

## \*~Briar's Perspective ~ The Garden's Poison ~\*

As Mari rode through the gate, I felt as if a curtain was slowly closing to block out the sun, plunging me into total night, a suffocating darkness that permeated every part of my soul. I stared after where she'd disappeared, pleading for her to return; her absence was more agonizing than I could have imagined.

The negative emotions constantly battling within me jostled for position—hopelessness, fear, worry—until the most dominant one emerged as victor: fury.

The flames of this ever-present fire grew, a blaze that trickled over the icy despair brought on by Mari's leaving and caused my fists to clench. I spun onto Drake and Rhea, who stood by with wary expressions, which only further stoked my anger.

*See the way they're looking at you? They're absolutely disgusted. How dare they show such disrespect to their king?*

"Briar?" Drake's voice was hesitant, but his sideways step that put Rhea more securely behind him was sure, as if he believed shielding her was necessary.

Of course it wasn't; I'd never hurt either of them. But I'd no sooner thought this than the darkness filling my mind challenged this reassurance, pushing it away.

*Of course you would...you should.*

I gave my head a jerky shake. *No...I couldn't hurt anyone, especially not my family.*

*But what if you do?*

"Briar?" Drake's frown deepened as his gaze flickered down to my balled fists before inching further in front of Rhea.

*Isn't it pathetic how much he dotes on his pathetic barren wife?*

*Stop saying such things!* But as always the darkness ignored my earnest plea, even whispered encouragement for me to say the words out loud, having a sick desire to see the pain they'd bring Rhea. I bit hard on my tongue until I tasted blood, determined to keep those words back at all costs.

But this wasn't the only battle currently raging within me—dozens more dark thoughts whirled through my mind, each a form of the shadows and darkness already occupying it, until one rose to the surface:

*It's their fault Mari is gone; they want you lose yourself.*

I recoiled against the words, while at the same time the beast within me found them pleasing, for they justified the burning anger currently slithering through me.

The beast was right—Mari leaving was Drake and Rhea’s fault. Her quest was pointless; it wouldn’t save me, only hurt me further by taking her away. Without her, I’d undoubtedly lose myself completely, which was likely exactly what Drake and Rhea wanted.

*After all, who’s next in line?*

“You did this on purpose,” I growled.

Drake’s eyebrows lifted. “That rose is the only hope of saving you and the gardens. I want to help you. We all do.”

*He’s lying; he wants to destroy you.*

The beast’s accusation made sense, making it easier to listen to, while at the same time confusion shrouded my thoughts, making it impossible to see what was and wasn’t real. Yet my sliver of doubt did nothing to loosen the beast’s control over my tongue.

“No you don’t,” I snarled. “You hate me and want nothing more than for me to lose myself so that you can take what’s mine. Now Mari is gone. I was a fool to listen to you.”

These accusations fed the creature inside me, which seemed to live off venom and hate, so that it grew stronger, rising within me and uprooting the small seed of hope Mari’s quest had planted. I tried to cling to it, but the beast yanked it away, leaving me with nothing but cold despair seeping over me.

Drake’s bewilderment faded as his expression hardened. “You’re being irrational. You know I have no aspirations to become king. Rather than pushing me away, let me help you.”

The darkness filling my mind immediately tried to sway me from his words, but I fought against it. Drake was right. Of course he was. I needed to apologize. But when I opened my mouth to do so, the beast supplied its own biting words, ones that had been festering inside me with every other negative emotion and dark thought.

“I don’t need your help,” I snarled. “I’m warning you: don’t push me. If you cross me, you’ll regret it.”

Drake’s eyes widened while Rhea peeked out from behind him in genuine fear. My breath hooked as I repeated the words I’d spoken back to myself.

*No! That’s not what I meant to say. I’d never—*

*Of course you would. You’re a monster.*

*No, I'm not. I'm—*

"I can't believe how much you've changed," Drake murmured. "You've nearly lost yourself completely."

The beast within me smirked. *See? He thinks so too.*

Despair warred with the triumph within me. "I—"

*Even though he's right, he has no right to tell you such a thing. Punch him; you know he deserves it.*

My hands shook as I fought to disobey the dark, seductive whispers, which caressed my thoughts with all the reasons why I *should* punch my brother. Only the memory of the confidence which had filled Mari's eyes earlier as she assured me that I'd never resort to violence gave me the strength to resist it now.

