

A CURSE OF ROSES SIDE STORY

A [👑]Crown of
Thorns and Roses



MARIA B MOSES

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Part I: Lilly The Fall

I sat at the piano, staring at my outstretched fingers as they lay on the keys, barely touching them. It had been only five days since I'd left Glorus, completing my trials and breaking my family curse.

And in those five days I'd done little more than sleep. The exhaustion hit me in waves. I was fine the first day, a little groggy but then it came at me with a vengeance. I could barely keep my eyes open. My father explained that it was the *Arcania* withdrawals, that my body was adjusting to the lack of it, and he assured me it would get better with time.

Today was the first day I'd found the strength to do more than lay in bed watching movies and scrolling on my phone, which, I was pretty sure, was slowly inducing brain rot. I was itching to move and do something, but I had no energy to do it. Most of it was because of the *Acrania* withdrawals but I knew, deep down, it was also because when I opened my eyes and found myself not in a forest or a palace, but instead in my cozy room, my heart ached. I spent a little time every morning staring at the empty space next to my bed. I swear I could feel him next to me. *Alix*. Those glittery blue eyes and charming smile were in my dreams, and my heart cracked ever so slightly when I woke up to nothing but air.

My longing for Glorus was something fierce. It was as though something was taken—snatched from my very soul, and all that remained was a gaping hole shaped like nothing that this world had. All I could hope for was that it would become small enough that I wouldn't notice it because I couldn't imagine it ever going away.

But who knows, it'd only been five days.

I closed my eyes, took a breath and pressed down on the keys, letting the sounds vibrate in my head. I played our piece, '*Flowers for your Curse*,' but only my parts. It was beautiful but incomplete.

The solo turned a sound that was once warm and hopeful into something lonely and sad. Tears began to build behind my eyes, but I held them at bay, determined to finish the song. When I played the final note, after a brief pause, the note Alix and I hit together, I sucked in a sharp breath and gripped the ring at my chest.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. There wasn't supposed to be a sense loss after my time in Glorus. But there was, and I felt it like a cold blade that didn't cut skin but burned all the same.

"That was pretty."

I smiled a sad smile.

"It is, isn't it? I got to play it to a crowd of people just before the first snowfall. I even got a raging round of applause," I said, turning on my stool to face my mother.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something had changed about her. Perhaps it was the way she looked at me, like she thought I was an illusion, and she was bracing for my disappearance.

I stood from my seat and strode up to hug her. I'd been mostly comatose the last few days and had barely seen her except when she fed me and called to make sure I was okay. I hadn't had an opportunity to express how sorry I was for everything I put her and dad through.

"What? You want something? Are you hungry?"

I smiled against her shoulder. "Yes. Fed me, please?"

I sat at the kitchen island while mom cooked up something fresh. It was unnecessary since there were leftovers in the fridge, but I wasn't about to talk my way out of a hot meal.

I stared at my mother's slight frame as she worked, she had her locks down and clipped out of her face so they lay at her midback. She wore a simple skirt and top that I'd seen dozens of times over the years. Even this image of her cooking, the way the sunlight shone into the kitchen, bouncing light off steel and glass, the smell of spices, the sound of a pot brought to a simmer that made my stomach rumble and mouth salivate—there was nothing new or special about any of it; and yet I found myself watching on as though it were the most precious thing I'd ever seen. And maybe it was, maybe the simplicity of it was precious.

"Tell me the truth miss princess, what do you prefer, my food or palace food?"

"Your food," I answered immediately.

She paused and turned to look at me with doubt in her eyes.

"Seriously." I shrugged. "You have some tough competition out there and it's a close second, but your food is the best there is."

"No ingredient compares to a mother's love I suppose."

I smiled at her back. Watching her for another minute.

“Mom, why’d you marry dad?”

I don’t know how I expected my mother to react, but laughter wasn’t it. The sound made me blink, and I wished I still had my Glorian hearing so I could truly hear the timbre of the light and flowery sound. It was different to my boisterous laughter. Mine came from the stomach while hers seemed to radiate from her chest.

“I liked him,” she answered,

I waited. “That’s it?”

“What more is there?” she shrugged. “I really liked him. I liked who I was with him. I liked that even when we fought, I still felt loved. I liked that even when it wasn’t easy it was still fun enough to keep us going. I liked...that I loved him and he loved me even more.”

Her voice became tender as she spoke, and I was enthralled by her words. There was a pure truth—a simple truth.

“It also helped that he had a good head on his shoulders,” she added with a chuckle.

I smiled but my lips quickly fell. “What about the curse...how did you...I mean...”

What did I mean, what was I trying to ask?

“I admit when he first told me about it, I thought he was crazy or trying to scare me off in the strangest breakup attempt. But I knew him, I knew he was telling me the truth. And when I met your grandparents, and they confirmed it, well...that was that.”

I shook my head. “And you just accepted it?”

“There was no ‘just’ about it. I had to think about what it meant for me, and for you. You weren’t even a concept. I

couldn't even fully comprehend what it all could mean. I was scared," she admitted. "I was so scared."

