



# Chapter 3

The reflection frowned back at Rose as she turned this way and that. Her room had become a battleground of feminine attire. She had changed her hairstyle at least three times already until she gave up and went with her signature ponytail. A pile of tested and discarded clothes lay at her feet. Makeup was scattered over her vanity. The latest contender was a pair of cuffed overall shorts and a frilled white blouse. It was cute, showed off her curves without trying, and could handle a fistfight if she really needed.

“It’s not a date,” she told herself, even as she carefully picked a pair of earrings. She had to keep repeating the phrase as she dabbed on her perfume (the same perfume Fox had once told her was his favorite) and tugged on white thigh-high stockings (she’d seen where Fox’s eyes had lingered in the past).

“What are you all dressed up for?” Cotton asked as he hopped into her room.

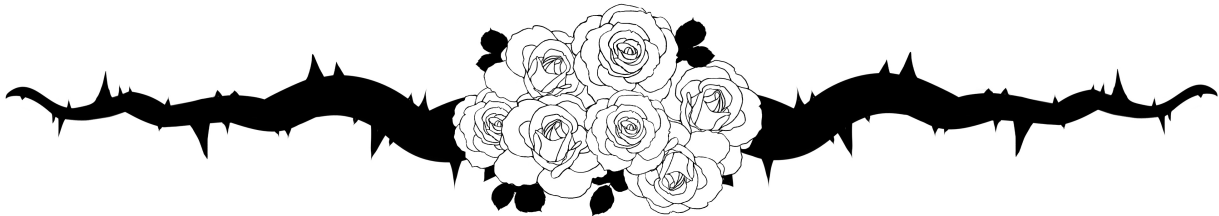
“I’m meeting someone for coffee.”

Cotton’s ears perked up and his nose twitched with interest. “A date?” he asked.

Rose felt her face flush. She shook her head, “no, just a casual meet-up.”

“With whom?”

“A friend,” she said, after a moment. She grabbed her purse off her bed. “Lunch is in the fridge. Don’t throw a party without me.”





The café Fox had suggested was one of Rose's favorite places in the whole city.

Small and intimate, with delicious drinks, the two of them spent a lot of weekends together there. Hours had been spent talking, laughing with just the two of them. Even if he had spent most of his time buried in his over-sized hoodie, she had always been able to pull a bright smile out of him. The image of him, lit by the afternoon sun, gaze cast far away had colored her memories with a peaceful glow. It was a safe place, somewhere that Rose loved. She wondered if Fox had picked it to make her feel comfortable. She wondered if it was as important to Fox as it was to her.

Any spiraling questions were blown away the moment she spotted Fox. He leaned casually against one of the outdoor tables. Long legs in tight black slacks were crossed at the ankles. The first three buttons of his white shirt were undone, and the sleeves were rolled up to the elbow to show off his forearms. He couldn't have looked more like a cologne advertisement if he tried.

"Hey," Fox greeted her, lips curled in a smirk. He had caught her staring.

Rose went red to her hairline. She cleared her throat and stepped up to him.

"Morning," she replied, pleased that her voice didn't crack.

Fox's eyes roamed over her. She could almost feel everywhere they looked. Warm electricity buzzed over her skin.

"You look good," he offered, finally.

"Th-thanks. You do too."

Fox's smirk widened, "thanks."

With an easy move, he pushed off the table to stand straight. Even without the heeled boots of his fighting uniform, he loomed over her. Had he always been so tall? In his Snapdragon days he had tended to slouch, but now he was straight-backed and confident. She had to do everything in her power to not stare at his exposed sternum.

Rose shook herself. There were more important things to focus on than Fox's chest! She clutched the strap of her purse in a white-knuckled grip.

"You wanted to talk?" she asked.

"Let's get a drink first. I did promise you one," Fox replied.

The other café guests seemed to share Rose's fixation with Fox. More than one café guest stared as Fox strolled in.

Rose did her best to ignore them. It was easier said than done, especially when the cashier turned an overly friendly smile onto Fox. She glowered at the menu and tried to ignore all the flirty questions they threw Fox's way.

"What name should I put the order under?" they asked.