Even so, my hands continued to shake, tremors which quickly overcame my entire body as the battle continued raging within me. I clenched my eyes shut, as if the act could block out the seductive temptation, and repeated Mari's words over and over in my mind: *you won't, you won't, you won't*. But the darkness still vied for control, slowly hooking itself not only around my thoughts but my sense.

I needed to leave. Now. Without another word, I stomped past Drake and Rhea into the palace, where I locked myself in Father's old bedroom—now mine. There I stood with my back pressed against the door, fighting for breath as I took in the familiar yet still foreign elegant surroundings. The king's chambers had never felt like mine; even following the beast's instructions on how to build a prosperous empire hadn't made me feel worthy of Father's crown.

Another memory of Mari's words filled my mind: *your father would be so disappointed in the way you're using your title to hurt and bully everyone around you.*

I groaned and slid down to the floor. There I sat, pressing my palms against my eyes until I saw spots. *I'm a good king, one that would make Father proud.*

I repeated these words over and over, but I didn't believe them, no matter how desperate I was to. How could I make Father proud with the battle currently raging within me, especially when it seemed to have only one outcome: the poison wouldn't rest until it'd consumed me completely. The venomous thoughts took advantage of my being alone, attacking with renewed vigor. As wearying and torturous as it was, I couldn't risk being around anyone else when I was so volatile.

I took to pacing my chamber, even as the exhausting battle between me and my thoughts continued to rage. I tried to focus them on Mari, for thinking of her was my only hope of staving off the poison's effects. But it wouldn't succumb so easily—the more I thought of her, the more it twisted my memories of her, especially as the hours since her departure lengthened. The longer she was away, the more my constant despair rose.

*She's been gone too long. Something must have happened to her.*

*She's left you. Why would she ever choose to remain with a beast such as yourself? She hates you...and with good reason.*

I dug my fingers into my scalp. "Stop it," I pleaded. "Leave me alone."

But the darkness was relentless. *Mari is never coming back...but that's fortunate, for without her, there's nothing to stop us. We're much better off without her.*

I gave my head a firm shake. No, she wouldn't leave; the thought was too agonizing to even consider. I struggled to push it away, but as always it was relentless. Exhausted, I sank to the floor beneath the window, where the light gradually faded, plunging the room into darkness. Here I remained as hours melted away.

Only the sound of urgent knocking on my door some time later caused me to stir. At my command, two guards entered, the same ones who'd accompanied Mari to retrieve the rose from Drake and Rhea's palace. My stomach lurched at the dried blood staining their temples.

I leapt to my feet, my previous weariness vanishing, replaced with a panic and a sense of urgency. "What's happened?" I demanded. "Where's Mari?"

"She's been taken," one of the guards said. I sucked in a horrified breath. No! The guard continued to explain, but I scarcely heard him. "While she was in Prince Drake's palace garden, several men came upon us and knocked us out. When we came to, she was gone, leaving behind only the signs of a struggle."

My despair rose, until I only saw red. The beast within me stirred, clawing its way to the surface as it fought to take over...but for once we were on the same side. I immediately gave it full reign, needing it for the task ahead: I had to save Mari. If anything ever happened to her...

*You shouldn't have let her go alone. You truly are a monster.*

"I must save her." I strolled purposefully past the guards into the hallway, where I found Drake. By the worry filling his expression, he'd undoubtedly heard what had happened.

"You can't go after her, not when your curse prevents you from leaving the grounds." I sensed his unspoken concern—could I be trusted outside the palace walls with the beast as my constant companion? Little did he realize that in this instance, the beast was my ally.

"I don't care what happens to me." My desperation rose, causing my previously rampaging mind to shift to a single purpose: rescue Mari, no matter the consequences to myself. But even with my thoughts eclipsed by her, some poisonous ones managed to trickle in.

*She's dead. You've lost her forever...and then you're next.*

I struggled against the darkness trying to convince me of the truth of these horrible scenarios as I hurried for my horse. *Don't believe it.*

But a part of me did anyway.

