

*Miniature
Rose*

Fairy Rose

A Blessing In Disguise

by

Shereen Vedam



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"Just one blessing for our beleaguered Kingdom of Emerset," Amity's Uncle Hamon had asked, holding up a finger. "Is that too much to ask?"

The argument with her uncle had upset her more than she wished to admit. Why else would she be out here alone at twilight, instead of home, reading by the firelight or sorting her pottery samples for sale the next day?

Amity skirted the muddy waters of a dwindling pond; swiping at the trunks of trees with the slender fallen branch she'd picked up on her walk. The dry grass crunched under her boots as she stomped through the woods. It was early summer and yet the greenery in this once lush forest was sparse and dying. If this drought lasted much longer, this year's crops would be no better than last, and her village would diminish even further as people moved away to find a better living. Her quarrel with her uncle, however, was foremost on her mind.

It wasn't so much that she'd displeased Uncle Hamon by her refusal to help but that his request touched a sensitive nerve she thought she'd healed. Born of a long line of sorceresses, Amity should have found her uncle's request a cinch to perform.

Blessings were the simplest of spells. Any child with a shred of talent could cast it. All you had to do was focus your mind and wish with all your heart. How difficult could that be? Well, for her, it was very near impossible. Another swipe startled a flock of resting sparrows and sent them fluttering into the air.

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The last time she wove a spell was five years ago when Uncle Hamon persuaded her that his favorite drinking partner had married the wrong woman. He said it was likely to make the man miserable and asked her to put a mild *forget-me* spell on the new wife.

Amity had hesitated, but after meeting the love-struck young wife, she had instantly sympathized with her. The girl looked no more than sixteen summers, and after seeing the miserable drunkard she'd married, Amity had changed her mind about the spell. The girl obviously needed help if she thought she would be happy with a man who didn't want her and drank all the time.

So Amity cast the *forget-me* spell.

The result had gone terribly wrong.

Amity had sworn then and there that she would never again strum the lines of magic. She was done with her birthright. It was nothing but a nuisance and far too often, plain dangerous.

She plunked down cross-legged by the edge of the pond and stared out at the still water. It was too dark to see very deep into the shallow pond, which appeared as murky as her future.

Was it so wrong to want go on with her life and leave her talent buried and out of harm's way?

* * * *

Close to sunset, Duncan crouched close to the ground. It was almost too late to go on with his hunt but he felt near his prey. The hairs on his neck stood on end and he could have

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sworn that his hands, planted firmly on the ground, vibrated to the trot of hoofs. His nose twitched as he distinguished one scent from the other. The buck had passed through here recently. It was nearby, no more than fifty feet away. He re-slung his bow across his back, mounted with a silent leap, and urged his horse forward.

"We almost have him, Storm," he murmured.

The steed neighed softly, nostrils flared, head bobbing.

Duncan crested the hill and down below he spotted the buck. It had stopped to drink at a pond. He dismounted and readied for the kill. He drew back on the taut string of his bow and with both eyes open, aimed his arrow. He held the shot, waiting for the perfect moment for a clean shot, and then released.

The sound of a scream startled him. That wasn't a deer. It was a woman's cry. The animal ran for cover and Duncan leaped over boulders and fallen trunks to see what he had hit. The buck had been in his sight, no one else. He couldn't have hit a woman.

This wood was supposed to be empty; it was miles from the nearest village. What would a maiden be doing lurking here in the dark, fouling his shot? He landed with a thump beside a large elm tree and saw his victim lying on the ground, her face and dark hair half buried by fallen dried leaves.

The arrow stood upright from her sleeve.

He knelt by her. "Miss, are you all right?"

The woman moaned and her other hand reached out for the arrow.

"No," he said, restraining her. "Don't touch it. He moved the leaves away from her injured arm trying to gauge how deep the arrow had gone. A flesh wound by the look, and clean through. That was a good, though she was unlikely to appreciate that fact.

"Hold still," he warned. If she came fully awake and saw her injury, she might become frantic. Best to get the arrow out of her before she began to struggle. With a quick efficient move, he snapped the arrowhead off at the other end and pulled the staff out. She cried out and his heart lurched at the pain in her voice.

"I have to bind the wound." He had difficulty getting his words past the lump in his throat.

He picked up her free right hand and held it over the wounded left arm to stay the bleeding. "Hold tight."

Her hand lay limp.

He positioned the fingers again. "Grip your arm," he ordered in a stern voice.

Her eyelids fluttered open, revealing light green eyes. She took one look at her bloody arm and did as he asked. Her lips moved gently as if she was trying to speak, but no words came out.

He slit a corner of her dress with his knife and tore a strip off the bottom. His gaze shifted from his chore to her face as he tried to see how she was handling the situation. After that one cry she had remained silent. Unusual in a woman. Most females he knew would have fainted by now or at the very least thrown themselves at this neck and burst into tears.

This young woman lay still and didn't hinder his work or blame him for shooting her. It was hard to see what she looked like. Leaves still covered a portion of her face. The rest of her, he noticed well enough. She was shapely, young, with a slim waist and an advantageous bosom. There was no ring on any of her fingers. So she was still a maiden. These thoughts flew through his mind in moments as he bound her arm.

"The arrow went straight through, Miss. The arm should heal well, though you'll need to clean it proper when you get home. Is there a healer in your village?"

She nodded. She had yet to speak a word. Her teeth bit into her bottom lip and Duncan realized she was holding back her cries. What a brave little thing. Who was she?

"What's your name?" Talk might distract her from his ministering.

"Amity."

A beautiful name and it suited her. She was an amiable woman both in temperament and looks.

"Mine's Duncan. Do you live near here?"

She nodded, yes. Her eyes flicked to his and they seemed eerie in the darkness that had descended on them. He realized that the sun must have set without either of them noticing.

