

Sandra R. Reeley

Thorns of  
Blood



# Contents

[Cover Credit](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[About This Book](#)

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[From The Author](#)

[About The Author](#)

Cover Credit

Christopher Coyle

[darkandstormyknight.com](http://darkandstormyknight.com)

Thank you for adorning my words so beautifully.

Sandra R Neeley

37,707 words

P.O. Box 127

Franklinton, LA 70438

authorsandrarneeley@gmail.com

# **Thorns of Blood**

**Sandra R Neeley**

Copyright © 2021 SANDRA R NEELEY

All rights reserved.

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. It is the copyrighted property of the author, and may not be reproduced, copied and/or distributed for commercial or non-commercial purposes without express written permission from the author.

Your support and respect for the property of this author is appreciated. This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales, is purely coincidental. The characters are creations of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademarked ownership of all trademarks and word marks mentioned in this book.

For those who still believe in Faerie Tales, and Vampires.

## About This Book

Thorns of Blood is a reimagining of the classic childhood fairy tale of a beautiful sleeping princess and the handsome prince who awakens her.

In it, you'll see that not all beauty is good. Not all darkness is evil. And unfortunately, beauty can often hide evil.

Morrigan is the beautiful Princess, cursed to sleep forever.

Fairuza is the Faerie Queen, who has cursed not only Morrigan, but most everything surrounding Morrigan's castle.

Yet all is not as it seems, as Prince Alexi, pure of heart, soon finds out.

Turn the page; join us, dear reader, and you'll see for yourself the true origins of this beloved tale. In actuality it's a 'Faerie Tale', and to this day the facts are often skewed.

## Preface

Alexi sat at the feet of his elderly tutor, his eyes wide with wonder as he listened to the old man spin his tale. It was a tale he'd heard many times over, but never tired of. It told of heartache and sadness. A beautiful young princess and all who loved her, locked away for centuries in a wondrous castle hidden behind acres of deadly thorns and brambles, never to awaken.

“But why?” the young prince asked, just as he always did. “Why would anyone wish to harm her?”

“Jealously, Alexi. There are those who are so unhappy within themselves that they wish to destroy all that is young, beautiful, and vibrant around them. This princess was so unequalled in her beauty and kindness, the very faeries of the land bowed to her in reverence. It was one of their own who cursed the poor girl to her eternal sleep. But it was not only the princess who was cursed; all her family — the King and Queen, and their court were cursed as well. Then the jealous faerie surrounded the castle with poisonous thorns and brambles, the likes of which no man can penetrate, to ensure that no one could ever awaken them,” the tutor said dramatically.

“How do you know? Did you try to find her?” Alexi asked.

The old man shook his head. “It's said that long ago, my people were noble, as are yours. Four brothers, all of them princes stood tall and strong. One of them, the eldest, was promised to the princess so that their two kingdoms could be joined. But he fell under the spell of an evil faerie Queen and never reached his beautiful princess and the life they'd share. One of his brothers and with half their army, soon followed,



searching for him. That brother, too, and most of the army were lost as well.”

“What happened to them?” Alexi asked.

“No one knows for sure. The few that returned told stories of a bloodthirsty Queen and the way she killed all who defied her. They claimed she drank their blood and laughed at their screams of horror.”

“Did the princes die?” Alexi asked.

“It was many, many years before I was born, but it’s said the family searched for them both. When they reached the castle, or where it should have been, they weren’t able to see it or reach it. They lost many brave knights trying to fight their way through the deadly thorns. In desperation, they began to travel the countryside, speaking to all they met. The villagers told them all who lived in the castle had fallen into a deep sleep, seemingly dead but not. Then they directed them to another castle, standing high on a cliff, overlooking the valley below. This castle was only visible after journeying through a beautiful forest filled with all the magical creatures of the faerie world. But once on the other side of that forest, the shadows crept in, shrouding the castle in darkness and sorrow.

It was there that one of the princes was finally found. Claude, the younger of the brothers who were missing. He was serving the faerie Queen who put the curse on the princess and surrounded the entirety of her castle and court in the poisoned thorns. He sent them home, sent word home to his family that it wasn’t safe for them and they should seal the borders of their land and stay away — he would remain to ensure their safety. But it was so long ago, no one really knows for sure anymore how much is fact and how much is legend.”

“But why didn’t he go home and stay safely with them if they’d been able to find him?” Alexi asked.

The old tutor shrugged, his eyes gazing off into the distance. “Perhaps the faerie Queen bewitched him. Perhaps he traded his life for the safety of his people and his land. Perhaps they never really found him and only said they did to soothe his distraught mother. It was so long ago no one really knows. There may not have been half an army who searched for them,

maybe it was only a few brave men. All we really do know is that there were once four princes, and then there were two.”

“There’s got to be a way to save them,” Alexi said. “I bet the first is asleep with the cursed princess. And the second is still in service to the evil faerie Queen!”

“I suppose it is possible,” the tutor said, “you know, anything is!”

“And they still sleep today?” Alexi asked, his ten-year-old eyes wide, and his heart hurting for the beautiful princess he’d never met.

“I guess they’d have to be as no one has ever been able to reach the castle or its occupants sleeping inside. They fell asleep long before I was a boy, and if it’s true, they must still sleep today. Any who try to save them die a painful death. The thorns surrounding the castle are poisonous, thwarting any attempt to reach her. They are so tall you cannot see over them, and so vast that it would take days to walk through them.”

“And Prince Claude must still serve the faerie Queen,” Alexi said, his mind filled with visions of himself riding in and saving them all while conquering the evil faerie Queen and claiming the sleeping princess for himself. “I will save them,” Alexi said, his face taking on a determined expression. “When I grow up, I’ll find a way to the castle, and I’ll find the princess. I’ll wake her and her family, and she’ll be so happy she will marry me, then her army will ride with me to free Prince Claude. He will take his brother home with him, and the princess and I will rule her land!”

Alexi’s tutor laughed indulgently. “If anyone can do it, it’s you. I’m sure you will, Alexi. I’m sure you will.”

## Chapter 1

A dark castle stood alone at the cliff's edge, intentionally built to overlook the sleeping castle across the valley from it, and the tiny village tucked in the valley between them. The dark castle's five towers, four at each corner and the largest at the center of the structure, were ever outlined against an eternally darkened sky. This castle, and the one female living in it had been the one thing standing in protection of the very few families still clinging to their lands in the valley below it for many, many years. Though they feared the castle and its owner, the villagers feared not having her there even more. They somehow found the courage to beg her assistance when all else failed. It never failed, eventually some foolish young man would decide he'd be the one to make it all the way to the sleeping castle, convince himself he could survive the thorns, and then collapse near death. Any foolish enough to go alone, didn't survive. Those whose friends waited outside the thorns for them might have a chance, if their friends were loyal enough to pull them out and carry them home so their distraught mother could bring him to the dark castle, to the evil faerie Queen, and beg for her son's life.

Tonight was no different.

As the moon rose to silhouette the castle's spires, a cloaked figure rushed along the highest parapet from the darkest tower in the darkest corner of the castle as a bell rang out, telling her she was once again needed. The figure hurried around the parapet from one tower to the next, determined to get to the center spire, and the stone staircase encased inside it, and thereby the gallery on ground level. Reaching the center spire she pulled open its heavy oaken door and took the stairs as quickly as her feet would carry her, her robes sweeping the

stairs as she ran, while her long flowing sleeves teased the cobwebs from the tower's walls.

"Mistress!" an old man's voice called, repeating his cry, ringing the bell to summon her yet again.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" she answered, her voice echoing off the circular stone walls surrounding her. Finally, minutes later she reached the bottom level of her keep. Pushing with all her weight against the heavy wooden door, she finally burst into the large main gallery of the castle she called home. "I'm here!" Fairuza called out breathlessly, looking around for her steward, the one person she allowed herself to depend on — her trusted confidante, Claude.

"Mistress! It's happened yet again. They're at the gate. What are we to do?" Claude asked, worriedly.

"Allow them inside. I'll do what I can," she answered, trying to quiet her gasping breaths.

"But it's too soon, you'll put yourself in danger," Claude warned.

"I can't leave them to die, or worse," she said.

"You cannot allow yourself to die either!" Claude insisted.

Fairuza shook her head. "If they'd only take my warning to heart, this foolishness would stop," she said.

"They bring it on themselves. You should not heal another of them! Leave them to their fates!" Claude exclaimed angrily.

"It is because of me, that this is their fate," Fairuza said patiently. She was very familiar with Claude's opposition to her having to heal those foolish humans who sought to find the sleeping princess and all her treasures.

"No, Fairuza. It is because of you they still have anything at all to call home. Without you, the horrors of the sleeping castle would have overflowed its walls and by now surely turned the whole countryside to blood."

"It will be fine, Claude. Bring them inside," she said, laying a hand on his arm to soothe him.