"Fox," he answered.



“Fox,” they repeated, then added, with a purr to their words, “it suits you. Anything else?”

Unable to take it anymore, Rose slipped her arm around Fox’s. A curl of pleasure warmed her belly when the cashier’s expression immediately vanished behind professional neutrality. She pushed herself tight against his side under the guise of pointing to the small menu on the counter.

“Yes, I’d like the cotton candy latte, please,” she chirped with a too-wide smile.

The cashier blinked at her, then at Fox.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Fox’s face shift into surprise then into a private sort of pleasure. She felt him lean slightly into her. Suddenly it was difficult to breathe.

“And one cotton candy latte,” Fox confirmed.

Rose’s heart pounded in her ears. She mumbled her name to the cashier when asked.

As soon as Fox paid, Rose yanked herself away. She crossed her arms over her chest and followed Fox to the end of the bar to await their drinks. She avoided looking at him, finding her sneakers a lot more interesting. Guilt and shame ate at her. People were allowed to flirt with Fox. He deserved people who were interested. If she stepped in the way, she was just being selfish and rude. He didn’t belong to her, after all. Even if she did want a taste, at the very least.

“Rose,” Fox said, as if he’d already said it once before.

“Huh, what?”

A bright pink iced latte appeared in her vision, topped with whipped cream and festooned with sprinkles.

“Your drink, princess,” he teased.

Rose’s face went red. She quickly took the drink with thanks.

Fox watched her a moment then asked, “do you want to talk here? Or...?”

“Can we walk?” she asked.

“We can walk.”

The two of them left the café, neither gave the cashier a second look. Outside, in the warm spring air, she felt a little more stable. She sipped her latte, sugar bursting over her tongue.

“So, I can call you Fox?” she asked.

“I’d prefer if you did,” he answered.

“The cashier was right; it does suit you.”

Fox’s eyes slipped over to her, the corners crinkling with a secret amusement.

“You think so? Why’s that?”

“Well... You’re clever, you look good in red and black and sometimes you bark when you laugh,” Rose listed.

Fox snorted into his coffee.

“I do not!” he defended himself.

“You do, especially when a joke takes you by surprise.”

Fox proved her point with a bark of laughter. The sound warmed Rose to the core. She didn’t realize how much she had missed it. Her heart ached with both loss and reunion.

The conversation was easy and comfortable. Leisurely, they wound their way through the city, passed familiar haunts. Memories, teasing jokes and anecdotes were traded as freely as air. Fox might not be Rose’s Knight anymore, but he was still her friend in all the ways that mattered. Though, much like before he left, she desperately wished for more.

“I think we’ve avoided the topic long enough,” Fox announced. They had made a lazy circle back to the cafe. He pulled out a chair for her at one of the outdoor bistro tables.

“Topic? What topic?” Rose asked as she took her seat. She was suddenly worried Fox knew that she had been staring at his exposed forearms and might know how she had spent the first night after his return.

Fox took the seat across from her. His eyebrow arched with amusement.

“Ask me about why I left.”

Rose took a breath. She looked down at her, mostly empty coffee cup. She turned it slowly in her hands. To give herself more time, she took her straw between her lips. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked up the final drops of her drink. Once she swallowed, she licked her lips, determined to ask.

“Why did you have to turn to the Night Blossom?” Rose asked, more curious than demanding. “You could have stayed a Knight.”

“Knights are always women,” Fox answered. He sent her a smirk, adding, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m not a woman.”

Rose felt her face burn. Of course she had noticed. All she’d been able to do was notice. She covered up a response by sucking loudly at the dredges of her coffee and ice.

There was no specific rule that said Knights *had* to be women, but the long history seemed to heavily imply as much. Knights were chosen by the ancient spirits of magic, the same spirits that powered their wands and weapons.

“The Night Blossom let me keep my powers and be myself,” Fox added.

“I wouldn’t have stopped you from being yourself,” Rose defended. It pained her to think that Fox might have never been comfortable with her, had been afraid to talk to her about who he really was, how he truly felt.

“I tried, you know,” he went on.

“Tried?” Rose asked.