"My horse is just up that hill. If you will allow me to assist you, I can give you a ride home."

"Thank you, sir," she said and moved to sit up. A moan escaped her tightly clenched mouth and Duncan reached down and lifted her up in his arms.

"I can walk. It's only my arm that's wounded, not my legs."

"It's amazing how connected the body gets when it's wounded," he said and smiled at the lady in his arms. She was light and when she put her good arm around his shoulder for support, she weighed nothing at all.

Storm stomped his hoofs and snorted when Duncan crested the hill. His feisty horse apparently didn't like the idea of a second passenger but Duncan calmed him with a word and gently lifted Amity up. He mounted behind her and held her securely with one hand while he took the reins with the other.

"Which way?"

She pointed. A woman of few words, at least when she was ill. Considering that most ladies of his acquaintance grew louder the worse they felt, he decided he rather liked this Amity.

* * * *

Amity held her breath and then breathed in shallow breaths as they rode over the countryside. His arm held her securely by her waist and her back pressed against the length of his solid body. Her heart thudded in her chest in tune to the throbbing in her arm.

She'd never been shot before. So she put her lightheadedness down to the shock of the arrow piercing her arm and seeing all that blood gush out after he pulled the stave out. But her continued rapid heartbeat was difficult to

explain, as was the tingling on her body wherever it leaned against this man.

"You've said naught about me shooting you," he said.

"I'm sure it was an accident. There is nothing to say."

She found she liked being held so close by this Duncan. Who was he? A nobleman from the castle? It must have been a shock to realize he'd brought down a village maiden instead of a deer. He had reacted well after the accident. He not only saw to her wound but also insisted on taking her home to safety. He was a kind man. She could tell that not only from the gentle look in his eyes, but by the way he had carried her up the hill, being so careful to protect her from further harm.

"What were you doing out by yourself so late in the day?" he asked.

Amity frowned. How to reply to that question? She must seem very silly or at the least unhinged to be out on her own without any protection so far from home. She found she didn't want this Duncan to think badly of her. They may never see each other again after he dropped her off, but she still valued his good opinion of her. So she spoke the truth.

"I had an argument with my uncle and needed time to sort it out in my mind. I like going for walks in the woods when I'm troubled. It gives me time to think."

"Did you not have anyone to talk to in your home? Most women I know find others of their kind to discuss matters with when they're worried. They don't go off into the woods alone. You're a very strange young woman."

Amity cringed. She had wanted him to think well of her and instead he thought her strange. Tears pricked at her eyes

and she was afraid she would make matters even worse by bursting out crying. She decided to change the subject. Talking about her would never impress him anyway, so why not ask him about himself? Her uncle Hamon always liked to talk about himself.

"What were you doing hunting alone?" she asked.

Duncan laughed. Had she made another mistake? She wasn't used to talking to men, let alone nobles. Had she been too forward with her question?

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," she said. "I ... I was just making conversation."

"It sounded more like an accusation," Duncan said. "In fact, you sounded just like my mother."

Amity didn't like that response. She hadn't been accusing him of anything and she hoped she didn't sound like an old woman. This conversation grew worse instead of better. Best if she held her tongue and kept her thoughts and words to herself.

She straightened away from him and sat up on the horse. His arm immediately pulled her back. His palm lay flat just under her bosom and his leg moved forward to rest beneath hers. The adjustment made her feel extremely uncomfortable and her body reacted in ways that were unfamiliar. All this touching couldn't be good. Why was the ride home taking so long?

He moved his head until his face was beside hers. "I like to be alone as well, when I need to think."

His breath warmed her throat and his cheek felt rough against hers. Somewhere during their conversation, she'd

stopped breathing. She took a gulp of air now and tried to think of something to say but her mind was unusually quiet. She swallowed the air and took another gulp, hoping to get her mind working again.

He chuckled and moved his head back and her thoughts began to settle into some semblance of order.

"What were you worried about?" she asked. What could possibly upset this self-assured young man enough that he rode alone to sort it out?

"My mother," he said. "You see, we have something in common. We both have relatives who cause us difficulty. Mine wants me to do something I totally disapprove of and know would foist a false hope in people's hearts."

"Then why don't you say no?" she asked.

"Because I love my mother dearly and don't want to hurt her feelings. She's going this course because she thinks it will help me. But she's wrong."

"Could it?" she asked. "Help you, I mean."

Duncan directed them along the outskirts of the village in silence. Meager crops struggled for life all around them. Twilight had darkened the landscape and it amazed her at how small the fields looked from atop this great prancing horse.

"The type of help my mother offers, I've no time for," he said.

The words were spoken in a harsh voice and she realized she might have overstepped the bounds of politeness by questioning him on it.

"What about you?" he asked. "What does your uncle want of you?"

Amity shrugged. "He wants me to do something I don't think I'm capable of. Whenever he's asked me to help in this way before, it's always been a total disaster."

Duncan chuckled. She listened to the sound and savored the vibration emanating from his body. She liked his laugh. It rose from deep in his chest. She didn't even mind that he was laughing at her.

His hand moved and she felt his knuckles brush the bottom of her breasts. Did he caress her? The movement ended as quickly as it began and she was left to wonder if she'd imagined it. His chin brushed along the top of her head and once again she was cheek to cheek with him.

"I can't imagine you doing anything that was other than perfect," he whispered.

Duncan dropped her off at her cottage, lowering her to the ground with gentle hands, considerate of her injury. He asked if she would like him to carry her inside.

Though tempted, she refused. If her uncle were waiting up for her, Duncan would be very difficult to explain. For some reason, she wanted to keep this meeting to herself. In a moment, he would be gone and she wanted nothing to mar this fantasy night ride.

She leaned against her front door and he inched forward and pressed his lips on hers.