No! Mari would be alright; she just *had* to be, for I couldn't bear to imagine the world without her...nor would I be able to survive the poison transforming me if I'd lost her.

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It felt as if hours had passed when I later awoke to the jostling carriage. I blinked in the surrounding darkness, disoriented. Where was I? How had I gotten here? Everything between when I'd been informed of Mari's predicament and now felt like a blur. I closed my eyes and scrambled to remember, a task made difficult by my pounding head.

The memories slithered in and out of my mind—the pain that came the moment I exited the garden as I violated the conditions of my curse, the fear pressing against my heart during my frantic horseback ride to rescue Mari, the fury as I confronted the scoundrel who'd taken her, and...what else?

I thought harder, the effort increasing the pain pulsing at my temples, and managed to remember more—the acute worry and despair for Mari, the fierce anger that had seized me in its unrelenting grasp when I'd caught sight of her bloodied wrists, the beast's thirst for bloodshed and Mari's pleadings for me to not allow it to take over...

*Mari!*

I forced my eyes open and found myself laying in her lap, a rather cozy position that provided a bit of solace from the battle raging my mind; as usual her presence acted as a light penetrating the darkness that was becoming more and more difficult to fight against—I could feel it sinking deeper and deeper into my thoughts, tainting everything it touched while remaining powerless to stop it.

I tried to speak to her, but before I could the carriage rolled to a stop. I could sense the garden's poison and knew we were just outside the gate of the palace; even from here, its venomous fingers curled around my thoughts, twisting them painfully. Their grip only tightened as the gate opened, allowing the carriage to clatter through.

The sensation grew the further into the grounds we ventured, until it was almost unbearable. I ached to rid myself of its unrelenting grasp. "Mari?" I said weakly as I struggled to sit up, desperate to get away from the descending darkness.

*You don't really want to do that, do you, Briar?*

I paused, considering. Perhaps I didn't.

Mari had drawn back the curtains to lean out the window, but at the sound of my voice she hastily ducked back inside. I locked my gaze to her concerned one and instantly felt the slightest soothing to the darkness shrouding my mind, but it wasn't enough. I extended my hand and slumped with relief when she took it and wrapped her arm around me to help me sit upright. As always, her presence was soothing.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I—need—gardens." I could barely form the words, and even as I did I realized they were the wrong ones.

No, I didn't need *those* gardens. But regardless of their current state, the curse Mother had placed on me connecting me to them had left me feeling as if I'd wither away if I were separated from them a moment longer. The weeds tainting the gardens didn't sever this connection, but surely relying on them would only strengthen the poison slithering within me.

What did I do?

Mari stroked my hair back as she ordered the carriage to stop, which it did with a hasty jerk. She immediately pushed the door open and helped me stumble out into the chilly morning. I immediately knelt to the ground and burrowed my fingers in the soil. The effect was instantaneous, the grainy dirt against my fingers lending strength in tiny

increments. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths, and in this position I stayed for several minutes.

But my peace was short-lived, for the more the weakness and exhaustion faded, the more room there was for the dark whispers to return: *You're being foolish bringing something so dangerous into this garden, something that will destroy us all. Whatever you do, you must not plant that rose.*

Mari was saying something, but I scarcely heard her as I opened my eyes and slowly took in the garden, which was now nothing but death and decay, the once vibrant plants black and wilted. Was the garden right—I'd suffer the same fate if I planted the rose Mari had obtained from Drake and Rhea's palace garden?

I reached out to rub a nearby weed between my fingers. Each touch increased my strength...as well as the volume of the insistent voice filling my mind.

*We're dying, but not all is lost. There's a way to save us, save you.*

Mari shifted beside me. "Are you ready to travel to the rose garden?"

I couldn't tear my gaze from the weed. *I don't want us to die*, I pleaded. *What can I do?*

*Don't plant that rose. It's poisonous.*

Doubt over the gardens' words niggled at the back of my mind, but once again the garden pushed it out. I scrambled to reclaim it, but Mari's jostling my arm interrupted my focus and it slipped away.

"Briar, we need to go to the enchanted rose garden. Now."

"The rose garden?" My brows furrowed.

*Ah, the rose garden. The girl is a fool to think planting the rose there will destroy us. Humor her; it's our only hope of surviving against that girl's interference.*

I nodded. "Oh yes, the rose garden. Did you get the rose?"

