

Chapter 5

In the safe chambers tucked inside of Cotton's gem, her mother and father lay in magical slumber on a grand bed surrounded by vibrant blooms. The flowers' pollen kept them asleep until peace was returned to the Garden. The still blankness of their sleeping faces did not bring Rose the comfort they once had. Floating orbs of pale light cast their faces in grim relief.

It was a comfortable tomb.

"Are you sure you want to talk to Nettle?" Cotton asked.

"I'm sure," Rose repeated for the fifth time.

Cotton sat back on his haunches, long snout scrunched with distaste. Within the safe chambers inside the gem he was able to be in his true form. Much like Nettle, he was a massive beast. Unlike Nettle, he was a soft, creamy white. Nearly as tall as her shoulder, he reminded her of a giant rabbit. Or maybe a lion pretending to be a rabbit. His long ears were pinned back against the massive fluffy ruff of his neck. He tapped one of his huge back feet impatiently against the ground.

"Princess," Nettle greeted. He seemed to glide out of the shadows surrounding them. He did not look or sound surprised to see them.

"Nettle," Rose replied. Nervously, she rubbed her sweaty palms against her skirt. "May I ask you something?"

"Always. Your every wish is my command."

Cotton rolled his massive ruby eyes to the ceiling. Not for the first time, Rose wondered what had created the animosity between the siblings.

"Thank you. Um, well, can we go somewhere to sit? I don't..." Rose gestured vaguely toward her sleeping parents.

Nettle's gaze slid over to them then back to her. He bowed his head once. On silent paws, he led her out of the sleeping chamber.

Cotton stuck close enough to nearly trip her, as they wove through the torch lit marble corridors. She laid her hand on his shoulder, comforting both of them.

Nettle took them to the library. The chamber was so massive the walls vanished into the darkness, torches and orbs unable to reach every corner. Towering shelves were crammed with books. Whatever didn't fit was carefully stacked on every available surface. A surprisingly comfortable sofa and matching chairs were bunched around a large fireplace. The giant opening was dark, empty and cold.

Rose took a seat on the sofa.

Cotton huffed, too large to crawl up beside her. He opted to sit by her knee. His solid warmth calmed her.

Nettle sat in front of the fireplace across from them. His edges were uncomfortably hazy, undefined against the darkness.

"I know Foxglove came to speak with you," she started.

"Foxglove?" he asked.

Rose frowned at the question.

"Snapdragon," Cotton provided.

"The knight-turned-traitor," Nettle said.

"He isn't a traitor," Rose snapped.

Nettle's expression did not change. He was even worse than Hydrangea when it came to his loyalty to the Garden.

Rose buried a hand in Cotton's fur to stable herself. She took a breath.

"What did you discuss?" she asked.

"The adaptability of a knight's wand."

"And?"

"She wished to know if there was a way to change the Knight's uniform."

