what they did heightening the intimacy.

Again and again she rocked, the pleasure building slowly. They kissed, indolently, languidly, mouths open to share the very breath of their bodies. When he reached climax, fingers tightening around hers to the point of pain, Aurora leaned in, wanting to feel the shudders that racked his body. The moment before it happened Hawk moved his hands as if to push her away, stop himself from spilling in her, but Aurora leaned into him.

She loved him, and for that love she would abandon the life she'd know, giving up a future of duty for one of love. She would bear this man's children and grow old beside him.

As she felt his seed spill into her a tear of joy slipped down her face, the guilt and worry free intimacy of the act triggering her release.

Aurora moaned in pleasure, leaning into him as her orgasm subsided.

Hawk unlaced their fingers to wrap his arms loosely around her waist, taking pleasure in simply holding her. Aurora rubbed her cheek against his stubbly one.

"How did you get the nickname Hawk?" she murmured idly. Aurora rested her forearm against his shoulder and played with his hair as he answered. She liked feeling the puff of his words against her skin as his low voice rumbled so close to her ear.

"How do you know Hawk is not my given name?"

"A lucky guess. A smart man once told me I was clever."

"That was a smart man indeed, for you are exceedingly clever."

"Will you not answer my question?"

"I would do anything for you. It is only that your exceeding beauty distracted me."

Aurora giggled, and for a moment wondered if she was foolish, naive, to be so charmed by his words, and so helplessly in love with the man who said them. Foolish or not, she loved him.

"Hawk became my name because it is said that I can spot a deer hiding in a thicket, or hear a fox's tail whisper over leaves on the hunt."

"So when we are married, Hawk," she teased, "our table will never want for meat?"

Hawk threw back his head and laughed. Aurora was somewhat disconcerted by the level of hilarity her comment raised.

"Nay my Rose, when we are married you will never want for anything." Hawk leaned in and kissed her before posing a question of his own. "So, my Rose, is that your given name?"

"Nay, but it is a name that means more to me than the one I was given, for it was a rose that helped me understand that there was freedom to be had, that I was not bound to the life I knew."

"It suits you."

"Thank you."

Aurora stretched, arching back as his cock slipped from between her legs.

"When must you return to your godmother's house?"

"By sundown, else she will worry."

"Have you told her of me?"

"Not yet, but I will, never fear."

"She will not warn your parents? Tell them you have found and taken a lover?"

"No, she is at odds with my parents, and she has her own reasons for wanting to see me marr—" Aurora stopped, biting her lower lip.

"There is no need to hide from me, are you engaged to another?"

"I do not wish to speak of it."

"Then do not speak, nod if you are engaged to be married?"

Aurora paused and then jerked her head in a small nod.

"Is it a union of your choosing?"

She shook her head.

"Will they force you?"

Nod.

"There now," Hawk hugged her, "that was not so terrible was it?"

"What you must think of me that I would so willingly betray a betrothal?"

"It is not a union of your choosing, and a life without choice is not a life."

Aurora buried her head against his neck. "Thank you."

They stayed that way for a moment, curled together as the sunlight streamed around them, their forms still and beautiful, living artwork set against the loveliness of the forest.

"Can you tell me about what it was that came after you, who might have sent that magic?"

"Oh!" Aurora jerked up, eyes wide. "I forgot!"

"You forgot?"

"You distracted me," she jumped to her feet. "Come, we must go tell Millie." Off they went again, running through the trees, as swift and graceful as deer.

When they reached the clearing where Millie's cottage lay Aurora urged Hawk back against a tree, telling him to wait while she went to report what had happened.

Phillip notched a bow in his arrow and kept watch as she scampered across the clearing, yelling for her godmother as she got closer. Once she was inside he quickly swung up onto a low branch, keeping his arrow notched.

Rose emerged a few minutes later, another woman behind her. Phillip's eyes widened as he got his first look at Rose's godmother. The woman was neither old nor motherly looking. Lush curves, showed to their best advantage in a tight-fitted black dress with lace barely concealing her breasts, a waterfall of black curls, and lips that gleamed red and lush, even from a distance.

Rose hugged the other woman, their breasts pressing together. Rose turned away and the dark haired woman gave her bottom a firm swat, causing Rose to jump and then turn and stick out her tongue. The other woman laughed, the sound rolling like low summer thunder, throaty and full, and then captured Rose's chin with her hand, pulling Rose down for a slow soft kiss. Their bodies melted together, soft feminine flesh yielding as they kissed.

Bow and arrow fell from Phillip's hands as his arms dropped along with his jaw. He scrambled from the branch, misjudged the distance, due to the fact that he had yet to take his eyes from the women, and fell. Scrambling up from his ungainly sprawl Phillip whipped his head around in time to see Rose break the kiss.

"No," he whimpered.

Rose came scampering back across the clearing, a large wicker basket swinging from one hand.

"Hawk?" She circled the tree until she found him, still half sprawled. "Hawk? Are you hurt my love?"

Rose set down her basket and knelt beside him, stroking his shoulders. In his mind's eye Hawk saw her hands stroking a very different set of shoulders, smaller rounded hands trailing down to cup and tease soft downy breasts.

He moaned.

"Hawk! What happened? Were you hurt? Did that magic light return?"

"Rose—"

"Yes, love?" Her hands traced over him, looking for the feared injury, her stroking doing nothing to calm his raging imagination, or his raging arousal.

"Have you and your godmother ever ... touched each other?"

"Oh." She started to draw away but he pulled her close, turning her face to his when she tried to look away. "You saw us kiss?"

"Yes, oh yes."

"Do you ... still love me?"

“Still love you? What a thing to ask. My cock hasn’t grown hard this fast since I was a boy.”

Rose’s eyes widened. “You were aroused by watching us?”

“Oh yes, and I will stop loving you if you don’t tell me, in explicit detail, exactly what you and your godmother have done together.”

“You want to hear that?”

“Oh yes.” Hawk tugged at her laces, his frantic movements tangling her in the dress rather than getting it off her. His eyes slid to his knife, but Rose leaned away.

“You may not cut off my dress!”

“Then take it off. Now.”

Rose worked her dress off, her sly smile telling him that she knew precisely what she looked like as the fabric slid up over her hips, exposing her blonde curls to the sun, waist delightfully nipped, begging for him to hold her, and finally the high rounds of her breasts, the pink nipples full and soft.

“Rose, please,” he begged, “Tell me.”

“Yes, my love,” she whispered with an impish smile, petting her breasts as she began the tale.

“I’d known Millie many years before she touched me that way, and we’ve never… played as much as I might like. I was the one who initiated it, after I’d been having sex with boys for many years. I knew the pleasure of a man’s cock, of rough, hard, flesh and hands against mine. I hadn’t seen Millie in over a year, and had grown much in that time. When I returned to her in my seventeenth summer I noticed her as more than my godmother. I noticed her as a woman.”

Hawk fumbled with his tattered breaches; only Rose’s soft hands on his preventing him from massacring what was left of the garment.

“Do you want to hear more, my love? Do you want to hear how I touched her, where I touched her, how she touched me?”

“Yes, fuck yes. Rose please.”

She took pity on him and gripped his cock in a firm fist, stroking his balls with her free hand.

“Millie went to bathe in the stream one day, and I followed her, crouching behind a tree to watch her bath. I’d never seen another woman naked, and she was so beautiful. Her skin was soft and rounded, begging to be petted.

“I waited for her to fall asleep in a patch of sun, only a thin chemise covering her, before I crept out. I petted her thighs and soft ass, lifting the chemise away so I could toy with the crease.”

“Br-reasts, breasts. Did you touch her breasts?” Hawk gasped the question, desperately wanting to answer yes.

“Her perfect round breasts? With their dark nipples? Oh yes, I pulled her chemise down and stroked them, very gently, with the tips of my fingers. Then I raked them with my nails, and then I bent and pressed my lips—”

Phillip grabbed her, consumed by the image in his mind of the fair-haired Rose kissing the nipples of the dark witch. There was a fleeting moment wherein the phrase “dark witch” sparked a memory, but it was gone when Rose mounted him, sinking down on his cock with a smooth stroke.

He closed his eyes and reveled in the moment. When he opened them Rose was

grinning down at him, her breasts bouncing softly, as she rode him.

“Was any of that true?” He asked, grabbing her hips and speeding the strokes.

“Does it matter? You seemed to find the idea of me touching another woman ... very pleasurable.”

“You’re not to touch anyone save me from now...”

“...of course my love...”

“...unless I’m watching. No, not watching. Directing.”

Rose’s laugh filled the woods, and Phillip swore he could feel the vibrations in his cock. Grinning ruefully at his beloved, for really the war between possessiveness and kink was somewhat comical, he pulled her down for a kiss.

She would make an excellent queen. As they fucked in the forest he realized how true that was. She was open and accepting, smart and independent. The ability to rule, to be at his side, his equal, was in her. Phillip realized he was looking forward to ruling at her side. With her as his queen the throne would be a gift, a challenge, not the burden he’d been avoiding. For years he’d been faced with the fate of a loveless, boring, marriage to the ridiculous Princess Aurora. He hadn’t even seen the girl in years, and rumor abounded that there was something wrong with the girl, and that’s why Aurora’s father kept canceling their visits. Hawk had hoped her father would cancel the engagement, as honor forbid him do it, but year after ceaseless year the betrothal stood, weighing down his future and pushing his to escape into the woods.

But now that time was done. He would break his engagement, the rules of honor be damned. He would find a way to improve his country’s economy so there would be no need to trap himself into marriage to ensure good trading. The kingdom would be better with Rose as its queen than it would with a treaty sealed by a bloodless, boring marriage and monarchs who were content to exist rather than live.

He slid his hands up her torso, cupping her breasts.

Rose tilted her head, lowering her brows as she looked down at him. “What is wrong, my love?”

“Why would you think anything is wrong?”

“Something has changed, I can ... feel it.”

“The only thing that has changed is that I love you more than I did a moment ago. You’ve given me back my life, which looked very bleak before you stole my clothes.”

Aurora paused in her rocking and leaned low to kiss him. “You have freed me, given my soul wings, if I have done for you even a small measure of what you have done for me...”

“You are mine, my love, my Rose, now and forever.”

“Now and forever,” she vowed.

She kissed him, and they remained that way as pleasure built and shattered, fading to grey and the sun sank in the west.

## Chapter Five

“Millie, I’m leaving.”

“So soon?”

“I have a long journey ahead of me.”

“What are you going on about? I will send you back through the mirror.”

“No,” Aurora lifted her chin as her godmother turned, dark eyes raking her up and down, seeing more than flesh.

“Why?”

“I’m taking the boy, the one I met in the woods, home with me.”

“That’s all well and good that you wish to keep him as a sort of pet—”

“No. I don’t mean that. I ... I love him.”

Millie slashed her hand in the air and thunder rumbled in the clear sky.

“Love does not exist between men and women. Lust, passion, respect. Those are true.”

“I lust for him, respect him, and love him. I let him spill inside me, repeatedly.”