She withdrew it from her satchel. My heart lifted in hope at the sight of the glittered crimson petals, still in full bloom. Surely planting it would save the gardens...

*No, you fool, it'll destroy them. That rose must not be planted at all costs; you must destroy it.*

The beast stirred within me, causing my fingers to itch to grab the rose and crush it. But the impulse faded the moment Mari held it out of reach.

The beast immediately flung a silent but harsh insult towards her for her interference. *Don't talk about Mari that way*, I snapped at it. It was silent a moment, as

if considering its counterattack to my rebellion, a moment that was a welcome reprieve that didn't last nearly long enough.

*Perhaps she doesn't understand what she's doing, it conceded, but we do. We must stop her if we have any hope of being with her forever.*

For the first time the garden's words soothed me. Yes, I wanted nothing more than to be with Mari always, and thus I'd do *anything* for that outcome.

Anything.

"Shall we go plant it?" she asked, once more tearing me away from the silent conversation I was having within myself.

I blinked hastily. "Plant it? Yes. We should."

Doing that was the only way to keep her from destroying the gardens, destroying me. I couldn't let either of those things happen. So I had to stop her, but without her realizing anything was amiss; that would ruin everything.

So I allowed her to help me stand, but before she led me to the rose garden, I dipped down for the weed, both for its strength and so I could continue to follow its whispered instructions. Curling it around my hand calmed some of the anxiety clenching my chest and provided me with the strength needed to allow Mari to lead me down the twisting, overgrown paths to the rose garden.

As we neared its entrance, she glared at the weed in my hand. "You need to drop that weed. It's clearly not helping."

Wasn't it? But before I could wonder, it whispered its assurances—it was helping, and it would continue to do so, for it knew exactly what needed to be done to save us. "It said I would."

Before she could argue, we arrived at the rose garden. The lawn surrounding the bush had already succumbed to the poison, whereas the bush itself was partially wilted, many of its petals scattered around it like splotches of blood. Despair tugged at my heart at how close the garden was to completely dying. I had to save it, save the kingdom, my people—

*No, you mustn't; you can't save that rosebush without losing yourself.*

I furrowed my brow. Was that true? My pulsing headache made it impossible to analyze the beast's words, nor resist it when it tugged my attention towards a nearby clump of thorny weeds, a sight which instantly soothed the pounding at my temples; I hadn't known this new garden could be so comforting.

*See? The garden is good; it's helping you. You mustn't allow it to be destroyed. Now, you know what needs to be done—plant the rose here, where it'll be overtaken by the poison, thus sparing us.*

This time I didn't question its instructions. "I think we should plant the rose here," I told Mari. She didn't answer. I glanced over my shoulder and found her own attention eclipsed by the rosebush, her hand cradling one of the petals, as if listening intently to whatever it was saying.

The beast immediately bristled with disapproval. *The rosebush is trying to sway her. Whatever it tells her, you cannot trust it. The rosebush wants us to die.*

Fear seized my heart at the thought. I jerked my attention back to the weeds. *I don't want us to die.*

*Then you must stop her at all costs.*

I frantically crawled closer to the clump of wild plants until I hovered over them. *Tell me how. Please.*

"Briar? Briar?" Mari nudged me. I reluctantly turned away from the weeds to stare at her. It took a moment for me to register her face, but rather than weakening the influence of the poison tainting my thoughts, instead doing so only solidified my determination—I'd do whatever it took to keep Mari.

"This is the right garden. The rose must be planted here." My tone held no room for argument, so heated annoyance flared in my chest when she shook her head in disagreement.

*"No, the rosebush says it's not. We must trust it."*

*It's lying. Don't listen to it.*

"We need to plant the rose here," I continued firmly.

"But the rosebush—"

*There she goes, interfering again.*

"I know my own gardens," I snapped. I regretted my harshness the moment the words left my mouth, even as the beast within me purred in approval.

Her eyes flashed before her own determination settled over her. "Come, hear for yourself."