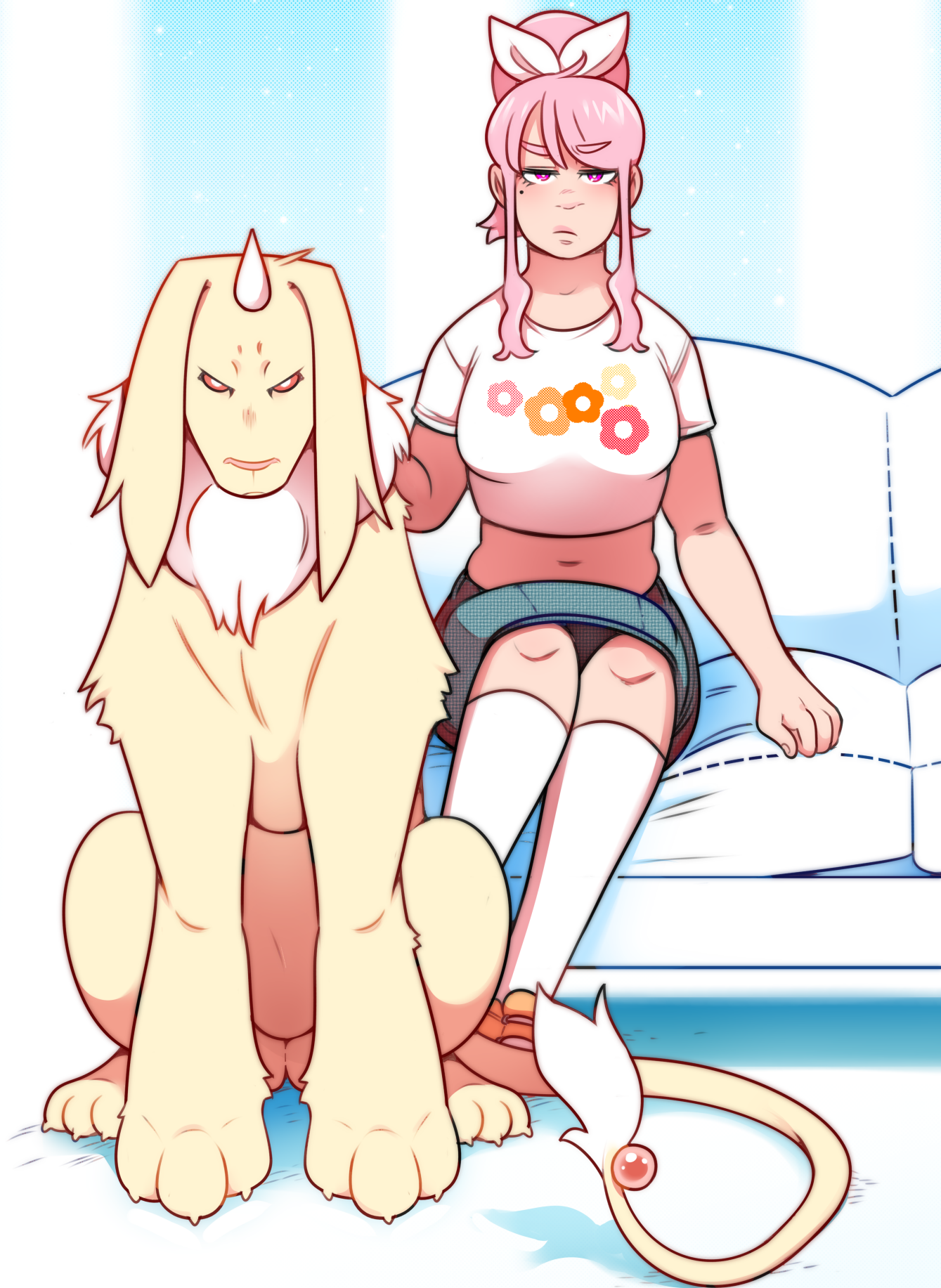
Rose recoiled at the wrong gender falling from Nettle's tongue. Her fingers tightened in Cotton's fur. If it hurt, he didn't say.

Nettle shook his head, unaware of her discomfort, "the Knight's uniform is ancient and sacred. There is no changing it just because of personal preference."

"There has never been a Knight in all of the Garden's history who wore pants?" Rose asked, waspish.

Nettle paused, thinking, "there was a Lady Hawthorne—"

"So it is possible to change the uniform," Rose interrupted. If she didn't cut in fast enough Nettle would launch into a history lecture. She didn't have time for that. Though she did put a pin in the name.



Nettle's snout closed and he nodded.

"Then why couldn't Fox change his?"

There was a long pause before Nettle answered, "the magic required to do so can be quite tiring for me."

"But it *is* possible," Rose pressed.

"Yes," he admitted.

"Then, what you really mean is that you didn't want to."

Nettle sniffed, lifting his head, "Snapdragon was already falling to the Night Blossom. I did not see the point in wasting my magic."

Against her leg, Rose felt Cotton stiffen.

"And you did not think to tell the Princess that one of her own Knights was in danger?" Cotton demanded. There was a low rumble of a growl behind his words.

"All conversations held within these chambers are private," Nettle said, impassive.

Cotton's snout raised in a snarl. Rose patted his back, soothing.

"What's done is done," she said, hoping she at least sounded like the peacemaker princess she was supposed to be. She didn't feel particularly peaceful at the moment.

Cotton sat back, though his long tail whipped furiously against the floor. If he could catch fire with his eyes alone, Nettle was in danger of being barbecued.

"I have other things to ask," Rose said. "It's about the Night Blossom."

Nettle stared at her. He did not prompt her to speak.

"I have heard that, that..." She shifted in her seat, uncomfortable. "Are the creatures from the Night Blossom former citizens of the Garden?"

"Yes."

The abrupt confirmation floored Rose. She hadn't expected Nettle to answer so quickly.