My mom stopped cooking. She hadn't turned to face me once since she started speaking. Now she was still, as though lost in the memory of the fear she once had. All I could think, was that I had made that fear all too real.

"I'm sorry, mom," I said in a broken whisper, tears welling up. "I'm sorry I—" I took a shaky breath. "I'm sorry for everything."

She turned to face me, shaking her head. "I made my choice. I faced my fears, and I would say I was rewarded. Can you say the same?"

I frowned. *Could I?* "I think so."

"Think about it," she pressed.

My choices derailed the destiny of a prince and basically blacklisted his friends—my friends. I arguably left each kingdom worse than when I arrived. I beat up one of the Hiaven princes. Two people were left comatose with unknown ailments—one of them a Crown—when I left Revena; and although it wasn't my fault, I still felt a pinch of guilt. As for Moremi, well I would say I humiliated the King. But what really made me uneasy was the effect it would all have on Tamikar and the trouble it would cause Alix and everyone once he became king.

The only place I left uneffaced was Halibel and that was only because it was abandoned.

I sighed, weighed down by the consequences of my actions. It was quite the mess I left behind. Jenos would probably curse me every day for the rest of his life.

My mom placed a plate of fried rice in front of me. There was still steam rising from the plate. I stared at the colourful meal; my appetite diminished from remembering all the trouble I'd caused.

"You must have been lonely," my mother said, taking a seat. "What?"

"When you were in Glorus, before you met your prince." She smirked at me, then her smile fell. "You've been lonely before and it was hard then too. Add a foreign world and all the curse nonsense and you probably clung to the only thing that wouldn't make you feel that way."

I ducked my head, blood rushing in shame. *Was that it? Was I really so lame?*

"You've always leapt first, looked later," she continued. "If you could convince yourself everything would be okay in the moments while you were still in the air, the fall didn't seem so bad."

I frowned and whispered, "I'm sorry."

We sat in silence for a moment. I felt like parts of me were crumbling. All my mistakes were coming back to me and chipping away at who I was.

"The fall was never so bad in the end," my mom finally said, breaking the silence. She took a spoonful of rice to eat.

"I don't know. I think this time..."

"You made friends and had an adventure," she said, as though it were that simple. "That's what it sounded like when you told me the story. It was grand and it was messy, but it's yours."

I blinked at her, the memories coming back with new force. The games we played and the stories we shared. The times I'd

sparred with Ryalie, teased Jenos, and smiled with Alle. Then there was Alix, every moment with him was burned into my existence. I faced down Crowns in a way that would have made my parents proud. I worked hard and overcame challenges, no matter what they were. I got to travel to another world, eat good food with good people every day. I tamed beasts and rode the most beautiful creature I was lucky enough to call mine.

I pressed my hand to my chest where Alix's ring had never left. It was always warm from my body heat and when I looked at it, I saw his eyes looking back. The thought of removing it was physically painful. I wasn't ready to let go yet.

"I guess the fall wasn't so bad."

My mom chuckled. "Eat, before it gets cold."

Part II: Alix Treasure Vault

'...and there was light after the war. There were new maps and new dreams. Flowers found the will to grow and thus people did the same,' Alix read. He'd been in the library for less than an hour, finding comfort in the silence here more than the emptiness of his room. Scholars and aids occupied the space with him, but they kept their distance, wary eyes finding him every so often. It would have been awkward if he could find the will to care.

But that was the problem, he didn't care. He didn't care that most of those who worked in the palace looked at him with distrust or distress. They didn't know his story—their story.

The prince ran a hand through his tangled mane of long bedhead and sighed in frustration. He was supposed to be getting back to what his life was supposed to be, but he was struggling to make it through each day. So much was going undone, preparations and promises going unfulfilled.

He closed the book in his hand, a book of romanticized history telling the story of how King Enver ended The War of Bloods. It painted him as valiant, true and almost entirely without fault. He was the king that all who were of his blood were meant to aspire to be. Alix almost laughed, he fell short

of his own mother's expectation, he had no hope of reaching that of an ancient king's.

He turned his hand over, studying the lines of his palms, and imaged her hand there. Their length, their warmth, the feel of them. He took a breath to curb the craving to have her within arm's reach again, to wake up to her tired green eyes, to hear her laughter that was a roar of joy every time. His chest ached and he had no way to ease the pain. She was the only remedy, and she was gone.

"You don't sleep enough."

Alix looked up to find Jenos taking the seat in front of him, distracting him from the ache. The knight frowned at his prince, brown eyes disappointed.

But of course.

"I find it hard to sleep lately."

"Without her by your side." Not a question. The challenge in his voice was unmistakable. As was the frustration. "It's been a week."

"Ten days," Alix corrected. It felt longer—so much longer.

Something flashed in Jenos's eyes, something Alix didn't recognise, hurt or maybe understanding, but it was gone too quickly. "The world doesn't stop just because she's gone."

A dull ache pressed on Alix's chest in response to his knight's words. They were true, the world didn't stop, but it slowed, and he languished in the spiraling march of time.

"You can't stop either."