She took my hand and I immediately tried to yank away; the last thing I wanted to touch was the rosebush determined to destroy me, but I stilled the moment my hand caressed its soft petals. Peace immediately trickled over me, and with it some of the

shadows crowding my mind melted away, allowing a soft, gentle voice to whisper soothingly:

*You must plant the rose where the poison originated. Healing the gardens is the only way to save your kingdom.*

*Don't listen to it!* The darkness had returned, louder than ever. *If you do, then we'll die.*

"Can you hear its instructions?" Mari asked.

*Lie*, the garden instructed. But I didn't want to lie...did I? I raged another silent war within myself before the beast once again emerged as conquerer. I had to trust it; it only had my best interests in mind.

*I knew you'd come around. Now you must lie to her so she doesn't realize what we're up to.*

I frowned. But Mari knew what the rosebush's message was. If I lied, then she'd realize what we were up to. The garden considered this argument.

*Then play along, but whatever you do, don't allow her to plant that rose at the weeds' source. Once you arrive, you must trick her into giving it to you...and then you must destroy it.*

Apprehension knotted my gut at the deception, but the darkness made it difficult for my conscience to convince me otherwise.

"It wants us to return to the source of the poison," I said shakily. "There we must plant the rose."

My gaze darted to it, and unlike before when it had brought solace, now nothing had ever looked more dangerous. I ached to snatch it and tear it apart petal by petal, but the garden urged me to be patient. My time would come, and once it was done, all would be well. It promised.

I stood, taking one of the gardens' weeds with me, needing its strength and guidance for the task that lay ahead. Mari followed me silently as I led her to Mother's garden. With every step, the gardens' arguments seemed weaker, and my purpose and determination grew, rising above the taunts that had been haunting me almost constantly for weeks now.

*We need to plant the rose, we need to save the kingdom, we need to—*

I froze as the beast once more roared in disapproval. *Stop! Those thoughts are dangerous. You must ignore them. Remember: if you kill us you'll die too.*

"What's wrong?" Mari asked.

Coldness encased my heart as I tilted my head, continuing to listen to the gardens' taunts: *if you kill us you'll die too.*

"Can you hear something?" she asked worriedly.

Tremors overcame me and my heartbeat escalated as terror seeped over me, dispelling my brief resolve to fight against the beast's suggestion as quickly as it had arrived. I couldn't stop the gardens, not when I was so intricately connected to them.

Mari tugged on my arm. "We need to move faster."

I nodded absentmindedly and allowed her to pull me down the path. I sensed her concerned glances as we walked, but her worry was nothing compared to the garden's chants filling my mind, eclipsing all other thought: *if you kill us you'll die too, if you kill us you'll die too.*

*I don't want to die.*

*Then destroy that rose.*

We arrived at the hedge enclosing Mother's garden, and rather than the cold, sinister feeling that usually settled whenever I was near its walls, instead I felt a sense of familiarity and even safety encompass me.

*You see? The garden whispered soothingly. We're not wicked, but good. Thus there's no reason to destroy us.*

"Do you have the key?" Mari asked. I ignored her, continuing to listen to the gardens' reassurances, which each dispelled my previous doubts one by one.

I glanced towards her. "The key? Of course I have it. I always keep it with me."

"Can you give it to me?"

I shook my head. She couldn't be trusted with the key, not when she could do something reckless that would ruin me and the gardens' plans. "No. I should be the one to open it. You don't know the gardens as well as we do and can't be trusted with it."

Annoyance filled her eyes, which only proved the gardens were right: we couldn't trust her. "It doesn't matter who opens it, so long as one of us does," she snapped.

I rolled my eyes as I pulled the key from my pocket. "Testy."

The garden guided my movements as I inserted the key and unlocked the door, which creaked open to the sight of festering weeds and black decay. The garden nudged me forward to step inside the misty, shadowy garden. Coldness seeped over

me as a bitter wind blew, bringing with it the scent of mold and a sinister reminder that pressed against my chest until I could scarcely breathe.

My stomach clenched. *This place is evil and must be destroyed.*

The garden already had a counterargument prepared: *If it's evil, then you're evil too. Don't you see? You belong here. Thus how can you kill us? We're not the enemy; the rose is, and it must be destroyed.*

I fought to resist their compelling arguments, but its power over me was stronger within these walls—rather than the beast being a creature inside me, it seemed to completely eclipse me.