Amity had only ever been kissed twice by a man in her whole life. The first time had been when her mother sent her to collect eggs owed them from the house next door. Eagan,

a boy of seven summers to her six, had laid a peck on her cheek, and then pulled her braid hard and run away. Amity had appreciated neither of the boy's touches, thinking him rude.

The second time, she had just turned seventeen. Stephan, the butcher's eldest son, had talked her into looking at his prize bull in the barn. Before she knew what happened, she found herself lying back on the straw bed and his hands on her bosom while he peppered her with wet and slimy kisses. A whispered word and a shove with her leg had sent him flying across the barn.

He had hit the sideboards with a very satisfying thump and crumpled to the floor like a rag doll. At first, Amity had thought she'd killed him. When she found he was still breathing, she ran away and never said a word of what happened to anyone. She'd also avoided going alone into any dark enclosure with a man again.

This third kiss from Duncan outshone the others like the sun blinding out the night and made her crave for more. The gentle passionate linking of lips ended all too soon.

Duncan rode off into the night, while she stood on her doorstep gasping like a lovesick fool. She saw now why her female friends compared a man's kiss to the excitement of finding a nugget of gold. With the wooden door of her small one-room cottage bracing her back, she looked across the moonlit landscape filled with blighted fields owned by her uncle, and yet felt wealthy beyond measure.

A shuffle sounded inside the house and Amity pulled away before the door opened.

"Niece," her uncle said in shock, "what's happened to you?"

She gave the old man a blank look, trying to think clearly, and all the while her heart shouted at her that she must find a way to see Duncan again.

The blessing Uncle Hamon wanted was to take place at the palace. During the prince's coronation service. All the nobles in the land would likely come to witness the coronation, if not the blessing. But they would be in the castle grounds.

I can't imagine you doing anything that was other than perfect.

She glanced into the night where Duncan had ridden off and then at her uncle, who stood murmuring worriedly over her wounded arm.

"I've decided to grant you your blessing," she said in a firm voice.

* * * *

As the weeks progressed, Amity's uncle pampered her and took care of her every need, even going so far as to cook her meals and wash her clothes. It felt strange to lie in bed and have a man wait on her. But Uncle Hamon didn't seem to mind. He scampered around the tiny one room cottage to fetch her a drink or re-apply the herbal cure on her arm.

His consideration touched her. Part of what motivated him was her agreement to help with his most recent cause. However, her uncle's devotion was also a reflection of his love for her.

The weeks passed quicker than she would have liked and slowly, the worry about the success of the blessing overtook her excitement of possibly seeing the handsome Duncan again. It didn't help that he never came to visit after dropping her off at the cottage the night of her injury.

All too soon it was time to leave for the castle. Her time was filled with packing and then the hard trek to the castle put Duncan out of her thoughts. But at night, while the dull jarring call of the fern-owl sounded outside, the sensual ride she had shared with Duncan across a twilight landscape haunted her dreams.

* * * *

"Hurry, Amity," Uncle Hamon said. He'd stopped when he noticed she no longer followed him up the hill toward the castle. "We must get inside before sundown. Come."

That was the last thing she wanted to do. Once she consented to enter that portal, it would be too late. By tomorrow, she would have played her hand and been caught in an act of deception. She was as sure of that as her uncle was certain it would all work out.

Her Uncle Hamon hurried back to Amity and with a firm hand on her elbow herded her through the huge wooden gates, and past the crowd rushing the other way that wanted to leave before the doors closed.

Once inside, Amity's eyes lingered on the men on the castle grounds, searching for a face dear to her. But Duncan was not among the men who chatted at the foot of the stairs, nor was he among those who practiced staff fighting or

wrestling. No glint of golden hair caught and held her eye, and no one stood as tall as the man who had captured her heart with one shot of his longbow.

She touched her upper arm and felt the scar left by Duncan's arrow. He must be somewhere here. He was surely a nobleman and would therefore be invited to the prince's coronation. That was the real reason she had agreed to her uncle's pleading to give this blessing during the ceremonies. That it might afford her a chance to meet him again. It certainly wasn't because she thought she could actually do a blessing and make it work. Amity checked the grounds again.

Not that Duncan would necessarily be pleased to see her. After all, since he had dropped her off at her cottage, not once had he come to visit her, or asked after how she fared.

Amity and her uncle arrived at the side door of the keep and begged entrance. A young boy escorted them to the kitchens, a maze of smoky corners lit by torches and burning hearths. The tall ceilings and lack of windows gave the place an eerie feel.

The head cook seated her uncle at the wide kitchen table and served him a mug of ale. Uncle Hamon was obviously a favored guest here. The tall plump woman's long face carried a look of warm welcome. Tiny golden curls escaped her tight bun and frizzled around her forehead, no doubt as much from the heat in the kitchen as from natural bent. A spotless apron stretched around her ample waist, which was worn over a dark smock that fit her from neck to toe.

Amity wondered how the woman managed to stay clean and untouched in such a messy business as cooking the

castle's myriad meals. Suddenly the woman yelled out a series of instructions to men, women and children who scurried around the room. Amity considered their filthy smocks and harried looks and understanding dawned on how this kitchen functioned.

"We're so glad you could come, my dear," the cook gushed. She pulled the bench by the table out further to ease Amity onto the seat. "I'm Beryl, by the by. We heard you'd been injured and thought the blessing would be cancelled. How're you feeling now?"

"I'm all healed," Amity said, and rubbed her arm. "Thank you for asking." She waited until the woman moved out of hearing range and then whispered, "Uncle Hamon, you promised you'd tell everyone that my blessings aren't always good. That sometimes they don't work."

Her uncle raised a finger to his lips and motioned to the cook who was headed back in their direction with a tray of bread and roast chicken.

"I'm preparing something special for you, Amity," Beryl said. "It's my best dish. It shouldn't be much longer."