Jenos still cared. He worked tirelessly to get everything back to how they were. Speaking to the queen in Alix's stead to start work for his coronation. Communicating with Revena to re-

establish a connection and ensure his engagement was secure. The plan was to announce it all in one night.

He was the only one who still believed that they could get back to the time before Lilly. Alix knew many thought the knight was naive but that wasn't the case. Jenos understood the only way forward was to move, this was just the direction he chose.

"The knight candidates," Jenos started, "I saw you personally suggested two Glorians, a warrior and a healer."

It took a second for Alix to realise Jenos was talking about the trainees from Syver that would soon arrive at the palace as hopefuls to secure a knighthood. They should've hosted a few by now but they'd been away for so long helping Lilly with her trials.

"Yes, Lilly recommended them," Alix said.

Jenos paused, his brows furrowing in thought. "I see. Okay then."

"That's it? No push back, or questions?"

"I trust her judgment," Jenos relented.

Alix smiled at him; it was an admittedly cheeky smile but there was genuine pleasure in there as well. He'd worried about Jenos and Lilly's relationship but was glad that at the very least there was respect.

Jenos sighed, annoyed at the look Alix gave him. "Aretia will be here soon. Two, maybe three days from now. I need you to co-operate. Don't be afraid to slip in an apology as well."

Alix almost laughed. It was rare to hear so much bite in Jenos's tone. In truth, Alix and Aretia had already talked in length, and he'd apologised the night after her trial while Lilly lay injured between them. She apologised for forcing her love

on him and he apologised for not loving her the way she deserved and not having the courage to tell her sooner.

She cried, and he didn't look away. He let the guilt and shame soak into his bones and ache there all night, and days after.

"Will Jimi be coming as well?" Alix asked, fixing Jenos with a look.

Jenos twitched. "Of course she will."

"For Aretia or you?"

"Stop this, Alix," Jenos warned.

The prince shook his head, shaking loose a flood of emotions he couldn't break free from. It was late, and he was tired, and Jenos was right, he wasn't sleeping enough.

"You don't have to marry her."

"It's for the best."

"Who's best?" Alix cried. "Not hers, not yours and not—"

"Don't," Jenos warned. "I will fulfil my duty as you will yours."

Alix shook his head. "You are ridiculous."

They stayed in tense silence, neither looking at the other. Alix tapped his finger on the book, clenching his jaw. Jenos was his oldest friend and although they didn't always agree on everything, Alix wanted him to be happy, whereas Jenos just wanted him to be a good king. Did he think that Alix then wanted him to be a good knight? He didn't need to marry Jimi, but it admittedly would keep to tradition and be a show of good will. But he could refuse, and Alix would happily make a different arrangement, all he need do was ask.

"She deserves better," Jenos suddenly said, breaking the silence. "Alle. She deserves someone better."

Alix frowned. “If you believe that, couldn’t you simply be better?”

They looked at each other, vulnerable and raw. Jenos’s eyes saying, *‘it’s not that easy,’* and Alix responding, *‘but isn’t it?’*

“There you are.”

Both prince and knight turned their heads to where Ryalie was coming towards them with a book in his hand. He took a seat—dark eyes wild, and purple hair held back with an assortment of clips at the crown of his head.

“And why are you awake?” Jenos asked.

“Sneaking into the royal treasure vault. I wanted a peak at Alix’s crown.” Ryalie looked to the prince. “It’s ugly, not worth stealing.”

Alix snorted while Jenos did a poor job of hiding his annoyance.

“But I did find this,” Ryalie said presenting them with the book he’d brought with him.

It was an old journal, bound with a rusted buckle and rotting at the edges. When Alix touched the cover, which appeared blank, he noticed a pattern imprinted on the soft material. He couldn’t make it out, but it was circular, detailed with some sort of shape in the centre, a letter perhaps.

“Put it back Ryalie,” Jenos demanded.

Ryalie snatched the book with a grin. “After I’m done. No one will miss it. It was hidden under a bunch of bloody clothes in this old chest.”

Alix frowned. He didn’t frequent the vault as much as Ryalie did, but he wasn’t familiar with a chest with such contents. The vaults held treasures that past Crowns had acquired, most of it had true worldly value but a few were sentimental. A painting,

a preserved flower, a note, books and diaries, among other things. The vault was where Alix had acquired the materials to make Lilly's ring.

The thought of her brought him low, rooted him in the reality of her absence yet again. He wondered if she kept the ring, if she still wore it. If seeing it made her think of him. He wished he had something of hers, something more than his memories to haunt him.

"Oh, this is very old," Ryalie said, bringing Alix back. He'd broken the buckle and opened the book. "Very, very old."

"And very delicate," Jenos growled.

"It's Enver's."

That made Alix and Jenos straighten in attention. All of Enver's belongings were preserved and kept in a separate, smaller vault that Ryalie was not aware of because it resided within the bedroom of the king and queen. To avoid any chance of disaster, Alex and Jenos kept that information to themselves.

"Are you certain?" Jenos asked. Alix could see him holding his panic at bay.

"Hmm," Ryalie said and flipped through the brittle pages. "It's poetry. Some I recognise, a lot I don't. There're some thoughts on the war, anger at his family..." He droned on, absorbed by his readings. "A lot of love poems. A scary amount. Guess the historians were right."

