

~Gladen's Perspective ~ The Spell Lifts~

This wasn't at all how I'd expected my confession of love to go. Admittedly I'd been too anxious to fully allow myself to imagine this moment, for my insecurities often caused my mind to create less than ideal scenarios—ranging from my fumbling the attempt, making a besotted fool of myself, or worse, Dahlia rejecting me—and I wanted nothing to cause me to lose my nerve.

Only my desperation for her to return my love had given me the strength to finally say the words, and admitting the depth of my feelings seemed to have gone well enough, as had the kiss that had followed, which I knew my mind never would have been able to accurately imagine, no matter my best attempts.

But the rest of the moment wasn't going at all like I'd expected. Dahlia seemed overly anxious, which only escalated my own wildly pounding heart. Her words whirled around me as she told me she wasn't truly Dahlia and of her regrets for harming me, none of which made any sense, but her distress as she spoke was real—it filled her eyes and lined her voice, compelling her to resist my every touch.

Confusion puckered my brow at the worry shrouding Dahlia's expression and my concern deepened. I tried to sort through her words but couldn't make sense of them. But whatever she meant, one thing was certain: nothing would change how I felt about her.

I ached to reassure her. "No matter what you did, nothing will change. I promise. For I love you."

Though I meant the words, I still felt shy saying them, as well as a bit awed, especially after the years I'd spent envisioning a loveless future. But though I hoped my words would reassure her, instead her distress only deepened.

"And I love you," she said slowly, causing my heart to lift in joy. "Even though I don't deserve you."

She feared she didn't deserve me? Was that what was troubling her? I'd spent years searching for a woman like her, and despite my own mistakes and insecurities that there was nothing to recommend me but my title, if anyone should feel they didn't deserve the other...it was me.

I opened my mouth to protest but paused at the anxiety twisting her expression. "My assurances to the contrary will be better received when I give them after learning why you think as you do. Please share your burden with me."

She took a steadying breath and met my gaze, her own wide with unmistakable fear, a look I'd do anything to erase. "The easiest way to explain is by showing you."

She extracted her hands from mine and I missed her touch the moment she pulled away and stood. I opened my mouth to call her back, but before I could she closed her eyes. Her lips moved soundlessly, whispering words I couldn't hear.

I startled as glistening light surrounded her, a glow I'd only seen in the presence of magic. My limbs stiffened and I made to stand in order to go to her...but I found I couldn't move, transfixed as I watched.

The light slowly began to fade, and with it, Dahlia—

I had no words to describe what happened. One moment I was looking at Dahlia... and the next, it was *still* Dahlia, and yet...

My breath hooked sharply. No. It couldn't...*what?*

I stared at her in disbelief, for though nothing about her appearance had changed, it was suddenly Enchantress Astrid standing before me. But...how could that be? Was Dahlia...*Astrid?* But if so, how had I not...? I didn't understand.

I had little time to sort out the puzzle when she took a steadying breath and slowly opened her eyes to meet my gaze. She didn't speak for a long moment, nor could I. Instead I simply stared at her in shock.

"You're—" My eyes widened as I stared intensely at her face, trying to make sense of what I was seeing...and why I was seeing it. "Enchantress...Astrid?" I said the name hesitantly, hoping my eyes were playing tricks on me, still not quite believing that what I was seeing was truly real.

But she only nodded. "Yes, I am Enchantress Astrid."

My heart sank. I didn't answer, only continued staring, blinking rapidly as if the gesture could dispel the vision before me. But it remained Enchantress Astrid. The longer I stared at her, the less I could deny who she was. But...she just couldn't be. I... didn't understand.

As if sensing my confusion she finally spoke, offering the explanation I both wanted and feared. "One stormy night I called upon you to gift you a rose, one I had placed a curse upon. The magic worked, disfiguring your appearance."

Icy dread filled me and I swallowed. It took me several attempts to find my voice. "It was you?" My disbelief caused my tone to come out harder than I intended.

"It was me," she said weakly. "I'm the one who cursed you." Her eyes were glassy, as if she were near tears. My heart wrenched in regret, but I was still too shocked to move to comfort her, though there was admittedly another reason I remained still.

Emotion was slowly overcoming me—the bitterness I'd experienced most of my life seeped over me, sharp and burning, and with it came anger...and hurt that I'd finally found joy only for it to be snatched away with her unwanted confession.

These feelings made it impossible to speak. The longer the silence lasted, the further the space I felt stretching between us. After a moment's hesitation she settled on the bench beside me and without conscious thought I found myself scooting away, not because I didn't want to be near her, but because I needed distance to sort out the revelation and all its implications, an impossible task when my mind was still numb with disbelief...and hurt.

Dahlia, my Dahlia, the woman I loved, had been the one to curse me, the one who'd stolen everything, and thus the one I'd been so upset with I'd become certain I hated her, the one whose actions remained an unresolved mystery.

