

Chapter 6

Written by ACM – Illustrated by DCS

As soon as Rose felt stable enough to be around other humans, she called Marigold. Even if she couldn't be with Fox, there was no way she could tackle her problems alone. It helped that she and Marigold were close. She was friends with all of her Knights, but she had known Marigold the longest—before Fox, before the Garden, before any magical destiny.

Even with their shared history, Rose's palms were sweaty when she heard the familiar knock on her door. She took a deep breath and let Marigold in.

Marigold entered like a bright ray of sunshine and smelling like daisies. The first thing she did was pull Rose into a tight hug. She always hugged like it was the last time she was going to see someone and she needed to pour every ounce of love and care into the embrace. The top of her head brushed Rose's nose.

"Hey, girl!" Rose greeted.

"Hey, girl," Marigold replied with a beaming smile.

Released from the hug, Rose looked critically over her friend. Thankfully, she looked good. She wore a long colorful sundress in anticipation of warmer weather. Her box-braids were styled artfully into two huge buns on either side of her head.

"I can't remember the last time I was here," Marigold said, stepping out of her ballet flats.

Rose winced, "I know, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Marigold reassured her. "But you'll have to tell me exactly why you've been ghosting us since the cafe. Well... longer than that, but I'll settle for the last couple weeks."

Rose laughed, "deal."

Once snacks and drinks were gathered, the two of them plopped onto Rose's couch. Cotton appeared at the crinkle of a chip bag being opened. He turned huge, pleading eyes on them until Marigold gave in and let him settle on her lap. She scratched her pastel yellow nails through his fur.

"So... I've learned some things since the cafe," Rose started slowly.

Marigold looked over the forgotten journal, Nettle's book, the stack of CDs and Rose's pile of gel pens. She took a sip of her soda then turned fully to face Rose.

"Lay it on me."

And so, Rose did. Everything that she had kept hidden from the Knights, what she had learned about the Night Blossom and her ever developing situation with Fox spilled out of her. She had never been good at keeping secrets, there would be no stopping even if she wanted to. No matter how much it hurt or embarrassed her to admit out loud, she held nothing back.

Marigold listened in patient silence. Until Rose mentioned the park.

"Whoa, wait, wait," she interrupted, cheeks flushed. "You did *what* in the park?"

"I hadn't planned to!" Rose defended. "We were just going at it and one thing led to another and—"

"You gave him a blowjob?" Marigold's brows lifted, expression unimpressed. Clearly there were about one hundred other things she could think to do in a park.

"I, well—" Rose spluttered.

"Girl! He's, like, the enemy!"

"He's not!" she insisted. She sighed toward the ceiling. She set her soda on the coffee table. It was still full.

"It's complicated," she said.

"I'll say."

Rose rubbed her face, careful to avoid accidentally scrubbing her eyeliner off. She dropped her hands to her lap. Marigold waited while she composed herself.

"Fox is, honestly, the least complicated part about all of this," she said. "I know how I feel about him but I also know I can't be with him until I fix the Garden."

"Fix the Garden?" Marigold repeated. Her large beaded earrings clicked when she tilted her head with confusion.

Rose nodded. She looked at Cotton for help. His eyes were closed in bliss, far a mess from Marigold's nails.

"I spoke with Nettle," she started.



Then she fell into everything she had learned. The home they had all been fighting for wasn't as innocent and peaceful as they had been led to believe. Rose's own parents had opted to purge the Garden—destroying their own home and people instead of fixing even one mistake. With the last of their magic they cursed the same populace they had sworn to protect, twisting them into pained, monstrous shadows.

Rose barreled through her explanation, barely giving Marigold the chance to speak. She was afraid if she stopped or paused she'd never be able to continue. It helped that Marigold was the perfect audience. She gasped, cursed and looked appropriately scandalized at all the right moments. When Rose's explanation wound down, Marigold slumped back against the couch.

"Oh," she breathed.

"Yeah."

Rose finally took a sip of her soda. The bubbles burned slightly against her parched throat.

"Then... what are we supposed to do?" Marigold asked.

"Fix it," Rose answered instantly.

"How?"

That, Rose didn't have an answer for. Everything had changed so quickly, was still changing. Whenever she felt she started to have a handle on things, something new would appear to throw her back to square one.

The silence was broken when Marigold asked, "do you really think we can do anything?"