Frustrated, but sworn to serve her, Claude hurried to do her bidding. His feet scattered the straw he'd strewn across the

stone floor to try to insulate it from the cold that permeated it and everything around it. It was an ancient structure, one feared by most of the locals, but sturdy and strong enough to protect them from anything and anyone who might have sought to drive them out.

They were a thankless lot — those his mistress watched over. No one ever seemed to think of them when the storms came, or when the cold came. No one thought to be sure they had enough food, or blankets. There'd been times they were alone for so long he wondered if any of the villagers even remained. But then, there would come a night like tonight. A night when a foolish man would fall victim, and they'd seek out his mistress and her magicks as though they thought they deserved them.

Claude had long told her that they should leave this place, seek out the others of her kind and find sanctuary with them, but she wouldn't hear of it. She insisted she was still needed here. He shook his head in frustration as he grasped the heavy chain that controlled the massive iron gate and threw all his body weight against it until the pulley it was wound around began to raise the gate.

The crying and simpering of the female who'd come with her husband to seek help for her son met his ears, making him grimace. He was long out of sympathy for these people.

"Thank you! Thank you, kind, sir," she wailed, reaching out with her dirt stained fingers to touch his sleeves and tangling those same fingers in his long white hair.

"Come along," he said, pushing her hands away from him as he led the way into the main gallery of the castle. "My mistress will see to you as best she can," he said. He glanced behind himself to be sure the father still carrying their son followed him. Both the father and the son had very similar features. Both were large men made strong from years of working the fields. However the son obviously had not outgrown the youthful ideal that he could overcome any obstacle and obtain riches beyond imagining, else he would not be here tonight.

Fairuza watched from beneath her cloaked hood as the peasant couple hurried into her home, not too proud to beg for help, yet fearful and condemning enough of her to draw back when she took a step toward them.

The mother drew her hands up and covered her mouth with one hand as she crossed herself with the other. The father was a bit less rude, at least understanding that he needed Fairuza's help to save his son.

"Thank you," he said.

Fairuza inclined her head, causing the hood she kept over her head to flutter with the movement, giving an indication of something more than a head beneath its folds.

The mother stepped back to place herself behind her husband and unconscious son.

"I will not harm you," Fairuza said to the mother, disdain dripping from her voice.

"Do what you must, just please, help our son," the mother begged.

"Bring him here," Fairuza said, indicating the floor just in front of her.

The father took a step forward, and his wife whimpered. "Hush, woman. We are here to beg for help and you insult her!" he hissed at his wife.

"I'm sorry," the wife whispered, crossing herself again and lowering her eyes to the floor. "I've just never imagined myself before... well, you," she finally said.

"Bring him here," Fairuza said again, indicating once more the floor just in front of her feet.

The father laid him on the floor and stood his ground, waiting for any further instructions.

"What happened to him?" Fairuza asked, knowing full well what had happened, but wanting to know if they'd try to lie as others had done.

"The thorns. He was trying to reach the castle in the center. The thorns tore his flesh, miss. The elders told me you grew the thorns, so you could save him," the father explained.

“Why are they there? Can’t you remove them?” the mother asked on a sob. “Our young people are dying because of the poison in the thorns!”

“No. Your young people are dying because they are greedy and seek the treasures still lying in the castle behind the thorns whose only purpose is to protect them and you!”

“It’s not their fault. Tales of treasures lure them. They want better for themselves than we’ve been able to provide,” the father said.

“You should have all left centuries ago. Built a better life elsewhere. I warned all those that came before you, and I venture a guess that I’ve warned you as well,” Fairuza said, peering at the father from beneath her hood.

The father didn’t deny her words, he simply stood before her, silently hoping she could save his son. She knelt beside the young man lying unconscious on the floor of her keep and used a dagger Claude handed her to cut away the shirt from his body. She leaned closer inspecting the man’s throat and arms. “There are no bites. I may be able to help him.”

“Bites?!” the mother exclaimed, her voice rising in alarm. “What kind of bites would there be?”

“Why is it that your people remember only the treasure and not the evil contained behind those thorns? The thorns protect you, all of you!” Claude snapped.

“Take them outside,” Fairuza said, now focused on the young man.

“Come,” Claude said.

“No! Please! Help my son!” the father begged, falling to his knees. “I’ll give you anything. Take me, I’ll serve you. Please, just save him!”

“I don’t require your service. And I ask nothing in return, except that you make the others understand. The evil beyond the thorns is a fate worse than death. A fate that once visited on you, cannot be reversed. Make them stop trying to best the thorns!” Fairuza asked.

The father nodded his head, his eyes filled with tears. "I'll tell them. I'll tell any who'll listen."

"Go," she said.

The man hesitated, wanting to obey her, but not wanting to leave his son until he knew the young man might be saved.

Fairuza sighed. "You cannot be here when I heal him. Leave this room. Go with Claude, I will do what I can, but I make no promises. It was not very long ago that I was called to heal another and my abilities are not without their limits."

"It is too soon!" Claude insisted. "You should leave him to his fate!"

"Claude..." Fairuza chided gently, looking up at the over-protective man who'd been by her side for a long, long time.

"Come!" Claude said, waving them toward the door they'd entered through with very little patience apparent in his demeanor.

Reluctantly the father rose and gathered his wife to him. Together they followed Claude from the main gallery, as the father repeatedly looked back at Fairuza over his shoulder.

Claude stepped through the doorway with the couple and pulled the heavy door closed behind them all.

Only then did Fairuza shove her hooded cloak back from her head, exposing two gracefully curved horns rising up from a glorious cascade of blue-black curls that spilled down her back and over her shoulders. She leaned over the young man, pressing her hands to his chest and began to chant in no more than a whisper. Her eyes fell closed as the deep-brown, inky substance mingling in his veins with his own blood began to rise from the surface of his skin and hover in the air before finding its way to the delicate horns adorning her head and settling there for only a moment before being absorbed into them. A few seconds later, their tips lengthened just barely, and their width expanded just a touch. But Fairuza didn't stop chanting. If she was to save this young man, she had to absorb all the poison from his body, into hers.

Her concentration was so focused she didn't hear the father standing outside the main door with Claude.



“Is she helping him?” the father asked. “I don’t hear anything at all.”

“She is,” Claude said matter-of-factly.

“Why can’t we stay with him? He needs us!” the mother said, beginning to wail again.

“He needs my Mistress. He does not need you. But if you insist, you are welcome to join her, and perhaps the poison she is extracting will enter you rather than her.”

“You mean the poison is…” the father asked, stopping to be sure he understood what Claude was inferring. “It’s entering your mistress?”

“That is exactly what I mean,” Claude said.

The father’s tears finally spilled over his lids. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea by asking her to save him, she’d be endangering herself.”

“How did you think she planned to save him?” Claude asked.

“I thought that her magicks would simply wake him,” the father said.

“There is a good and evil balance in all things — even in magicks,” Claude said.

All was quiet for several awkward moments before the father spoke again. “Whether or not she is successful. I will never forget her efforts.”

## Chapter 2

Fairuza remained on her knees, chanting, her hands held just over the young man's chest, calling to the poisons lingering in his body. She felt the tingling of the poison as it left his body and was absorbed into hers. She felt the rapid beats of her heart as her body began to process the poisons of her people, sifting through them to deposit them in a place that could do her no harm. As the last of the poison entered her bloodstream, her head began to pound, her eyes grew heavy, and she swayed as she tried to get to her feet.

These faerie poisons she'd let out into the human world in her bid to protect it from the dangers that dwelled inside the sleeping castle. It was ironic that while deadly, they were the only thing keeping that world alive.

"Claude," she said weakly, believing she'd called out, though, her voice was only a rasp.

But he'd felt her need anyway. The door opened and he rushed in, while the anxious parents stood in the doorway behind him. "I am here, mistress," he said, catching her small body in his surprisingly strong arms as she threatened to fall to the floor.

"I must rest," she said, her eyes closing, her head falling weakly against his chest.

Claude held her upper body in his arms as he turned to the terrified couple behind him. "Take him. Take him and go. If he falls ill because of his stupidity, he will not be healed again."

The father hurried into the room, gathered his son in his arms and turned for the door. "Thank you, miss," he said, pausing only momentarily to look over his shoulder at the now ill woman, her dark, blue-black curls spilling over Claude's arm as he kept her from falling. His eyes hesitated on the near

beautiful, mahogany colored, seemingly wood-grained, delicately curved horns protruding from the sides of her head.

“I am ever in your debt,” he rushed out.

“Don’t say that!” his wife snapped at him.

“Hush woman!” he scolded, pushing her out of the way as he turned and hurried through the door. “Move, make haste so that she can rest!” he told his wife, ushering her as best he could while carrying their adult-sized son.

“But he’s not awake yet! She’s not saved him!” the wife exclaimed.

“Move!” the husband bellowed at his wife. “Can you not see that she’s given of herself for us?!” he demanded.