"Why, why didn't you tell us?" she wheezed.

"It was never asked."

If Rose's jaw tightened any further her teeth were in danger of breaking. She knew she could always trust him to tell the truth, almost to the point of pain, but right now she hated him for it.

"If they are citizens of the Garden," she grit out, "then we should have been trying to save them instead of killing them."

Nettle was difficult to read, but right at that moment Rose knew he looked down on her, judged her for her words.

"Those creatures turned to crime and let themselves be corrupted," he said, voice even, almost sneering, "they are not worthy of saving."

"How can you say that? They're your fellow citizens! Fox was one of your Knights," Rose implored.

"They are selfish betrayers." Nettle's words came out in a bark of anger. His eyes were bright with a righteous fury.

"They are my people!" Her shout echoed over the shelves, ringing with irritation. She felt Cotton shrink under her touch.

Nettle ducked his head, though the claws of his front paws flexed against the floor. He did not look up as she stood from the sofa. She looked down her nose at Nettle. She wasn't exactly the image of an imposing royal in her cropped baby tee and jean skort, but she did her best.

"I am the crown princess and protector of the Garden," she reminded him. Her voice came out strong, unwavering. She kept her eyes locked on him as she spoke, "I have a duty to save my people and that includes those that fell to the Night Blossom."

"Your parents sleep because of them," Nettle hissed. He looked up at her without raising his head. There was no deference in his gaze.

"And the Night Blossom suffers because of my parents," Rose shot back.

"They cannot wake if you do not destroy the Night Blossom."

Rose knew that. She had heard it over and over. She had never questioned it until that moment. As much as she wanted to meet her parents, hear their voices, she could not grant their freedom on the back of someone else's suffering.

"Then let them sleep."

Nettle sprang to his feet. Sparks of ice sparked around his paws. A chilly wind whipped around him before he could contain his rage.

"Let them sleep until I can figure out how to save the Garden *and* the Night Blossom," she explained. She softened her tone enough to add, "I must try. Grant me this, as your princess."

For a moment Rose thought Nettle might argue, maybe even attack her. Cotton must have thought so too. He planted himself in front of her, hackles raised against his brother.

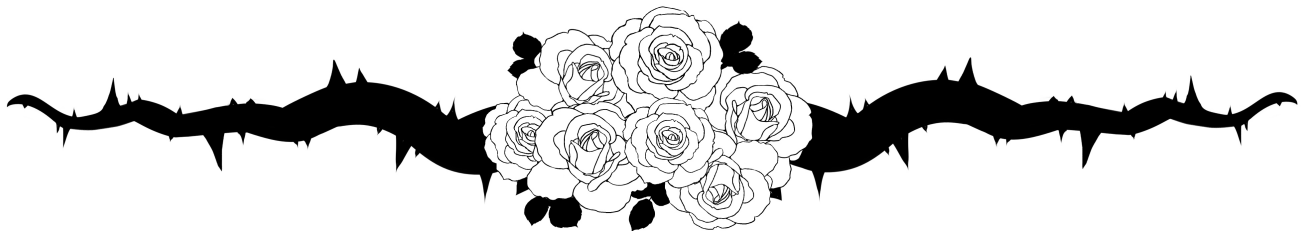
Slowly, the wind died down and the ice melted back into his paws. Nettle's expression soothed once more.

"I must remind you, the title of princess is only a temporary one."

Beside her Cotton sucked in an angry breath. Rose turned back to look at Nettle, brows furrowed. She didn't know what he meant but his tone chilled her.

"Are you threatening me, Nettle?" She asked, lightheaded with the thought.

Nettle merely blinked his huge blue eyes at her. He did not say another word. Nor did he stop her when she left.



On the floor beside her coffee table, Rose stared blankly at her notebook. The steady tap of her gel pen against the paper matched the back beat coming from her portable stereo. Pink glittery ink spelled out the words 'The Garden' in large bubble letters. She had circled it twice. The rest of the page was blank.

Ever since stepping out of Cotton's gem, her mind had buzzed with information. She thought that if she wrote it all down she could make sense of it. That was what Belle always did. Except she couldn't convince her hand to scribble out her thoughts. There was too much; she didn't know where to start.

Rose's eyes were trained, unblinkingly, on her stereo as if it would provide her guidance. All it did was diligently play the next song on the CD. The player was pink with silver accents, one speaker dented from when Marigold had accidentally dropped it during an outdoor picnic.