"I—don't understand," I managed. "I've never understood. *Why...why* did you curse me?"

Desperation twisted her expression as she leaned forward. "Because I was blinded by my own anger. At the time I thought seeking revenge was the only path open to me; an enchantress only resorts to such measures for a reason, and at the time I felt I had ample reason to do what I did."

I stared, still perplexed...and hurt. If anything both emotions only deepened with her fumbled explanation. "But...*why*?"

"You hurt my sister." Her words came out sharp, biting. "You broke her heart when you slighted her in the garden, *this* garden. She'd finally managed to heal after our parents' deaths, and your rejection despite your past friendship caused her to slip back into that darkness. I thought you a conceited prince who cared nothing for others' feelings, least of all my dear sister's. I wanted you to pay for what you did, and because I have magic, it seemed the perfect way to enact my revenge...so I did. And at the time I relished it."

With every word the pain filling my heart deepened. Her *sister*? *That* was the reason behind her devastating curse? "I—don't remember doing such a thing."

She snorted. "Of course you don't. But I do. Thus I chose a curse that would reflect the state of your heart; the fact it changed you only proved your guilt."

Her words were hard, without any trace of the soft affection that had been between us only moments before, an affection I felt slipping through my fingers no matter how desperately I tried to cling to it.

The loss was acute, opening the wound in my heart further and causing my pain to deepen. I felt it seep over me, bringing with it anger for what she'd done, for forcing me to care for her only for her to take away the dream I had only just begun hoping was real.

"You'd condemn me so easily?" I managed, my voice hard.

"You were cold and cruel," she said. "So yes, I did."

I ached to argue, but the more I considered her words, the more I realized how true they were. "I...likely did as you said. I found the attention of fawning women wearying, for each reminded me that no one could see past my title, and thus I'd never find someone who could truly love me."

My anger shifted towards myself for having offended her enough to lead her to do something so drastic. With it my despair grew as I felt what I most wanted slip further away, brought about by my own shortcomings. Whereas I'd always hated my title for getting in the way of the love I'd always wanted, now it was only my own faults coming to haunt me. In my insecurity I'd feared I didn't deserve love and would never be able to find it, only to see it coming true before my eyes.

I lifted my gaze to meet hers, swirling with deep remorse, the same emotion I couldn't escape. "My actions were wrong, but did they truly warrant such a punishment?"

She sighed. "At the time, I thought it fitting, but it went wrong. It touched me too, and because of the hatred I felt towards you at the time, I suffered the same fate. In my desperation to break the curse, I disguised myself so you wouldn't know who I was and..."

"...got close to me." My despair only escalated as this horrible truth settled over me. "That's the only reason you were able to look past my title, past my disfigurement.

It was never about *me*, but only yourself. At the time I thought you were different, but I should have known no one would ever see me as anything more than a prince.”

“But I *do* see you.” Desperation wrenched each word. “Whatever I felt before is gone now that I know you for who you truly are. And because I do, everything is different. But I was afraid the truth would change what we’ve created, so I wanted to hide it. But that isn’t love. I had to tell you, despite knowing it might cause me to lose you.”

For a moment her words pierced my whirling emotions, allowing a sliver of hope to penetrate my hardening heart...before it faded, not because I didn’t find her sincere, but because the wound she’d opened had only reminded me of my many inadequacies, which slowly snatched the hopes I had for the future I yearned for one by one until none remained.

“How can there be love without trust? Could I ever trust you after what you did to me—not just the curse but the lies that followed, ones you still kept from me even after things were changing between us?” I took a steadying breath. “Was any of it even real, or was it all a trick of magic?”

“Magic can’t create love,” she said.

“How do I know that’s true when I’ve witnessed firsthand that it can create not only revenge and deceit, but false hope when it made me wrongly believe I could finally obtain what I’ve always wanted?”

Her expression crumpled. “So I am losing you after all, despite your promise I never would.” Though I knew it was inevitable, my own heart broke all the same.

My heart protested her words, causing me to hesitate, but my hurt was currently stronger, as was the anger over the sense of injustice I felt had been dealt me—not only towards the curse she’d inflicted but that she’d made me care for her only for me to lose her. “That promise was made to Dahlia, a woman who’s nothing more than an illusion. You are not who I thought you were.”

And unable to bear being around her a moment longer, I left her alone in the garden.

If only leaving Dahlia—no, *Astrid*, I reminded myself—behind would allow me to also escape the memories, the hurt, and even my feelings towards her, but they only followed me, lingering to work on my thoughts and my heart.

Since she remained in my favorite refuge, the rose garden, I went to the library instead, yet I found very little comfort there. The room contained too many memories—they filled the shelves of books we'd read together, the alcove where we'd spent hours conversing. Everywhere I turned she was there, recollections that were still sweet even as they now stung, for they reminded me of what I'd just lost.

I'd been foolish to think I could keep the happiness I'd found. So utterly foolish.