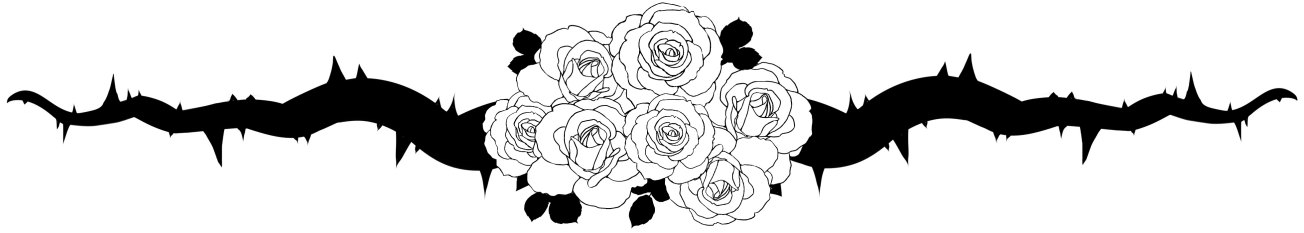
"What do you mean?"

"The Garden is an ancient kingdom. Someone must have tried to fix things in the past, right?"

Rose shifted uncomfortably. She didn't know which idea was worse, that their ancestors had known but done nothing or no one had ever known and had never tried to know. She took a large gulp of her soda as if to drown the thoughts.

"We still have to try," she said, finally. "Come out with me tonight. Help me find one of the Night Blossom creat—individuals. Let's see if we can talk to one."

Marigold looked skeptical but after a short pause, "well, I can't just let you go alone, can I?"



Later that night, the two of them climbed onto Marigold's extending wand to fly over the city. Rose's arms wrapped tight around Marigold's soft waist for safety and comfort. Their start had been delayed when Rose's wand hadn't responded to her commands right away. It had taken two tries before the wand listened and let her transform into her uniform.

Marigold had watched in concern while she struggled. No one mentioned that Fox had dealt with the same problem before he had left the group.

"I'm sure it's just because you're stressed. It'll be all right," Marigold had promised. "We'll use my wand to fly tonight."

The sun had started to set and lights were springing to life below them. The city never really slept but things did become calmer as the sun went to bed. Floating so far above the streets it was easy to pretend nothing was wrong.

"Where do you want to look first?" Marigold asked, breaking through Rose's thoughts.

"The park," Rose answered.

Marigold sent her a knowing look over her shoulder. Rose cleared her throat loudly. It and Marigold's giggles were whipped away by the wind.

They touched down in the park. Marigold flipped her wand and it shrank back into a more reasonable size.

At that time of the night, the park was quiet and empty. Rose hadn't been able to appreciate the calm tranquility last time. She had been too focused on Fox. The memories rushed to the surface. To avoid Marigold's amused smile, she turned her attention to the trees and bushes.

The chances were low that the dog was still there, but they didn't have anywhere else to start. The two of them split up to search. They checked under benches, behind trashcans, up in branches.

"Should we look somewhere else?" Marigold asked when her search of the slides turned up empty.

Rose opened her mouth to answer when a scratching sound caught her ear. She held a finger to her lips. The two of them turned toward the noises. A bush close to Marigold rustled ominously. The shadows seemed to stretch out from under it, as if testing the sidewalk.

A thin, bony paw took a tentative step into the light. A narrow snout followed, nose twitching in the night air.

Marigold's eyes widened. Rose's heart pounded with excitement. Both of them inched toward the creature.

As soon as it noticed them, it whipped back into the bushes. A warning hiss echoed from the shaking leaves.

"Wait, please, I just want to talk," Rose said. She glanced at Marigold and added, "put your wand away."

Marigold bit her lip but tucked her wand into her belt. She stayed back as Rose moved forward.

Undeterred, Rose slowly knelt with her hands raised to show she had no weapons. She hoped her face showed something kind, friendly. Not the like the nervous mess she felt inside.

Closer to the bush, her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She could see the solid edges of the Night Blossom creature. It was much smaller than she thought. Made out of sharp angles and thin limbs, it shivered even as its maw split to flash sharp, vibrant purple teeth at her. An eerie growl rolled from its throat.

It was scared. She had scared it. Her stomach squeezed uncomfortably with the thought.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

The dog's nose twitched. Its snout remained wrinkled in a snarl, but it didn't pull away.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't mean to scare you last time. I really just want to talk."