Alix snorted. The story that Enver had a love that he lost, one that was unrequited but all-consuming in nature, was well known. Despite him being recognised as a man of swift action and courage, he was brought low by whoever he'd loved. There were guesses as to who the subject of his affection was, but no

one could be sure, but everyone agreed it was not the woman he ultimately made his queen.

“I hide my heart in the past so I may rule as she promised I would,” Ryalie mumbled.

Alix frowned. Maybe he and the once ancient king had more in common than he initially thought. He wished it was a happier resemblance.

“Maybe I can find something about those swords the Glories mentioned in here,” he said, flipping through the pages. “I can’t find them anywhere.”

Alix frowned. He’d completely forgotten about that. He’d never heard of them, they were not mentioned in his history education, family records—nothing. If the source of the information were not the Glories he’d think they were a myth.

“Put that back when you’re done.” Jenos glared at Ryalie.

The knight in question gave a non-committal grunt, but Alix and Jenos knew he would do it. No matter what he took from the vaults he always returned them once he was done admiring or studying it.

Alle suddenly appeared, taking a seat, looking displeased. Her arrival was so sudden that it took Alix a second too long to react. “To what do we owe the pleasure of the Lady’s presence?”

“An inability to sleep,” she replied. “I’m uneasy.”

That made Ryalie peek up from the journal.

Alle tossed a letter on the table. “From Moremi, the queen has fallen ill.”

“And they’re calling for your aid?” Jenos asked, taking the letter. He stared hard at it. “She’s fallen asleep and won’t wake?”

Alle nodded. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about Jali and Sylvette—the state they were in. *Arcania* depletion without natural healing. I’ve never seen anything like it. What if this is the same?”

They hadn’t spoken of it since that night. Lilly pressed for answers but when Rion shut her down, he essentially brought them all to silence. The princess was left in the Glory’s hands, and they presumed she was taken care of, but no news of her wellbeing had reached them. No news of her state of being had reached them at all. The Crowns seemed to be keeping what happened a secret. As such, neither Alix nor his friends had brought it up again.

“It’s not a new sickness,” Alle said. “I don’t believe it is anyway.”

“Then what?” Jenos asked.

Alle frowned. “That’s the problem. I don’t know. I don’t like not knowing.”

“I don’t like when you don’t know either. It’s one of the few things that makes me truly uneasy,” Alix said.

“That and the queen.” Ryalie smirked, flipping a page.

No use denying that.

Jenos folded the letter. “For now, I think you should see to the queen. I will ask—”

“Oh!” Ryalie jumped, staring at a page with wide eyes. “I think I know who...” his eyes sparkled with excitement as he looked up from the journal, but it faded as he stared at their newest guest that had appeared.

Rion stared at them with a frown and bright brown eyes. His features were passive if not a little annoyed. “You’re all together,” he said.

Alix raised his brows. He hadn't questioned how they all gathered in one place despite the magnitude of the palace. No matter where they were they always found a way to meet up eventually. They always found each other.

"No greetings?" Rion asked.

"It's late," Alle said, glaring. "We're tired."

Rion scrunched his nose at her but sighed in resignation. He then pulled out two small purple crystals and held them out to them. "This is purple ameris, it will take you to Lilly."

Everyone was on their feet now, eyes staring at the gems that glowed faintly with their own light. Alix had never even seen ameris that colour let alone heard of ameris capable of such things. Rion stared at them, no falsehoods in his gaze.

"Purple ameris," Ryalie murmured. "That's what she was talking about."

Before Alix could question Ryalie, Jenos spoke, "Please explain yourself. Why do you want us to go to where Lilly is?"

"She needs to come back, that is all I can say for now."

"You promised she would not have to return if she does not wish to," Jenos argued. "And we need more of a reason to venture across worlds."

"More of a reason than a chance to see her again?" Rion asked, staring at the prince.

Alix swallowed, he didn't need more. He would have grabbed the ameris and been on his way if he knew how.

"For some of us, yes," Jenos grumbled.

Rion sighed. "There is no need to force her. Tell her she needs to return. She will return."

Doubt plagued their minds, but Rion sounded so certain. Why would she return when she worked so hard to leave?

There was nothing for her here, Alix thought and dealt a blow to himself as a result. Nothing to make her stay and nothing to bring her back.

“Does this have something to do with Ibis?” Alle asked. They all looked at her questioningly. She shook her head. “Before we left Moremi, she hugged me and apologised. I wasn’t sure then, but it was like she knew *something* would happen.”

Rion stared at the healer and there was a look like pity in his eyes. “Something,” he said, as though regretting the word. He walked up to Alix and pressed one of the gems into his palm. The Glory’s fingers were hot to the touch. “Tell her to come back, and when she’s ready, bring her.”

He threw the second gem against a wall, and the wall rippled, becoming liquid, a light shining where the gem hit.

Alix wished he could say he hesitated, that he questioned the motives behind the Glory’s actions, the ominous meaning behind the word ‘*something*,’ but he didn’t. He walked forward with thoughts of her pulling him forward. He didn’t know if she would come back, but he would go to her—run after her one more time.