Amity smiled, clenched her fingers on her lap and watched her uncle set into his meal as Beryl hurried away. Over the last few days, worry had gained a stronghold on her.

She'd thought failing in front of her whole village was a huge humiliation. Now she had set herself up to fail in front of her future king and the entire kingdom.

Why did the prince want this blessing anyway? Everyone said he didn't believe in sorcery. Even with his mother's Elven blood in his veins, he still scorned the inner powers. When

she noticed she'd chewed off the last of her nails to the quick, she placed both her palms on the bench and sat on the back of her hands.

It would be all right.

The blessing would work.

She would close her eyes and wish with all her heart as her mother had taught her. She always dreaded the experience of the power as it surged through her body. It frightened her how out of control she would be while she wrought the spell. What if her hands flailed and she looked like a dolt or she thought of the wrong thing at the wrong moment as often happened? What if she messed up as badly as she had the last time she cast a spell? Only this time it might affect the entire kingdom of Emerset!

She jumped up off the seat. "I can't do this."

The noise in the kitchen evaporated like smoke up the chimney and every eye turned in her direction.

"I'm sorry," Amity said holding out her hands, palms up. "But you must understand, I'm not good at this. My spells are more apt to make matters worse than help. It would be best if we forgo this ritual. Or get someone more worthy of the art to lay the blessing."

Beryl came to Amity's side and took her hands in hers. "We've had several hundred would-be mages who have laid blessings on this land and the drought still continues."

Amity didn't reply, what could she say?

"Will you come with me?" Beryl asked. "I wish to show you something."

Her uncle nodded acceptance on her behalf and when Amity still hesitated, he pushed her from behind to follow the cook.

Beryl led her up the stairs and out a narrow corridor to the vegetable gardens at the back of the castle.

"This is my favorite spot in the whole castle."

Amity could see why. Row upon row of all types of leafy vegetables, carrots and potato plants lined the ground as far as she could see in the dim light of the setting sun. All appeared lush and green. It had been so long since she'd seen crops do this well; the sight took her breath away. This is what all of Emerset should look like in the summer, not strips of dried out browns and grays so common these days.

"These plants grow well because the castle has hundreds of servants to fetch water and see to the crops every day," Beryl said. "The farmers further out are not so lucky. You know that, you come from a farming village."

Amity nodded.

"Your uncle has told me a great deal about you," Beryl said.

"Uncle Hamon has a great deal of faith in me. It's misguided." She released her breath in a sigh. "I never knew my father, Uncle Hamon's brother. He died defending the king during a siege long before I was born. And my mother passed away many years ago. Since then, it's just been my uncle and I. We take care of each other."

"As family should. But more than that, he cares deeply for you."

"And I him," she said, and smiled. "That's why it's so hard to say no to his few requests."

"Like the blessing?" Beryl asked.

"Yes. He knows this could end up a disaster and still he asks it of me."

"As do I," Beryl said. "You have not had the pleasure of a mother's advice for many years, my dear. Would you accept mine in its place?"

Twilight was upon them. Amity strolled between rows of lettuce to avoid Beryl sensing her reaction. For some reason, this woman's offer brought tears prickling to the back of her eyes. She was used to not having a mother. Years of dealing with problems on her own had taught her to be strong. Yet, Beryl's quiet offer showed her how much she'd missed her own mother's guidance. She gazed toward the horizon until she had her emotions in control and then turned back to her hostess.

"I would dearly welcome any counsel you give me, Beryl," she said.

The cook walked up to her. "You are as wise and brave a child as Hamon said. And that is exactly what you must be tomorrow. Our kingdom needs your assistance."

Moonlight glinted on Beryl's fair curls and Amity squinted up at the woman who towered a head over her. There was something familiar about her.

"What little our villagers harvested last year must last them out this year. And next year, well, who knows what that season will bring? As it is, many have left our kingdom to find a home elsewhere. The more who leave, the less subjects we

have to defend our lands. What your father fought and died for will have been a waste, for this drought will surely finish Emerset off."

"I understand what you say," Amity said. "But I may not have the power to change any of this. Every time I try a spell, disaster befalls the poor victims who requested my services and oft times innocent bystanders as well. I'm not my mother. *She* was gifted."

"You're our last hope, Amity," Beryl said. "You must have courage and faith in yourself." She walked down an aisle and looked up at the dark moonlit sky. "The time is auspicious. Tomorrow is not only the coronation day, but the moon will be at its full cycle. I feel it in my heart that you can help not only the prince but the entire kingdom with your blessing."

"But..."

Beryl held up her hand. "Would it not be better to try and fail, than to not try at all?"

Amity shook her head. "I'm not so sure of that. Last time I tried a spell was over five summers ago. My uncle asked me to set a *forget-me* spell on a poor maiden whose family married her off to a drunkard. I do not like to interfere in other people's personal lives, but I made an exception once I met the couple in question."

"You are much like your uncle. He too finds it hard to stand by and not help when help is obviously required. You're a good-hearted child."

"My motives do not matter," Amity said. "For when I cast that *forget-me* spell, every man, woman and child in my

village did not know who they were or what they did for a living for an entire month."

She watched stunned as Beryl broke out laughing. This was not funny! She had ruined lives.

Beryl put a hand to her mouth as if that would control her laughter. "I'd heard about that incident, but didn't connect it with Hamon and his niece. I'm sorry, my dear. I know you think that was a complete disaster."

"It was!"

"Yes, of course, it was. But it was an accident. However, what it shows is that you have more power than you give yourself credit for. You must simply learn to harness it."

She gestured for Amity to come closer.

"Aside from water, the reason my plants do so well is that I have learned over the years where to plant my seedlings, what plants do well growing beside others, which ones need more sun, which less. Hundreds of details run through my mind from how to grow the juiciest beets to raising the largest radishes. I didn't know any of this when I began. If I had allowed my first failures to deter me, we wouldn't now stand beside this wonderful garden. Everything in life takes practice, Amity. And mistakes are part of learning. Accept that and each failure will drive you closer to success."