Claude watched, his distaste clearly read in his expression as he watched the ungrateful woman being forced outside the castle by her husband. “You should not have healed him,” Claude said, looking down at the sleeping female in his arms. Shaking his head and tsking in irritation, he very gently laid her down on the straw covering the floor of the castle, then went to lower the gates that kept them secure inside. He returned to the main gallery and once again gathered Fairuza into his arms, then began the painstaking process of slowly climbing the stairs one at a time until he reached the top and the parapet that would lead him to the rooms she kept for herself at the highest point of the darkest tower, that stood furthest from the village.



Fairuza lay in a state of semi-consciousness as her body finished working through the toxins she’d taken into herself in order to save the young man. She turned her head and felt the slight softness of the down pillow beneath her head. It was the one luxury she allowed herself.

“Rest now, Fairuza. All is well,” Claude said, making his way around the tower room, pulling back the heavy tapestries, and then throwing open the shutters that protected the round room from the weather outside. “I’m opening the windows, letting in the elements. You’ll be feeling right as rain before you know it!” Claude said, more for himself than for her.

Fairuza felt the heavy night air against her face, and in her delirium turned toward the humid breeze. Inhaling deeply, the corners of her full, pouty lips turned up at one corner as her mind took her to another time, another place, when all was right in her world and the purity of love everlasting had given her hope for a very different existence.

Centuries before...

Fairuza’s laughter tinkled on the wind as she ran through the trees, flowers, and grasses, her footfalls silent as they fell on the moss covering the forest floor.

“I hear your laughter! You cannot expect to hide from me if I can follow the music of your laughter!”

Fairuza slapped a hand over her own mouth to drown out the sound of her happiness as she ducked behind a huge crystalline boulder. She hurried through the narrow passageway behind it until the roar of water surrounded her. She looked up at the magnificence of the crystal clear water rushing overhead, creating a falling curtain of water in front of her as she stood looking past it to the sparkling pale-blue pond that it fed beyond. Her heart swelled with love for the land she looked out on. The lush green of the trees and grasses, coupled with the beauty of the rainbow of multi-colored flowers and

the multitude of fauna that called it home, made it a place truly unlike any other known to her or her people.

“I’ve found you,” a sensual, velvety voice purred from just behind her.

Fairuza smiled to herself as his hands cupped her waist, pulling her gently back against him. “And so you have. What shall you do with me now?” she teased.

“I will hold you forever, never letting you go,” he said, pressing his lips to her bare shoulder.

“Do you promise?” she asked, turning to smile up at the man who’d stolen her heart.

“I do,” he said, smiling down at her as he looked into her eyes. “You have made me blind to all others, my Fairuza. All I see is you.”

“Will you be happy here with me?”

“You know I will. You are all I need.”

“Once you are among us, accepted by my people, you cannot go back home,” she said worriedly.

“But I’ll be home. Anywhere you are is home. I have only one more task to carry out, then I’ll return to you. You’ll become my wife, and together we’ll live and love in this place forever,” he said.

“Not here, but close to here,” she said.

“Anywhere you wish,” he said sincerely.

Fairuza went up on her tiptoes to kiss him and he smiled as she slowly pulled away after tasting his lips.

“Is that all I get?” he asked.

“Would you like more?” she teased.

“I want every bit of what is mine,” he said, dragging his fingertips up her rib cage to the underside of her breast.

Fairuza leaned toward him, pressing herself against him. “You have to earn my favors. Once you are free to pledge your loyalty. Then I’ll give you all you like.”

“I’ve already pledged my loyalty to you,” he said, quickly slipping his arm around her waist to pull her in tightly for a passionate kiss.

Pulling away breathlessly, she looked up into his eyes, her delicate hand resting against his cheek. “I love you, Phillip,” she said.

“I love you, Fairuza,” he said, the fingers of one of his hands toying with her breast. “I look forward to the day you will take me to husband. Then I will be complete.”

Fairuza smiled at him. “You are my husband of the heart now,” she said, pressing her hand against her heart. “I was not aware that a part of me was missing until I happened on you.”

“Is that how you see it? Happened on me?” he asked.

“And what would you call it?” Fairuza asked.

“Fate. We were born for one another. The fates brought us together, there was no happenstance about it,” he said, pressing his lips to hers.

“Yet, you were promised to another,” she teased.

Phillip grumbled and his face became hard. “It was not my doing and I will not abide by it. I will be free of the promises my father made for me. I am yours, now. Through and through.”

Fairuza smiled hesitantly at Phillip. “Will your father not send his knights after you?”

“Not after tomorrow. I’ll present myself to them all, tell them I’ll have no part in it, then I’ll return to you.”

“Your family will be angry,” Fairuza said, thoughtfully. “They may blame me.”

“If they truly wish me to be happy, they’ll support me and embrace our union. If they do not, I’ll no longer share their name. It’s as simple as that.”

“You are their heir,” Fairuza gently reminded him. “They will not be happy about your choices.”

“They have three other sons who are more than willing to become King and live by their rules. I am not needed, and I

will not give up my happiness, my Queen.”

“I’m not a Queen,” Fairuza said, looking up at him with love in her eyes. She was not yet willing to tell him that she was in fact, destined to be Queen of her people. More powerful since birth than all of her kind. She needed to know he loved her for the core of her soul first, then she’d show him all she truly was. It was better for now that he thought her nothing more than Fae.

“You’re my love, which makes you my Queen. We do not need an army of knights or a castle on a mountainside to keep us. We will live here, among your people, and the creatures that call this forest home. We will have all we need, just as you always have. Only now, you have me as well,” Phillip said. “For as long as you’ll have me,” he teased.

“Forever,” she said.

“I’m not sure that’s long enough,” he said seriously.

Fairuza laughed, and as her laugh died down, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She leaned into Phillip and rested her head against his chest as her slender arms wound round his waist. She wondered how he’d react once he saw the magnificence of the castle she called home, and learned that she was indeed a leader of her people. “I’ll miss you until you return,” she said, keeping her secrets for the day he pledged his loyalty to her people. He didn’t know yet that he’d live forever beside her. The magicks of the water they swam in every day, and drank with each meal would keep him young and healthy. It would even keep his beloved horse, Bolt, in the same exact state he was now — healthy and strong.

“I won’t be long away, my love, but it must be done. Two days at most and I’ll return.”

“I know,” she said resignedly.

“Let it not ruin this day. Come, let’s celebrate that we’ve another day together and not think of what the morn will bring until we must.”

Fairuza looked up at Phillip and grinned at him. “I wonder what you’ll get if you can catch me,” she said, with a sparkle in her eye.

“I’ve already caught you!” he countered.

Fairuza tossed him a playful look and turned toward the waterfall at her back.

His smile fell as he watched her grip the simple shift dress she wore and pull it off over her head.

Then she disappeared from sight as she raised her arms and dove through the wall of water and into the picturesque pond beneath.

Phillip tore at his clothes, desperate to remove them from his body. Then he smiled as he watched the woman he loved disappear beneath the pond’s surface, then break the calm of the water halfway across the pond as she surfaced, her beautiful purple eyes looking up at him, waiting for him to join her.

“Are you coming?” she called out as she treaded water in place.

Phillip stepped through the sheet of water and raising his tanned, muscular arms above his head, launched himself off the rock ledge and into the water with Fairuza.

Before he even surfaced, Fairuza was swimming toward him.

From below the surface he could see the beauty of her graceful body as she moved expertly toward him. He swam toward her, taking her in his arms and sliding his body along hers as he gradually broke the surface, allowing her to feel every inch of him against her. The water coursed down his face and shoulders as he pressed his lips to hers, eager to sink himself inside her again. “I need you,” he whispered.

“Then take me,” she answered, smiling as he guided her to shallower waters to do just that.





Morrigan stalked through the elaborately decorated great hall of her family's castle. Her target was the golden candle sticks sitting on the mantle. Grasping one in each hand she turned and hurled them across the room, sending servants scattering for cover.

She screamed as loud as she could, the inhuman sound echoing off the walls. "He should have been here a month ago! How dare he desert me?" she screeched.

"Perhaps he's simply become lost, or encountered those who required his help. I'm sure he'll be here soon, daughter," her father said, trying to calm her. "He was born a prince. Their kind is bred to help other humans."

Morrigan turned to face her father, and for just a moment he saw the angelic child she'd once been with her unmatched beauty, her flowing golden locks and bright blue eyes before they bled to red as she reached adulthood. "I was born a princess! It is I he should be concerned about, not any other! And he should have been here long ago! If his family has sent an envoy in search of him, and he's not yet here to meet it, it's apparent he's not coming!" she shouted.

"Morrigan, dear, you don't know that. Anything could have kept him," her mother said.

"Their letter said he should have arrived a month ago! They're inquiring about his silence since arriving! He is not coming!"

"He may have fallen victim to a crime, my daughter," her father said.

Morrigan glared at her father. "Surely, he is not that weak. I would not have chosen him had he appeared so fallible!" she snapped.

"Then he will arrive at some point. And when he does you can turn him, make sure that he will not be at risk again."