The memory of the stereo's fateful trip made her smile. It had been one of the last times she and all the Knights were together.

After a particularly hard battle, Marigold had suggested a picnic at the beach. While picking their way down the narrow trail that led to the water, Marigold had tripped. They had all watched with horror as the stereo flew from her hands. The lid popped open, a CD Rose had forgotten was inside flung itself free and huge D batteries sprang from the back. It bounced down the path until it vanished into the tall beach grass.

Fox and Belle diligently picked through the beach grass and brambles to find all the missing pieces. Hands scratched, they returned triumphant with a slightly worse for wear stereo. Marigold felt terrible, apologizing over and over. There had been no significant harm, apart from the dent and the fact that the battery door would only stay closed if stickers were liberally applied.

The rest of the day was spent playing in sea and sand.

Rose blinked herself back to reality.

Those days were gone and she didn't know if she'd ever experience them again. She wanted to bang her head against the coffee table. Instead, she lowered her pen, pushed herself to her feet and headed to her bedroom. If she could write, she might as well prepare for bed.

She left Cotton to sleep on the couch. Taking his full form always made him tired. He spent so much energy protecting the gem containing her parents that he didn't have a lot left over. She had promised to help find something alleviate his burden until the Garden was saved. Maybe find ways to boost his energy or, somehow, alleviate the burden of hiding her parents. All her ideas had fallen to the wayside, no further on helping him than she was in the bubble letters before her now.

Just another task she had failed to complete as his friend and Princess.

Guilt pricked painfully at her.

In her bathroom, she changed into her favorite pajamas. A matching pair of shorts and camisole made of petal pink satin trimmed with lace. Wearing them always made her feel like a princess, a little spoiled. The thought turned sour in her mouth.

It isn't fair, she thought as she spread paste on her toothbrush and jammed it into her mouth. *Why couldn't things go back to how they were?*

As soon as she thought it, she dismissed it. She couldn't force Fox back into a body that wasn't his. She couldn't wander around pretending there weren't people suffering because of her parents, her own actions. There was no going back, for any of them.

She scrubbed viciously at her teeth. If she couldn't save anyone, she could at least fight cavities!

A gentle knock at her bedroom window took her from the battle. She called her wand up and peeked out of her bathroom door.

The window was on the opposite end of her room, leading out to an ancient iron fire escape and the alleyway below. She always kept her window locked just in case an enemy felt brave. Through the glass she could make out a familiar form. Her heart leapt at the same time her stomach dropped.

Fox offered her a small wave.

How dare he give her such a cute, cheeky smile after the park! After not calling or texting for days! All her buzzing thoughts narrowed down to one topic: Fox. Fox dressed, not as a villain, but casually, like he was a normal boy visiting a normal girl. Toothbrush clenched between her teeth, she marched over to her window. She flipped the lock and flung it open.

“Waa aa oo ooing eere?” she demanded, though toothbrush and paste.

“I came to see you,” he answered, translating correctly.

It isn't fair, she thought again as he slipped in through her window.

No one should make climbing through a window look so easy. Or sexy. He didn't even bother to slip on one of the magazines scattered over the floor. She realized, suddenly, that Fox had never been in her room as himself. Certainly never in a black leather motorcycle jacket over a tight white tank top and even tighter black jeans.

Not fair.

“Aaybe I on't wan oo ee oo,” she huffed.

Fox couldn't translate that time. He tilted his head, brows furrowed in question. Then his lips quirked slightly in amusement. It looked too damn good on him.

Not fair!

“Can we talk?” he asked.

Rose opened her mouth, remembered her toothbrush, and stopped. She lifted a threatening finger, telling him to wait and stormed into her bathroom. Mouth rinsed, face dried, she hurried back to him. Hands on her hips, she faced Fox. She tried to not let the sweep of his gaze over her figure get to her. But it curled hot and satisfied in her belly.

“What is there to talk about?” she asked.

“A lot, I thought,” he said.

“Then talk. I want to go to bed.”

Rose's words came out sharp, a little cruel. She would feel bad later, but at the moment she was tired and hurting.

“Why did you leave immediately after? Why haven't you talked to me since?” he asked.

“You haven't talked to me either!” Rose retorted, defensive.

Fox's mouth worked uselessly for a moment. Then his jaw clicked shut. He turned his head to glare ruefully at her wall.