Amity listened with growing unease. Could Beryl be right? Had she feared her powers so much that she wasn't willing to take the chance to learn from her mistakes? Whenever a spell failed, she'd avoided ever repeating it. How many opportunities had she lost to practice at getting better at her craft?

"You have given me much to think about," she said.

"Good," Beryl replied. She hesitated and then gently touched her arm. "Your uncle told me about your injury but not how it happened."

"I was shot," Amity said.

"By a longbow?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"No matter. You are all healed now?"

She nodded and rubbed her arm. This was the first time she hadn't thought about Duncan all day.

"Did you see who it was that shot you?" Beryl asked.

"Yes. He was very kind. He bandaged me and even gave me a ride home."

"You were not angry he hurt you?"

"It was an accident. Not his fault."

"Caring of others *and* forgiving? How is it that such a lovely girl as you remains unmarried?"

Amity looked away and shrugged. "I have my uncle to care for. I do not need anyone else in my life."

Or so she'd thought, until she met Duncan. When he dropped her off at her cottage, she had leaned against her front door wanting to prolong the end of the evening despite the pain in her arm. And then he'd kissed her.

"You don't need to explain," Beryl murmured.

Amity came back to the present with a start, finding Beryl's hand touching her forehead gently, leaving a tingling behind when she withdrew. The woman dropped her arm, a secret amusement playing about her lips.

How rude she must think her, going off into a dream while in the middle of a conversation. She felt her cheeks heat in embarrassment and Beryl chuckled.

"You're a sweet child," she said. "Now I must return to the kitchen to check on the evening meal's progress. Take your time and think about what to do on the morrow. I know in my heart you will come to the right decision."

Suddenly, Beryl looked over her shoulder, as if startled by a sound and then back at Amity. That strange smile was on her face again. Amity looked past Beryl's shoulder to see what had caught her attention but all was darkness.

"Go for a walk in that direction." Beryl pointed. "A lovely hedge surrounds a rose garden. You'll find places to sit and think. It's secluded, people rarely go there so late at night. I'll come and fetch you when your meal is ready."

Amity wandered in the direction Beryl indicated. She was well inside the maze when she heard voices. Uncertain what to do, she paused. Should she retreat, return to the kitchen? The cook had said no one would disturb her here while she gathered her thoughts about the upcoming blessing while waiting for her supper.

"Damn my mother," a man muttered.

She knew that voice! Duncan? Her heart hammered in a mixture of alarm and pleasure. Should she leave? If she stayed, she would be eavesdropping. And he sounded angry. That anger could easily turn to her if he found her here, uninvited, unexpected, unwanted.

His companion replied in a quiet tone, so she didn't catch the words. She picked up her skirt and took a tentative step toward the exit. Her foot snapped a twig.

"Who's there?" Duncan called.

Panicked, she tugged up her skirts and sprinted for the opening. Just as she turned the corner something heavy landed on her back and crashed her to the ground. She lay winded. Someone grabbed her arm and turned her around. She lay on her back staring up into Duncan's face, inches above hers.

"Amity?"

* * * *

Duncan was stunned to find he'd brought down his wood nymph, for the second time in as many months. He touched her face; unable to believe she was actually here. How many times had he dreamed of going in search of her? To see if she was well, to seek an excuse to hold her again? She looked as beautiful as ever. Hair dark as midnight, eyes green as Emerset's once lush forests.

"You know this woman?" his friend Hugh asked.

The query brought him back and he realized he still lay over Amity on the ground. He stayed still, enjoying having her in his arms. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come with my uncle for the festivities." She glanced at his friend and back at him. "I'm sorry to disturb you. The cook suggested I come here for a walk. I didn't mean to intrude."

"The cook?" Could she mean who he thought she meant?

She nodded. "Her name's Beryl. But please, don't be angry with her. She assumed no one would be here."

Duncan frowned. He wasn't so sure of that. Trust Beryl to interfere in his life. Again! He jumped up and extended his hand down to help Amity up. Just as she reached for him, he changed his mind and clasped her by her waist and stood her up in one swift move, drawing her close, inhaling her scent. She reminded him of lavender and roses and he wanted nothing more than to hold her like this for all eternity.

"I see you have matters well in hand," Hugh said. "I'll leave you to it then." He sauntered away with a backward smile.

Belatedly, Duncan brushed the dirt off Amity's dress. When she would have moved away, he held her in place while he ran his palm down the length of her left arm. "You've healed?"

She nodded. Her hair brushed his chin. He wanted to lower her sleeve and see for himself if his misguided arrow had left a scar. And if so, kiss the mark and beg her forgiveness. But first, he must know what connection she had to the 'cook.'

He stepped back. "How well do you know Beryl?"

"I just met her today, but I think my uncle and she are friends. Do you know her? Well, of course you must. You're probably very familiar with court and those who live here."

Duncan watched her flounder for words. She was nervous. To be with him? Not enough to run away though. But if she found out who he really was, would it send her scurrying from him in fear? That he could not allow. He'd intended to find her

after the ceremonies tomorrow. But to have her here, tonight, that was worth a summer's rainfall.

"Are you looking forward to the festivities?" he asked.

She looked away.

"What's wrong?" Had someone upset her? His hands clenched. He would have them thrown in the dungeon.

"If truth be known, Duncan, and you will laugh when you hear this, I think I came here hoping to see you. You must think me very silly, but I missed you after you left."

"I wanted to return. But I couldn't."

"Yes, I understand."

He could tell she didn't. Yet, how could he explain that he was on the brink of a major change in the kingdom of Emerset, and if he'd approached her, she would have been drawn into the whirlwind of his life? She'd been injured, because of him, and the last thing she'd needed was the inevitable future he was spinning toward.