"And if he doesn't?" Morrigan demanded. "If he's intentionally not presenting himself for marriage?"

"Then we'll find him. We will go to his father's court and demand that he be turned over to us."

“And if they don’t turn him over?” Morrigan pressed.

“Then, we’ll kill them all, just as we always do, dear. The only reason we’ve not killed them and taken their lands already is that you’ve fancied Phillip and decided he would be yours,” her mother said.

“He will love me!” Morrigan insisted. “I am beautiful! And kind! Every male I meet desires me! He will love me!” she screeched.

“Of course he will, dear,” her father agreed. “There is no question. His family has agreed to the betrothal. He’s simply been held up. You will see.”

“He’d better hurry. No one refuses my attentions!” Morrigan shouted, grabbing up a crystal bowl from the mantle and throwing it to the floor to shatter into thousands of shards before stalking from the room.

“The poor dear is heartbroken her betrothed has not arrived yet. She fears for him,” her mother said.

“I have held my tongue for the sake of our daughter, but I do not understand why we must entertain this farce! Why can’t we simply attack their castle, eradicate all who defy us, take their lands and use their people as we’ve used our own? There is no reason for the intolerable unpleasantries we are forced to endure. They are merely human! They are not worth all the consideration Morrigan is forcing us to employ,” her father said.

“She wishes the boy to love her, not simply live at her side under her spell. She wishes him to want to be turned by her, and offer loyalty of his own free will. He will never do that if we kill his family. Hence the farce. Eventually, he will fall in love with her and he will live happily among us.”

“They’re food, Catherine. Simply food. Why will she not consider one of our kind?” her father asked.

“He will be of our kind once she turns him,” her mother said. “Come. I’ve had a serving girl brought to our chambers. You need to feed.”

“Morrigan killed my favorite,” he grouched.

“She didn’t mean to. She’d waited too long between feedings, my husband. Come along, I think you’ll be quite pleased.”

“Where did you find this one?” he asked, allowing his wife to guide him by the hand toward their private chambers.

“In the village as usual. She is sister to your favorite,” Catherine said. “And if you don’t like her, we’ll keep bringing them here until you find one whose taste you prefer. Surely there is another that will appeal to you.”

## Chapter 3

Phillip woke to the early morning dawn, the slightly pinkish hue of the sky painting a brilliant picture for his eyes. He'd never been happier, never more at peace. And the old resentments he'd felt at having to adhere to rule after rule in order to be the next King of his family's line had melted away. It was simple now. He'd happily give that mantle to his next youngest brother. His brother had always wanted it anyway and now they'd both have what they wanted — Phillip would have freedom, and Claude would have the monarchy.

Phillip stretched, allowing his body to gradually wake, knowing once he was up and moving, he'd have no choice but to go. He'd postponed his departure from Fairuza's side for as long as he could, but it soon became apparent he had to leave her. It was only temporary, though. This woman was all he'd ever desired, and there was nothing in this world or the next that could separate him from her. Phillip rolled onto his side and stroked her hair from her face. He smiled down at her as she slumbered beside him. "I love you," he whispered, pressed a soft kiss to her temple, then got out of bed. He had a long day ahead of him, and the sooner he got started, the sooner he'd be back at Fairuza's side.

He dressed for the day, adding to his standard clothing the chain mail that he'd not worn since he'd met Fairuza and followed her into the forest. He smiled when he remembered dropping it at his feet, and then falling to his knees before her, exposing his throat in a show of trust. Proving that he was not there to harm her or those she loved. He'd simply seen her from the path he followed and had no choice but to go after her.

He doubted he'd need the chain mail today, but, it was part of his look, a piece of the part he played, and it made him

appear more dangerous and unapproachable. It made people more likely to do his bidding when he was the epitome of the capable knight, the prince, the heir apparent to his people. And that is exactly the feeling he was going for today when he told the King and Queen of this land that he'd not accept the marriage they and his parents had arranged.

He expected resistance and threats, but he didn't honestly care.

"Phillip?" Fairuza said sleepily, reaching out for him and finding him not there.

"I'm here," he said, fastening his chest plate and kneeling beside the bed to take her hand in his.

"You're leaving already?" she asked.

"I must, my love. But I shall return within two days time."

"I wish that I could go with you," she said.

"No, you stay here, safe and away from all the ugliness that will no doubt follow my announcement," Phillip said, lifting her hand to his lips.

"What will you do if they insist?" she asked.

"What we discussed. Once I make it clear that I have no interest in ruling my father's lands and people, that the mantle has been passed to Claude, I'm sure the princess will have no problem accepting him in my stead. And he will do the same. He's always wanted to rule but had given up on it. He is suited to it much better than I."

"I'll wait for you," she said, closing her eyes again.

"You won't wait long, sweet Fairuza," Phillip said, rising from his knees and smiling down at her once more before he left her home. He wasted no time making his way to the lush fields where his horse had been turned loose to graze. He quickly saddled him, his mind on the task at hand, anxious to be done with it all and back beside the woman his heart had chosen for its home. He mounted his horse and looked back toward where he knew Fairuza's home stood. Then he rode away, his heart pure, his mind clear, his courage focused on

exactly what had to be done to clear the way for the rest of his life.



It was well past dark when Phillip finally approached the castle. He rode right up to the gate and rang the huge bell mounted outside the castle gate to signal his arrival. He found it strange that no guard was on duty, but eventually, the huge portcullis was slowly raised, and a single knight stood a fair distance back from the threshold, waiting for him to enter.

Phillip felt uneasy. Something about this entire situation was not right, but still, he was an honorable man, and there was business to be taken care of here before he could begin his life with Fairuza. He rode his horse into the castle, casting a glance here and there, before stopping just in front of the knight who awaited him.

“I am Prince Phillip. I wish to speak with your King,” he said, sitting up straight and proud in the saddle.

The knight bowed just ever so slightly. “He is expecting you,” he said, gesturing to the door behind him. The knight turned his back on Phillip and started toward the door.

Phillip looked over his shoulder at the portcullis, and back at the knight who was leaving him behind.

“Won’t you close the portcullis before leaving the castle walls unmanned?” Phillip asked, never having seen such a poor security measure before.

The knight looked back at Phillip. “It won’t be necessary. There is nothing that will threaten us.” Then the knight pushed open the heavy wooden door and disappeared inside.

Phillip got off his horse and looped the reins back over the horse’s neck, before patting the horse. “Stay here,” he said, looking around suspiciously and walking away from the

animal. Phillip followed the knight, and stepped inside the keep of the castle. He looked around as he entered, taking note of the windows sealed shut with thick pieces of wood, and the darkness that filled the inside of the great hall. The only thing allowing him to make out any features of the great hall at all were the candles burning in their holders along the walls.

“Prince Phillip!” a loud voice boomed from the opposite side of the room. “At last you have arrived! We had begun to worry for your welfare.”

“King Lionel. How does this night find you?” Phillip asked.

“Well, very well, now that you’ve arrived. Princess Morrigan has been a handful, I must admit. She feared you would reject her and not come at all,” King Lionel said on a boisterous laugh. “I assured her you were merely kept from your destination by your deeds for others. It is well known how your people spend all their free time seeing to the welfare of those in need.”

“My people?” Prince Phillip asked.

“Yes, others like you,” King Lionel said non-committally.

Phillip thought the comment strange, but decided to ignore it in favor of the subject at hand. “I’m pleased to find you alone, King Lionel. It is necessary that we speak before you call for your daughter.”

“I’ve already called for my daughter. Seeing as how she’ll be your wife within merely hours, there is nothing she cannot know of,” King Lionel responded.

“That is the reason for my visit to you this evening,” Phillip said, rushing ahead to speak his piece before the princess joined them.

“Visit? You seem to think you will be here only a short while, when we expected you to take up residence here, as is customary,” King Lionel said, his suspicions rising.

“I will not even be spending the night here, King Lionel. I’ve come to speak to you man to man. I am unable to marry your daughter, and in my stead offer my next youngest brother.

He will be stepping into my role as Crown Prince, and as such will be the better match for Princess Morrigan.”

King Lionel smiled sinisterly and took a step or two toward Prince Phillip with his hands clasped behind his back. “For a moment, I almost thought I heard you refuse my daughter’s hand, and instead offer your brother as her husband.”

“I did. I cannot marry your daughter. I will no longer be my father’s heir. I’ve chosen another life.”

“There is nothing more important than honoring your commitments,” King Lionel snapped.

“Honoring thyself is most important. Living your truth is most important. I did not make the promises you speak of, and they are not mine to keep. I love another. I have decided to step away from the monarchy and make a life with her,” Phillip said, unable to hide the happiness in his smile at the thought of Fairuza.

“It’s not that simple. My Morrigan has chosen you, not your brother, to take to husband. She will have exactly what she wishes,” King Lionel said, his voice cold and deadly.

“Marriage to me will not make her Queen, or even Princess of anything. There will be no riches or luxury to be had. No status to her name. She will be much better satisfied with the new Crown Prince.”