I hypnotically extended my hand towards Mari. "Give me the rose."

She refused, as if she sensed she and I were no longer on the same side. She cradled it close. "We should do it together."

"No, Maren," I said. "As the king who's connected to these gardens, I have to be the one to do it."

She didn't move. *The stubborn girl. She'll ruin everything.*

I glared at her. "Give me the rose, Maren. Now."

A small portion of my hardened heart wrenched at the sight of her flinch, but the rest of me was triumphant that my yell had stirred her to action, causing her to slowly hold the rose out to me. I snatched it before she could change her mind. Her eyes widened with delicious fear at my smirk.

"Are you going to plant it?" Her voice shook, pleasing the beast further.

My smirk widened. "Plant it? Why ever would I do that?"

"To stop the—" I cut her off with a bitter laugh, a harsh sound I scarcely recognized. "What's so amusing?" she stuttered.

"You are. You're so naive, Maren. Planting this rose is the last thing I want to do, not when it'll destroy everything."

"But..." Her forehead furrowed, her previous determination replaced with confusion. "The rose will heal the gardens; it'll heal you. That's what we want."

For a moment, a sliver of sense penetrated the garden's poison. Yes, of course that's what we wanted...but once again the garden was stronger than these arguments.

I advanced a step closer. "No. Don't you see? This rose will destroy the gardens, and do you know what will happen to us once it does? We'll die."

Her breath caught. "What do you mean?"

"What do you think?" I spat. "I'm part of these gardens. If I kill them, then I'll also die."

And as if confirming my words, the gardens' previously subtle taunts became a roar, their harsh words filling the surrounding wind: *If you kill us you'll die too, if you kill us you'll die too, if you kill us you'll die—*

Mari pressed her hands to her ears. "Stop it!" she screamed.

"Can you finally hear the gardens?" I asked. "They've been whispering to me ever since we arrived back at the palace. We must trust them." But the words were more a reassurance for myself than for her.

"We can't." Her panic escalated, filling her voice. "Whatever was once good and beautiful in the gardens no longer exists. We can't listen to them. We must trust the rosebush, the only part of the old gardens that hasn't been consumed by the poison from the noxious weeds."

Her argument made sense, and yet.... I snorted. "The rosebush isn't part of us and therefore can't be trusted."

"But then why did you heed their advice to come here to—"

I laughed again. "You're so gullible."

She flinched again, and horror immediately filled my heart at the cruel words I'd spewed at her. *Stop it*, I pleaded with the gardens. *I'll listen to you, just don't make me hurt Mari.*

But I couldn't seem to help it; the garden supplied each phrase, prompting me to follow its horrible script line by line. I tried to fight each one, but within these walls and the surrounding weeds and decay, they were nearly impossible to ignore.

Mari's copper-brown eyes widened with horror as her realization dawned. "You tricked me into bringing you here?"

The small part of me that hadn't been overtaken wrenched at her distress, but once again it wasn't enough to combat the beast's poison. It pushed me towards a tall, thorny weed growing several feet high in the center of the grounds, which immediately extended its claws out for the rose. My hand holding it began to shake as I fought to resist giving it, but my movements were long beyond my control.

"Stop it, Briar!" Mari cried desperately. "You can't give it the rose. Please!"

Mari's despair pierced the almost hypnotic force guiding me, but it was her sudden cry of pain that jerked me completely from the garden's grasp to spin towards where

she'd fallen to the hard earth. Worry crowded out all other emotions warring within me, allowing me to step beyond the gardens' reach towards her.

"Are you alright, Mari? Are you hurt?"

Relief filled her expression, but it was only temporary before her desperation returned. "Please don't do this, Briar. You're better than this."

*She lies. You're not.*

I frowned. "How do you know?"

"Because I love you."

Her words were like a healing balm for the cold darkness holding me in its unrelenting clutches. Her love pushed away most of the shadows filling me, replacing them with warm, welcome light to illuminate the most important emotion I'd ever felt.

"I love you, too."

I took another step closer, even as the garden raged in anger and the weed tried to tug me back. I ignored them, only pausing when it snarled a reminder about why I was listening to it: *If you truly love her, you must want to remain with her forever. Only by listening to us can we make that happen.*

I slowed. It was right. "It's because I love you that I have to protect the gardens at all costs," I told her. "Don't you see, Mari? If I die alongside them, then I lose you."