"You were arguing with your friend when I came up," she said. "Is something wrong? May I help?"

"The planned festivities have me twisting in the wind."

"What about it upsets you? It's meant to be a time of celebration. We're about to crown our new king."

Duncan stared at her, not sure how to explain his problem.

"Are ... are you not pleased about the coronation ceremony?"

"The coronation is necessary. It's the blessing that's a sham."

* * * *

Amity shrank within herself and took a step back. "You don't approve of the blessing?" The one she had been asked to perform?

"How can I?" Duncan strode around the enclosure swiping at the bushes. "Emerset is in the middle of a drought. Villagers are starving. Daily people leave the kingdom in droves. We need a plan to sustain our farmers, not delude them with false superstitious hope."

Her throat tightened and it became difficult to swallow.

"Worst of all, it's the queen herself who insists on perpetrating this abomination on her people."

Amity reached behind her to touch a bench and sat before her shaking legs gave way. "Is the prince also against this blessing?"

Duncan came to stand before her, fists resting on his hips, legs spread wide. "The prince, in this instance, is nothing but a puppet. Do you really think he has any say on how these proceedings are planned? If he had his way, the priest would crown him in private. The food and drink planned for the festivities would be distributed among the poor of Emerset. And he would have the charlatan who makes false promises to rid his land of drought in exchange for blood money fed to the wolves, one torn piece at a time."

Amity stared at her clasped hands, her heart beating faster than a jackrabbit escaping a predator. She worried she would pass out at any moment from lack of air.

Duncan knelt in front of her. "I'm sorry, Amity. I've frightened you with my temper. Please say you forgive me?"

She laid a shaking palm on his cheek. He seemed so distressed to have upset her. What a strange and complex man he was. "You could never frighten me." She loved him.

He pressed his cheek into her palm and a smile played about his mouth. "I wouldn't really feed him to the wolves you know. It was just a saying." The smile disappeared. "But tomorrow, after he does the blessing, I will be king and I will ensure the cold hearted cheat is banned from entering my kingdom ever again."

"Your ... *your* kingdom?" The pieces of the conversation finally fell into place. She jumped up and backed away.

"Please don't be frightened." Duncan drew her to him and lowered his head to kiss her.

Amity's body shuddered in sweet reaction. She was in love with the prince! The one who wanted to feed her to the wolves?

"I didn't tell you before because of all the fuss that's happening right now. I wanted to wait until after the coronation to present you to court as my wife and my queen."

"I must leave."

"Amity, I love you." He held onto her hands when she would have run away.

"You don't even know me, Your Highness."

"I know that you're brave. No other woman I know would have taken that arrow in her arm and not complained or cried. And I know that you're faithful. You have watched over your uncle. That you're strong willed and like to walk alone in the woods when you're troubled. Which, by the way, you will never do again, not without me by your side. And I know that

when I hold you in my arms, like this, I feel complete." He kissed her then with a passion that warmed her trembling heart. "You belong with me, my love, and after tomorrow, we will never be parted again."

* * * *

The next morning seemed the longest morning of her life as Amity waited to enter the area where the blessing was to take place. Her uncle motioned her forward. The raised stage was set up in the courtyard. Every spare inch was packed with people, young and old, all sizes and shapes. All looking hopeful.

Right up the front, next to Beryl, who was dressed in royal robes instead of a serviceable gown and apron, stood Duncan. He had on a purple and gold tunic and a jeweled crown on his head. His arms were crossed and he wore an angry frown.

Duncan glanced around him. The coronation was over and now the blessing was about to begin and still Amity hadn't arrived. Maybe she had changed her mind about coming to the blessing. Good. Perhaps, unlike his mother, his future wife had more sense than to believe in this tomfoolery.

The sorceress, dressed all in black and wearing a veil, approached center stage. He hadn't expected a female mage. He strode forward lifting up a large plant in a pot he'd brought with him specifically for this ceremony. He plunked in at her feet with a thump, enjoying her surprise.

She curtsied, sinking to the floor in a graceful gesture.

"Woman, you should be ashamed of yourself, trying to trick my people into believing in magic." He turned to face the

crowd and raised his voice. "From this day forward, *I* will be your king."

A loud and vibrant cheer went up and Duncan held up his hands for silence. "My mother has acted as queen these many years and today has passed to me the right to rule this land. As your new king, I will not permit anyone to believe that magic is the answer to your problems. Hard work, new methods of farming and persistence will see our future bright and glorious once more."

The cheer this time was a bit more subdued. Everyone glanced from the silent mage to their new monarch.

"You have come to see this *person* rid our land of drought, but I shall prove to you that only time can rid us of it."

He picked up the pot and held it high. A dried droopy stalk flopped over from its center. "This woman cannot make this plant grow. Only water and sunlight and daily care can do that." He dropped the pot. It crashed sideways and shattered.

To the accompanying gasp of hundreds of people, parched dried soil spilled across the mage's feet.

"So, you can work magic?" Duncan asked. "Then do so. Carry out your *blessing* on this plant and we will all see how talented you really are."

Amity knelt and touched the dry compact soil that powdered when her fingers brushed it. She closed her eyes and sought the lifeblood of the land. It was weak and hungry. She stood up and raised her hand, allowing a handful of soil to trickle through her fingers. She kicked off her sandals and trod forward until her toes dug into the spilt soil.

She shivered. All her life she'd hated casting spells, the sensation of power surging into her body. The world would change, turn from dark to bright then dark again and her perceptions would swing wild. And more often than not, the spell would go horrendously wrong.

She would never have agreed this morning to do this blessing if her uncle had not begged her last night. He'd said that, considering the suffering of the people of Emerset, even a failure would be better than not trying at all.

Amity straightened, better to bear the blow to come, and spread her arms wide open. She was ready, willing, wanting to experience the pleasures her mother promised could come with working good, proper magic. Her bare toes curled into the soil.