“Morrigan deserves that which she desires. She desires you. You will take her hand. You will stand beside her, and you will accept your place in the monarchy to secure her status.”

“I beg to differ. There is nothing in this world that will make me accept her or my place in the monarchy. I am completely unavailable. I’ve offered the option of my brother, who I’m more than sure will take my place uniting our kingdoms. If she does not want him, she will have to choose again.”

“I’ll have to do what?” Morrigan asked from behind him.

Prince Phillip turned and his eyes fell on the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. She was slender, yet curvy in



all the places a woman should be curved. She had voluminous, wavy blonde hair lying across her shoulders and down her back. Her face was angelic and the grace she exhibited as she moved was clearly regal. Yet he felt nothing at all. His heart and soul were for Fairuza alone.

“Princess Morrigan,” Phillip said, performing a crisp bow for her before straightening to his full height.

“Prince Phillip,” she said, curtsying, and inclining her head. “I’m relieved that you’ve arrived at last. I feared for your safety,” she said in the most delicate voice, keeping her eyes downcast.

“I am well, Princess. I was tending other necessities in the interest of my future,” Phillip answered. “But thank you for your concern.”

Morrigan looked from Phillip to her father. “What does that mean?”

“It means, that he’s chosen another to marry, and he’s giving up the throne to his younger brother. It would seem she’s not only a human, but a commoner, else he wouldn’t have to give up the monarchy,” the King said.

“Human?” Phillip asked, thoroughly confused by the use of the word human since they were all humans. He turned his attention to Morrigan, and watched as she firmed and clenched her jaw.

“You would refuse me for a human?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Are we not all human?” he asked, looking at her strangely. “I’m here to dissolve our betrothal. The reasons are clear. I did not make the promise of betrothal — my father did. As I’ve been explaining to your father, I cannot marry you — I love another,” he said, standing proudly. “My brother will take the crown, and I have no doubt be thrilled to take you to wife, joining your two kingdoms. I no longer wish to be a part of either.”

Morrigan lifted her eyes to gaze into Phillip’s for the first time and he was taken aback by the red glow shining from hers. “I don’t care what you wish and don’t wish to be a part

of. I chose you. You will not embarrass me by refusing my attentions.”

“Stay away from me!” Phillip ordered, stepping backward in an effort to put distance between himself and Morrigan and her father.

“Morrigan, dear, do you really wish for a male who doesn’t appreciate you. Choose one of our own, I beg you!” King Lionel said.

“I will have this man! I will not settle for less!” she shouted.

King Lionel sighed, then turned his own now red gaze to Phillip who was standing stunned as he watched this all unfold. “You see, I’d rather have her marry a male of our own kind — much stronger, much calmer, less trouble. But she wants you,” he said, beginning to walk toward Phillip.

“What are you?!” Phillip shouted. “This cannot be! What trickery is this?!” Phillip demanded, turning and running for the door as he realized that Morrigan was advancing on him as well.

“Well, we’re certainly not human!” she shrieked, her fangs clearly on display as she snarled. “And neither will you be for long!”

Phillip ran as swiftly as he could, just making it to his horse before he felt himself lifted off his feet and spun around. King Lionel held him securely as Morrigan stepped closer to him and opened her mouth, sinking her teeth into his throat.

Phillip screamed and began clawing at Morrigan’s head and hair, trying to pull her off himself.

Morrigan snarled at him, removed her teeth from his throat and bit down again, beginning to take long swallows of his blood into her body.

Phillip thrashed, fighting as much as he was able as he grew weaker by the second, until finally King Lionel smiled at him, then let him fall into Morrigan’s hands.

“You may as well accept it, you belong to Morrigan,” the King told him.

Morrigan drank from his body twice more before letting him fall to the ground and took a kerchief out of the sleeve of her silk gown and demurely dabbed at her lips. “Now, it won’t be long until you die. Then I’ll let you feed from my vein, and you’ll love me forever,” she said. “It’s not the way I wanted your love, but, it is what it is.”

Phillip lay in the dirt beside his horse who was snorting and trying to move further and further away from him.

Morrigan looked down at him and took pity on his horrified eyes. “Let me help you my love. We can go inside and do this the right way. It shouldn’t be traumatic, it should be loving and appreciated. It is a gift.”

Phillip focused on her the best he could while he pressed a hand to his torn throat and scooted backward out of her reach.

Her gaze turned furious as she snarled at him. “Fine. Then lie here in the dirt until you have no choice but to accept me!” She spun on her heel, stomping away from him and back into the castle.

Phillip turned, crawling to his horse, and pulled himself up by holding onto the stirrup. His vision swam, and his head lolled on his shoulders as he tried to muster enough strength to put his foot in that stirrup and actually get on the horse so he could ride away from these creatures. He actually managed to get the toe of his boot into the stirrup, but then he was ripped away from his horse, his hands making smears of his life’s blood across the saddle he clung to and his horse as he was pulled back into the body of a large male and thrown over that male’s shoulder. The last thing he saw was his horse, spooked at all that had happened, as he ran through the portcullis leaving Phillip to certain death.

“It didn’t have to be this way, Phillip. All you had to do was accept her and this all could have been much nicer,” King Lionel growled as he carried Phillip back inside and dropped him on the stone floor.

## Chapter 4

Fairuza woke for the fifth day without Phillip. She rose from her bed and made her way outside, hoping for sight of him returning to her. But he wasn't there. Something was wrong, she knew it without a doubt. He'd have never left her. Surely he was somewhere lying injured or at the very least was being prevented from returning to her.

Fairuza made her way to the edge of her enchanted forest, and waited there for any sign of him. Growing more restless as the hours passed, she looked back over her shoulder toward the paradise they'd fallen in love in, then made a spur of the moment decision. She was going to find him. Despite the fact that the Fae were forbidden from interacting with the outside world, she was going to find her Phillip.

Sneaking away to play in the human world from time to time was quite a different thing than leaving her world with the intent to immerse herself in theirs, risking everything for the life of one of them no less. She knew those who tended her would be disappointed. She knew her mother would be equally disappointed, but neither of those reasons were enough to stop her. As a future Queen of her people, she was raised to be independent, strong willed, and courageous in the face of anything that threatened her world. And Phillip had become a very important part of her world. She had to go after him.

Fairuza spread her wings and took a deep breath. What she was about to do could never be undone. With one mighty stroke of her wings she broke through the barrier between her world and the humans.

She traveled for an entire day, keeping herself unseen until she was past the village situated in the valley below the castle. It was there that she spied Phillip's horse, still saddled but

grazing in an overgrown field. She landed near him and spoke soothingly to him as she approached. The horse lifted his head to look at her, nickered gently and stepped closer. Fairuza reached for the reins and held them in her hand as she petted the horse's nose.

"You're a good boy," she cooed, petting the large animal. "Where's your master, hmm?" she asked. Her eyes traveled over the horse's head, then down to his legs. He seemed to be uninjured. Then she turned her attention to the saddle, and her heart skipped a beat. There on the horse's neck and on the saddle and blanket beneath it were smeared, bloody hand prints. It appeared as though someone gravely injured had tried to mount the horse, but had fallen off, or were pulled off, leaving smears of blood behind.

"Where is he?" Fairuza asked, her voice shaking with fear for Phillip.

Fairuza swung herself up into the saddle and turned the animal toward the castle looming up ahead. That was Phillip's destination, and now it would be hers, too. "Let's find him, and bring him home," she said to the horse, who had become extremely nervous now that she'd turned him toward the castle.

Fairuza rode swiftly until she was just outside the castle, then she slid from the saddle and approached the portcullis, locked up tight with no guard in sight. She rang the huge bell mounted outside the castle gate to signal her arrival, but still no one came. Undeterred, she turned to the horse fidgeting behind her. "You wait here," she said. Then she unfurled her wings and took to the sky.

Fairuza peered down into the grounds behinds the walls of the castle and found no one there at all. It was as though it had been deserted. Then she noticed the blood stained dirt halfway between the keep and the portcullis. Phillip was here. And wherever he was, he needed her. Setting herself down near the blood soaked ground, she forced open one of the huge wooden doors just enough to slip inside. She looked around herself, her eyes adjusting to the darkness, realizing there were no open windows in this keep with which to let in the sunlight. They'd

all been boarded up. And there was no one inside to greet her, and no signs of life. Then she picked up a slight noise off in the distance, beyond the far side of the great room she now stood in. Following that noise, she found herself in a room, watching two young women dunk bedding into barrels of water as they worked at the soiled linens they'd been tasked with cleaning. They were not aware she stood there.

“Is there no one here but you?” Fairuza asked.

Both the young women spun and regarded her with fear in their eyes, pulling back and pressing themselves against the wall. “You must go!” one of them rushed out. “Hurry, before you're discovered.”

“I'm searching for someone. Someone dear to me. He should have returned home days ago. Have any strangers arrived here?” Fairuza asked.

The young women shared a look, then the bravest of them met Fairuza's gaze. “You mean the prince,” she said, more a statement than a question.