"I left because you clearly didn't want me there," she continued. Hands balled into fists at her sides, her eyes burned with unshed tears.

"Didn't want—?" he scoffed. "What makes you think I didn't want you there?"

Rose blinked, then glared and pointed a shaky, accusatory finger at him. "You dressed immediately," she barked. "You didn't say a word, just slipped back into that stupid, sexy outfit!"

"We were in a public park!"

"I know that!"

Really, she did. She had been all too aware that someone could find them at any second. The memory thrilled as much as it embarrassed her. To think she'd let herself go in such an open place! She shook her head.

"Even still, you didn't say anything! You wouldn't even look at me! And then you didn't text or call. Was I just a random hook up for you? Just someone to, to get your jollies off with?"

"Get my jollies—no, Rose," he tried.

Rose cut him off with a chop of her hand.

"You're so confusing! I don't know what I'm supposed to do with myself around you!"

Everything that she couldn't put to paper came tumbling out of her mouth. Her mind had been a mess since that day in the park—longer actually. Now there was an opening to let it all out. Tears spilled down her cheeks; she angrily wiped them away.

"You came back all powerful and glow-y and, and, *seductive*, talking about the Night Blossom and the Garden and how much you want me," she barreled on, not taking a breath. As she spoke, she paced the room. She was a tempest, raging against the calm stone of Fox. "Then I finally let myself give in and you, you—you didn't say a damn thing!"

"You didn't give me a second to try," Fox cut in.

Fox had waited until she paused, effectively cutting in before her next sentence could begin. She whirled on him. His face was tight, lips thin. She thought he would let her continue but then he blurted, "did you hate it?"

The question took Rose by surprise. Her expression shifted into confusion. Was that why he hadn't spoken to her? The very idea made Rose's head spin.

"What? No—"

"Then did it disgust you? Do *I* disgust you?"



The questions made Rose flinch. There was so much raw fear and anger buried in it. She wasn't the only one hurting, she could see that now. Every inch of her wanted to soothe it away. Just because she was angry didn't mean she wanted to see him in pain.

"No, Fox, you're, like, the hottest person I've ever seen!"

Fox straightened, arms crossed over his chest. There was a tic pulsing in his jaw. She knew what that face meant. He was at war with himself, between pleased at her words and wanting to remain angry. He was trying to school his expression back into something unaffected.

"Is... is that why you didn't talk to me? Did you think I hated you?"

Fox's fingers dug into his arms. If his jaw went any tighter he was at risk of breaking teeth.

"Fox, I loved it. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it," she admitted. Though she did not cross the physical divide between them, her tone did ease slightly. "But I did hate that you didn't say a damn thing. Not even right after!"

"You'll have to forgive me," he said, finally unclenching his jaw. "The woman I love had just sucked my dick! I didn't have the brainpower to talk."

Despite the sarcastic bite to his words, they sliced through the furious storm of Rose's mind. Her lips parted around a quiet, unknowable sound.

"Love? But then..." She stepped into his space, glaring up at him. "Then why didn't you call? Or text?"

Fox tried to avoid her gaze. It helped that he had some solid inches on her and could just look over her head when he wanted.

"I thought," he started, took a breath and tried again, "that you hated it."

"I just said I didn't hate it—"

"I know that *now*," he interrupted. Fox rubbed his face, brows pinched and eyes closed. The tic in his jaw was back. Slowly, he lowered his hand and opened his eyes, his gaze locking with hers. His face was so open, vulnerable. There was too much for her to read. "I didn't know that then. I thought it would be best to leave you alone for awhile," he explained.

"Why did you think that?"

Lips lifting a shaky smirk, he said, "y'know, in case you tried to come and kick my ass."

The attempt at humor pulled a watery laugh out of Rose. The fight, the anger, left her all at once. She stepped back and sank down on the edge of the bed. She was tired with relief.

"It's all too much," she told her knees. "I just want..."

The bed dipped beside her as Fox sat down. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him start to reach for her, stop and return his hands to his lap.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Rose shifted her feet, burying her toes in her fluffy pink rug. She twisted the hem of her camisole between her fingers.

"I want you," she admitted. She took in a shuddering breath. "But I also want everything to make sense. I want everyone to be safe."

"You can have all those things," he said.

Rose shook her head, "I can't. Not until I have everything figured out with the Garden and the Night Blossom."

Fox paused, then said, "that might never happen."

Rose's eyes squeezed shut. She breathed, "I know, I know, but I have to try. Right?"