Millie skirted around the table, moving fast. Aurora resisted the urge to retreat and stood her ground as Millie grabbed her upper arm, fingers digging in.

“Foolish girl.” Millie hissed, looking deep into Aurora’s eyes. “What have you done?”

“I’ve done nothing foolish, nothing wrong. It is my life, and I’m making a choice. I’m choosing to live for love. I will return to my parents, try to make them understand, and then I will leave, and never return.”

“You will do nothing of the sort.”

“I will.”

“How dare you disregard all I have done for you!”

“You taught me to be strong, to believe in myself, to make my own choices. That is what I am doing.”

“You are meant to be queen. You are meant to right the wrongs done to me!” Millie screamed the last bit and lightening struck the tree outside the window. A horse whinnied in the sudden silence, then all was quiet.

“Is that all I was to you Millie? A little moldable princess, so bruised and broken you thought I would do your will?” Aurora whispered. Tears stung the corners of her eyes.

“I did not mean that,” Millie said, easing her grip on Aurora’s arm. “But you must be queen. Don’t you see that you can change what is? That is a gift.”

“If I live a life without love I will become just like them, just like Mother and Father.”

“You will not. You are better than that.”

“You’re right, I am, because I’m choosing my own way. My will is strong, stronger than yours, stronger than my parents. I’m choosing love.”

Millie panted, chest heaving, hair lifting from her scalp with electric crackles. For the first time Aurora saw the dark witch they whispered about.

“You ungrateful girl!”

“Ungrateful? Do I owe you payment? Name your price. Do I owe you love? I’ve

given you that, for you are more mother to me than she who gave birth to me. But I do not owe you, or anyone, obedience.”

Aurora’s voice broke on the last word. She felt as if the ground were crumbling beneath her feet and there was a gnawing hole in her belly. Millie was her rock, the one person who loved her, and now she was finding that Millie thought of her the same as her parents did—a tool, a thing—to be manipulated and used.

“I thought you cared for me. For me, for Rose,” she whispered, nearly pleading.

“I do, but I expect you to be what I’ve raised you to be.”

“You raised me to be myself!” Aurora sobbed, clenching her hands over her heart. She jerked away from Millie’s hold and backed toward the door. Betrayal at the hands of the one person she trusted would have destroyed her only days ago, but now there was another, one whose love was truer, and all she could think of was finding the safety of his arms.

“Do not do this, Rose.”

“I am no longer your Rose. I belong to another. One who loves me without expectation of repayment.”

With those bitter words Aurora left the cottage, running to the far end of the clearing where Hawk waited, mounted on his tall steed. As she raced toward him, graceful despite her turmoil, Hawk spurred his horse forward.

“Rose, are you all right? I waited as you asked, but there is something unnatural here. Lightning and thunder in a cloudless sky—”

She stopped at his side, lifting her face to his. He saw her tears, saw her trembling, and was already reaching down for her when she lifted her arms. Hawk scooped her up, pulling her across the front of the saddle and turned his horse into the woods.

Neither looked back to see the dark witch standing in the doorway, her eyes narrowed on the handsome man who carried away the princess.

\* \* \* \*

They rode hard and fast all through the day. They rode until the horse’s flanks steamed and Phillip’s thighs and arms trembled. Despite his fatigue, and that of his faithful mount, Phillip was not willing to stop until he felt Rose relax in his arms. He did not know what had transpired in that cottage, but assumed her godmother had not offered her blessing to their union. Phillip wondered if he should have approached the godmother and revealed his identity to sooth the woman’s worry, but Rose had been so desperate to leave he’d abandoned that thought. Soon enough the world would know.

During the grueling ride Phillip had time to muse on the conversation he would soon have with his father. There would be blustering anger, maybe disappointment, but he’d never doubted his parents’ love for him. He was secure in his knowledge of his parent’s love, and so did not doubt that, in the end, they would support his decision to wed the merchant’s daughter. He’d complained about his betrothal, but never truly objected. There’d been no reason to. With a betrothal set he did not have to worry about the future, it was taken care of, no matter how bleak it might have been. It was only in the dark of night that he admitted to himself that cowardice bid him maintain the life he’d been handed. There’d been nothing to really fight for, so he’d grumbled and bemoaned his fate, but never truly objected.

Now he had something, someone, to fight for. He was finally a warrior with a damsel

to rescue. Remembering their escape from the creeping ball of light he ruefully admitted that she wasn't that in need of rescue. But she needed protection, help, if not the strength of his body then the strength of his love.

There were things, so many things, they needed to discuss, but now was not the time. There was no pressing need, they had all the rest of their lives to look forward to.

It was deep dusk—the trees glowed gold and the air shimmered with the magic of the earth, and the barriers between the worlds were thin—before they stopped. In this light Rose's hair was the deep gold of precious metal still hidden in the earth, and her skin velvet smooth.

"Can you build a fire, or shall I do it?"

Rose turned at his question, and her sad distracted expression softened. She blinked, focusing on him, and she dipped her head shyly, whispering, "I can do it."

Charmed by this new, and thoroughly unnecessary, shyness, Hawk hid his grin lest he hurt her feelings, and began unsaddling his horse. He brushed the horse and picked his hooves, pampering the beast with one of the few remaining carrots in his bag.

He talked softly to his mount, all the while aware of the beautiful girl who picked stones from the edge of the creek and formed them into a circle for the fire.

"You talk sweetly to your horse," she said to him as she placed stones.

Phillip leaned his arm along his horse's back and considered her. "Do I not speak as sweetly to you? I certainly hold you in greater affection than I do my horse."

"Have you an unnatural liking for animals? Mayhap I should be worried. After all, aren't I the fierce beastly you caught?" She turned as she made the comment, her face lit by a wicked grin and she was once again the brazen young woman who'd stolen his clothes. Hawk grinned and started to reply, but the teasing fell from her face, she blushed, lowering her eyes, and turned back to her task.

What was wrong? He started toward her, but a flicker of movement caught his eye. An unwary rabbit rustled the brushes not far from where they stood. With a glance at Rose he grabbed his bow and arrows and started into the woods.

He returned to their small stake less than an hour later with two fat rabbits. He'd drained their blood and skinned them deep in the forest, so the blood would not attract other predators, and even gone so far as to spit them. A crackling fire greeted him, the warmth of the blaze a match to the heat she stirred in him.

She rose, silent, and took the rabbits from him, laying the spits into forked branches she'd stuck into the ground in preparation. The skill was below a well to do merchant's daughter, but she was full of surprises.

Her silence puzzled him. He did not think she was afraid, and when he dropped to the ground beside her and toyed with her hair as she began turning the spits, she did not pull away.

They sat in silence, they two strangers who loved, as the meat turned from red to white and the fat crackled.

"Why are you shy with me tonight?" he finally asked, the backs of his fingers stroking up and down her back.

"I ... don't know."

"Don't be afraid of me Rose. I would never hurt you."

"I know that. It's just..."

"What dragon torments your thoughts? Tell me that I might slay it for you," he



teased, smiling at her when she looked over her shoulder at him.

Rose laughed, and a bit of her old self seemed to return. "I don't know why I feel this way. It is silly to do so when I feel like I've known you all my life."

"But you have known me only a few days, so nervousness seems most natural."

"I am not nervous of you. I love you, I trust you. I really do. It's just that ... I've never spent time with a man, never ... lived with one. I don't know what to do."

"That is what worries you?"

"Yes."

"Rose, that's, uh, hmm. Come to think of it I've never lived with a woman."

"What do we do? I mean ... how are we supposed to act?"

"Ignorance will be our excuse. We shall make our own rules. All I want you to be is Rose, and all I want you to do is love me."

"Then this will be easy because I love you desperately."

"Come here," he commanded, cuddling her into his chest as they watched the fire and waited for their dinner to finish. He held her there, warming her back as the fire warmed her front.

When dinner was ready he stripped the meat from bone with his knife and fed her the chunks, kissing away the juices. When no meat remained he added logs to the fire, then heated water in the small tin pan he carried, washing her hands and face, then his own.

Then they rose, standing face to face in the fire light, and Phillip undressed her, stripping her one piece of clothing at a time. When she was naked, skin dancing with the light of the flames, he removed his own clothing with quick hard jerks. Before his pants had hit the ground her curious fingers were exploring his chest, shoulders, and arms. She traced his upper arms, pressing on the muscle with her fingertips. He flexed his arm and she dug her nails in, eliciting a grunt from him.

"Too hard?" she asked.

"No, I like the feel of you testing your claws against me."

"My claws? Well a beastie must have claws." Rose set her nails against his chest and dragged them down, drawing light scratches.

Phillip could control himself no longer. He dropped to his knees before her, pressing his lips to her soft belly, licking the skin over her hipbones, and nipping the flesh at her belly button. Her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him close.

He cupped the sweet cheeks of her ass in his palms, holding her in place as he kissed the plump mount of her sex through the soft blonde curls.

"I love you," he told her, before urging her stance wide so he could part the lips of her sex with his thumbs, exposing the fragrant interior. She whimpered prettily as he rubbed the inner lips of her sex with his calloused thumbs. Those whimpers turned to moans as he dipped his head and pressed an open-lipped kiss to her sex. He lapped at her, tasting her with long firm strokes of his tongue from the entrance to her body to her clit. Her hips jerked forward with each flick of his tongue over her clit. He released the lips of her sex and dug his fingers into her ass, demanding that she accept the pleasure he offered.

Again and again he lapped at her, the flat of his tongue stroking her, toying with her. There on his knees before her he worshiped her, thinking only of her pleasure, wanting to give her this and so much more.

"Love, my love," she panted, fingers tight in his hair. Phillip didn't stop, didn't break

rhythm, as again and again he licked her clit, firm hard strokes at a steady pace, pressing his lips and chin into her sex.

When she peaked, Rose threw her head back, screaming her pleasure to the sky. Phillip rose quickly to his feet, catching her as her body went limp, but he offered her no succor. He slipped his fingers into her sex, thrusting two fingers deep inside as his thumb toyed with her ultra sensitive clit.

"No more," she panted.

"Again," he commanded.

He cradled her down until they lay by the fire, cushioned by their discarded clothes. He propped himself on one elbow, looking down at her, as his fingers moved within her, thrusting in and out, his thumb circling her clit. He watched her eyelids flicker, felt her fingers press into his shoulders, and drank the moans from her lips in long hard kisses. He thrust his tongue into her mouth as he fingers sank into her, penetrating her.

He wanted all of her, needed all of her.

He pulled his fingers from her sex and slid them down between the globes of her ass, rubbing her rear entrance.

"Has any man ever taken you here, my love?"

Rose's looked up at his, wide eyes full of trust in the dark. "Once, but it hurt."

"I am going to take you here," he rubbed his fingertip over her. "It might hurt a bit, but I will prepare you."

"I'll do anything you want, my love. I trust you."

Phillip smiled in the dark, white teeth flashing in the light of the fire, and then bent his head to her breast. He sucked her nipple into his mouth, sucking hard as he rubbed his finger over the puckered entrance to her bottom. He stroked wetness from her sex down to ease the way.