“I do! Phillip! Is he here?” she asked eagerly, taking a step forward.

The woman shook her head. “You're too late. He can never leave here.”

“Too late? What does that mean?” Fairuza demanded. “He's a prince! They cannot hold him prisoner!”

“He belongs to them now, just as we all do — some more than others. He can't leave this castle. If you don't go soon, you won't be able to leave its walls either. Please - go now, before you are trapped here with us.”

Fairuza looked at the woman with heartbreak in her eyes. She began to shake her head in denial. “No. I will not abandon him,” she whispered.

“He is not the man you knew,” the woman said, trying once more to warn the stranger away. “You must hurry, go now before they find you here!”

Fairuza shook her head again, causing the hood of her cloak to fall to her shoulders. “I will not go without Phillip. He

would not go without me. Where is he?”

The young woman’s eyes rounded in surprise when Fairuza’s face was revealed to them. It was clear she was not human, she was of the Fae.

“He’s in the princess’s chambers,” the young woman whispered. “He’s been kept there since she claimed him.”

Fairuza’s heart skipped a beat. “Claimed him?” she asked.

“He tried to escape... they’re just too strong,” the woman said, lifting her shoulders in a shrug and her arms just barely lifting out from her sides. “I’m so sorry,” she added.

“Where?” Fairuza asked, her eyes fighting back the tears that pooled in them.



Fairuza followed the maid’s instructions until she came to a large ornate door at the end of the main hall of the north wing of the castle. She paused outside the doors and placed her ear against the door, listening for any sound at all. There was none. Who or whatever was inside was settled, most likely asleep.

Her heart hurt that inside these chambers, her Phillip, was most likely slumbering beside the princess he’d come to refuse. According to the maid she’d spoken to, he’d tried to return to her, but ‘they’d’ been too powerful. Fairuza sniffed again, and wiped the tears from her eyes. They may be powerful, but they’d obviously never expected her. She was the most powerful of all her people — destined to be their Queen from birth. And she refused to let whoever these people were keep her Phillip here against his will. A worthless thing like a forced vow meant nothing to her, or any other intelligent being for that matter. She’d simply remove him from this place and allow him to make his own decision of where he chose to

be — with her, or with those who sought to force him to their will.

Fairuza tried to open the large, heavy door before her, but it didn't budge. It was barricaded from the inside. Shaking her head at their rudimentary attempts at security, Fairuza simply closed her eyes, dissipated into a heavy mist and materialized on the other side. Fairuza took on a defensive position, prepared to battle any who attacked her as she took shape in the princess's outer chambers, but there were none to offer resistance. Instead, she found a darkened room, all windows completely sealed, allowing not even a wayward sliver of sunlight through. The only entry and exit from the room was the heavy wooden door, and now that she turned to look at it, it too had been sealed with a thick tapestry hung over it to keep any light from entering the chamber from its edges. Someone had even bunched a swath of linen on the floor to seal its threshold.

Fairuza's brows came down over her eyes as she considered all she'd found so far. The indication that this princess and her people kept away from the sun was somewhat disconcerting, but there was no way its indication could be true. If the princess was of the breed that could be killed by sunlight and required the blood of others to live, surely she'd have heard of their existence from the villagers. She'd have been aware of missing villagers and stories of how they'd never been heard from again. But she'd heard nothing. In all the years she'd been sneaking away to her enchanted forest hideaway, she'd never heard tales of any such thing.

Fairuza's attention was drawn to a slight clanking sound through another door on the opposite side of the room. Making her way silently there, she listened again for any sound from the other side. A quiet moan met her ears. Fairuza wasted no more time, she reached out and tried the door, pushing it open and stepping inside. Her eyes, already adjusted to the darkness from the outer chamber, immediately fell on the most horrific sight she'd ever seen.

The princess, beautiful and serene in appearance, slumbered peacefully beside a bloodied, filthy Phillip, who lay



by her side, kept in place by chains about his ankles and wrists.

Fairuza's hands lifted involuntarily to clamp over her mouth as she forced herself to swallow her cries of sorrow. Then, she swiftly yet silently approached the enormous bed. She looked down on the horrifying scene, her mind desperately searching for any explanation other than that which was obvious to her. And in her hesitation, Phillip opened his eyes, his now blood-red eyes and gazed dazedly up at her.

The moment he recognized her, he began to sob and turned his head away from her.

"How? Why?" she asked, her heart and soul screaming in unison.

He swallowed convulsively as he fought to get his emotions under control, the movement must have been painful from the wince on his face with each swallow.

"Why?" Fairuza asked again, her voice just barely a whisper, as tears flowed freely down her face.

He turned back to her, his eyes full of sorrow, and even fear. "Kill me. Please, my love, kill me. Do not leave me to this fate."

Fairuza's gaze traveled from him to the princess still slumbering beside him, then back to him. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words followed.

"I chose you. She would not have it and attacked," he said, his chained hands gesturing to his freshly healed, raggedly torn throat. "Now I am a monster! Kill me. Before I can harm any innocent, kill me. You must free me from this torture," he begged.

"I can't kill you," she said, her lips trembling, her entire body beginning to shake as she realized there was nothing she could do short of killing Phillip to protect the world from all he'd become.

A hiss filled the room, and suddenly the princess, Morrigan, was on her hands and knees, lying across Phillip as though she meant to protect him, or guarding her kill — both

seemed suitable to Fairuza. Morrigan snarled and her face contorted horrifically as Phillip shied away from the female. “How dare you enter our chambers! I will see you dead!” Morrigan shrieked.

“He’s not yours, he doesn’t love you,” Fairuza said, her voice still shaky with the emotion she still held inside. “Release him,” Fairuza said.

Morrigan took in the shakiness of Fairuza’s voice, the trembling in her limbs and the tears on her face. She mistakenly assumed it was all the result of her fear. She raised up off Phillip and sneered at Fairuza. “Poor little faerie... does your heart ache for a lost love?” Morrigan asked as she stroked Phillip’s bare chest, still smeared with blood and bits of flesh from when she’d torn out his throat. “He is mine. I made him. I have given him immortality. You no longer mean anything to him. He needs me to live, and you, all you’ll ever be to him is his first meal. She’ll make a nice wedding feast for us both, won’t she, husband?” Morrigan asked, turning her red eyes on Phillip.

Phillip spat at her. “I will never be your husband! Never!” he shouted as best he could, the need to remain quiet long since gone now that Morrigan was awake.

Morrigan laughed, the beautiful, melodic sound turning sinister as she snarled at Phillip. “Oh, but you are. And you’ll forever be. There is no way out of the immortality I’ve gifted you. You will rule at my side, and you will be the perfect husband, or you will live a very miserable life.”

Phillip turned his gaze to Fairuza again, it was all he could move as his body was still chained down. “Kill me,” he begged again. “Please, my love, kill me!”

Fairuza shook her head, then moved quickly toward the bed as Morrigan attacked Phillip when he called Fairuza his love.

“You ungrateful, simpering, excuse for a male!” she screeched, falling on him with her hands and teeth in a rage.

Fairuza reached out, grabbing the seemingly rabid vampire by the shoulders and yanking her off Phillip, who was

unable to defend himself. “Stop it!” Fairuza ordered, using all her strength to control the raging vampire princess. “Stop it!” Fairuza shouted.

“Kill her! Kill her, Fairuza, and then kill me. Kill the whole castle, we should all be damned!”

Fairuza heard Phillip’s words, and with a mind of their own, her hands shoved Morrigan away from her as she lifted her hands in the air, magicks sparking from her fingertips as she enveloped Morrigan in a power she could not overcome.

Morrigan screamed in pain, her body contorting as she fought the energy being forced through it.

Then Phillip began writhing on the bed. The longer she kept Morrigan in the grasp of her magicks, her intention to kill the female, the more intense pain Phillip suffered.

After only a few minutes, Morrigan lifted her head, her sweat drenched hair clinging to her beautiful face as her red eyes gazed at Fairuza. “You’re killing him,” she whispered.

Fairuza’s magicks faltered and Morrigan fell to the stone floor of her chambers, gasping for breath and panting as she lay exhausted, unable to move, from the attack Fairuza had carried out. Only a few moments longer and Fairuza would have been successful in killing Morrigan.

“Kill her,” Phillip weakly begged.

Fairuza approached her, her hands at the ready, prepared to attack the female once again.

Morrigan just managed to turn her head enough to see Fairuza’s approach. As Fairuza raised her hands in the air once more, Morrigan began to laugh, causing herself to wheeze in pain. “You can’t kill me. If you do, Phillip will die, too. Every immortal life I’ve created will die with me.” Her smile of satisfaction, spoke to the level of surety she had that Fairuza wouldn’t kill her. “You won’t kill me,” Morrigan wheezed. “Your precious Phillip — my Phillip,” she snarled, “will die with me. You however, will suffer for your actions,” she said, beginning to try to lift herself off the floor as she gradually recovered. “You will die this day,” Morrigan threatened.