Come, she said, half afraid, half excited. I'm here. Take me. I want to serve you. I am willing to serve you.

The sensation began in the soles of her feet. Fear leaped like a flame through her legs and up the center of her spine churning familiar thoughts of mistakes, humiliations and dread that she was not good enough.

She took a deep breath and blew out the flame of worry. Today, there was no room for mistakes. The biggest one was behind her. She had lied to Duncan and there was no taking that back. As for humiliation, it had always been an integral part of her life and she lowered her barriers and accepted it with love. Dread scampered in retreat from the dawning of that power.

Let it become you, and you will become the power, her mother had taught her.

A Blessing In Disguise
by Shereen Vedam

Her faith blossomed and filled her with confidence. No harm would spread to her, or from her. She opened her toes and heat swept up her calves, torched through her thighs and shot up her body. She became a vessel for the earth's gift.

Amity shivered. All the hopes of her world filled her and she spun to the heavens on wings of courage. Her world turned light and dark and then light again and she saw that all in her was good.

Her focus returned to the earth and she channeled the gift back through her body and her legs to the hungry soil at her feet. It suckled the liquid fires like a newborn babe taking its first drink.

She came back to the present, mind light and dizzy. She'd done it. She had blessed the land and it would be fruitful. The wind stirred around her, enveloped her in its grateful embrace and released her.

She lowered her arms, opened her eyes to look directly at Duncan. "It is done."

* * * *

Duncan stared at the mage, puzzled. She must be good. For a moment, when her arms rose, he could have sworn he felt light shoot up beside him. But that could not be. It must have been a trick of the sunlight. And her suggestion that she was performing magic. Yet, he couldn't help but check the soil at her feet and deep within him, a hope stirred that she *had* made a blessing. That the land would be cured of the drought. Could his people's suffering be over?

The sight of the dry scattered soil crashed his hope and spurred his anger. Not only had she fooled his people, but also at the last, she had managed to fool him.

"Charlatan," he called and pointed at the ground.

The woman looked at him as if stunned by the accusation. Her glance fell to the ground and slowly she bent down to touch the soil as if she couldn't believe the blessing had not worked.

Amity picked up a handful of soil and let it run through her fingers. It was fertile again. And in the air around her she felt the stirrings of rain. She brushed off her hands and stood up. "You are mistaken, Your Highness," she said in a soft voice. "The blessing did work."

"Still you will not admit to your lies?"

The crowd booed her and egged on their king to get rid of the pretender mage.

"Son." Beryl climbed up onto the stage. "Be patient. These things take time."

"No mother. This has gone far enough. It has brought people far and wide; neglecting the land they are so concerned about to listen to nothing but foolishness. This ends now."

Duncan approached the woman in black. "You will not practice these lies in my kingdom again. And you will not hide behind the trappings of your trade." With those words, he ripped the dark veil from her face.

Amity reared back, her hands covering her face and Duncan's heart crashed against his chest.

"That's enough." Beryl placed herself between him and Amity.

Duncan took a deep breath as the meaning of this revelation sank into his mind. Amity. She'd lied to him. About who she was. Had she lied about loving him as well? His memory churned up the knowledge that she'd never actually said she loved him. It was he who had laid his heart at her feet. And she'd trampled it the way she did that soil while conducting her so called *blessing*.

She'd listened to him rave on about how much he hated this ceremony and all the while she'd been laughing inside knowing he had no choice but to let the event go ahead because his mother wanted it so much.

"I told you last night that the person who conducted the blessing would be banished from Emerset. Did you think that your feigning a relationship with me would save you?"

Amity looked up into his eyes. His anger masked a deep hurt and sense of betrayal. She bent her head and whispered, "No. What we shared was my saying goodbye to you."

He stared at her in silence and then said, "I want you out of my kingdom by night fall."

"Duncan, no," Beryl said. "You cannot do this."

"Yes, I can, Madam. I'm now king and what I say is your command."

Beryl stood with her arm around Amity's shoulder as he strode away.

"Well," the former queen said, "I've wanted him to have the audacity to stand up to me for a long while, but now that he has, I don't believe I like it one bit."

Amity put her hand to her mouth to stop the hysterical laughter that erupted. She knew if she let it out, tears would soon follow. And she had a long way to travel before she could allow that emotional release to take place.

* * * *

A week later, Duncan stood in the open back doorway of the keep and watched his mother work a row of plants, clipping dead leaves, pulling weeds, checking for new growth. The day he lost Amity, he had also, it seemed, lost his mother.

It hurt to think that he'd disappointed the queen. He loved her deeply, admired her. She had been the one constant in his life after his father's death. She believed in him and stood by him through every difficult decision he'd made as he grew up. He wondered if he'd come looking for Beryl now because he wanted her companionship back or because he wanted her to talk him into going after Amity.

He had slept little since Amity left the castle. By sunset she had disappeared into the dark void as quietly as she'd appeared in the garden the night before his coronation. There had been no cries for mercy, no pleading with him to reconsider his decision, and no insistence that she loved him.

It was that last bit that hurt the most.

If she truly cared for him, why did she not fight to keep him? Tell him that she loved him? He'd been plain enough about how he felt. Yet she'd been reticent in her words.

But not in her action.

She had kissed him as ardently as ever he kissed her. When he touched her, her body trembled. And her eyes surely told him that she loved him a hundred times. But never in spoken words, not even after he'd declared his feelings.

Why?

Beryl moved onto another row and Duncan kept pace with her two rows down. If Amity were a fake mage, would she not have used words of love to convince him to be more lenient with her? And why bother to do the blessing in the first place once she knew he meant to banish the one who performed it? Was she so poor that she needed the money his mother paid for the ceremony? He'd offered Amity his kingdom and she chose his mother's payment over that?