Fox nodded. His mouth was a thin line.

“I tried to be myself, even back then. Tried to be a man,” he clarified. “I cut my hair, wore sports bras or a binder to flatten my chest.”

Memories of Fox after his haircut sprang to mind. At the time Rose had thought it was so cute. An edgy look for an edgy girl. She had teased Fox for being such a tomboy. In her memory, Fox had laughed. Shame welled up in her throat, a vile acid as the memory shifted in context. That laugh had been strained, she could see that now. Had she truly been so wrapped in herself that she had missed every moment that Fox had cried out to truly be seen as himself?

“But every time I had to use my wand—no matter what I wanted to look like or who I wanted to be—I was dropped right back into being a girl. I argued with it. I even tried to break it.”

Rose sucked in a breath.

The wands were formidable artifacts even when not in use. Ancient magic protected them from damage.

Another memory invaded Rose’s mind. Fox had shown up at her house for their weekly movie night. His hand had been wrapped up tight in bandages. Nothing more than a bad fall while skateboarding, he had told her. She had let it go with a warning to be more careful. That had been the same night that she had spent hours bemoaning her huge essay due for one of her college classes, the same one with the classmate who kept asking her out even though she wasn’t interested.

So much of their time together had been spent focused on Rose and Rose alone. She wanted to cry. It hurt so much. She had been a terrible leader and even worse friend. Fox had been suffering but all she had done was think of herself.

“When that didn’t work, I went to the Garden itself.”

“You did?” Rose spluttered, shocked out of her wallowing.

What remained of The Garden’s royal palace was accessible only through Cotton. The tiny furball had the kingdom remnants in a safe dimension locked inside of a gem. Tucked safely inside the gem were the crumbling walls of Rose’s ancestral home, vast plots of magical flowers containing all the knowledge of the kingdom and, more importantly, her sleeping parents.

“I thought if I couldn’t convince my wand then I could go to the source,” Fox explained. “In retrospect, that was stupid. Your parents didn’t answer, the flowers refused to speak to me and their guardian scoffed at me.”

Rose winced. She knew from experience how reluctant the flowers could be when it came to conversation. More than once, she had visited the flowers to ask them questions. The plants could be touchy and stand-offish but not nearly as touchy as their guardian. Cotton’s twin, Nettle, stayed within the gem to watch over the sleeping royals. Unlike Cotton, Nettle always lived in his true form, a massive, horned creature with jet black fur and golden eyes. Nettle was dismissive and rarely entertained visitors.

Rose could imagine Nettle's anger at any of them asking to change their magic, their role within the kingdom.

Then a thought occurred to her and her empathy shifted into hurt.

"Wait," she started, leaning forward across the table. She did not miss the way Fox's eyes glanced downward. Her annoyance blocked any potential preening. She continued, "you went to Cotton first? *Cotton*?"

Cotton was a brat and a gossip. Not only that, he also did not play well with anyone who wasn't Rose. More than once, Camilla had complained about Cotton's attitude. As their only genuine link to The Garden, they had had no other choice than to put up with him. The idea that *Cotton* knew about Fox's hardships grated against Rose.

"You weren't home when I arrived," Fox answered, though he did have the grace to look a little sheepish.

Rose's lips went thin.

"You could have waited," she said.

"I could have," he said. "But after talking to Nettle, I... didn't want to stick around."

"So, you ran straight to the Night Blossom?" Her words came out more clipped than she meant. She couldn't help it. She was hurt. Nettle and Cotton had both known something was wrong with Fox but neither had told her. On top of that, Fox had run into the arms of their sworn enemy before ever trying to speak to her.

"Not straight away."

Rose raised an eyebrow at him, a silent gesture for him to continue.

"Do you remember that flytrap we fought?"

How could Rose forget? Half-woman, half-plant, the flytrap had managed to suck an entire mall under her spell. Ruby red lips had spit lies and hatred at the Knights. Fox and Hydrangea had both fallen under her poisonous vapor, cradled against her ample breasts while the others fought to free them.

The kiss Fox and the flytrap had shared was seared into Rose's memory.

"Yes, I remember," she grumbled.