He could feel her tension over what was to happen in the stillness of her body. She waited, tense, for him to pillage her. He gentled her, not entering here, merely playing with her, letting her get use to his possession of this part of her body. He lapped and sucked at her breasts as he rubbed her, and waited until the tension had melted from his body to push the tip of one finger inside.

She yelped as his finger entered her, but quickly relaxed again. He pulled his finger out and then pushed it back in. She was gloriously tight, and Phillip's cock, which had been stiff with arousal for far too long, twitched with the need to shove inside this tight entrance to her body.

He pushed his finger in past the second knuckle.

"Ohhh," she moaned.

"Does that hurt?"

"Yes, no, I don't know. It feels good, but strange."

"I am going to add a second finger. This will hurt."

He pulled his index finger fully out, then added his middle finger and started pushing them up into her ass.

"Oh, it hurts!"

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked, looking down into her beautiful eyes.

"No," she panted, "I like that it hurts."

"You are perfect," he told her, capturing her mouth in a kiss as he forced his fingers in with a hard push. Her body arched up off the ground and she bit his tongue.

Phillip could stand it no longer. He had to have her, now.

He pushed his fingers in and out a few more times, hoping it would be enough, then pulled his fingers out and moved between her legs.

"I have to have you now," he told her, hooking his arms under her knees, drawing her legs up to the sides of her chest, opening her lower body to his use.

"Whatever you want my love. Take me."

Phillips rubbed the tip of his cock over her clit, then sank into her pussy in a long hard stroke. He thrust a few times, coating his cock in her body's moisture, then pulled out and dragged the tip of his cock down to the entrance to her ass.

He pressed forward, and her body clenched against his invasion.

"Relax, my Rose."

She nodded jerkily, eyes wide and nervous.

Her body finally relaxed and Phillip flexed his hips, forcing the tip of his cock in. Rose yelped, her ass squeezing tight around the shaft of his cock just below the head, and Phillip let out a small yelp of his own.

She was unbelievably tight, gloriously so. He pushed in another inch and they both moaned. Bit by bit he worked his cock into her, until his balls pressed against her ass and his hips were flush with her body.

"I'm all the way in," he told her. "How do you feel?"

"Full, very full. It's odd, but not painful, at least not like it was before."

"I'm going to move now."

He pulled his cock almost all the way out, and then did what he'd been longing to do, and slammed into her in a brutal thrust.

"Hawk," she gasped.

This time he pulled all the way out, and then slammed into her again. He fucked her like that, long hard thrusts in and out of her ass.

"Reach down and play with your clit while I fuck you," he commanded.

Rose wiggled her fingers down between their bodies, sliding two fingers around her clit. Phillip could feel her hand moving against his belly.

"I'm close," she told him, "I want to come."

"Do it, pleasure yourself until you come, then put your fingers inside your pussy, so you can feel it as I fuck you and come myself."

His words—his brutal coarse speech—seemed to inflame her, and in moments Rose was twitching and moaning beneath him. She peaked, body tightening around him so he was forced to still his trusts, and then he felt her fingers sink into her pussy, adding pressure against his cock in her ass.

Phillips resumed his thrusts, hard and quick, nearly frantic as he felt his own long-denied fulfillment creeping up on him.

He thrust in once, twice, and then a final time, gasping her name as he spilled inside her.

## Chapter Six

It took then a week to reach the border of her father's kingdom.

Aurora never admitted to Hawk that she did not know the way, because if she did he would wonder how she'd gotten to Millie's. Aurora wasn't yet ready to explain that her fairy godmother transported her through a magic mirror.

She'd told him she lived on the outskirts of King Stephan's kingdom. He'd hesitated slightly when she'd said that, and his hesitation had given her a moment of panic, but then he'd nodded and smiled, the moment gone.

It was lucky she'd spent so much time exploring the kingdom on those occasions that she'd escaped from her father's cage, because as they crossed the border she knew instantly where they were. And where they were was very near the royal lands.

"Let's stop here," Rose said over the beat of the horse's hooves, squeezing Hawk's waist to signal she wanted to stop. He slowed the poor horse to a trot, then a walk, and they both slid off its back.

It was near dusk, and in the fading gold light Aurora was able to make out the rooftops of the huts of the closest village to the royal lands. It was half a day's walk to the palace from that village.

"I know where we are. Come."

She led Hawk through the trees of the forest they'd been paralleling to a small clearing with an abandoned hut.

"Is it safe to make a fire here?" he asked.

"Yes. Sometimes hunting parties use this as a camp, so no one will take note of a fire."

The roof of the hut was falling in and infested with mice, so they dragged out what useable things they found—some wood for a fire, a kettle, a tin plate—and made camp under the stars.

They ate leftover meat from the night before and a few greens Aurora had collected along their journey.

As they ate Hawk leaned over and flicked the garland of flowers Aurora wore on her head. She'd made it for him, out of wildflowers she'd collected as they walked. When he'd stopped to kneel and check the horse's hoof, Aurora had placed it on his head, declaring him king of her heart.

Hawk had given her the oddest look as he rose, taking the garland from his own head and placing it on hers.

"My queen," he'd said, bowing, and for a moment Aurora's heart stuttered in fear. But it had been no more than a joke, his playing off what she'd already said.

Since that incident she'd been worrying over how, and when, to tell him who she really was. She decided to wait until after she'd confronted her parents. She knew how they would react, knew what they would think of her choice, but a small part of her held out hope that, as her parents, they would want her to be happy and so welcome the man she loved into their lives. If that did happen she would bring Hawk to the palace and admit who she was. If her parents instead reacted as she expected, forbidding her love and locking her up, she would sneak out, rejoin Hawk, and flee her father's domain.

forever. Once they were safely away she would tell him the truth of who she was, and impress upon him the importance of her being Rose, not Aurora.

But for now she had a final night with him, one more chance to be a simple girl from the woods.

She'd finished eating, and quickly cleaned up a bit as Hawk finished his final few bites. She wetted a cloth and wiped her hands and face, passing it to Hawk so he could do the same.

"I've enjoyed our journey," she said, eyes lingering on his handsome face.

"As have I." He opened his arms and Aurora scooted into them, curling up next to him, her head on his shoulder. She'd learned to protect herself, to rely on no one but herself, but with Hawk there were no reservations about letting herself lean on him. She loved him, desperately, and always would.

She had no doubt that, were she to tell him exactly the kind of danger she faced from her parents, he would insist on coming with her. But she had to confront her parents alone.

And so she buried herself in his arms, soaking up the feeling of being so loved, so protected, because, come the morning, she would be on her own once more.

"What worries you, my Rose?"

"How do you know I'm worried?"

"We are in love. That means I can feel your worry as if it were my own."

"I worry for the future."

"I can support you, I promise you that."

"Thank you, my love, for if my parents are not as ... understanding of my choice as I hope, I will have no dowry to bring."

"I want no dowry for you. You are all a man could need."

"Tomorrow ... tomorrow I will go to meet my parents and tell them about you."

"They will not be pleased, because of your betrothal?"

"They have a choice in mind for me, a plan for my life. I just need to remind them that it is *my* life."

"Let me meet them. I will speak with your father."

"I want to do this myself."

"Promise me you won't be in danger."

"They are my parents, they wouldn't hurt me," she lied. "Give me a few days—"

"A few days? No. I will give you one day. Then I will come to you."

"That might not be enough time for me to convince them."

"Then I will join you and help you convince them that I am the correct choice. Rose, I will not leave you alone for that long. You told me already, both in word and action, that you are afraid. I will not let you suffer alone for longer than a day."

She looked up into his face, and saw his firm resolve there. His eyes, which normally danced with mischief and laughter were serious, making him seem older, stronger.

"As you wish, my love. On the day after tomorrow I will meet you at the ruins."

"What ruins?"

"Do you remember the village? Go to the village, and on the other side follow the right fork, and keep going until you see the ruins of a gray watchtower amid the treetops. There is a path that leads through the forest to the ruins. I will meet you there at sunset."

"Sunset? That means we will be apart for a day and a half."

“A terrible long time, it’s true.”

“Let’s make the best of the time we have,” he said with a smile the light of mischief back in his eyes.

They came together in a long kiss, arms holding one another tight as night pressed down on them. They reveled in the kisses, breaking the long slow meetings of mouths with small pecking kisses along jaws, cheekbones, and eyelids.

So caught up were they in the kiss that neither noticed the darkening sky, and when the first rumbles of thunder started they were muted by the passion and love that bloomed between them.

The first drop hit Rose’s foot, which had slipped from her shoe. It took her a moment to understand what that drop of warm rain signified. She broke the kiss, lifting her face to the sky. A drop struck her cheek, then her chin.

“It’s raining,” Hawk said, wiping the rain from her face. He pulled her to her feet and together they bundled their camp and stuffed it in the cabin under the section of the roof that still stood.

By the time they were done the sudden summer shower had turned into a downpour. Hawk finished stuffing the last of their things in the cabin.

“There’s too little room in there. We will have to bed down under a tree.”

Aurora watched him move about the clearing, radiating control and command, his shirt pressed to his chest and back by the rain, the thin white fabric nearly transparent. She could see the dark pink circles of his nipples through the fabric.

“Who said anything about bed, or sleeping?”

Hawk turned to her, his eyes moving up and down her wet form. Aurora unlaced her outer dress, stripping off the thick fabric and draping it over a dry tree branch well sheltered by the limbs above. She stepped into the middle of the clearing and lifted her arms, letting the water pound down on her. Her under dress was soaked through, plastering to her skin, as her hair turned dark gold from the water.

In two strides Hawk was on her, his hands smoothing the wet fabric of her dress over her breast, tweaking the hard points of her nipples through the fabric.

Hawk’s hands curled around her ass, and Aura hopped up, wrapping her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck. She tilted her face up to the rain, letting it caress her, as Hawk licked and sucked her neck and the upper swells of her breasts.

Hawk dropped to his knees, still holding her, and then lay her down on the wet ground, pushing her chemise up around her hips, spreading her legs so the rain caressed her open sex. His wet fingers slid into her, two into her sex and one into her ass.

Aurora gasped as the sweet fullness, loving how masterfully and thoroughly he penetrated her.

She fumbled with his breeches, the tie wet and swollen, nearly impossible to get open. The moment his cock was free she cupped it in wet, greedy fingers. She pushed him onto his back, his fingers slipping from her body as he rolled. Aurora pushed herself up to kneel beside him, long locks of wet hair falling on his belly and legs as she bent to his cock, sucking down the sweet length in one smooth motion. He was long and thick in her mouth, hot and firm against her lips and tongue.

He pulled her chemise down, bunching the wet fabric under her breasts and toying with her nipples, as she sucked his cock. He plucked, twisted and flicked them, as she nibbled along the underside of his cock.

“Ride me.”

Aurora released his cock from the warm vice of her mouth and straddled him, sinking down on his cock in one, long smooth stroke. The rain continued to pound down on them as she rode him. Her hands pushed up the wet fabric of his shirt and then slipped and slid over his wet chest.