Part III: Zalia Cages

He'd been gone for several days, longer than any other time.

Zalia walked the halls, checking in on her people who occupied the rooms. Many families shared one room, creating makeshift beds with the abundant pillows, mattresses and blankets within the palace. It struck her as odd that the Glories would have bedrooms. Many of them. More than they could need. *Did they host guests in the past? Surely not.*

She opened the last of the doors and swept her gaze over the darkened room where many of the children slept deeply but in disarray. She smiled at the look of their small, round faces. They were happy and well feed. Things were better here. Though no one had broken the habit of communal sleeping because they preferred to stay close to each other at night.

Zalia slept wherever she could lay her head. That too hadn't changed with freedom. She often found herself waking curled up on a chair and always with a blanket she'd never placed. A blanket no one had seemingly placed. There was no other person it could be, but she did not imagine *he* held such care for her. If he did, would he have disappeared moments after telling her she would be leaving to retrieve Lilly with little explanation?

He'd gone and said there was something he needed, something vital for the future of Glorus.

There was no keeping away the fear that crept over her skin once he'd gone. It was hard to breath, like a weight kept her lungs heavy. As she stood now, in the palace hall filled with emptiness that somehow made the large space small, surrounded by silence and the absence of all life but hers, she battled that fear. She willed herself not to fall to her knees, not to think of all he'd said and done. He was their saviour, their provider, the one who set them free. She had no say about what he did with his freedom.

Zalia blinked, felt him like the tugging of a chain in her chest. It was never painful, but it was there. A tether that bound them.

She walked the halls silently, heartbeat in her ears. As she opened the study door to find him—he stood a young man. His skin was rich, a warm golden tan, with sharp green eyes and a mess of red curls. He was tall, easily surpassing Zalia in both height and width. She couldn't help but feel uneasy by how much he'd changed from the young boy he'd been a few months ago.

“Welcome back,” Zalia said meekly.

He smirked at her, as though mocking her pitiful attempt at courtesy. “Thank you Zalia, it was...a worthwhile endeavour.” He placed a very large sack on the table, and it landed with an exceedingly loud crash that sounded like colliding stone.

Zalia stared at the sack, having the desire to both look closer and turn away.

“They're chains,” he said, answering the question she had no intention to ask.

She swallowed and nodded. There were several questions she should have asked, so many that lingered on her tongue, but she held it in. She found her ignorance was safe but in the way

cages were safe. There was no ease to be had within, but there was no pain from without. Even if whatever he would do with those chains was despicable, she could do nothing against him.

“Before you left, you said...” she couldn’t even finish the thought, the absurd, terrifying thought.

“That you will bring Lilly back,” he completed for her. “And you will. There were a few things I needed to procure beforehand, but rest assured I am ready.”

“Ready?” Zalia asked and cursed herself for it.

“Ready to fulfill my promise and make everything right.” There was something in the way his eyes went dark when he spoke, a shaded determination that would see the world burned before it died out. It made Zalia’s stomach clench and twist.

She would survive this, her people would survive this, Zalia thought, no matter if her choices were good or bad, she would protect them.

“Rest now,” he said and grabbed the sack of chains he brought causing them to let out a cacophony of unfortunate sounds. “Tomorrow, the work begins.”

Then he was gone, and she was left in the silence yet again.

Part IV: Kija

No

“I’m not enjoying this game you set up.”

The Queen of Moremi lay in her bed, in deep unshakable slumber. Kija stared at her, mostly annoyed but also a little regretful. Ibis knew he would come for her, there was a chance he would kill her, but she took the risk, said his nature was the preservation of life not the ending of it. Kija almost laughed at the absurdity but could not argue with the queen who saw more than anyone.

“You’re here.”

Kija did not turn to face the king despite the distress and relief in his words. She didn’t take her eyes off Ibis’s still figure. There was such peace on her face, was it simply because she was asleep, or did she have faith that all that she’d done would amount to whatever she hoped to achieve?

She’d never said what she wanted, Kija realised. She was not sure that their goals aligned at all, but she knew that the queen didn’t want a repeat of the past and that was good enough.

“Can you do anything for her?” King Demien asked. He was still behind the Glory, had not made any move to approach. There was urgency in his voice.

“No,” Kija answered. Ibis had given no indication that she wanted to be awoken.

The king said nothing.

The Glory finally turned to face him. He was unkept and the lack of sleep was evident in not just the dark circles under his eyes but even the slouch of his shoulders. Kija stared at him, young and proper, Prince Alix's older brother, Queen Ibis's chosen partner. He would never have become Tamikar's king and would have given it up for Ibis no matter the circumstance.

Kija smirked. She long since pulled out of the affairs of the Crowns and their world, but every so often she found herself drawn into their fuss.

"It's done." Rion appeared beside her, making the king jump.

Kija didn't look away from Demien. "The *Renai*," she said.

"Excuse me?" the king asked.

"I cannot do anything for her, but the *Renai* can. And if we're lucky, she will."