"Well, while I was trapped, she spoke to me," Fox explained. He tapped his temple, "in here. She knew I was struggling and told me she could help me—"

"You were literally poisoned," Rose protested. "She was just telling you what you wanted to hear—"

"Is that so bad?" Fox snapped, unruffled for the first time. His hand was tight around his coffee cup.

Rose sat back in her seat, chastised.

Fox sighed, brushing his hand through his hair to recompose himself.

“It wasn’t just that. She showed me a way to make my powers my own instead of just being another tool for The Garden,” he went on. “She showed me what, *who*, I could really be.”

Words tangled up on Rose’s tongue. Each one fought to come out, but her voice was stuck.

“I could have helped,” she finally told the remains of her latte.

Fox sent her an unreadable look. After a moment he asked, “would you have found a way to stop the wand from forcing me into a skirt every time we transformed?”

“I would have tried.”

“And if you couldn’t fix it? What would you do then?”

Rose hesitated. She looked down at her drink, the whipped cream had melted into a strange sludge.

“Would you have let me go?”

Rose’s hands tightened. She squeezed her eyes shut. She had had to let go of Fox once already.

“I would,” she whispered, opening her eyes.

“You would,” he agreed, voice soft, “but the Kingdom wouldn’t have. The flytrap, the Night Blossom, showed me the truth.”

“Lied to you, you mean,” Rose sniped, nerves still raw.

Fox tilted his head. The expression on his face was like a teacher trying to be patient with a particularly trying student.

“You said you’d listen,” Fox reminded her.

“I’m listening, I’m listening,” Rose said, a little petulantly.

The huffed chuckle from Fox only made Rose feel a little better. She turned her cup in her hands while she waited for Fox to continue.

“I learned that The Night Blossom aren’t our true enemies. They aren’t invaders. They’re former citizens of The Garden.”

Rose nearly choked. She shot Fox a stunned look.

“Cotton told us that everyone in the Kingdom possesses magical powers, right? Some have more, or stronger powers, like you or the Knights,” Fox explained. “These powers are regulated to be in service of the Kingdom.”

The bitterness behind Fox’s words made Rose’s heart clench. She shook her head against the feeling and his words.

“But the Night Blossom only sends creatures. They aren’t humans, like we are,” she said.

Fox lifted his right hand—perfectly human and claw free.

“Not human anymore. They’re what happens when the magic goes haywire, when no one is there to help them, to guide them,” he said.

“Which is why powers are carefully regulated to prevent harm,” Rose said.

“Those regulations are bullshit,” Fox hissed, hand clenched into a fist. “They’re only in place to keep peasants or lesser powers in line.”

Rose blinked at the vitriol in Fox’s voice.

“That’s not a nice way to look at it,” Rose muttered, feeling a little foolish even as she spoke. She straightened and added, “it’s to ensure no one is using their magic for evil deeds. Or helping people when their magic spins dangerously out of control. That’s what the Knights are for.”

“And how, exactly, do they help? How do Knights stop the danger?”

“Well,” Rose started, then stopped. She realized she didn’t know. She had never seen what happened when magic first started spiraling. All their battles had been with creatures who were too far gone.

“They’re turned away,” Fox answered for her. “Left to be consumed until their only option is to turn to the Night Blossom.”

“Turning to the Night Blossom isn’t the answer,” Rose argued.

“Why not? If you were alone, scared and in pain, wouldn’t you take any help you could?”

“They should always come to the Knights first, come to me!”

“What if they tried? And they were turned away at the door? Like Nettle, the flowers, did to me.”

There was too much truth behind Fox’s words. Pressure built against Rose’s temples. She wished she had more coffee to drink, to take the dryness away from her tongue.

“You didn’t try to come to me,” Rose stated, head held high, brows pinched.

Fox shook his head, “it’s not about me right now. It’s about the citizens that your parents rejected, left to rot in the darkness and be consumed. They failed their people and reaped the consequences of their actions.”

“No, that can’t be true! My parents would do everything they could to protect their own citizens,” Rose retorted.

“The same parents who orphaned you?” Fox asked.