The long, wispy tail thrashed once, twice, then slowed. Slowly, the dog eased out of its defensive crouch. The fangs disappeared as the snarl dimmed.

"Do you know Fox?"

In the shadow of the bushes, it was hard to tell if the dog moved its head in a nod or not. Rose took it as a nod.

"I'm trying to help him," she went on. "Well, I'm trying to help all of you. May I help you?"

"Help..?"

Rose blinked. She shared a quick look of surprise with Marigold. The dog had spoken! It was raspy, the shadow of a normal voice, but still!

"Yes, I want to help!"

The dog quailed at her excitement. Those jewel-bright teeth reappeared.

"Sorry, sorry," Rose reassured quickly. "I've just... I didn't know you could talk."

"I... can," the dog wheezed.

Rose's smile was huge. She held her hand out to the dog. It tickled when it sniffed at her fingers. Her heart pounded with nerves, wondering if the teeth would come out. Seemingly satisfied,

the dog finally emerged from the bushes. It was hard to tell where shadow ended and solid body began. Rose wasn't even confident 'dog' was the right descriptor. It moved on four legs with a long, lanky body that could twist easily, but there weren't any cute floppy ears or fur for her to pet.

Probably for the best. She doubted it would appreciate that.

"How, how can I help?" Rose asked.

Its shadowy edges fluttered with an unreadable emotion. It lifted one delicate paw toward her.

"Help... curse," it said.

Rose's brows furrowed. Beside her, Marigold looked just as confused. Then it clicked. Night Blossom creatures were created when their magic went out of control. The Garden was supposed to help prevent that from happening. No one had been there for this shadow. It had slipped through the cracks. Rose swallowed against her emotions. She took the tiny paw in her hand. It was smoke and bone, cold and difficult to hold.

"Remove," it repeated.

Rose closed her eyes. Just beyond the shadow she could feel a thrum of magic. It felt a lot like her own, like her Knights, but instead of the steady warmth that she was used to, it jumped and thrashed wildly. It was sometimes bigger than she could hold and other times disappearing all together.

Pain lurched through Rose. It felt terrible, confusing and chaotic. All it wanted was stability, to feel normal. On instinct, Rose tucked herself around the jumbled magic. She soothed away the ache, calming the jagged sparks.

"Rose," Marigold gasped.

Rose's eyes opened. In her hand the tiny paw had started to change. The shadowed edges dragged back revealing a small black, furry foot. Then, slowly, the paw started to lengthen. The fur receded to reveal slender fingers. She felt as the ephemeral shadow solidified into something warm.



A sudden wave of dizziness crashed over her. She tipped to the side. Marigold caught her.

“Oh, sorry, I’ve never... done that before,” she said. She lifted her hand to keep going but she was shaking.

“Maybe we should stop,” Marigold suggested. “It was your first try. We can keep going later, right?”

The question was directed toward the dog.

“Yes, later.” Even its voice sounded more solid, more human. “Thank you. I... tell others.”

In a blink, the shadow-dog vanished once more. The two of them stared at where the dog had been, processing what had just transpired.

“You *can* help them,” Marigold whispered. The shock in her voice didn’t sting. Up until a few minutes ago, Rose didn’t think she would be able to do anything either.

“We can do this,” Rose said. She shifted in Marigold’s hold to meet her eyes. “We have to keep going.”

Marigold nodded, eyes wide, “yeah, yeah, we do.”

Finding another citizen of the Night Blossom was much easier said than done. The next few nights sent Rose and Marigold home empty-handed.

“Do you think the dog lied?” Marigold asked when yet another search seemed fruitless.

“No, no, I’m sure they told other Night Blossom people,” Rose said.

Though she couldn’t help but feel a little worried. It’s not like she could blame the Night Blossom. After all, who would suddenly trust their enemy just because one person said things were okay. To top it off, she hadn’t even been able to fully regulate the dog. She doubted one fresh paw would be enough to convince anyone.

“Princess?”

A nervous hiss pulled her from her thoughts. Rose whipped her head around toward the source.

There, tucked between a newspaper dispenser and an over-flowing trashcan was an unusually twisted shadow. Under the buzz of a nearby streetlight, a serpentine body uncoiled carefully. It reminded her of a snake. Huge, reflective eyes were trained on Rose.

“Hello,” Rose greeted, voice a little shaky. She had to admit to herself that a nervous tension locked her nerves when her eyes landed on the long pearlescent claws that trimmed its front feet. A dragon would be a better descriptor, she thought absently.