He gathered the long rope of her hair and used it to pull her down for a kiss.

They came within moments of one another, gasping their pleasure and pledging their love as they found fulfillment.

As suddenly as it came, the rain was gone.

## Chapter Seven

"It's time for me to go." Aurora finished lacing her dress. Her chemise was still damp and she grimaced as the cold, wet fabric pressed into her. Hawk was dozing inside the bedroll they'd tucked against the base of a tree after their bout of lovemaking in the rain. It was just breaking dawn, and she had half a day's walk ahead of her. She slipped on her shoes and knelt beside Hawk, stroking his sleeping face.

He looked young in sleep, his lashes crescents on his cheeks, his lips slightly parted. She kissed his cheeks, chin, and lower lip. He was reluctant to wake, for they'd been asleep only a few hours. Aurora herself could have done with more sleep, but nerves had woken her just before dawn. She was ready for her new life with Hawk to start, and to do that she had to face her father.

"Come back here," Hawk murmured sleepily, eyes still closed. His strong arms emerged from the cocoon of covers, wrapping around her waist and pulling her down on top of him. Aurora giggled, kissing his sleepy face as he hugged her tight.

"Why are you so cold?" he mumbled, throwing a bit of cover over her.

"Our clothes are still wet."

"Why are you wearing clothes?"

Aurora lay her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. "I have to go," she whispered, kissing his chest. She gently detached herself. The moment she left his arms Hawk opened his eyes.

"Rose?"

"It's time for me to go."

"Wait and I'll walk with you part of the way."

"No, I can do this. Just promise me you'll be there tomorrow at dusk, in the ruins."

"Of course I'll be there." Hawk fumbled to get out of the covers. Aurora got a delectable look at his tight ass as he fumbled into his breeches. It was almost enough to have her curling back up with him, if only for a chance to get her hands on that butt.

"Then rest, for you can't help me anymore. I have to do this on my own."

Aurora rose and turned away.

"Rose, wait! I'll come with you. I want to protect you."

He jumped to his feet, breeches half on, boots in his hand.

Aurora turned back and smiled. "You've already helped me, and given me all the protection I could want. Your love gave me hope. Meet me tomorrow, at the ruins."

"Rose!"

But she was gone, darting between the trees, fleet as a deer. She ran fast as she could, before courage failed her.

It was past noon before Aurora reached the outer wall of the castle. It had been a long tiring morning. Her feet were sore and her stomach grumbling. At least her dress had dried.

She marched right up to the gates of the castle.

The guards at the gate realized it was their missing princess before she'd even reached the gate. Aurora had no doubt that they'd sounded the alert when she'd first left, and everyone had been on the lookout for her since. Her peasant girl disguise had long



ago stopped fooling anyone.

“The princess! The princess!”

By the time she’d actually reached the gate columns of soldiers flanked her. Two of her father’s elite approached her, barring her path.

“Let me past,” she commanded in her best Princess voice.

“We have orders, Princess. Upon your return we are to take you directly to the king.”

They grabbed her upper arms and started escorting her to the castle.

Head held high, as if she weren’t being treated like a prisoner, Aurora marched up to the castle, prepared to meet her Father and make a final declaration of independence.

Her father kept her waiting for several hours. They escorted her to a small antechamber, and locked her in there. She told one of the guards she was hungry. After giving her a confused look the guard left her there, returning with a jug of water, no food. All in all it was a mild punishment, though her stomach was knotted from the combination of hunger and nerves by the time her jailors came back from her.

“The king will see you now.”

Aurora pushed herself up off the floor, dusting off the hem of her dress, and twisting her hair into a long rope and settling it behind her shoulders. The guard reached for her arm, but she slid past him, striding forward. She would not be dragged before her father; she would walk in on her own terms.

She strode through the doors, marching down the center of the chamber, the light from the stained-glass windows painting her bedraggled form, illuminating the truth that no amount of dirt or tangled hair could hide: she was every inch a princess.

“Father,” Aurora dipped into her most graceful curtsy.

“Aurora,” his voice was cold, icily so. She preferred his anger. Cold he was wickedly cruel, hot with anger he was easier to manipulate.

“I will not ask where you were, as there is no doubt that you were out whoring yourself for the peasants.”

Aurora felt her face heat, stomach knotting. She raised her chin, looking straight at him. Her father would not meet her gaze, he looked over her head.

“This disobedience and unacceptable behavior have gone on long enough. I’ve done my best to teach you to be a princess, yet you’ve proven yourself to be a disgrace to your birth.”

“If that is how you feel then I will leave.” Aurora’s heart clenched. She had not realized that she would regret losing her crown until she was ready to give it up. Millie’s tutelage had convinced her that she was destined to be queen, a great queen, who would rule with compassion rather than harsh rules. But she’d made her choice, a life of love rather than duty, and she would abide by it.

“You will not leave.” The doors of the hall banged closed, and the guards positioned themselves in front of them. The first ribbon of panic slid through Aurora’s belly.

“It is my deepest regret that I did not have another child,” the king continued.

“No doubt, for then you could have long ago banished me.”

“Banished? I would not have banished you. If I did not need you, you would be dead.”

Aurora gasped, falling back a step. He could not hate her so much that he wished her dead, could he? “Father no, do not say that,” she pleaded.

“As it is, I have no choice but to deal with you. You will be married at the summer

solstice. Your foolishness has gone on long enough.”

“I will not marry Prince Phillip; you cannot make me.” Aurora raised her chin, working hard to maintain her courage.

“You will, and I can. A lashing and a few weeks confinement will make you more malleable.”

The guards at the door started forward and Aurora’s belly clenched in fear. “I have survived your cruelty before, and will do so again. You cannot break me.”

“Perhaps you are right. A wise king knows when he needs to enlist the aid of other powers. You will marry Phillip, and you will marry him as the docile princess you were meant to be. Take her away.”

“Wait, no, Father, what do you mean? What are you going to do?”

“Twenty lashes, welts, no cutting. I don’t want her permanently marked.”

“Father!”

The guards grabbed her arms, dragging her from the throne room as she screamed for her father. The last sight she had of the king was of him seated stiffly upon the throne, staring at the far wall, impervious to her cries.

The edges of her vision went dark at the fifteenth lash.

Aurora screamed in pain, pressing her face into her arm. They’d bound her to a whipping post in the garden behind the kitchen. The guards had cleared away all the kitchen help, supposedly to protect her status as a princess. Normally, she was treated with respect by the guards, as she’d always done her best to lessen the trouble her behavior caused them. Today was different.

They’d stripped her naked, their rough hands pawing at her breasts and thighs. They’d bound her, arms stretched above her head, forcing her onto her toes. The guards gathered around her, their rude and frightening comments hammering at her. Those who’d been her shadows in the past, men she’d believed at the very least respected her, watched her beating, laughing at her screams.

Aurora was in trouble, greater trouble than she’d even been in before. She could not believe that her father was unaware of how they were treating her. He was far too in control, and the fact that he was allowing this frightened her more than anything.

What could have changed? Her latest disappearance had been no more dramatic than those in her past, yet her punishment was so very severe. Could he know about Hawk, about her plans to run away?

“You ready for another, Princess?”

Aurora pressed her face into her upstretched arm, gasping for breath, closing her ears to the guard’s taunt.

“Too good to answer?” The guard came up behind her and the jeers of the men escalated. “Answer me, Princess.” He shoved the handle of the whip between her legs, pressing it upward so it dug into her sex. Already on her toes, Aurora had no way to escape the painful pressure.

“Why?” she sobbed. “Why are you doing this? I’ve done you no harm.”

The guard stepped back, raised his arm and swung, the whip falling across her back in the sixteenth lash. Aurora screamed, voice going hoarse, and sagged in the ropes.

The king stood on the rear wall of the castle, looking down on the kitchen yard and his daughter amid the guards. His fists clenched with each lash that fell, his lip swollen from holding back the command to stop. His reaction was unexpected. He’d never felt

this ... protective of his daughter before. When she was young she'd been the perfect child, but so quiet he rarely thought of her. In her eleventh year, when her behavior had changed and she'd become the disobedient harridan, she'd begun to remind him a bit of his brother, who'd died from a horse accident at a young age. His brother had been wild, full of life, friend to any and all, but that was not the behavior of a princess.

She'd run wild for too many years, and it had to come to an end. He needed the mighty army her marriage would bring them, and he'd been holding his enemies to the south at bay with bribery and tariffs while she ran wild. He could no longer afford it.

The fifteenth lash fell, his daughter screamed in agony, and the king turned his head. She was his to do with as he pleased, and this harsh treatment was the only way to teach her. When she screamed again he looked back to see the guard molesting her with the handle of the whip.

He could not watch this.

The king turned away, leaving her to suffer alone.

His plan had been to beat her every day, humiliate her as much as possible, until she broke to his will. Unexpectedly, he found he could not do that. He was, after all, her father.

But there was another way to break her, a way he did not want to consider because he found it distasteful. The king moved through the castle, head high, never acknowledging the subjects who cleared the corridors as he approached.

He moved to his study, withdrawing a key from a chest that rested beneath a tall stained glass window. Key in hand, he slipped behind a tapestry, opening the door hidden there. Up a long, winding, stair, to one of the castle's small towers, the king climbed, lips twisted in distaste.

The circular room was layered with dust and cobwebs. The air was thick with the scent of old magic and fear. It had been many years since he'd been in this room, for the last time he called on the witches was when he was desperate for a child. Their assistance had allowed him to conceive, and though it was only a girl child it had proven their magic. He'd seen them only one time since then, at Aurora's christening. They claimed to have given his daughter "gifts" through their blessing, but he put no stock in that. He would have dismissed magic all together, if not for the proof that existed in Aurora's very birth.

Now that there was no choice, and he'd been forced to harm her in way he didn't think suitable for a princess, he would call on the witches. Perhaps with their aid she would learn to obey.

## Chapter Eight

Aurora flinched away from the light as the dungeon door opened. Shielding her eyes she could do no more than pray that they had not come to further abuse her. After the whipping they'd thrown her into one of the cold rooms below the kitchen. She'd had just enough energy to gather together scraps of canvas and cover herself with them to protect her naked skin from the cold. In a way the cold was a blessing, because it cooled the fire on her back.

When the door opened she curled into a ball, swallowing her whimpers. She had the strength to survive whatever they'd intended—she had to believe that or all was lost. Lying there in the dark she'd thought of her love, her Hawk. She didn't know what time it was, didn't know if day had turned to night. She knew that not enough time had passed for it to already be dusk of the next day. Would he look for her when she didn't show up? Lying there in the cold and dark she began to doubt. She wanted to believe he would search for her, but he would never think to look for the princess Aurora.

His love would fade as the search dragged on. He would think she abandoned him, would think her a whore and a liar. He was so strong and handsome a million girls would vie for his attentions, and he would replace her easily.

She was all alone, doomed to suffer whatever punishment he father had planned. It seemed she was to be a prisoner until her marriage. He father could torture and torment her, but she had to stand before the Lord and speak the words of marriage with Prince Phillip of her own free will, and that she would not do. She'd escape again, somehow, find Hawk, and if he had not found another she would have the simple life of love she'd dreamed of.