"You're not going to die; they're lying to you." But her voice wavered, revealing her uncertainty.

*No, she's the one lying, the gardens hissed.*

"You don't know that," I said.

She hesitated. "I don't," she conceded slowly, and the gardens smirked in triumph. "But I do know that the voice you're listening to is evil. If the weeds are telling you that planting the rose will kill you, then it must be a lie."

*She lies. We'd never lie to you, but she would, not when she's on the evil rosebush's side.*

I paused in my advance, frowning. "How do I know *that's* not a lie?" I wasn't entirely sure whom I was asking—her or the gardens.

"Because you know and trust me," she said. "You can't allow the evil garden to trick you, to change you into something you're not. Please, Briar."

My frown deepened. I ached to believe her words...but I simply couldn't, not when the garden brought many memories to my recollection—all the horrible actions I'd

done as king, my failure to protect my people and my kingdom, the fear that had filled Mari, Drake, and Rhea's expressions with each of my previous outbursts...these had all been done by *me* and me alone, exposing who I truly was, and that was anything but a good man.

My heart sank at the realization. "They're not changing me. This is who I am."

"That's not true." Her voice hitched as her despair escalated. "I see who you really are and it's not this; the true Briar is a man of compassion and gentleness. I don't want to lose you. If you want any life together with me, we can't let the dark garden win. Don't listen to it. Fight it. *Please.*"

Her pleas pierced the walls encasing my heart. As always, Mari provided light to what otherwise felt like impenetrable darkness. If she could see goodness in me, despite all I'd done...did that mean it actually existed?

*Don't listen to her!* the garden ordered repeatedly. *You can't! She'll ruin everything!*

I fought against the venomous thoughts, pushing against them with all my might. *Get out of my head!*

And quite suddenly...they left, and for the first time since this endless, exhausting war had begun, *I* was the one who emerged as victor, and with this victory came... clarity. For the first time since the beast had slithered itself inside me I felt a break in the storm, and with it came peace, which lifted the burden that had been weighing heavily upon me until it was no longer there.

*This isn't who I am.* Such a freeing thought, one that allowed me to finally control my own actions in order to do what I knew needed to be done.

I approached Mari and crouched in front of her. For the first time in days I felt as if I could truly see her. I slowly took her in. She was so beautiful—with her copper eyes lit with her exuberance and spirit, her dark hair that surrounded her face in waves, the mischief, light, and kindness that filled her expression, her darling upturned nose...but my gaze lingered on her own, aglow with love.

My heart swelled and the corner of my mouth lifted in my first smile in...so long. "You have such lovely eyes, Mari, and that's not the only thing I love about you—everything about you is beautiful, good, and so wonderful."

I cradled her cheek and smiled more fully as she leaned against my touch, causing my heart to flip. For several moments we stayed in this position, neither of us wanting to pull away. I wanted nothing more than to be in this moment forever...but I knew I

couldn't, for despite the brief reprieve from the storm that had constantly raged within me since the weeds had begun to overtake the gardens, I knew it wasn't fully over.

While I longed for nothing more than the chance to marry Mari, watch her bear my children, and spend the rest of my life cherishing her and them as a devoted husband and father, other images filled my mind, reminders I desperately needed—of the famine raging my kingdom, my starving people, my harsh laws that exploited them and deprived them of their freedoms...I'd taken my father's legacy and destroyed it, and thus restitution needed to be made.

If I lived, the beast would live too, and no matter how much I longed for a life with Mari, it came at too high of a cost. Although the garden had warned me that killing the weeds would in turn kill me, I had no doubt it was a sacrifice that needed to be made for the greater good. But knowing this didn't dispel the fear, which almost paralyzed me against doing what needed to be done. Only Mari's belief in my goodness gave me the strength I needed, even as my heart ached that the decision would cause me to lose her forever.

I tore my gaze away from her to focus on the rose I still held. I twirled it thoughtfully by its stem. "The gardens are right—I've been so overtaken by the poison that killing the weeds will likely kill me. But you're also right; this will indeed destroy them."