“You’re here...”

It spoke in the same painstaking way the dog had. The larger creatures the Knights had fought had no problem with speech. They had also appeared far more human. She didn’t know what caused the differences. Was it strength, will-power or time that dictated how human a Night Blossom citizen could remain? Would it affect how easily she could lift the curse? Would she have to go through each citizen to help them or was it something she could lift in one fell swoop? If she could answer just one of those things, she might be one step closer to fixing everything.

“I’m here. So is Knight Marigold.”

Those massive eyes turned toward Marigold. She offered a tiny wave in response.

“You two will...” It paused, seeming to recenter itself. “Help?”

“Yes, we’ll try,” Rose promised. She knelt, just like she had for the dog, and held her hands out.

The narrow body slithered forward until a scaly nose bumped against Rose’s fingers. Then it tumbled into her arms. She could feel strong muscles under the chilly shadows.

Marigold knelt beside her. She hesitated before she laid her hand over Rose’s.

"I think both of us should try," she suggested to Rose's questioning look. "You may be the Princess, but your Knights are supposed to help you, right?"

Rose's smile quivered with emotions. She swallowed and nodded.

"Ready?" she asked the snake-dragon.

It shivered in nervous, eager anticipation. It wanted help, had been searching for it for so long. Rose was not going to make it wait anymore.

Rose closed her eyes. Like before she searched for the brush of magic against her skin. It reminded her of a breeze but when she tried to follow it, the wind turned to something jagged and cruel. Her own magic, a steady warmth that lived deep in her core, reached out toward the pain. She felt Marigold's magic brush against her. The two of them blanketed over the flashing, static chaos.

The snake-dragon seemed to sag with relief. When Rose opened her eyes, she could see sapphire scales glint through the shadows. Rose's heart leapt at the flash of color. She and Marigold exchanged excited looks.

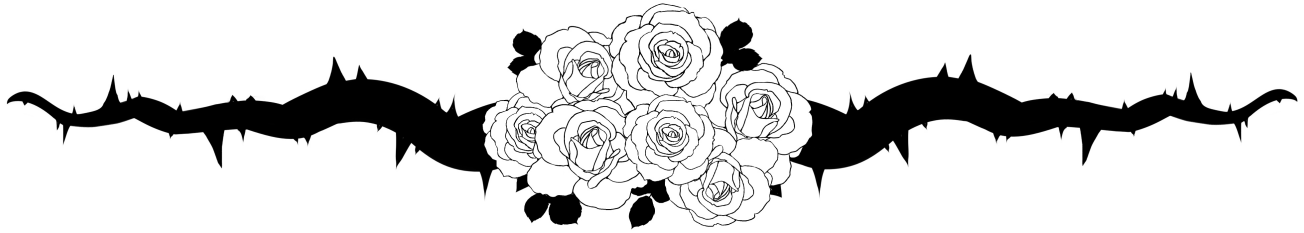
Dizziness threatened the edges of her mind. She shook it off, determined to continue. But she was interrupted again when a shivering burst of magic swept through the streets. Powerful and dangerous, it brought goosebumps to Rose's skin. The snake in her arms did its best to burrow deeper into her warmth.

"What was that?" Marigold asked, taking her hand away from the snake to grab her wand.

Whatever it was, it was nearby and it was powerful.

"I don't know," Rose said. She released the snake, urging it back into the shadows. "Go somewhere safe. I'll find you again."

"Be safe," it said.



There was another wave of magic; Rose and Marigold raced toward the wave of power. The magic was growing stronger. The very air seemed to shimmer with it. Whoever was fighting was powerful and Rose had a feeling she knew exactly who it was.

Unfortunately, her suspicions were confirmed when she and Marigold rounded the street corner. There in a wide boulevard, Hydrangea and Fox faced off against each other. Belle, bow clutched in her hands, stood a few feet back. She spotted them as soon as they arrived.

“Rose, Marigold!” Belle called.

Marigold and Rose raced over to the other Knight. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Fox’s head turn toward them. He did not have the chance to speak or move when Hydrangea caught him in another attack.

“Belle, what happened?” Rose asked as soon as they were by her side.

“Hydrangea and I were looking for Night Blossom creatures. We managed to corner a bunch when Fox appeared,” Belle explained. She gestured toward the far end of the boulevard.