"Princess, Princess."

The whispered words took a minute to penetrate her muddled thoughts.

"Princess, come now."

Aurora lifted her head, blinking against the light. The cook and her aids stood in the doorway. They lowered the ladder that led to the kitchen.

"Go," Aurora croaked, "go. If the guards see you—"

"We've taken care of the guards, come Princess."

Aurora pushed to her feet, brushing the bits of canvas away. The pain in her back flared as she climbed the ladder to the kitchen. Hands cracked by a life of work pulled her out. Fabric brushed her back and Aurora cried out.

"Bless us, look what they've done to her."

"Oh Princess!"

"Here, hold this Princess, and we'll look at your back."

Aurora pressed the cloak they handed her to her chest and followed them to a bench in the kitchen. She sat, bending forward, chest to her knees. Cook and her helper bustled around, gathering things to treat her back.

"Do what you can, quick as you can. My father will punish you if he finds you helped me." Aurora pushed out the words through teeth that chattered with cold and pain.

"I've family in the north, Princess; they'll shelter you."

"I have ... someone. If I can get to him I'll be safe."

“You won’t be able to go far, not like this.”

“I’ll manage.”

Salve and bandages went down on her back. Aurora sat up, allowing them to wrap long strips around her chest to hold them in place. Cook handed her a cup of tea that smelled more of whiskey than tea, and Aurora downed it.

The salve and whiskey worked their magic and Aurora’s head cleared. She blinked, looking up, for the first time able to focus on what was really going on around her.

Cook stood beside her, wringing her hands. Aurora recognized the helper as Cook’s daughter. The daughter held a dress draped across her arms.

Aurora smiled at them. “Thank you both. I feel much better.”

They smiled in relief, then helped Aurora rise and slip into the dress. It was one of Aurora’s own dresses, made of heavy blue velvet and richly embroidered. She would have preferred a peasant dress for disguise, but this one was velvet lined with satin, both warm and smooth. They wrapped a royal blue cape over her shoulders.

“Are you sure? Will you be safe?” cook asked.

“Once I’m outside the castle walls I’ll find my way.”

“There’s no guard at the garden gate, the one past the manicured lands. We heard the guards saying they had no one to man that gate. That’s why we decided to free you now. I hope you’re not angry with us for leaving you down there, Princess. We didn’t know what to do.”

“You’ve done more than enough,” Aurora tucked a roll and a bit of cheese Cook handed her into the inner pockets of her cloak. “I thank you both truly. If you’re asked, tell them I’ve escaped, that I tricked you. Throw suspicion on myself.”

“Is the prince waiting for you?” Cook’s daughter asked the question in a rush, as if she’d been holding back the words.

“The prince?” Aurora asked sharply. “What prince?”

“The man waiting for you, your prince.”

“Why would you think him a prince?”

“You’re a princess.”

“I am a princess no longer. From now on I’m just Aurora, and the man waiting for me loves me, and that is worth more than the title of prince.”

Cook’s daughter nodded, eyes wide, and with a last nod of thanks Aurora left the kitchen. She hugged the castle wall, sneaking through the kitchen yard to reach the edge of the formal gardens. She skirted them, laying low in the shadow of the tall border shrub. It was midday; not as much time had passed as she’d imagined. She’d make it to Hawk if she hurried.

At the end of the formal gardens the wild grounds spread in all directions. The castle wall bordered the far end of the wild field, and she could just make out the gate. There were no formal shrubs here, no trees to hide behind. If Cook was correct, and no guards were at the back gate, this would be a simple escape. If there were guards she’d have to backtrack, find her way into the castle, and then out through one of her secret passages.

Pulling up the hood of the cloak to hide her distinctive hair, Aurora bent low, hissing as the movement caused the bandages to shift, and started across the wild garden. She did her best to move in shadows, following a natural depression in the landscape. The sun was bright ahead, and Aurora was sure that, at any moment, a guard in one of the castle towers would spot her and raise the alarm.

She sprinted the last few yards, holding bunches of her skirt clenched in her hands as she ran. When she reached the wall she pulled up her hood, which had fallen back, and paused to catch her breath. There was neither sight nor sound of the guards. Hugging the wall, Aurora sneaked toward the gate.

“Your Majesty should have called upon us sooner,” the titan-haired witch, dressed in leaf green, admonished quietly. She stood between her sisters, each with a hand on the shallow stone basin the king had used to call the witches. The king’s hands also rested on the basin, though his were clenched in anger.

An image flitted across the water in the basin, a wavering picture of Princess Aurora as she raced across the wild garden to the gate in the rear of the castle wall. Her hood fell back, exposing the golden fall of her hair, and the king’s lips pulled back in a snarl.

His feelings of protection, and regret for the torment he’d put her through, were forgotten in his anger.

“How long has her behavior been ... displeasing?”

“Many years, over five at least,” he answer.

“So long?” the fairest witch asked. She shared a look with her sisters, then glanced back at the image of the princess.

“She’s maintained her beauty and grace,” one sister said to the others, breathing the words so lightly that the king did not hear. “What became of her obedience?”

They looked to their sister with the hair of red, who’d bestowed the gift of obedience. Her lips were pressed together, distaste writ upon her features.

“I know not, sisters.”

“Wait, look there.”

They looked at the princess, who’d stopped at the wall and reached up to put her hood in place.

“The bracelet is gone.”

The witches looked at one another.

“It’s not possible, unless...”

“Maleficent’s spell. Did she not temper our magic so that the bracelet could be removed?”

“Do you remember her words?”

“I do,” the fairest said, “ ‘Your beauty and grace are yours to keep, though neither will bring what others think they do. Your bracelet of gold, to which those gifts are bound, is now tempered. By blood its spell is broken, and by the briar rose it is remembered.’ ”

“A powerful spell,” the golden haired witch said, her eyebrows drawing together.

“We never said she was not powerful.”

“But how would a princess come in contact with something so ugly as a briar rose? Let alone prick herself on it.”

“That is of interest, but no matter. Maleficent’s spell allowed her to remove her bracelet, and stripped her of the obedience we instilled in her.”

The witches had forgotten about the king, who’d been following their conversation with keen interest.

“You say that Aurora’s ... behavior, when she was young, was a result of your spells?” he asked.

“Yes, as are her beauty and grace,” the fairest said, after sharing a glance with her

sisters.

“Then her behavior now is her ... natural way?”

“It is. Why do you ask, Your Majesty?”

He looked away. “It does not matter, only that she ... reminds me of someone.”

“Do you wish her to remain this way?”

He sighed. “No. She refuses to marry, and marry she must. Can you make her the way she was?”

“If you have the bracelet, we can return it to her wrist, and she will become the obedient daughter you wished for.”

The king looked down at the image in the bowl. “I remember the bracelet. I did not realize she should not have taken it off.”

“She should not have been able to. When we created it we bound it to her, so she would always have her gifts, but Maleficent added a spell of her own, which allowed the princess to remove the bracelet.”

“I’ll send the guards for her.”

“No,” the witches smiled in unison, “we’ll take care of her.”

## Chapter Nine

Hawk paced the ruins for the hundredth time, then looked to the sky. The lower rim of the sun had just touched the horizon. There was no sign of Rose.

He'd made the best of yesterday and today, wandering into a small village to purchase food and drink. There he'd listened to the locals, searching for any gossip about a beautiful young woman promised to marry. Though he'd spread his coin across the bar, buying drinks for men too old to work in the fields in order to loosen their lips, he'd heard nothing of use. The one bit of interesting gossip he'd heard had been from a man well into his cups. The old farmer had muttered something about the princess having run away again as he complained about the soldiers who'd woken him to ask if he'd seen the girl. The man had been hushed by others in the tavern, who'd then looked nervously at him.

Phillip had made a show of paying the comment no great attention, and they'd calmed, but the incident had peaked his interest. After leaving the little village, he'd climbed a tree atop the highest rise in the area. When he parted the branches, he'd been rewarded with a view of the rich countryside, the landscape dominated by a whimsical castle.

Phillip had nearly fallen out of the tree.

They'd traveled further south than he'd thought. He was nearly at the foot of the castle where his own betrothed resided.

He'd spent a frantic hour pacing back and forth, wondering if Rose could know the insipid Princess Aurora. If Rose were the daughter of a well-to-do merchant she might be a lady-in-waiting or attendant.

He hadn't seen the princess since they were young. Her father had sent word that her delicate nature made guests a trial, and they'd stopped what had previously been annual visits. He'd considered it no great loss, for his memories of the time spent with her were colored by tedium and boredom.

His father had needed the marriage between himself and Aurora to secure trade relations between his country and Aurora's, but, in the nearly twenty years since the betrothal had been arranged, his father's kingdom had expanded industry and trade. They no longer needed the marriage to define economic stability; they would survive without it. Phillip had briefly considered using the princess's supposed bad health as an excuse to call off the wedding, but his father's reaction when he proposed it was shocked horror. The friendship between their kingdoms was long standing, and this had been the first time there were children of the same age able to be betrothed. His father claimed that, even if they did not need the marriage for economic reasons, they would honor the betrothal to maintain the friendship between the kingdoms and foster goodwill.

Phillip had never really objected before. He'd made token protests based more on his dislike of the princess than any objection to the betrothal. Having a bride already waiting had freed him to enjoy women, without worry of leading them on or being trapped into marriage. His paramours always knew they were there for nothing more than fun, and Phillip made sure the fun they had was of the highest quality.

All that changed when he met Rose.



If his father gave him the choice between his crown or Rose, he'd choose Rose, and damn the crown.

He didn't really expect that to happen. The more likely scenario would be extensive groveling on his part to King Stephan. He would come and train this country's army, since what they lacked was strength of arms. He truly meant this kingdom no ill will.

For the first time in his adult life Phillip was taking an active role in his own future. The rest of his life was no longer a well-paved road with the destinations pre-determined, but a series of opportunities.

Phillip leaned against his horse's shoulder. The horse turned his head and looked at Phillip with one big dark eye.

"Don't worry, she's coming. She is." His horse just stared at him. "What do you know anyway?" He pushed the horse's nose away. The gelding lipped the bottom of his tunic apologetically.

Phillip looked to the horizon. The sun was almost gone.

"Hawk, Hawk?" Aurora called out.

She was stumbling, near exhaustion, by the time she reached the ruin. For all her innate grace she could not keep her balance and was forced to stagger from tree to tree.

The sun had just finished setting she'd made it. She'd returned to her love.

Though she could not stay.

That realization had come to her over the course of this long, hard trek. Her father's anger had been worse than she'd anticipated, worse than she'd ever imagined. What he'd had done to her was terrible and terrifying. She feared that there was nowhere, in any kingdom, that he wouldn't find her. And when he did find her he would kill Hawk.

She would rather live a life in chain and torment than see Hawk hurt.

She should have turned and gone back, leaving Hawk to think she wasn't coming. In time he would forget her, and not think fondly on her memory. He would be free to go on and find another woman to love.