Phillip tried to get up, but his chains kept him in place. “Fairuza! Fairuza! Look at me! You cannot allow her to live. You cannot allow any of us to live. If she lives, she and all the others she’s created will destroy all you love. I don’t want to end up like her! Please, my love! Please!” he begged.

Morrigan had managed to pull herself to her knees and was trying to stand, a steady snarl pouring from her as her chosen husband professed his love for the Fae witch who dared to enter their chambers. “You will be punished for that,” she said to Phillip.

Fairuza’s mind was whirling, as she watched everything play out almost as though she was someone else. Vampires — there were vampires in her own world, on the lands she’d played and lived on every chance she got to sneak away from her own kingdom. Those vampires were obviously the King, Queen, and their daughter, Princess Morrigan. And Princess Morrigan was responsible for taking Phillip from her.

Fairuza stepped toward Morrigan once more, intent on killing the female, then making her way around the castle and destroying every vampire life she found. “You will pay for this,” Fairuza said, advancing on Morrigan and again extending her hands to force her magicks into her. Morrigan shrieked in pain as Fairuza’s powers again forced their way into her body.

And so did Phillip. Though death was what he begged for, not only for himself, but for Morrigan and all those like her, the pain was immeasurable for him. He’d only just been turned and did not have the centuries of existence and strength to draw upon as Morrigan did.

As he cried out, Fairuza herself screamed in agony at hearing him in pain and dropped her hands to her sides, unable to harm him, regardless of what he’d become. “I cannot kill you!” she screamed.

Phillip didn’t answer, he was far too weak to reply.

Morrigan began to laugh, pleased to no end that her husband’s Fae lover couldn’t kill her because in so doing she’d kill him, too.

Fairuza sobbed in frustration, not sure of her next move. She couldn't separate Phillip from the vampire who'd claimed him. It just couldn't be done. And if she killed that vampire, she also killed Phillip, and that was something she couldn't bring herself to complete. But then, Phillip managed to turn his head in her direction. His eyes stared into her soul. His dried, bloodied lips parted and he whispered the last words she'd ever hear him say. "I'm sorry, Fairuza. Please, give me peace. Make me sleep forever."

Fairuza knew in that instant what she had to do. It wasn't what he begged for, but it was an acceptable compromise. She raised her hands again and began to chant. The elements she commanded swirled about the room she stood in as Phillip's eyes closed, and Morrigan who was struggling to get to her feet, fell to the floor, her body collapsing helplessly. Fairuza closed her eyes and continued chanting until a strange calm fell over her. When she opened her eyes sometime later, she knew she'd been successful. Phillip appeared dead, but as she approached him, and pressed her hand to his chest, she could just barely detect his heartbeat. He slept.

Then she walked over to Morrigan, still sprawled on the floor, and used the tip of her shoe to turn the female over. Reaching down, she pressed her hand to Morrigan's chest, and confirmed that she, too, was simply sleeping. Satisfied that her spell had worked, she went back to Phillip, and laid hands on the chains that bound him. She spoke a few words of magick and the chains fell away. She spent the next hour, cleaning him, then laying him comfortably in the bed. Then she moved Morrigan to the outer chamber, secured her with the chains she'd removed from Phillip, and left her lying in the middle of the floor.

Fairuza went back to Phillip's side and kissed his warm, yet still lips. "I've done the best I can, my love," she said, with tears streaming down her face. "I've given you your wish. You will peacefully sleep forever. Only a kiss from an innocent, pure of heart can wake you. But no one will disturb you. I'll see to it. I'll watch over you, my Phillip. I'll love you forever." Fairuza waited only a moment longer before she left the bedchamber, closing the door behind herself. She ignored the

female, chained and left uncomfortably in a heap on the dusty, dingy floor of the antechamber, and dissipated into a heavy mist once more, as she began her exploration of the castle to be sure that all who lived there had fallen into an eternal sleep, as Phillip and the monster who'd stolen his life, both had.

## Chapter 5

Fairuza took her time, painstakingly checking each and every room in the enormous castle, stables, and all its outbuildings. Everyone she came across was locked in eternal sleep, just as she'd intended. There was not a single soul, human or vampire, mammal, reptile, or insect in the castle that had not fallen under her spell.

Satisfied that she'd done the best she could for Phillip, she sobbed as she left the castle, spreading her wings to take herself up and over its walls. She climbed on Phillip's horse, and slowly rode away from the castle, where the man she loved and the creature that took him from her, would sleep under her watch for eternity.

When she reached a nearby hill, she paused and looked back at the castle. She needed to be sure that no other would venture into it and somehow wake the evil inside. Her desperation brought to mind pictures of the poisoned thorns that grew in the dark corners of the Fae world, and she knew right away they would keep the castle safe. Still sitting astride Phillip's horse, she thrust her hands into the air, calling on the elements once more, her wails a testament to her mourning heart. She imagined the castle covered by the vines even her own people avoided, and they began to grow.

Gasping in deep breaths of life giving air, she focused on the ground outside the castle, and it was only a moment's time before she could see the first deep, dark-brown wood-like vines erupt from the earth and begin to creep toward the castle walls. Fairuza watched as they grew longer and thicker, twisting and turning their way up the castle walls before spilling over the parapets and then climbing back over the top of the wall to double and triple in size. Once the vines had established themselves, the thorns began to grow from them,

protruding from the thick, woody vines to be as long as the forearm of a large man. They were black with tips of blood red, dripping with the poison they held inside, waiting like living things for the opportunity to prick some unsuspecting interloper, as they sought to pillage the sleeping castle.

Fairuza watched as the castle disappeared behind the thorns, still holding her arms aloft, her spell silently falling from her lips as the vines and brambles grew to cover all traces of the once accessible castle, and then a mile's distance from it in all directions. Deciding that her measures made the sleeping castle impenetrable, Fairuza dropped her hands at her sides, and rode away.

She leaned her upper body against the neck of Phillip's horse, sobbing as the animal carried her toward home and away from the thorns of blood, as they were known to her people.



Fairuza spent the next month in her hideaway alone. Everywhere she looked reminded her of Phillip, and it was slowly killing her will to live. She'd lost Phillip, her heart was shattered, and her will to carry on could seriously be questioned if she'd cared enough to do so. All she did was exist, and that was just barely.

It was as though the universe heard her plea to fade away into nothingness, and obliged her.

Then, one day she awoke to the sound of someone speaking to Phillip's horse. Fairuza had simply removed the saddle and reins from the animal and allowed him to wander the beautiful landscape at will, eating the rich green grasses, and drinking the clear sparkling waters to his heart's content. He didn't need her for anything, yet wandered close from time



to time to snort and whinny, reminding her that he was still there before wandering again as he grazed uninhibited.

“Well, aren’t you a beautiful boy?” a familiar voice asked.

The horse nickered, and the voice spoke again. “I know! I agree. You are quite the beautiful creature.”

Fairuza rolled over and buried her head under her pillow. She was in no frame of mind to deal with anyone at this point in time, least of all the person standing outside speaking to Phillip’s horse.

“Fairuza, dear! Are you inside?” the woman called out.

Fairuza squeezed her eyes shut tightly and hoped that by not answering, the woman would just go away.

“Fairuza, I know you’re here. Come out and speak to me.”

Fairuza huffed out a breath, but didn’t answer.

“If you don’t, I’ll have to come inside. Do you want me wandering around your little home here?”

Fairuza took a deep breath, and vowed to remain completely quiet, hoping that the woman would leave. But then she heard another voice.

“Fairuza, this is nonsense! Come out here this instant, otherwise I’m coming in. Your mother may be content to stand out here speaking to a horse, but I will not be put off. Come out here and speak to us as the noble you are!”

Fairuza knew there was no avoiding the confrontation any longer. They were both here; her mother and her grandmother. Slowly she slid off the soft bed of ferns and blankets she and Phillip had spent so many wondrous nights in, and let herself land on the cool, dirt floor of what she’d thought was her secret sanctuary. She sat there as the minutes ticked away, trying to let the spinning in her head stop. It had been weeks since she’d been upright.

“Get. Up,” a stern voice snapped.

Fairuza raised her head to look at the old woman standing before her. “Grandmother,” she said, her voice raspy from non-use.

“Granddaughter,” the old woman answered.

“What do you want?” Fairuza asked, allowing her gaze to leave her grandmother’s and survey the dirt floor she sat on.

“Will you make me repeat myself?” her grandmother asked.

“No,” Fairuza mumbled, beginning to get to her feet, by bracing herself against the bed behind her.

“Look at you,” Fairuza’s mother said as she came to stand beside her own mother, tsking as she moved to help Fairuza. “What has happened daughter? Why are you so despondent?” her mother asked as she helped Fairuza to stand, and then sit on the side of the bed.

Fairuza looked up at her mother, then her grandmother, and her eyes filled with tears. “He’s gone.”

“Who’s gone?” her mother asked.

“You know full well who’s gone!” her grandmother snapped.