"How much?" he asked. "How much did you pay her?"

His mother did not respond. He was about to give up hope that she would ever speak to him again when she said, "I gave her a special dinner. Her uncle said that she likes lamb stew, so I made her the one you like so much, spiced with my fresh herbs."

He stood flabbergasted. Her mother paid for Amity's services with a serving of lamb stew?

"She loves me," he said. Why else would she not tell him about the blessing? She was trying to spare his feelings once he found out she was the mage who was to perform the ceremony.

Beryl straightened and with a hand to her lower back stretched her spine. "Those are the first sensible words you've spoken in a week. Well, don't just stand there, go find her and bring her home."

"But how, mother?" Duncan climbed over the row of lettuce till just one row of plants separated them. "I ordered her to leave Emerset. She's not at her home."

He gave her a side-glance and said softly, "I checked her uncle's cottage two days ago."

Beryl's eyebrow rose.

"She might have needed supplies for her travel," he said, sounding more defensive than he liked. "Since I'm the one who ordered her departure, I thought I should at least provide for that. And she's just recovered from her wound. I thought she might beg me for more time to pack and ready for her journey." He made another circuit of the beets. "None of the posts around our perimeters have reported seeing her pass. They have orders to report the moment they spot her."

He halted before his mother his shoulders slumped. "She's gone and I have no way to find her."

"You know as well as I, that is not true." Beryl picked up her basket of vegetables and retreated to the castle.

Duncan watched her walk away in frustration. His mother insisted that magic was real. That the reason these crops fared so well was due to her Elven magic and that his father had died because of an evil spell, and not because his heart gave out after a fight with his son.

More to the point, since Duncan was born of her, she insisted that magic had been bred into Duncan as well. Even after Amity's spell failed in front of every eye, his mother still refused to admit that sorcery was merely a superstition of the weak-minded.

Except, his mother was not weak in any respect.

Could there be something to her belief? Perhaps magic did exist but few could wield it well. He crouched down and touched the large stalked leaf of a plant with tiny white flowers. He'd assumed this garden did well because of the servants who tended to its care. But now he thought of it, few servants came this way. Whenever he rode through this part of the castle grounds, it was usually just his mother who roamed among the rows.

If magic was real, could he too have the ability to work it? And if so, of what type? The few things he was naturally good at were tracking and hunting and he was a good shot with the longbow. That reminded him of his first encounter with Amity.

He'd been tracking a buck all morning and when he finally spotted it, he took aim and let fly his arrow. But he'd brought Amity down instead. He'd been drawn to the woods she strolled through. It was not his usual hunting grounds. Had he, even back then, used his special senses to seek her out?

Duncan closed his eyes and pulled Amity's image into his mind. It came swiftly, her dark hair and tender eyes stirring his heart with sweet sorrow. When he opened his eyes, he realized he was pacing toward the east, his legs and body moving of their own accord.

Just before he left the castle, his mother gave him something to give to Amity. The sight of it made him smile and shout with joy.

* * * *

Amity covered her uncle with a blanket. He'd insisted on traveling with her when she left Emerset. After a hard day of

walking, bone tired, he slept soundly. She walked to a nearby stream where the streambed overflowed with clear water and the edges were lush with greenery. In fact, through most of their travel, she'd noticed that the ground cover was thicker than at home. If only her spell had worked. At least then her banishment would mean something.

She'd been so sure it had worked. Yet, no rain had fallen and the soil had remained barren as she left her village. She'd disappointed everyone. Duncan was right to make her leave. No one should play with peoples' hopes and dreams.

She determined that one day she would return to the kingdom of Emerset with the full knowledge of how to cure the fields and make them flourish as lushly as this streambed. She would do the next blessing quietly, when no one was around to witness the event. And leave again before anyone noticed. The villagers would attribute the event to a natural return to good times. Perhaps even praise Duncan for having faith in waiting out the bad years. That would make her happy.

The problem with her plan was that she couldn't understand what had gone wrong with her spell. Every time she tested the air or the soil as she traveled out of Emerset, it resounded back full of life and vitality.

Seated on the bank she cried out to the clouds, "Why do you not rain?"

"Perhaps because you are no longer in Emerset."

Amity jumped up, startled.

Duncan moved away from the tree that had hidden his arrival.

She sank to the ground and curtsied low, head bowed.
"Your Highness." What was he doing here?

He knelt before her and took her hands in his. "Forgive me?"

She raised her head at his words. "There's nothing to forgive." Her voice caught in her throat. Was Duncan really here, by her side? Or was this a dream? Had she fallen asleep by the streambed? "You had a right to banish me. I deceived you and all those people who came for a blessing."

A crooked smile tugged at his lips and Amity's heart skipped a beat. He brushed the side of her face and she leaned into the caress. "I have dreamt of you every night since you left."

"Duncan, I'm sorry for disappointing you."

"The only disappointment I will have is if you refuse to return to Emerset. My love, please come home? I love you."

"I love you, too, but I was afraid you would hate me for what I'd promised to do."

He kissed her before she could say more. The weight of him toppled her to the grass bed.

Duncan raised his head and chuckled. "Why is it that every time I come near you, you end up on the ground, hmm?"

She brushed back the hair that had fallen over his forehead. "Since each time it's resulted in my having you in my arms, I have no objections." Then she remembered what he'd said. "Duncan, what did you mean it's not raining because I'm not in Emerset?"

Between kissing her eyes, cheeks and neck he said, "I meant your spell took. It has been raining for the past two

days. My mother sent you the plant I threw at your feet. It is as tall as my steed and sprouting corn, all in one week."

"My blessing worked?" Amity said in wonder. And then forgot all about spell making and sorcery as Duncan showed her that the magical power coursing through her body was but a pinprick to the feelings he could generate with his well-aimed caresses and burning kisses.

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