When she lifted her head to look at Fox she found him watching her with a sad expression. Something in him was closing itself off. There was some private acceptance that made Rose's guts twist with fear.

It's not fair, she thought, fresh tears welling up in her eyes. If she was just Rose West, college student, none of this would have been a problem.

Fox lifted his hand to cup her cheek. She tilted into the touch. His thumb brushed the tears away.

"No more tears," he whispered. "I'm not worth them."

"Yes you are," she said instantly. "You are worth everything."

Fox swallowed thickly.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"I thought it was obvious," she murmured, turning her face to half hide against his palm. Her cheeks were flushed but she couldn't only blame it on crying.

"Tell me anyway?"

The question was soft, almost nervous. It made Rose's heart pound in her chest. She lifted both hands to take his in a light hold.

"I love you too, Fox."

Weight lifted from Rose's shoulders as she spoke the words. A truth she hadn't even known was pulled to the surface. All the memories she had carefully filed under 'best friend' reshaped themselves in an instant. Fox *was* her best friend but he was also so much more than that. There was no one else she turned to when she needed comfort, gave her secrets to so easily. There was no one else who had ever held her heart so gently and no one else she would entrust it.

No matter what happened, it was her truth and she needed Fox to hear it.

Fox's eyes widened slightly. He sucked in a breath.

"You do?" he croaked.

"It's a lot, and, it's confusing, and... painful. But I do."

"May I kiss you?" Fox asked.

She was going to let herself be selfish. One last time, before she had to wake up, before she had to be more than just Rose West, college student. She nodded.

Fox leaned in. His breath ghosted her cheek, then his lips pressed to hers. *Soft*, she thought. Then, *warm*. He kissed her as if she was precious.

They had not kissed in the park. How different would things be if they had?

"So, you love me?" she asked when they had broken apart.

"I think that was obvious," Fox said with a roll of his eyes.

"Tell me anyway."

"For a very long time. Throughout everything, yes."

Rose sighed, eyes fluttering closed with the confession. She brought her hands to his chest. His skin was warm and his heart thumped an excited rhythm against her palm. It was the closest they had been since he had returned that didn't involve fighting.

"Kiss me again," she whispered.

Fox didn't hesitate.

Kissing Fox was good. If Rose was honest, it was perfect. They kissed like they had done this a hundred times before and he was just coming back for the hundred and first. Fox might have been content to keep the kisses soft, almost chaste, but Rose wanted more. She guided Fox's lips open, let their tongues slide against each other.

Steadily, the kisses grew wetter, more eager. She pushed him back against her pillows.



Fox made a noise of surprise as she climbed on top of him.

"I haven't stopped thinking about this since, like, forever," she said. Not giving him a chance to speak, she grabbed the lapels of his leather jacket and hauled him into another in a heated kiss. It was hard promise of so much more to come.

"Touch me," Rose breathed against Fox's lips.

Fox's hands seemed to hesitate against Rose, as if afraid to touch pale skin or delicate satin. She took pity on him. While she peppered his jaw with kisses and nips, she moved his hands to her hips. Then helped them slide under the hem of her camisole.

The brush of his fingertips against her belly sent a shiver down her spine.

Slowly, Fox got the picture. He steadily grew more bold as Rose gave him quiet words of encouragement. His hands felt so big and warm. Palms made rough from sword-fighting dragged over the sensitive skin of her breasts.

The touch, after spending so many nights fantasizing about it, made Rose dizzy. A loud moan was pulled from her lips. She didn't bother to be embarrassed by the noise, she wanted Fox to know it felt good, that she wanted more.

Fox shivered against Rose. His own pleased noises echoed between their lips as she traced her tongue over the roof of his mouth. It was his turn to break the kiss first. His mouth wasn't unoccupied for very long. He pulled Rose up so he could kiss down her collarbone to her sternum and all the way to the neckline of her camisole.

The intensity of Fox's eyes as he flicked them up to her in silent question was almost enough to undo Rose right then and there. She answered by tugging her camisole up and off. Fox took to the new skin excitedly.

"Ah, not so hard," Rose admonished when he took her nipple between his teeth.

Fox's apology was the careful swirl of his tongue over the abused bud. His hands cupped her heavy breasts, pressing and playing with an eager reverence as if he had been dreaming about

this as much as she had. It almost made Rose giggle but she was a little too distracted. Especially when he sucked on one nipple and pinched the other between his fingers.