Though she lectured herself time and again that this is what she should do Aurora had kept moving. If she was going to resign herself to a horrible life the least she could ask for was one more chance to see her beloved.

"Hawk?"

"Rose!"

He was there, standing beside the ruins. A sob of relief welled in her throat and her legs gave out. Her hands scrapped down the bark of the tree she was clinging to as she sank to her knees.

Hawk raced to her, skidding to a halt beside her. He lifted her hands from the bark and helped raise her to her feet.

"Rose, my Rose. What has happened to you? Are you hurt? I should not have let you go alone."

"I'm fine now that I am with you," she said, smiling weakly. It was true. The fear that gnawed at her was fading, and the pain in her back not so great.

"I've a fire for us; come with me."

Hawk led her into the ruins, where he'd cleared a space and started a fire.

"My Rose," he whispered cupping her face and drawing her in for a kiss. His lips pressed softly against hers, a chaste and wonderful kiss. Then he deepened it, his tongue touching the seam of her lips as his hands slid down to her back, pulling her closer to

him.

Pain flared and Aurora screamed into the kiss. Planting her hands against his chest she pushed herself away.

It all came flooding back to her: her father's anger, the danger she posed to Hawk, the fact that she must leave him.

She hugged her arms to her chest as her back throbbed. "I—I must go."

"Rose, what happened?" Hawk's brow was furrowed with concern. He reached for her and Aurora darted back.

"Don't touch me!"

"Rose, what happened? You're pale, you're hurt. Come here, sit by the fire."

"I have to go," she whispered. She studied his face, his form, hoping the memory would be enough to sustain her throughout the rest of her cold life.

"Who hurt you? Your father?"

Aurora shook her head. Tears welled in her eyes, but she turned her head. She didn't want him to see her weep.

She needed to lie to him, to say something so horrid it would drive him away.

But should ... could not do it.

"I must go. I must. I'm so sorry." Aurora started to back away.

Hawk matched her step for step. "Whatever it is your fear, I will fight it for you."

"What I fear ... is you."

That stopped him in his tracks.

Aurora bit her lip to stop herself from blurting out the truth—that what she feared was his death.

Aurora backed herself out of the ruins, away from the promise of happiness and safety.

"Stay back," she commanded as her heart broke. "I—" *I love you, will miss you, never forget you* "—must go."

Aurora turned and ran.

Phillip stood, frozen in place. He was too bewildered to feel anything as he watched Rose run from the ruins.

Nothing that had just transpired made any sense.

Her rejection stung, but he could not get past the fear he'd seen in her. Something had happened to her, someone had hurt her.

Shaking himself from the stupor that sat heavy on him Phillip ran from the ruins, heading for the woods where he'd seen her disappear. He cursed himself for not telling her who he was. Maybe if she'd known she would not be afraid as she would know he could protect her from her family and betrothed.

"Well, what a prize we've found."

Phillip jerked to a stop, hand moving to his dagger. There was nothing but lengthening shadows around him.

"I see why she's chosen you, why she'd throw away all our planning and work for you."

"Who are you? Show yourself," Phillip commanded. His heartbeat was quick, his breathing shallow. It was a woman's voice—Rose's godmother?—but she'd said "we."

"She'd abandon all for a woodsman of no great wit," the woman sighed. "A fine form and nice face are all you have. How we misjudged her."

Phillip was sure he'd identified three distinct voices. The godmother must have brought friends.

"You speak of Rose. Show yourself so that I might defend her name," he challenged. His horse, tethered outside the ruins, seemed unaware of the voices, which alarmed Phillip. These were creatures of magic.

"You are a simple fo—" the voice broke off on a scream as Phillip whipped out his dagger and threw it into the dark. He'd kept her talking long enough to accurately judge the woman's position.

There were three distinctive popping noises.

"Who are you, what have you done with my Rose?" Phillip demanded, pulling his bow and quiver from the saddle. He'd wounded one of them, but that left two able bodied magic workers.

There was no answer.

## Chapter Ten

There was a flash of smoke at his side and a figure robed in black appeared beside him. Pale flesh and blood-red lips were all he could see of her face, shadowed by a hood. The woman raised her arm, and Phillip's own dagger caught the dying light. Phillip whirled, slapping his horse on the rump. The gelding let out a surprised whiny and took off at a gallop. The hooded head turned toward the horse, and Phillip used the distraction to snatch the woman's hand.

The woman gasped and released the knife as Phillip squeezed her wrist.

There was a flash of black light and Phillip stumbled back, falling to the ground. In the fading light Phillip could see ribbons of dark fog rising from the ground. They wound around his arms and legs, turning from fog to thick, black rope in the space of a single breath.

Phillip thrashed in the bounds, but they were frighteningly secure.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"You fool, what are you doing throwing knives? You cannot kill them."

"Answer me."

"You fool," the witch snarled. She threw back the hood of her cloak and Phillip saw a woman of heart stopping and terrible beauty. From the dark curls to the flashing eyes she was exactly as Rose had described her.

"You're Rose's godmother," Phillip said. Suddenly it all became clear—this witch, Millie, Rose had called her, must have stopped Rose from arriving at the ruins.

"Mayhap you are not as stupid as you look. Where is Rose, and why are they here?" she gestured into the woods with one ruby bedecked hands.

"Tell me what you've done with Rose and I might tell you where she is," he snarled, frustrated by her double speak and his inability to free himself. The long moments of thrashing had left him exhausted. Phillip let his head fall back against the ground.

Cool fingers touched his cheek, turning his face into the light of the candle she now held. Phillip jerked his face free of her grasp and tried to roll away from her.

"You look like ... no, it cannot be." Millie rose to her feet and threw back her head, laughing a terrible dark laugh.

Unease rolled within Phillips gut.

The laughter was cut off. "They're coming back, and I haven't time to move us both."

Phillip was lifted. He could feel small hands with clawed fingers carrying him, though when he looked he could see nothing. Phillip shouted in alarm and a piece of cloth materialized across his mouth gagging him.

They—whatever they were—carried him back into the ruins. He was tipped up into a standing position and leaned back into a tree that grew in the middle of the ruins. The witch stood in front of him, assessing him with black eyes.

She jerked her head, as if she'd heard something, and then waved her hand. The air before them wavered, as if it were suddenly water. Though Phillip could see the ground outside the ruins he had the strangest feeling no one could see him, a suspicion that was confirmed when Rose came stumbling toward the ruins.

She was crying, calling out to him. Phillip strained and thrashed against his bounds but could not get free.

“Hawk, Hawk! Please, please don’t have left. Oh I need you, I need you so. Hawk! Please help me, they’ve come for me.”

Three wavering balls of light, the same ones they’d seen in the forest only days before, followed her.

Rose stumbled, falling to her knees. She let out a sob—his name. Phillip felt tears sting his eyes. Every fiber of his being ached to go to her, to protect her. She seemed so alone, kneeling there in the clearing.

The balls of light sped toward the ground, and when they hit they blossomed up as three beautiful women. Phillip jerked in surprise, looking from them to the dark witch at his side. Her face was tight, her hands clenched. If she was Rose’s godmother, who were the other three?

Three witches of light, one of dark—that meant something, Phillip was sure of it, but could not remember what.

They stood in a semi-circle around Rose, whose blue gown pooled around her bowed figure. Phillip, never one for fashion, just now noticed the fine fabric of the gown and cloak—finer even than a merchant could afford.

“We saw your hunter,” the one in green said. She crooked her finger and Rose was suddenly on her feet.

The one in yellow stepped forward and unfastened Rose’s cloak, letting it fall to the ground. They began to circle her, inspecting her as one would a horse, as they spoke.

“He is a fine figure of a man, and quick with his dagger,” the one in pink said, motioning to her arm, where a bandage was wrapped.

“We were delighted to see you leave him on your own—that is the only reason we did not kill him.”

“It is good to know that there is some semblance of sense in you.”

“Have you decided to be obedient?” the one in green asked, taking Rose’s chin in her hand.

There was a moment of tense silence, and Phillip could see the struggle on Rose’s face. Finally, she jerked her face away.

“I will return to my father,” she spat out, “And I will do my duty; there is no need for your interference.”

“I’m afraid your father doesn’t trust you,” yellow said, “And neither do we.”

“Your time of running wild is at an end,” pink intoned.

“It is time for you to be obedient once more, Princess Aurora.”

Phillip’s heart stopped. It could not be.

“I have already told you I will do as my father wishes; just leave him alone.”

“Your hunter? Why he is already gone. Men do not handle rejection well. I’m sure he has already moved on to another,” the one in green said, stroking Rose—Aurora’s?—hair.

At this her face crumbled and she looked to the ground.

“Oh, poor child, to have such a broken heart. All the more reason to put things back to the way they should have been.”

“Broken hearts make women behave strangely—Maleficent is proof enough of that.”

The dark witch at his side hissed out a breath.

“She should have never helped you remove that bracelet. If you wore it still you would be already be married to Prince Phillip.”

Phillip didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

He'd fallen in love with his own betrothed. He would never have guessed that the beautiful and wild Rose was the meek and boring Aurora. What had happened to her to change her so, to drive her into the woods away from her castle?

All the problems he'd anticipated were gone—there would be no objection to their union.

The pink witch lifted her hand and a gold bracelet appeared, hovering just above her palm.

“No,” Rose whimpered.

“No,” Maleficent echoed.

Phillip narrowed his eyes—the thing look familiar. Thinking back to the last time he'd seen Princess Aurora he could just barely recall the large bracelet she wore—and the legend that surrounded it.

At that moment it all clicked into place for him. The story of her christening, and the blessings and curse that came with it, must be true. But it seemed Maleficent was not the evil witch the story portrayed. If she were, indeed, the woman Rose considered her godmother and who had given her a sanctuary in the woods, it was the three who now surrounded Rose that presented the danger.

He looked at Maleficent, who met his eyes. He jerked his head toward the three, frantically motioning to be released. She shook her head and breathed, “No, I cannot fight all three of them, and now that they would expect it your arrows and knives would do no good.”

Phillip shook his head as anger and disbelief mounted. He'd found the woman he loved, discovered she was his Princess, and yet there was danger still. These women's intention toward his love was not kindly.

“No please, I don't want that.” Rose—for he still thought of her as such—tried to back away, but the one in green raised her hand. A pale mist, much like the one that had caught him, rose from the ground to encompass her.

Her completion now a frightening green Rose stood in place, rooted as if she were made of stone. A gesture from the green witch and Rose's arm rose, the wide sleeve falling back to reveal her delicate wrist.

“A second gift we give to thee, and stronger than the first,” pink intoned.

“A life of quiet obedience you'll lead, a princess now in truth,” green said.

“The bracelet but a token, to hold our spell in place,” yellow added.

“Once on your wrist let it remain, until the grave you meet,” they chanted in unison. Twining ribbons of green, yellow and pink light wove around the bracelet.

“Damn them, damn them, they'll kill her,” Maleficent whispered.

Phillip looked at her in horror.