Her lip trembled. "It won't kill you."

It would. But it was for the best. I had to take advantage of this moment where I was in control of myself before it slipped away once more, leaving me a prisoner of the beast trying to take over my soul. If I had to die, I wanted to still be *me*.

"I'm part of these gardens, and therefore I'm part of the thorns that have consumed them. I can still feel them fighting to take over; soon there will be nothing left of who I once was. Which means I must stop this before they're victorious." My heart wrenched. "My biggest regret is losing the opportunity for a life with you. I wanted nothing more than to be your husband, to embark on all sorts of adventures and cherish you forever. But I made a vow when I became king to put my people first, no matter the cost. I just didn't realize it would be so high. To give you up and our future together—it's unbearable."

Her tears escaped, and with them I almost lost my resolve. "Don't talk that way, Briar. You'll be alright. You have to—"

Her pleas were too persuasive, so I silenced them with a kiss, one sweet despite being stained with the salt from her tears and my own regret for all I was giving up. In that moment my longing for her almost eclipsed me, but another yearning also stirred my soul, a potential Mari had always seen within me, even when I hadn't been able to see it within myself—to be a good king for my people.

My fingers dropped from her cheek as I pulled away. "I hope that no matter what your life has in store that you'll find happiness." I tugged off my signet ring and pressed it into her hand. "Will you give this to Drake?" Removing the ring solidified my decision; there'd be no turning back now.

She let out a strangled sob the moment she cradled the ring in her palm. "No, Briar."

She scrambled for my hand, but I forced myself to straighten and step out of reach; feeling her fingers around mine would only make this more difficult than it already was.

Despair filled her eyes. "*Briar!*"

I gave her a sad smile as I held up the rose. "I must plant this in order to heal the gardens and my kingdom. I want nothing more than to be a good king for my people, the one both you and my father believe me to be."

I knelt down and dug a hole, where I carefully planted the flower. As I patted the dirt around it, a soft whisper caressed my thoughts, one more gentle and soothing than the beast had ever been.

*One more thing is required to heal us—the greatest sacrifice a king can make for his people.*

Fear briefly clenched my heart when I saw what it was, but this emotion slowly faded, replaced with calm. This was right—I had to die if it meant life for the people I loved, but I wanted to do it not only as the king Father would be proud of, but as the man Mari believed me to be. Only her faith in me gave me strength.

Would death hurt? And would the price be enough? I wasn't sure, but the love I felt for my subjects compelled me to try; I had to do right by them.

I met Mari's glassy gaze, trying to memorize her features before I lost her forever. "I love you, Mari. Always."

"Briar, please don't—"

I dug my thumb into the thorn. Piercing pain spread from the wound. I watched, hypnotized, as the blood dribbled down the rose's stem and seeped into the earth. The

soil soaked it up, and immediately the rose began to glow, transforming from crimson into the purest white. As the light spread, it seeped into me to slowly dispel the shadows that remained inside me until none were left.

Peace filled my heart: I'd die me.

I lifted my gaze to Mari, for she was the last thing I wanted to see...and she was, both her beauty and her love, before the world around me slipped away until there was nothing...nothing except total tranquility. And warmth. This feeling engulfed me even as I collapsed, surrounding me like the tenderest embrace. As the light enfolded me, I felt its healing release me from the chains which had kept me bound for so long.

I basked in the feeling for a moment before allowing my eyes to flutter open. The first thing I noticed was Mari burrowed against my chest, sobbing. I marveled at the sensation of her forehead pressed against my chest, the feel of my heart beating against my ribs, the gentle breeze that caressed my face and the warmth from the sun filling the previously chilly garden.

I was alive.

I caressed Mari's back. She gave a startled gasp as she scrambled up to gape down at me. Nothing had ever looked so beautiful than her.

"Briar?"

I smiled and brushed her tears away with my thumb. "Hello, darling."

She gaped at me for a moment more before flinging herself at me. "Oh, Briar."

She squeezed me close and I happily enfolded her in my arms, a place I wanted her to stay forever...and because I was alive that was a future I could enjoy. I hadn't anticipated surviving my sacrifice, but I was utterly grateful for a second chance, one I wanted nothing more than to spend exclusively with the woman I loved.

My beauty.