Rose sent him a glare, “I doubt they made that choice easily.”

The subject was sensitive to her. She had no memories of her parents or the halls she was supposed to be raised in. Her memories started the day she arrived at the orphanage. Found wandering the streets, wailing, as a five-year-old girl, she had been brought to their doorstep. She had spent her life bounced between foster homes wondering who her birth parents had been, where she had come from. It was both source of great pain and pride.

“What kind of parents willingly abandon their child?” Fox demanded, eyes flashing with anger.

“They were under attack! The Night Blossom would have killed them!” Rose argued.

“So, they threw their only child to the streets? They couldn’t even be bothered to send a good enough guardian to look after you. How long did it take Cotton to find you?” Fox scoffed. He shook his head and went on, “no, they just don’t want to take responsibility. They’re expecting you to clean up their mess.”

“I’m not cleaning up their mess, I’m making the kingdom safe—”

“By conveniently killing off all their former enemies! And they’ll conveniently wake up when you’re all done to reap the benefits of all your hard work,” Fox interrupted.

Rose bristled with anger. She shoved herself out of her seat. The chair wobbled dangerously.

“Don’t you dare talk about my parents, the King and Queen, like that,” she snapped.

They had all been told the same story. When the Night Blossom was defeated, the Garden Kingdom would be free to return, and the King and Queen would wake from their slumber. Rose would rejoin her parents, take her place as the princess and heir. The Knights would remain as her guardians, until they could take their place in the Council. The burden of fighting would be lifted from her shoulders. She would be free to be a normal princess, whatever that looked like in The Garden.

“Rose—” Fox started, half-standing to follow. “You’ve never even been to kingdom. It’s in another dimension, Rose. The Night Blossom isn’t the villain here; it’s your fucked up parents.”

“I didn’t come here to listen to you insult my parents,” Rose sniffed.

“They aren’t your parents!”

“Yes, they are! They’re the only family I have! They’re *all* I have,” Rose said, throat tight. Her eyes burned but she refused to cry. She turned on her heel, ready to flee home.

Fox’s hand caught Rose’s arm. She didn’t know when he had moved. All she knew was that his warm grip brought her stumbling into his embrace.

Protests died on her lips when his arm wrapped around her waist. Rose slotted perfectly against him, hip to chest. He held her like something precious. She was sure he could feel the rapid beat of her heart. The masculine scent of him, something like smoke and cinnamon, filled her nose. His breath ghosted over her lips. They were so close, closer than they had ever been outside of a battle.



Rose barely had to move to close the gap between them. Her eyes slipped down to his lips. She could practically taste Fox.

“Rose,” Fox breathed. Her name was a deep, rumbled prayer from his throat. “They aren’t all you have. I am here for you.”

“But you weren’t,” she said. “You left me.”

The words cut her lips as they escaped.

“I came back. I will *always* come back.”

Rose’s eyes lifted to meet his. Her throat was tight, tears threatened to spill down her cheeks. His lips were so close to hers. She could give in. She could cross the line.

“Let me be here for you,” he whispered, his head tilted ever so slightly, prepared to close the gap between them.

“I can’t,” she gasped, lower lip quivering.

“You can. All you have to do is say yes, Rose.”

Rose pulled away. Everything hurt too much. Their conversation had shaken her to her core, and she didn’t know what the truth was. It seemed far too easy to give in, to place her heart in the hands of her former Knight. All she had to do was say yes and she would leave her Knights, her Kingdom, her title all behind.

The tips of Fox’s fingers were cool against her heated skin as he brushed her hair behind her ear. His eyes, when she forced herself to meet them, burned bright and intense. She could not look away. She had to look away.

“Please, Rose,” Fox whispered.

The words broke her. She fled from the cafe. The tears that had been threatening to fall finally spilled down her cheeks. Wishes and prayers swirled at a dizzying speed through her mind. She wished she could go back in time, be there for Fox the way he had needed. She wished she could make Fox see that The Garden wasn’t his enemy. She wished she could take all the pain away, for all of them—herself, Fox, the Night Blossom.

More than anything, she wished Fox had tried to stop her one final time.

## To Be Continued...

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