“They way she was before—the quiet obedience—was a spell. The spell was broken when you gave her the briar rose and the bracelet unlocked. But this—they tie the spell not to the bracelet as before, but to her soul. They will change her, kill Rose, leaving only Aurora.”

Phillip shook his head frantically.

“Do you love her?”

He nodded.

"I hope you speak the truth; maybe that will be strong enough to break it."

Maleficent turned away from him, to the witches who continued to croon over the bracelet.

"What magic worked, with intent to harm, be humbled by my curse. What spell they bind to the princess's heart let it not change her soul. Once broken by the briar rose, let now this exception take. The spell will hold only until true love's kiss bid her wake."

Maleficent threw out her hand and a ribbon of dark light shot toward the bracelet. It zipped around the gold, muting the pastels, just as they locked it in place on the princess's wrist.

"Did you see that sisters?" the one in pink cried.

"Maleficent is here. Did our spell take?"

"Test it."

"Princess Aurora," the green witch said, "Thank us for our gifts."

Rose dipped into a graceful curtsy and murmured, "Thank you, fairy godmothers, for your kind and generous gift."

When she rose from the curtsy she kept her eyes lowered, her hands folded at her waist. Now, for the first time, Phillip recognized the Princess Aurora in the woman he knew as Rose. His heart broke in his chest to see what they'd done to his laughing, bright girl.

"What was the name of your huntsman?" one asked.

"Hawk."

"You may not speak of him, or seek him out."

She shivered, and for a moment her hands clenched into fists, as if she would fight the order, but then she still and said, with perfect composure, "Yes, Godmother."

"It is fine, whatever Maleficent tried has failed, let us leave this place before she appears in truth."

In a swirl of light the three witches and Rose disappeared.

## Chapter Eleven

Phillip fell to his knees as his bonds were released.

“Who are you?” Malificent demanded.

“We haven’t time; I must go to her.” Phillip pushed to his feet, though his legs were half numb, and staggered from the ruins, whistling for his horse.

“You are Prince Phillip, aren’t you?”

He looked back at the witch, then nodded.

“Idiots. The pair of you. Idiots.”

“Thank you, but I’d realized that.”

“She has reason to keep her identity secret. What was your excuse?”

“I was enjoying time by myself, something the prince cannot find, but Hawk can. Where have they taken her?”

“Back to the palace, but you cannot go there now.”

“What are you saying? I am her betrothed, and I will rescue her from those bitches.”

“They wouldn’t believe who you were if you arrived now, and if they saw you before you convinced anyone of your identity they would kill you, or Stephan would. He is madder than I’d thought. What he did to Rose when she returned...”

Phillip’s blood ran cold. “What was done to her?”

Maleficent just shook her head.

Phillip grabbed his horse’s rein and prepared to mount. “Your words convince me that I have no choice but to go to her.”

“She is safe now. She will be obedient—she has no choice. It is not Hawk who can help her, but Prince Phillip.”

At those words he paused. What she was saying made sense. “It would take me days to reach my father’s castle.”

“Take my hand.”

Phillip looked at the outstretched hand and in a flash, they disappeared.



## Chapter Twelve

“Phillip, you’re home! Good to see you boy.” King Hubert looked up from a stack of parchment, smiling at his only son and heir.

“Father, I wished to claim my betrothed. We make for King Stephan’s castle at first light.”

Phillip, still in the clothes he’d been wearing for days, spun on his heel to leave again. He’d been shouting orders since he’d entered the castle, ignoring the startled looks from the servants.

Though perhaps they were startled not by his orders but by the witch who followed him.

“Phillip, who is your, er, guest?”

His father had risen from the desk. Phillip paused, took a deep breath, and tried to still the frantic need for action that consumed him. Worry for Rose was like a thorn in his heart.

“This is the witch Maleficent. She is an ally of our kingdom.”

Looking more than a little baffled King Hubert nodded in reply to Maleficent’s curtsy. “It is a pleasure to have you in our home,” he said.

“Thank you, your Majesty,” she said.

“Phillip, now what is this that we are going to Stephan’s? Did someone give you the message?”

“What message?” Phillip said, whirling to face his father.

“I received a note from Stephan, sent by pigeon, only moments ago. Read it for yourself.”

Dearest Hubert,

Would you do me the honor of being my guest at your soonest convenience? I’d like to discuss the future of our kingdoms.

Stephan

“This is all?”

“Yes. Phillip, what is this about?”

“I met a girl, Father, in the woods. I met a girl and I’ve fallen in love with her and I’m going to marry her.”

Hubert staggered back. “Marry? But Princess Aurora... Oh dear. Did you inform Stephan already?” He held aloft the note.

Phillip shook his head.

“Phillip, to break the betrothal...”

“I have no intention of breaking the betrothal. If you’ll excuse me I must go and bath and chance. Perhaps Maleficent can explain in.”

Phillip ran from the room, leaving Hubert with the beautiful witch. King Hubert shifted uncomfortably, unsure exactly what he should do. His son trusted the witch, which was enough for him, but he wasn’t sure of the etiquette.

“Er ... would you like a drink?”

Phillip returned a few hours later to find his father, mother and Maleficent sitting comfortably in front of the fire.

“My God, I can’t believe Stephan would do that to his own child.”

“Do what?” Phillip asked, adjusting his tunic. He was shaven, dressed in silk and leather.

“It would do no good for you to know,” Maleficent said. “It would only make you angry and your anger could lead to trouble.”

Phillip clenched his jaw but said nothing. His mother gave him a slight nod and he knew she would tell him later.

“I knew they’d had trouble conceiving,” the queen said, “And wondered if they’d sought magical help. Poor Leah,” she said, shaking her head.

Phillip felt little sympathy for Rose’s parents, especially her mother, who should have protected her from her father.

“Father?” Phillip asked.

His father, normally so jovial, was clearly disturbed by what he’d been told. “We leave at first light.”

## Chapter Thirteen

“Aurora, I have news of your future.”

Aurora stood before the thrones, head bowed.

“You are to be married in two weeks. I have found a better match for you than Prince Phillip. King Markus recently lost his wife. He has offered greater weaponry as well as a peace treaty in exchange for you. That is all.”

“Thank you, Father.”

Aurora dipped into a curtsy, turned, and left the throne room, two maids in waiting following obediently behind her.

With measured grace she returned to her rooms in the tower. Once there her maid divested her of the formal gown she’d donned for the summons.

“My lady, are you alright? This is unexpected news,” one maid said.

“I want only to make a marriage that aids my kingdom,” she replied.

“But Princess, they said Markus killed his wife because she couldn’t conceive.”

“Beth, hush!” the first maid said.

Aurora didn’t react to the news.

They redressed her in a blue velvet dress, rich for all its simplicity, and left her.

Aurora stood by the window, face smooth as she looked out.

She let the silence of the chamber seep into her, only when all around her was calm and she was alone could she sometimes draw up some portion of who she’d been.

*Hawk.*

She could not even speak his name aloud, for they’d forbidden that of her. They had not forbidden her to remember him, and the memory of his face, his kiss, his touch, sustained her.

It was as though she were living inside a glass box. She couldn’t get out, and nothing could get in. Every order she was given was a compulsion—she didn’t even have to think, her body simply obeyed. The right words, the right actions, came to her automatically, a result of those first eleven years of training.

Phillip or Markus, it mattered not—she couldn’t have the man she loved.

She spread her hand over her belly, her last remaining source of hope. Hawk had spilled in her, many times, and she was several days late. Mayhap her love would save her from this life, though not in the way she’d hoped. If her wedding was only two weeks away her child—if she was pregnant—would not be mature enough to show and give reason to call off the wedding. She would have Hawk’s child, raise it as the crown prince of another man’s kingdom. She would never tell anyone of the deceit.

Hawk was good man, and his child would be a good King.

Alone and heartbroken Aurora stood by the window, watching for a man who would never come.

“Princess, it is a pleasure to see you.”

Aurora jerked to a stop just inside the door to her chamber. The witches stood there. Each wore a calm, terrifying smile.

“We know you lay with your woodsman many times, and we are concerned you might have something of his you shouldn’t.”

Aurora's heart fell. "Please," she whispered, knowing it was useless.

"We spoke with your father the king, and he is very angry. I'm afraid you will soon be punished, but that punishment won't take care of the problem, will it?"

They held out a goblet full of foul smelling brew. Aurora took a step back.

"Drink it," they commanded.

With a hand that shook from the warring forces within her Aurora took the goblet.

*No! No!*

Though she screamed inside she could not stop herself from raising the cup and, sip by noxious sip, finishing the brew.

When she was done she dropped to the floor, arms wrapped around her belly as the poison snuffed out the small life inside her.

"Rise Princess," they said.

She tried but could not, so they used their magic to raise her to her feet and strip her dress off until it hung loose to her waist. The door opened and one of the guards entered, carrying a whip.

"Careful not to break skin," the witches said as the guard pressed Aurora against the wall and took his place behind her. "She has to heal before her wedding night."

"The king wants her hurt," the guard said.

"Don't fear," the witches murmured, "she is in terrible pain."

Aurora wept from the pain in her heart, in her belly, and, as the first blow fell, her back.

*Hawk, save me.*

Hawk was gone, she was alone. The ever fading spark of hope within Aurora snuffed out as the pain overcame her. She stopped fighting against the spell they placed on her, stopped fighting or caring.

When the whipping was done, she sank gracefully to her knees.

She said nothing as the maids put her into bed, said nothing as they tended her back.

She closed her eyes and went to sleep, finding that in sleep she was free of this horror her life had become.

A week later, and a week before her marriage, Aurora's chamber door was opened by an excited maid.

"Princess, they say King Hubert is on his way."

She did not respond.

"And they say Prince Phillip is with him. The prince wasn't supposed to come, they say only the king was invited, but he's coming. Maybe he'll want to marry you—you are very beautiful—and then you won't have to marry Markus."

Aurora nodded woodenly. None of this was news to her. She'd watched the banners approaching the castle, and correctly identified all of them, including the personal shield of the prince.

"Beth, please help me off with my dress. I am so tired."

Aurora found it difficult to stay awake.

She was sleeping from before sunset to after sunrise, and each morning it was harder and harder to wake up.

Secretly she hoped that some day when she went to sleep she would remain asleep and be forever in a world of dreams.

Beth helped her into bed and drew the drapes.

Strangely, Aurora could not sleep. There was a tingling, almost like excitement, in her fingers and toes. She hadn't felt anything like this since ... since the woods. Since Hawk.

What could be causing this? Agitated, she tried to will herself to sleep, but it was no use. She called for her maids and redressed.

They hadn't thought to forbid her from leaving her chambers unless called—probably because she hadn't bothered to do so before.

Feeling more herself than she had in ages Aurora made her way to the throne room. There was a viewing room built into one of the upper hallways. A small spy hole allowed the viewer to look in on the great hall while remaining concealed.

She slid into the alcove.

From here she had a view of the thrones. Her father was rising from his chair, coming down the steps to hug King Hubert, whose round figure was distinctive. The tall fit man at his side wore a circlet on his brow and garments of the finest leather and silk. Aurora's heart caught as she looked at the prince—the shape of his head, his hair, they were so very much like Hawk.