Rose's sleep shorts were quickly growing damp. It took everything in her power to not rub herself against the rough fabric of Fox's jeans. It was a very near thing. She'd be damned if she came from only having her breasts played with.

As much as she wanted Fox to keep going, Rose managed to push him off. She shoved him back down to her pillows. She looked down at him, cheeks flushed and eyes dark.

Fox swallowed under the weight of her gaze.

"You're staring," Fox said, some of his bravado returning. He shifted up onto his elbows.

Leather jacket falling off his shoulders, hair a rumpled mess from Rose's fingers and lips kiss-swollen, Fox was a vision that no fantasy had ever been able to properly capture. He was a picture Rose wouldn't soon forget.

"I have a great view," Rose replied, unabashed. She leaned forward, dropping her hands on either side of Fox's head to bring their faces close together once more.

Fox looked about to retort but it was quickly taken over by a gasp as Rose trailed a series of searing kisses down the length of his neck. Successfully distracting him with the press and nip of teeth, Rose trailed clever fingers down to the button of his jeans. Though he absolutely noticed the brush of fingers over his boxer-briefs.

"Rose—" he started.

Rose hummed against a blooming spot of red just behind his jaw. Not hesitating, she cupped her hand over the hard heat between Fox's legs. She stroked her fingers over the cloth, rubbing the soft cotton against sensitive skin. He throbbed against her palm.

"You're already so hard," she breathed into Fox's ear.

"I, well, can you blame me?" Fox attempted, face red. His hips pushed up toward Rose's hand, seeking more.

Rose chuckled. She pressed a light kiss to Fox's hair.

"You're so cute," she said.

Fox's grumbled complaint swiftly dissolved into a moan. Rose had squeezed his dick through the thin cotton barrier.

"And so easy to distract," Rose laughed. She dipped her fingers past the waistband of Fox's boxer-briefs. She hadn't been lying when she said that Fox was already hard. His dick throbbed against her fingers, eager for her touch. The wetness from his folds made the stroke of her hand a little easier.

Rose decided that one of her favorite pastimes could become drawing each and every noise of pleasure she could from Fox. But all she had was one night. She could only take what she could get.

"Rose, wait," Fox panted. He grabbed her wrist, stopping her.

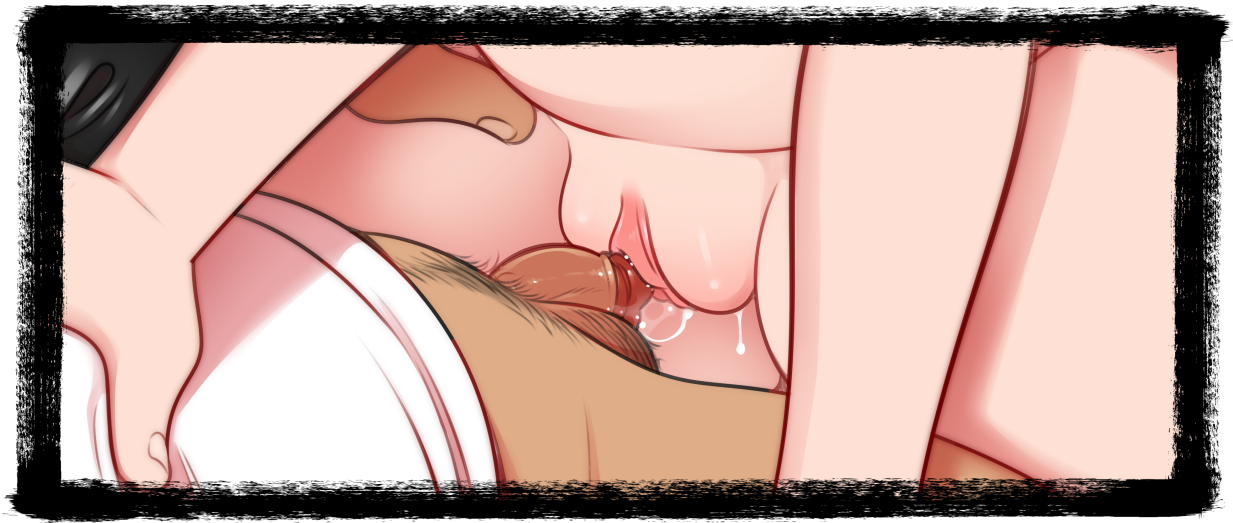
"Are you okay?" Rose asked, worried it hadn't been good.