Across the great divide, Rose stared at the swirling masses tucked behind Fox. What she had always taken as angry violence was actually fear. Shadowed limbs writhed not with hatred but with fear, a need to protect themselves. Her memories spun dizzily as all her encounters with the Night Blossom were thrown into a different light. Exiled and hunted, the remains of her people had been forced to do anything for survival. While she had been comfortable, safe, they had been trapped in darkness, searching for any scrap of kindness. Something they should have been able to find in their princess, their sworn protector.

Rose had only ever been their executioner. The Knights had only ever been their tormentors.

“Why are you cornering them?” she demanded. Her wand pulsed in her hand, seeming to warn her.

“What do you mean, why?” Belle’s face pinched in annoyed confusion. “You told Hydrangea to track them down. She asked me to help.”

“Yeah, so we could talk to them! Not kill them!”

An ear-shattering crash brought Rose’s attention around to the fight. Marigold brought her wand forward but didn’t move forward to join the fight. No one wanted to step between Hydrangea and Fox.

Hydrangea and Fox had always been Rose’s strongest Knights. Their determination to out-perform each other had often landed them both in precarious situations. The number of battles that had devolved into competition between them was well into double digits. Where Hydrangea had deadly precision and fearless speed, Fox thrived on sheer, often self-sacrificing, determination. He had always been a steady, unyielding force, only stopped when there were no more enemies or his own body gave up from exhaustion.

To see the two of them turned against each other was as awe-inspiring as it was terrible. Lance met sword repeatedly in a seemingly never-ending series of blows. The clang of their weapons was an echoing explosion of thunder that ricocheted around the boulevard. The terrified squeaks and yelps of Night Blossom creatures added to the cacophony.

Fox caught Hydrangea’s lance in his claws.

“I won’t go easy on you, Fox,” Hydrangea hissed.

“I didn’t expect you to.”



“After weeks of tricking and lying to our princess, I’ve been dying to face you,” she continued. There was something cruel and icy about her expression. It wasn’t one Rose had seen before. It made her stomach twist uncomfortably. “Our princess is too pure, too innocent. She should have put you down the second you stepped out of the shadows. I’m willing to take on the task to save her the trouble!”

Hydrangea yanked her lance free. Her lips curled in satisfaction as her blade tore a bloody path over his palm. An almost imperceptible wince crossed Fox’s face. Otherwise, his face was horribly blank, a hollowed-out shell that made Rose sick to see. He wasn’t even angry, just resigned to some silent fate. His sword struck out, just barely missing Hydrangea’s middle. She leapt back to avoid the blow. Her lance crackled with anger, blue lightning jumped around her.

The fight couldn’t end peacefully.

“Belle!” Hydrangea shouted. “Anytime now!”

Out of the corner of her eye, Belle’s arrow flared to life, notching on her bow with deadly aim. Her arm drew taut, ready to fire. Her lower lip trembled, betraying her hesitation.

“You’re just going to keep listening to her, Belle?” Fox asked, voice sharp with contempt.

Belle’s eyes squeezed shut, her hand tight around the shaft of her bow. Her throat worked around silent words of pain.

The archer had been close to Fox. She was caught between two people she cared deeply about. She had been hit hard by his disappearance; but where Rose had chosen to cling to her remaining friends like a bur, Belle had withdrawn. When she did resurface, she was quiet, unwilling to trade jokes like she used to. Only Marigold’s concentrated efforts had managed to draw Belle back.

When Belle opened her eyes, they were dark and dangerous. Her aim was trained on Fox’s open chest.

“You joined the Night Blossom,” she said.

“I had to, you know I had to.”

“They’re the enemy!” she tried again.

“Belle, would I lie to you?” Fox asked. “Have I ever lied to you?”

Rose could see the moment Belle started to waver. The point of her arrow tipped downward, away from Fox.

“Don’t listen to him,” Hydrangea interrupted. “He abandoned you, Belle. He abandoned all of us and betrayed the princess.”

Fox’s furious gaze snapped back to Hydrangea.

“What are you waiting for?” Hydrangea barked. “Fire at them!”

Distantly, Rose saw her own hand raise. She watched, in mute fascination, as her fingers wrapped around Belle’s wrist.

“Rose?” Belle asked, eyes wide with confusion.

“We have to help them,” Rose said.

Hydrangea gave a yell of frustration. A spark of lightning flicked toward them in her rage. Belle flinched and her arrow burst free.