"But...but she is..." Kija wasn't sure the king knew what he was trying to say. "How?"

Kija shrugged. "Who's to say? Well Ibis is, but she can't now."

Demien was a mess of confusion and distress. Kija would have laughed if the sight wasn't so appropriate for the situation.

Kija's dark eyes met Rion's bright ones. "Shall we prepare for their arrival?"

"At the very least a burden will be lifted," Rion grumbled.

"For us, perhaps, but for the five of them, this will be just the beginning." Kija turned once more to the king. "Goodbye then. Hopefully this won't be the last you see of us, but if it is, be well king."

Part V: Blaze
Mine
(Special chapter)

I knew when she came into this world; felt her *Arcania* spark and bloom. The beginning of life, the first sounds of a heartbeat. *Mine*, I thought. A foreign feeling, not one shared by kiliabis, everything was ours by the natural order. We lived long and powerful lives and lived it wherever we pleased. There were not many of us in these lands, but I knew they all felt that presence as I did. That presence was a song in the blood.

I ran. Down the mountains, through the wilderness, and I did not stop except to drink, sustaining myself on the *Arcania* in the air. I followed my one desire to find her, before any of my kind could.

Mine, mine, mine...

The thought spurred me on, pushed my claws to dig deeper and sprint further and faster. The world was a bright and vivid thing that was sharp in my vision; colours melting and shifting as I moved from the mountains to the meadows and then forests. My ears twitched as my own limbs snapped and broke at the foliage around me, making all other beasts flee in fear of being hunted. They were not my prey, I sought no prey, I sought only what was mine.

I ran until the sun set, taking the warmth of the day with it. I'd passed a place where people gathered and lived, I'd once

wondered there and the stench of their fear was nauseating, the sound of their screams more so.

She would not be afraid of me, I thought, but there was doubt. How could I be sure?

I kept running through the night, fast and out of sight, keeping to where others would not encroach. I found others like me, but smaller and weaker. My anger caused me to snap my jaws at them, baring my fangs, growling with more voracity than I'd ever shown.

Mine, I warned them.

It was days later when I arrived. A forest like any other I'd passed but too close to where the *wrong-ones* lived. I saw her and my fur stood on end; the *Arcania* within me flowed with vigor despite not having rested in days.

She stood with another, male, taller with *Arcania* much like hers, *Arcania* of the wilds. He was an intrusion in my vision of her. She was perfect, she stood and looked like any of her kind would, but I could sense her power, smell it off her. I also smelt her anger and discomfort. She looked around at her surroundings in displeasure, but her eyes sought out something.

Is she looking for me? My ears perked at the thought, wishing to rush to her side, but stopped myself. I could not frighten her. I would watch for now.

And so, I watched her, from a distance, for many days. She would not always come out into the forest and when she did, she was not alone. I quickly realised the male with her was teaching her. I observed the way she clawed at her skin, tapped her foot and often let her gaze wander.

Restless.

The more I watched, the more I wanted to approach her, to test her courage, to see if she truly was mine as I had declared.

Then one day, she was alone, and she was running. I watched her dash through the gaps between the trees, swing off branches and climb, hopping from one to another. If my senses were not so sharp I would think she was running from something, but that was not fear in her racing heart, it was something lighter and freer.

She stopped suddenly and sat, resting her back against a tree trunk, her chest rising and falling as harsh breathes left her.

That is when I approached—slowly, creeping from the darkness I'd made my home for so long. She reacted immediately, coming to attention as I padded towards her. Her heartbeat remained fast, did not falter. I watched her closely for any fear and apprehension.

I stopped, staring down at her slumped figure. I realised she watched me as I watched her. We both watched each other—waiting.

She pushed off the ground, smacking the dirt off her body. A small creature, with great bright fur and dauntless eyes. She reached her small paw out to me, I sniffed at it, memorizing her scent, that of the forest, flowers, and something uniquely hers.

Mine.

I pushed into her, a rumble building within me at her heat and touch. She made a light sound, high and pleasant. I pulled back to look at her.

“Aren’t you beautiful,” she murmured.

Yes, I am. As are you, I thought, pushing into her yet again.

“Your fur is like fire on charcoal, a blaze of flames,” she said. I purred at the feel of her paws stroking through my fur. “I’ll

call you Blaze. You can be my friend. Would you like that? I would like that. It...gets lonely.”

I would be whatever she needed of me.

The days went on, many of those days I spent with her, at first in silence and slowly she began to talk more and more. There was a sadness in her I wanted to banish but I could do little more than give her my warmth.

It was later that she rode me for the first time. Her heartbeat was fast, her weight was almost nothing on my back, her claws digging and gripping my fur. I felt her breathe, the way she vibrated in excitement against me. I took it slow at first, simply trotting but her legs clenched as though urging me on and so my strides grew longer, and my speed increased. She made that sound, a pleasant one that meant she was happy, it was loud, wild and free.

“This is amazing,” she screamed, pushing me to greater speeds.

I liked running with her and I could feel when she wanted to run—when she needed it. I could understand her because I watched her. I wasn’t sure if she could tell, she would be walking alone and looking at her surroundings as though she sought me out but could not see me.