He turned his head slightly and she got a glimpse of a smooth chin and the feeling of familiarity faded.

Prince Phillip strode forward to clasp wrists with her father and Aurora narrowed her eyes. He even moved as Hawk had.

She shook her head—any resemblance was born of desperate fantasy.

"Hubert thank you for coming. I did not mean for you to drag your son all this way."

"It was time we saw you again, old friend," King Hubert said as her father led them to a table to the left of the throne. With each passing moment Prince Phillip's resemblance to Hawk grew.

*Turn around, let me see your face.*

"Besides," Hubert said as wine was poured, "Phillips is anxious to take Aurora to wife. He's not getting any younger."

"Ah, well, that is what I wanted to discuss with you," her father said. "You see, Aurora is not ... well."

"Still?" Hubert asked.

"I'm afraid so. As Phillip is still a young man, and deserving of better, I'm releasing you both from the betrothal."

"Stephan, don't be silly. This betrothal has been in place since they were children. You need our armies, I need your trade. It is the perfect marriage."

"I've decided to marry her to Markus."

"Markus? My God man, are you mad? He killed his wife."

"Hubert, he nips at my lands to the south. I need his good will and he wants a wife. I hope, old friend, you will understand this."

"Why didn't you tell me? I would have placed men at your south border. Stephan, listen to me, don't be a fool. She's your daughter. You don't want her married to that man."

Her father only shrugged.

"You bastard." It was Prince Phillip who spoke, and Aurora's heart leapt. *Hawk*. "Haven't you hurt her enough? Where is she?"

If this was a dream Aurora did not want to wake. That was no Prince, but her own

beloved Hawk.

She tried to call his name, but the words caught in her throat, the order to never speak of him preventing her.

Tearing from the alcove Aurora ran for the stairs.

\*

“Sisters, I think a trick is played.”

“Why?”

“Does that man not look like the huntsman?”

The witches three peered into their bowl.

“He does, but why would king Hubert help play that sort of trick?”

“I know not, but if we were to expose such a thing...”

“...Stephan would be well pleased with us.”

The witches stepped away from their scrying bowl and disappeared in a swirl of pastel.

Aurora burst through the doors of the throne room. Her father looked up, frowning. She knew he would order her away, and so had only one chance.

“Beloved!” she cried out, looking at Phillip’s back. If it was truly her Hawk he would come to that name.

Prince Phillip turned. It was he—her beloved, her Hawk. He was well dressed and clean shaven, but there was no mistaking him. Would he know her?

“Rose!”

Aurora laughed in joy and ran toward him. She didn’t understand what was happening, but didn’t care. Hawk was here, under what guise she couldn’t guess, but he was here.

“Aurora, stop.”

The order rocked her to a stop, her father’s voice commanding her limbs to still. Against her will Aurora lowered her head and folded her hands.

“Return to your room. This is unseemly behavior.”

She fought the order with all she was, panting at the effort it took to keep herself from turning and leaving. Tears welled in her eyes—surely Hawk would think she was rejecting him again.

Strong hands took hers, hands as familiar as her own. Then he was cupping her cheek, tilting her head up. His touch erased the pressing need to obey her father.

“Hawk,” she mouthed, unable to give voice to the word.

“Yes, my beloved,” he said with a smile. “My Princess.” He smiled and the smile became a laugh. “How very strange to have fallen in love with my own betrothed.”

“You are Prince Phillip? This is not some elaborate rescue?” she whispered.

“I am Prince Phillip—Hawk is what my friends call me. You should have told me who you were.”

“*You* should have told *me*,” she retorted.

He smiled, “There’s my Rose, I was worried I’d lost—”

There were three sharp popping noises and Aurora was wrenched away from Phillip.

“Princess,” the witches said in unison, “Return to your room.”

Phillip watched her eyes widen, then go glassy before she dipped her head, spun gracefully, and left the room. He tried to run after her, but hit an invisible wall.

“Let me through,” he snarled at the witches. They ignored him.

“King Stephan,” they said, “We’ve come to warn you of a terrible plot.”

Stephan had pushed up from the table, as had Hubert. “What plot?”

“This is not Prince Phillip, but the huntsman Aurora found in the woods, the one whose bastard she carried.”

Those words stilled Phillip. Aurora was pregnant?

“How can that be?” Stephan asked, brow furled.

“What are you talking about?” King Hubert asked, “This is my son.”

“We know this is the man she met in the woods. We recognize him.”

“Yes,” Phillip said, hand on his sword, “I am the man she met in the woods. And I am Prince Phillip, son of King Hubert.”

He saw fear flicker across the face of the pink witch, but the one in green pressed on.

“You are no prince.”

She threw out her arm and a bolt of light raced toward him. Phillip hit the ground and rolled out of the way.

“How dare you attack my son!” his father roared.

“Shield!” Phillip shouted, and his father took the ceremonial shield Phillip had carried in and tossed it to him. Phillip slipped his arm quickly into the straps.

The witch in green slapped her hands together and a veil of green smoke concealed her. Within the smoke a shape morphed and grew until there stood a sinewy green dragon. Phillip’s heart stilled. He had nothing but a ceremonial sword and shield.

“Stephan, what is the meaning of this treachery?”

The dragon bent its head and blew a long stream of fire. Phillip raised his shield, crying out when the heat singed his arm through the shield.

Just behind the dragon he could see the other two witches, who looked uneasy.

As the heat overwhelmed him he felt a breath of cool air, and black fog rolled around his feet. A glance over his shoulder showed him that Maleficent stood there in all her dark glory.

The pink and yellow witches stepped forward, now ready to battle.

“Don’t show mercy,” Maleficent told him. She drew back her arm and sent a bolt of magic at the other two, leaving Phillip to fend with the dragon.

“Do you love her?” the dragon hissed, taunting him. Its tail swung out, swiping the thrones from the dais. “I could tell you she doesn’t love you, but you’re about to die, so it doesn’t matter.”

Phillip checked to see that his father was safely out of the way, then upended the table they’d been sitting at, using it as a shield.

“Did we tell you about the child? She was pregnant, but the babe is dead. She wanted to keep it. We could hear her thoughts, but we forced her to drink the potion that killed it.”

Phillip felt sick. He leaned forward, bracing his hands on the stone as the world spun around him. As the dragon had intended, that distracted him long enough that he didn’t see the tail coming.

A powerful swipe of the tail knocked him across the room. He hit the wall and slid down. He’d lost his sword. It was lying on the floor fifteen feet away.

“Fool,” the dragon hissed, then it threw back its head and laughed, a terrible barking sound.

*Rose* he thought, and the memory of her laugh, dancing, kissing him, making love to

him, gave him the strength to run for the sword.

Then, with the courage of fools and men in love he charged the dragon. With a mighty leap he drove the sword into the dragon's heart.

The dragon screamed, thrashing and snarling as it faded into the form of the green witch.

She staggered back, hands around the blade, then fell to the floor, dead.

He looked at Maleficent, who knelt on the ground, bloody and bruised. The other two witches were on the floor, dead as their sister.

He spared them no more than a thought as he ran from the throne room.

He did not know the way, and yet his steps were sure as he headed for the winding stairs of a tower.

He burst through the door of the tower, his bloody sword falling from his hand.

Two weeping maids stood beside the bed, stepping back as he approached.

Rose lay atop the bed, with her hands folded on her stomach. She was pale and lovely, but nowhere near as beautiful as she was when she was awake, her eyes dancing with life.

"We cannot wake her," one whispered, and Phillip feared he was already too late.

"Leave us," he said.

Dropping to one knee beside her Phillip leaned down and pressed his lips to hers.

He kissed her with passion, with joy, with sorrow for the child they'd lost. He kissed her with desperation and longing and all the love he had to give. He swore to himself that if this kiss were not enough to break the spell cast on her he would search unto the ends of the earth to find a cure.

He kissed her with love, and it was enough.

Aurora's eyes fluttered open, her lips parted against his as she sighed. Her arms lifted to twine around his shoulders.

Phillip slid his arms beneath her and lifted her from the bed, spinning her around as he laughed in joy.

"Aurora," he said, smiling down at her.

"Phillip," she touched his cheek.

"You are safe now," he said.

"Safe?" she hugged him tighter and he could feel her body rocking with sobs. He sat on the bed and soothed her until her sobs quieted. He kissed her brow, cheeks, and finally lips.

She sighed and rested her head on his shoulder. She was awake, she was his, and that was enough. He missed the feisty Rose of the woods, but that the spell hadn't broken didn't matter. There was time enough to fix that.

Aurora pushed away from him, getting to her feet. "What happened?"

"The witches are dead."

"You killed them?"

"Yes. Well, one of them, Maleficent the other two. But the one I battled had turned to a dragon."

Aurora considered him for a long moment then said, "Crap."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm the one they abused and I didn't get to kill any of them." As she spoke Aurora worked off the hated bracelet. She dropped it to the floor and tried smashing it with her



foot, which resulted in no more than cursing.

“Don’t do that, for you’ll hurt your foot.”

She ignored him, ignored a direct order, and went right on stomping.

Phillip laughed in joy and relief as he realized the spell was broken.

Aurora picked up his bloody sword, knelt, and began banging on the bracelet with the hilt.

“Might I help you?” he asked.

“No,” she grunted.

Phillip roared with laughter, “My beautiful Rose, how I love you.”

She dropped the sword, rose, and tackled him, knocking him back on the bed and coving his face with kisses.

“Do you know it is you who saved me? Long ago you gave me a briar rose.”

“I would say that I loved you even then, but I didn’t. You were boring.”

“You always smelled badly.”

“Ouch.”

“You want ouch?” her hand crept toward his crotch.

“Wench,” he mock growled, grabbing her and rolling so she was on the bottom. Her cry of real pain stopped him. Remembering how she cried out when he held her in the ruins Phillip eased from the bed and drew her up.

She kept her head down as he eased the dress from her body. Phillip sucked in a breath as he saw her back, saw welts both new and old.

“He did this to you, when you returned home that day.”

“Yes. Oh Phillip he was so angry. I knew he would kill you. That is why I left you. I shouldn’t have gone to the ruins at all, but I wanted to see you one last time.”

He shook his head. “I could have saved you from this if I’d told you who I was.”

“I made the same mistake.” She raised on tiptoe to kiss his cheeks, the corners of his mouth. “I don’t want to talk about the past. I want to feel safe again. Touch me.”

Phillip took her to bed, as gentle with her as if she were made of glass. He pleased her with lips and fingers before pulling her astride him.

“I love you, Princess Aurora,” he said.

“And I you, Prince Phillip.”

In the courtyard below the briar rose bloomed.

**The End**

### **About the Author:**

Lila lives in Hollywood, after a six months stint terrorizing a sleepy little town in Surrey, England. Lila is current dieting (which makes her grumpy) because she’s getting married summer 2010. Having spent extensive time in France, Egypt and Turkey, and England Lila speaks five languages, none of them (including English) fluently.

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