“No!” Rose screamed.

Belle’s arrow pierced the crowd.

A pained screech broke through the stunned silence.

All at once the Night Blossom creatures flew into action. In a great, terrible wave of cold and darkness, they flooded toward the Knights. More arrows followed the first.

Marigold's wand flared to life. Her first blast knocked some of the Night Blossom creatures back. Her face was twisted with fear and regret.

"Stop, stop!" Rose cried. "Don't hurt them!"

"We have to defend ourselves!" Belle retorted.

Pain and fury surrounded Rose. Magic flashed in an array of colors around her. Shadows were torn apart before her eyes. She needed to do something. She needed to move. Her legs felt like lead. In the middle of it all she could just barely see Fox and Hydrangea falling into blows once more. She felt a scream pull itself from her throat when Hydrangea's lance ripped through Fox's side.

Rose wasn't entirely sure when she started moving. What she did know was that, suddenly, she was between Hydrangea and Fox.

The blow of Hydrangea's lance against Rose's wand threatened to rip her arms out of their sockets. Rose dug her heels in and remained standing. She wasn't as strong as Hydrangea, but it would take more than one hit to take her out.

"Rose?" Fox croaked.

Rose glanced at him over her shoulder. His face was pale. Blood oozed from the wound on his side into the darkness of his suit. Beyond him, suspicious, imploring eyes peered out of the shadows at her. Could she be trusted? They seemed to ask. Did it matter if she was keeping their real protector safe? The rest seemed to answer.

The last of her resolve crumpled. There was no version of her life that didn't have Fox in it.

"Princess?" Hydrangea demanded. She had leapt back as soon as she realized where her lance had landed. "What are you doing?"

"Protecting them," Rose said, voice far steadier than she felt. She glared at Hydrangea. She clutched her wand, demanding it to work. Pressured by her fury, her shield finally flared to life.

"They are betrayers, criminals, scum!" Hydrangea snarled.

An angry titter erupted behind Rose. Shadows flicked at the edge of her boots but went no further.

“We are the betrayers. We let them down and chased them into the shadows! Fox was the only one to see that!” Rose argued, her voice growing in volume and confidence. Something flickered over her shield but she ignored it. She felt Fox shift behind her, rising to his feet.

“They destroyed the Garden, *your* kingdom, and trapped your parents in eternal slumber,” Hydrangea shot back. She eyed Rose with obvious disgust, “you would do this to your own family? To the loyal people of your kingdom?”

“These *are* my people!”

“You are not the princess of the Garden,” Hydrangea roared. Her expression was thunderous. The edges of her figure started to spark and glow with an icy-blue haze. “If you will not protect the Garden, then I will!”

The butt of Hydrangea’s lance struck the ground. A blinding swirl of lightning enveloped Hydrangea.

A pulse thumped through Rose. It felt as if someone hooked her heart and was doing everything to rip it out. Her vision went fuzzy. She realized, with a gasp, that her magic was being pulled away. It was so different from when she had willingly given her power to the shadow-dog or the dragon. Her shield burned in her hands; she refused to let go.

“Rose? What is happening?” Fox asked, barely audible over the crackling and sparking. A solid, warm palm laid against Rose’s lower back. It was the only thing that kept her standing.

Rose couldn’t speak. Just as quickly as it had started, it ended.

The light faded to reveal Hydrangea. She still stood tall, face set with fury but she was not the same Knight she had been the second ago. A feathered crown ringed her head. With dawning horror, Rose realized what had happened.



“She—I, I’m not the princess anymore,” Rose gasped. She felt Fox recoil with shock.

“Stay strong,” Fox whispered. “I’m with you.”

Hydrangea’s lance snapped up, pointed directly at Rose. The lightning that had been sparking around Hydrangea was pulled into a hissing ball.

“Gea, don’t—!” Belle cried.

There was no chance of stopping Hydrangea. Her face was set. Her lips parted around a breath. Then...