I was watching her on that day too, when she found the male bleeding. He was of no interest to me but when I smelled his blood on her paws, I smelt the *Arcania*, rich and powerful. I recognised the scent when he came back again. And again.

And when he came with others and they chased her. Was it a game? No, she was scared, she was angry. I watched. She was mine and so she was strong as I was strong. I’d never seen her fight; she fought well but she was poorly matched.

She ran away. I observed those she left behind, three males. I considered attacking them and ridding her of those who caused her pain, but the one she'd saved was there. I could still remember the smell of his blood. She'd called him a friend before—like me.

I remained back and watched them. But I did not go into the forest where the *wrong-one's* lived. I'd gone to the border of their territory a few times and once with mine and I knew never to trespass.

The males brought her back, unconscious but safe.

The days went on, and she began to change, her *Arcania* became more refined, her eyes shining brighter.

Until the incident when she inhaled the poison of the deadly flower and her body became very still.

“Lilly!” the male screamed, the scent of his fear was thick. “I need to save her. Alle—Alle, we need to get her to Alle.”

“Calm down, Alix. She'd be fine even without Alle—”

“She's not like us, what if she isn't!” he screamed back. “What if she...” he knelt and lifted her, frantically searching—for what, I don't know.

I emerged then. There was surprise in his wide eyes.

“Blaze,” the noisy one said. “It's Lilly's kiliabi.”

The male I knew by blood rushed towards me without hesitation. “Please, help. I need to get to my palace. I need to save her.”

His desperation was clear. He cared for mine. I could smell the truth of it behind the fear.

I nudged the other male, the quiet one I had carried on my back before. His body froze in place, but he quickly nodded in understanding.

I knelt for him. With some maneuvering he mounted my back, and I was racing through the forest. He gripped my fur, guiding my movements. I was unused to being commanded in this way, but he was gentle. Which is why I stayed when mine stayed where he guided me.

She made no move to leave and so I remained within reach, resting in the dense bushes and trees.

I could smell her, sense her anger, fear and happiness. I could sense no danger, but I could feel her turbulent emotions. It was the most I'd ever felt from her.

The snow fell and the next day she called for me, anger and sadness coming off her in waves.

She left that place but then was forced back, pleading that I do not help her, but I followed those who took her. I waited for her but felt her terror suddenly, it was sharp like the taste of blood on my tongue. The feeling forced a roar from my chest.

She emerged, fighting and free. *We can leave*, I thought. But she was taken once again, and I could only faintly sense her. She was too far away. I bared my fangs, anger coiling around my limbs, making my tails stand on end.

“Hush now.” The words came from one of *Arcania*. “All will be well.” At her small touch my anger was soothed into an idle thing, and I retreated to where I'd hidden before, to wait for the return of mine.

I felt the shattering of her *Arcania*, and I felt the melding of it.

I felt her return, but she did not come to me. I waited, but I was not in solitude. The nosy one would often come and stroke my fur, speaking, his eyes filled with wonder. The quiet one came with offerings, hesitant at first but just as filled with

wonder as the other. He did not speak, he watched, observed in silence. I liked him, his heartbeat was steady even when standing in front of me. He had *Arcania* like that of *mine*, *Arcania* for the wilds.

The last one came every night. He too had no fear in his heart and simply sat before me, staring with longing in his eyes. I stared back. *He was hers*, I thought. I liked his scent, his *Arcania* was strong as well. As the nights went on, he would get closer and closer until he rested against my fur, taking comfort in my warmth as she once did.

“You are all I have of her,” he said one night. My ears twitched at the sound of his voice. This was the first time he’d spoken. He continued, “she agreed to something crazy, something she may not survive...”

I huffed at his words.

He chuckled. “You’re right, she’ll survive. She’ll survive and then she’ll leave me.”

I tired growl vibrated through me.

“I’ll miss her. I’m losing my mind missing her now. I don’t know what I’ll do when she’s truly gone.” He paused. “I suppose I’ll just...live.”

His words made me ache. I had not seen mine in so long, but I was compelled to wait for her return believing the word of the one of *Arcania* that all will be well.

He stood before me now and lifted his arms, offering his paws. I sniffed at them, memorizing his scent like that of spring flowers and bitter seeds. It was warm and rich. I placed my head in his arms and rubbed against him.

“Lilly said you found her and because of you she wasn’t too lonely,” he said and wrapped his limbs around me. “Thank you, Blaze.”

I closed my eyes and huffed. What a strange male he was.

Mine returned. She was different, changed from our time apart, but when she saw me, she embraced me as she’d always done, radiating warmth, eyes glowing as she bared her fangs. She smelt of power born from blood.

Much had changed but she was still as she was to me. As she sat on my back, gripping my fur, I noticed she was heavier than before, her grip stronger, her posture more sure. She rode me the same, trusting I would not falter, would keep her safe. We did not run as we usually do, having to keep up with the other beasts her companions rode. She slept at my side when night fell and I often found the strange male watching her in her sleep, something in his eyes I did not understand.