The library pressed in on me, suffocating. Unable to remain trapped within its walls of memories any longer I left. With every step through the corridors I felt my dark emotions working on my heart, and halfway to my room I felt a familiar prickling sensation on my hand, causing me to freeze.

Horror cinched my chest. *No.*

At first I couldn't bear to look and see the evidence of what I knew would be there, but eventually I couldn't risk stealing a peek. I slowly lifted my hand eye level, gaping in horror at the sight that greeted me—blotchy, wart-coated skin, signifying that the curse had returned.

For a moment I simply stared in disbelief, an emotion that had been present ever since learning Astrid and Dahlia were one and the same and one I was quickly growing tired of. Before her revelation the curse had almost completely faded, making me believe it was gone forever, and now...no, no, *no.*

I gaped at the disfigurement marring my skin before my desperation, already so close to the surface, rose. I tried to frantically rub the warts off, but they remained, the curse too powerful to be so easily overcome. The more I tried to rid myself of it, the tighter my desperation cinching my heart became, squeezing relentlessly.

My emotions were rising, all the anger, hurt, bitterness, and sense of injustice that the woman I cared for had been the one to hurt me, stealing her and our future from me. The longer these dark feelings filled my mind, the more I felt my skin prickle—the curse was strengthening, spreading from my hand up my arm.

I released a growl of frustration as well as several choice cursings towards Enchantress Astrid as I stomped to my room. Each dark thought I felt towards her not only escalated the curse but was like a stab to my heart, each muttered curse burned my tongue, feeling like a lie and a betrayal. How could I feel such dark emotions towards the woman deep down I knew I still loved?

I gave my head a rigid shake. No, I didn't love her. How could I love someone who'd deceived me, hurt me, and taken away my chance for love and a happy marriage?

The moment I entered my room and slammed the door behind me my gaze settled on the rose Astrid had given me, still residing in a vase on my nightstand. I froze, my breaths coming up short as I stared. Thanks to the enchantment placed on it the rose still remained in full bloom, and like the magic placed upon it I knew that no matter what happened, my own love for Astrid would never wilt. Despite being buried beneath my hurt and insecurity, it was still there.

And suddenly, I realized what I was feeling wasn't anger towards Astrid...but fear. My own insecurities that I could really have what I most longed for had compelled me to push her away before she left on her own, and these fears had allowed my bitterness towards the loveless future I didn't want to fill my heart, crowding out the love that I still felt and always would.

I lifted my hand to stare at the warts marring my skin, even as Astrid's words returned to me, explaining the nature of the curse...one that reflected what was inside my heart.

I lowered my hand and shifted my focus to the rose, allowing the meaning behind it to work on my hardened heart. Astrid hadn't taken anything away, *I* had. She'd only sought forgiveness, offering me a chance to prove myself and my devotion...and I'd failed when I'd rejected her sincere apology.

How could I deserve her mercy after what I'd done to her?

She felt these same feelings and fears before confessing to you. The thought prickled my conscience. I'd seen her hesitancy, her fear of my rejection, her worries over my reaction. I'd assured her nothing would change how I felt about her...and nothing had. In my shock and hurt I'd reacted badly, a response I now fiercely regretted.

The realization brought with it a fresh wave of remorse. But just as my feelings hadn't changed towards her despite what she'd done, perhaps hers too remained, notwithstanding my own mistake.

I seized the rose and sank onto the edge of my bed, twirling it by its stem as I stared at it. Astrid had given it to me to remind me of my worth, a symbol that she saw

something deeper in me than I could see in myself. Would this vision allow her to forgive me and allow me a second chance?

For I loved her, even now, and had been a fool in allowing any other emotion to make me forget those precious feelings.

I lifted my cursed hand once more. What was in my heart now? Not a lack of love, but hurt. But like my earlier bitterness had gradually dispelled, I could allow the wound caused by these feelings to heal as well. And I would.

Despite my determination, it took some time. Over the next several days I worked through my pain, focusing not on it but instead on stoking the beautiful emotions brought by my love in order to dispel the last of my bitterness.

And gradually...my hurt faded away, leaving behind only my shame for my reaction towards Astrid, my fears I no longer deserved her, and my reservations at the thought of approaching her in order to make amends for how I'd treated her. But though I was afraid to approach her after how I'd treated her, I missed her too much to stay away for long.

Finally I gathered enough strength to seek her own forgiveness. I set out, my determination to make things right and my longing to be with her growing as I walked towards the Enchantress's cottage on the other side of the royal grounds.

My love swelled with every step, each which further dispelled the last of my reservations until none remained. Even if she rejected my apology, I would do everything I could to make things right. For now that I'd found love I wouldn't toss it aside, especially due to fear, but would instead fight for it. Not only did I deserve happiness, but so did she. No matter what she'd done, Astrid deserved to be loved.

And I wouldn't rest until I proved it to her.