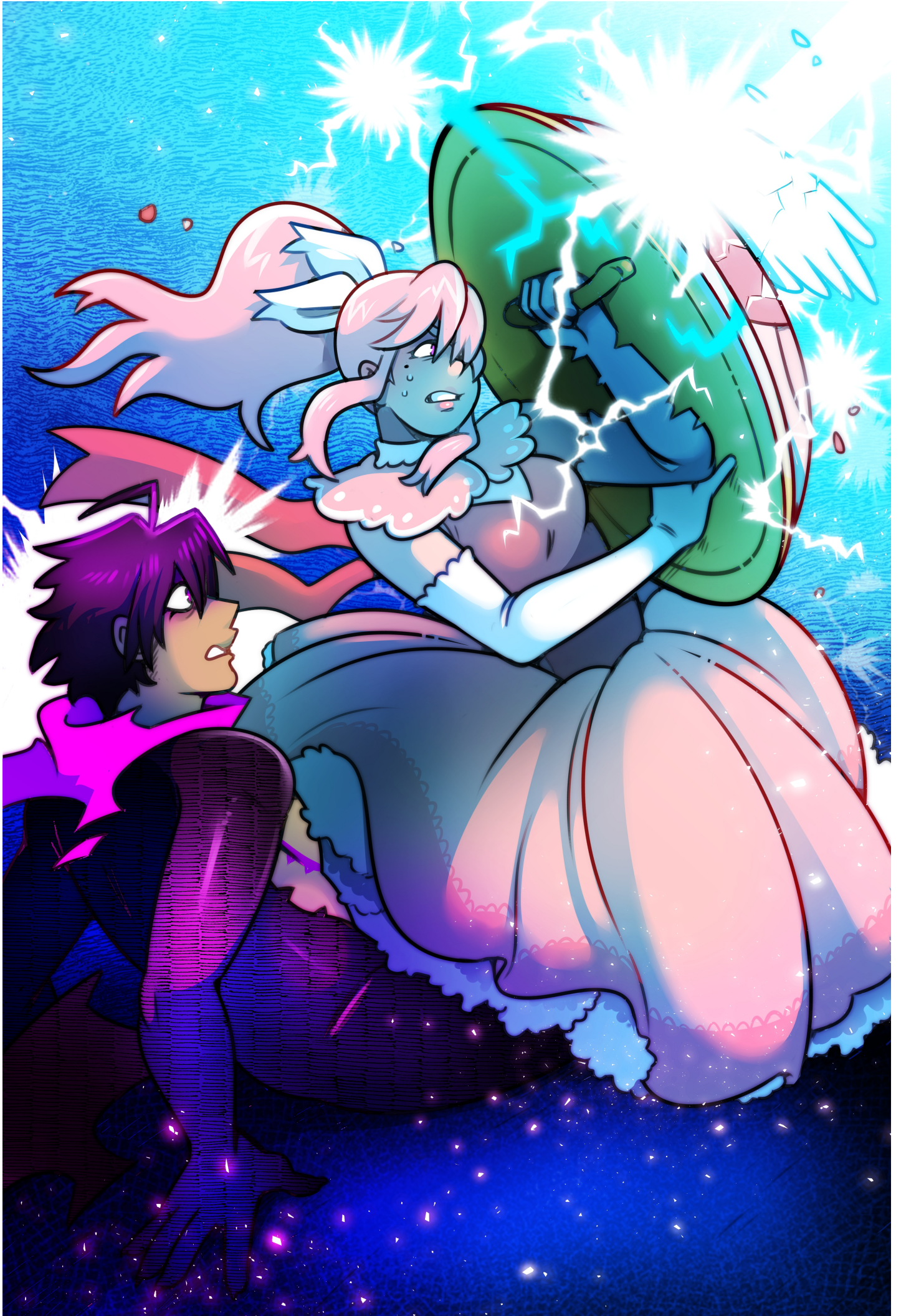
The ball slammed into Rose’s shield. Great arcing shards of lightning shattered around the edges, spearing into the Night Blossom creatures huddled behind her and Fox. She gritted her teeth against their wails. The edges of her vision swam alarmingly. She felt her feet slide, pushed back by the pressure. If she fell, Fox would be totally exposed. She urged more power into her shield, she needed to protect them, to protect Fox. He needed the chance, no matter how small, to help the creatures to safety.

“Rose, stop!” Fox shouted over the static chaos.

A great crack rang out. All the air from the alley seemed to be sucked down to the point where Hydrangea’s lightning met Rose’s shield. There was a split second when the world stood still, just long enough for Rose to see the split in her shield, the righteous fury on Hydrangea’s face and the utter horror taking over Belle and Marigold’s.

Rose’s heart thumbed once, twice and then... Her shield exploded.

Rose’s vision went black.



To Be Continued...

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