"More than okay," he reassured. "I'm... I'm just close."

Rose's lips twisted in a self-satisfied smirk. The expression was quickly wiped away with his next words.

"I want you to finish with me," he said.

Rose's head bobbed in an eager nod. She pulled her hand out of his pants so she could more easily shove them down. She sat up and shimmied out of her shorts. Fox's hand on her side kept her from toppling off the bed as she removed them. As soon as the last barriers between them were removed, she sank back down on his lap. She rolled her hips forward, dragging her clit and pussy lips over his dick.



Fox's throat was thrown into relief as his head fell back against the pillows. His hand pressed bruises into her hip as she started to rock against him.

A sigh of pleased relief fell from her lips. Every slide forward caught the tip of his dick against her soaked lips. Fox's free hand moved up to cup and squeeze her breast. His thumb pressed against her hard nipple. Liquid fire pooled low in her belly.

Hot, wet, panted breaths filled the air of Rose's bedroom. They moved against each other, both chasing completion.

"Fox," she whispered, "look at me."

It took a moment but he opened his eyes to look up at her. His face was raw and open, full of heated adoration. It sent a lancing thrill that electrified every nerve in Rose's body. She did not look away from him, burning every second into her memory. She saw the moment his ecstasy reached its peak. His mouth opened, framing her name as he fell into orgasm. His hips twitched and his dick pulsed against her.

Rose's head fell back as her own pleasure tore through her. With a shuddering, gasping moan she spilled into orgasm. Her nails bit into Fox's stomach in an attempt to keep herself steady as her body shook with the force of it.

"Rose," Fox murmured, gathering her into his arms and pulling her against his chest.



The two of them sank into her pillows. Their breathing slowly returned to normal. The air was cool against their sweat-damp skin. It brought a goosebumps to Rose's skin. Fox rubbed them away, valiantly. Within their quiet, gentle bubble they could just exist. Two normal people without the weight of a kingdom on their shoulders.

Rose wanted to close her eyes, to sink further into it. In the dim light from her bedside lamp, she watched the flutter of Fox's pulse in his throat. It was strong and steady. She traced her fingers along the line of his jaw. The shadow of stubble rubbed against her fingertips.

"You're staring," he whispered, eyes still closed.

"I thought you were asleep," she said.

"Dozing," he corrected. "What are you thinking so hard about?"

Rose carefully pulled her hand back. The motion made Fox open his eyes. He pushed himself up onto his elbow, looking down at her quizzically.

"Rose, what is it?"

Rose pulled her lower lip between her teeth. With her decision she could lose him forever. It might not be the right choice for her but it was the right one for the Garden, for the Night Blossom. She couldn't keep putting her needs over everyone else. Even if it chilled her to her core, she would have to let Fox go. She took a steadying breath and met his worried gaze.

"I cannot see you until I've gotten everything with the Garden figured out," she said.

A series of emotions cascaded over Fox's features. Then his face went horribly blank. He pushed himself up fully, blankets pooled around his hips. His back to her, she couldn't see what he was thinking.

Rose sat up, hands clasped tight under the blankets to stop them from shaking.

"Why?" he asked.

"I have to take care of the Garden, the Night Blossom, the girls," she answered. She sounded surprisingly stable, even to herself.

Fox's head jerked in an aborted motion. Mute, he left the bed. With his back to her, he redressed in quick, sharp movements.

"Is that what you want?" he asked over his shoulder.

What she wanted didn't matter. She swallowed back her wants.

"It is my duty."

There was a tremor in Fox's hand when he set it on the window frame. Rose's lower lip wobbled at the sight. She wanted to go to him, take him back into her arms.

"Fox," she tried.

Fox hadn't looked back to her once but he paused, one foot on windowsill.

"I love you," she whispered. "Please, never forget that." She wasn't entirely sure he heard her. Her voice was too quiet in the expanse of her room, over the sounds of the city outside.

Fox was still for a long, heartbreaking moment. His shoulders heaved with a choked in breath.

"Goodbye, Rose."

The window closed with a click.

Rose sank into her pillow. The weight of her decision crushed against her chest. The posters above her bed blurred as tears filled her eyes. She didn't know how long it took for her to stop crying.

It's not fair.

To Be Continued...

Written by ACM

Illustrated by DCS

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