We continued for a long time, I stayed by her side, watching, giving all that I could as we crossed great bodies of water again and again.

And then we stopped in a land unlike the others, a wildness to it I’d never felt and never knew I longed for. I prowled along, close to mine and her companions, until I was within one of their structures. I’d never been inside one, my eyes wandered, and I sniffed the air. There were others here. And something strange.

The nosy one suddenly jumped on my back. I shook my head, agreeing not to attack him before stalking away. He urged me on, and I obliged him, running. He was jovial, sounds coming out of him not unlike what mine often released.

I sniffed, smelling that strange thing again and moved towards it. I rammed my body through a barricade.

“Throne room,” he said, sliding off me. “And a thief.”

He referred to the small creature holding a shiny object in its hands. I prowled forward, a growl pulling my mouth back to reveal my fangs. I did not like it.

“I respect the greed, but that isn’t yours,” the male said, snatching the small thing. The creature released a shocked sound as the male lifted it up in his arms. “Are you alone?”

“I’m sorry,” it said but its eyes, dark and boundless, stared at me as it spoke. It did not look upon me in fear as most would, especially creatures so small.

I bared my fangs once more, ready to bite but then the male jumped onto my back with the creature in tow.

“Let’s find Lilly,” he said, and pulled for me to move. “She needs to see this crown. And the kid. I can’t leave you alone to wander this place. Too dangerous.”

I huffed. I did not like the thing on my back out of my sight, but I obeyed.

We found her and I rested for a moment, sinking into a space unfamiliar to me but not unfamiliar to my kind. I could smell another like me. The scent was long faded but it was there, it was comfortable.

From my resting place I watched the thing the loud one had released. He moved about the area with silent steps and grabbed an object out of my sight. It then came to me, baring its fangs.

“She is wonderful, isn’t she?” it said, looking in the direction mine had gone to—a space too small for me. “You did well

protecting her until now, I thank you. It won't be much longer now." Then he was gone.

I growled at the space it'd occupied.

Mine returned and we all moved back to where we'd started, her, the noisy one, and the strange one. Her other two companions were still gone—

My ears twitched at the sudden roar of fear, and mine was on my back before it'd even ceased. I ran towards it with the urgency I could hear in her heartbeat.

When I ran my senses sharpened, I could hear more and see even more clearly, details sharpened and became brighter. Which is how I smelled them before I saw them. My kind. More than I had ever seen gathered in one place.

Mine leapt off my back to her companion and I growled, stretching my claws out as I stood against a pack. The one before me was my equal, fangs bared, eyes slanted, muscles coiled for the attack. I could not let him out of my sight. He would be the first to attack.

"Stop!" Mine commanded.

My eyes darted to her as she stood between us. Her voice laced with the power I could smell on her the moment I'd met her. Mine was unbreakable and demanded obedience. I felt her command take hold of my limbs, bend them to her will, ring in my mind like a melody. It was not forced control but compulsion, an influence that swayed the heart.

The others began to swarm her, seeing clearly what she was.

I snapped my jaws at them. She was *mine*.

The days that followed were slow and mine remained at my side through most of the nights. I could sense a sadness in her.

It was in the way she stroked my fur and whispered stories to me, stories of our time together before she met her other companions. I licked the sadness that leaked from her face.

We arrived in the place where those of *Arcania* resided and the next day mine wrapped her limbs around me and barred her fangs happily, but I could hear the heaviness in her heart. I could sense her pain build and build but not erupt even when she was gone.

She was gone. I could no longer feel her.

“You did well,” one made from *Arcania* who had flowers in her fur spoke. She looked upon me as though sated. “Your work may not be done I fear.”

I huffed, wishing for mine to be returned to me.

She pulled my head against hers and I felt her *Arcania* pulse against mine. “I do hope you find her again if she needs you.”

I now stood in a forest—one I was familiar with. Mine was gone. Gone in a way I did not understand. I would feel her death, but this was not death, this was something else.

Would she return to me? I did not know. I did not know, so I rested my head on my paws, taking steady breathes.



Much later, I opened my eyes and stood, running towards her. Running to *mine*.

THE END

What's next?

Thank you for reading this side story, if you enjoyed it leave a review. Next up is the third and final installment of the *A Curse of Roses* series: *A Tale of Crowns*.

BLURB:

We pile our sins on the backs of Roses

She couldn't hide, couldn't run; fighting was the only way home.

Lilly belonged to a family of Renai—chained for generations to Glorus by a curse of hatred and survival. She shattered it—freed herself, but freedom comes at a cost. Just because she's done with Glorus doesn't mean Glorus, or its secrets, are done with her

When Prince Alix and his friends arrive in Lilly's world, saying she's been summoned by the Glories, Lilly refuses at first, but when Chris is taken, she has no choice but to return. Yet, when she arrives back in the world she fought to leave, she learns truths that shatter everything she thought she knew and reveals the dark history that threatens to repeat itself

In a reckless and desperate bid to put an end to the madness, Lilly ends up lost, alone and without her memories from her time in Glorus. With chaos and corruption on the rise, her

allies lost, and her oldest friend taken, Lilly will need to fight harder than ever before.

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