Fairuza looked from one to the other of them, then back again. “You knew?” she asked.

“Of course, we knew. We know everything,” her grandmother said. “The important things anyway. We’ve been watching you waste your time in the human world as you put off accepting your role in ours. Time marches differently here, you know. You’ve wasted better than two months’ time here — this trip anyway — while in our world, it has only been days. You’ve lolled around long enough. You have things to tend to, people waiting for you to take your place as our Queen, duties to see to,” the old woman said. The horse nickered, and she spoke again, “and horses to tend before you come home. You can’t leave him uncared for. Get up, Fairuza, and become the woman you were raised to be.”

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“You can. And you will,” her grandmother insisted firmly.

“It’s a terrible thing to lose a man you thought you’d live your life with, but we are all forced to do things we shouldn’t

have to. Humans are just not as fully bound to those they love as we are,” Fairuza’s mother said.

Fairuza looked up at her mother with a look of outrage on her face. “He was bound to me!” she said tearfully. “He was taken from me!”

“Who in their right mind would leave the Queen of the Fae?” her mother asked, laughing lightly. She was always so positive. It not only drove Fairuza insane, but also was the reason she was personally taking the throne at such a young age. Her grandmother was tired, and her mother just wasn’t firm enough. She’d rather decorate their castle, and grow flowers and see to the forest creatures and the sprites than see to the issues of their people.

“Why are you here? How did you find me?” Fairuza asked, not bothering to answer her mother’s question.

“We’ve known for sometime that you would sneak away to steal moments here to get away from our world. Usually it was a blip in time to us, but this time, it’s been longer. It’s been long enough that your presence has been missed by not only ourselves but our court, so we came to see what held your interest and saw you with your young man,” her mother said.

“Phillip,” Fairuza said, her eyes filling with tears again.

“Not this nonsense again!” her grandmother snapped. “You are much too strong for this. What’s done is done. He didn’t have the good sense to stay at your side and chose another. Get over it and move on!”

“He didn’t choose another! And I can’t,” Fairuza said simply.

“You can! You may not believe it yet, but you are the strongest of all of us. You will do what is necessary to keep peace and order in our world. There is no other option. It is your time, now, child,” her grandmother said. “Now come home, I’m tired, and your mother isn’t as well suited for such things, it’s your turn.”

Fairuza sat silently as she considered all that had happened, then something occurred to her. “Did you know he’d be taken from me?” she asked, looking up at the two

women who'd raised her. "Is that why you didn't interfere earlier?"

"No, Fairuza," her mother said, taking a seat beside her. "We only knew that you'd fallen in love, and that you were here with him. We tried to give you all the time we could, but when you didn't come home at all, and we found you here in tears every time we came back, we knew he'd left you."

Fairuza shook her head. "He didn't leave me willingly."

Her grandmother and mother exchanged a look, then her grandmother spoke. "You keep saying that. Explain yourself, child."

Fairuza didn't look at either of them. "He didn't leave me. He had to go to break off a betrothal his family had arranged without his consent, and he was forced to stay."

"If he'd wanted to return, he could have," her grandmother said matter-of-factly.

"He was attacked, she changed him! He was so weak from her attack he couldn't get away, he tried to fight and just couldn't. And when all was said and done, he couldn't have anyway. He would never have survived," Fairuza said between sobs. "She stole our future!"

"Fairuza, dear, you're not making any sense. Stop crying and tell us what happened," her mother said.

"The Princess Morrigan. She claimed him, changed him!"

"Into what?" her grandmother asked.

"Vampire," Fairuza finally managed to get out.

"That's impossible! We'd have known if there was a vampire nearby. You'd have sensed her on your adventures here," her mother exclaimed.

"She's vampire. Her family is, too. And now Phillip is as well," Fairuza said.

Her grandmother thought about it. "The only way they could have remained undetected is with the help of our kind, or those like us."

“But who would have helped hide away a coven of vampires, knowing how deadly they are to any living creatures in their vicinity. They spread like a plague!” her mother exclaimed.

“Any we’ve cast out would have gladly assisted them if their rewards were great enough,” her grandmother said thoughtfully. Then she pinned her daughter with a sharp, knowing look. “Flower, Furlie, and Stormyweather!”

“No! Would they?” her daughter asked.

“They would if they thought themselves aligning their own kingdom with vampires at their beck and call,” the grandmother said. “They were expelled for derision. For practicing magicks forbidden in our world. This would not go against their beliefs in any manner and would make any bid to take the throne of our people more likely to succeed with the strength of the vampires behind them. If Fairuza is right, and there are vampires about, I’m fairly sure those three were involved in keeping the very nature of the King and Queen and their court, including the Princess, a secret. It would have had to have been them; we’ve exiled none more powerful than they!”

“And our dear Fairuza stumbled upon them, and struck them all down. And my poor, poor girl, you had to sacrifice your love for the greater good. It is heart wrenching at best. Would that I could take away your pain, my brave girl,” Fairuza’s mother said, hugging Fairuza to her.

“We are proud of you, Fairuza. What you have done is not easy. But you have triumphed. Well done,” Fairuza’s grandmother said, proudly. “You did what had to be done. The vampires and their protectors are no more, and your young man is at peace now. Good for you. It stands as testament to your strength.”

Fairuza looked up at her grandmother, then pulled free of her mother’s arms. “I’ve not seen Flower, Furlie, or Stormyweather at all! And I’ve not killed anyone! They’re not dead!” she said, looking back and forth between her mother and grandmother again. “I couldn’t kill him. I tried, but I

couldn't do it. He'd have died if I'd killed his makers, and I couldn't kill him!"

"You left them alive?!" her grandmother shouted incredulously. "You cannot allow any of them to live! And if your man has been turned, he can't live either!"

"He's my anam cara! I can't kill him! He was to rule at my side!" Fairuza shouted.

"It matters not! Things have changed! These things have changed! It must be done!" her grandmother insisted, her voice rising.

"It does matter! And I won't! I can't kill him!" Fairuza screamed.

"Then I will!" her grandmother shouted.

"You can't. Part of me is already bound to him," Fairuza said tearfully sobbing.

"Oh, Fairuza! Why?" her mother asked.

"I knew he was mine. There was no reason not to build our bond. So, we did," Fairuza admitted. "I did. Gladly."

"Where is he?" her grandmother asked.

Fairuza shook her head.

"Fairuza, you know this must be tended to," her grandmother said. "You're not fully bonded, it will hurt, but you will not perish. He must be dealt with, as will those who turned him, and those who protected the entire coven."

"We are fully bound!" Fairuza insisted.

"You're not. We've not accepted, nor blessed your union. It is the last step for our kind," her grandmother reminded her. "I'll deal with this mess. Where are they?"

"I've already dealt with it. This world and all in it are safe from them," Fairuza said.

"How? What have you done?" her mother asked.

"I spelled them. They'll sleep for eternity. The King and Queen, the Princess, their court and all their servants, and my Phillip," she finished on a sob. "He begged me to kill him, but I just couldn't. So I gave them eternal sleep instead."

“I suppose Flower, Furlie, and Stormyweather are eternally sleeping as well?” her mother asked.

“If they were on the castle grounds, they are,” Fairuza answered, “but as I said, I didn’t see them. If they were there, they’d hidden themselves away.”

“And if someone stumbles on the castle and its occupants while they sleep, what then? We cannot have evidence of the supernatural world left unattended in the human world,” her grandmother said.

“No living creature can get through.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I spelled them, then I willed the poisoned thorns of our world to grow around and over it. It’s encased fully and a mile in any direction. Only one pure of heart can penetrate the thorns surrounding the castle. There is no one pure of heart. And I’ll watch over the castle to be sure it’s never disturbed. None of them are a danger,” Fairuza insisted. “And I can’t allow you to kill him. Or them, because it will end with his death, as well.”

“Fairuza,” her grandmother said, shaking her head. “You know more humans will die if they contact the thorns you’ve placed around the castle. We cannot affect the human world. It’s not allowed.”

“I’m not going home. This is my home, now. I’m staying here. I’m keeping watch. No one will disturb them. They’ll sleep forever. I’ll make sure of it,” Fairuza said.

“You cannot just give up your life over the loss of a man. You’re our next Queen! Our people depend on you!” her grandmother insisted.

“No they don’t. They’re perfectly safe and content in your hands. You lead them, and you,” she said, turning to look at her mother. “They don’t need me, they have both of you. I’ll stay here and oversee my love’s final resting place.”

“This is unacceptable!” her grandmother said, beginning to stalk out of the small cramped space Fairuza had made her home in.

“If you destroy him, I’ll never forgive you. I’ll disown you both and I’ll never return to our world. Never!” Fairuza shouted.

Her grandmother stopped in her tracks and looked at Fairuza with an outraged expression. “You can’t mean that!”

“I vow it,” Fairuza said calmly.

“Come outside, Mother,” Fairuza’s mother said to her own mother. “Let us speak about this as Fairuza tries to gather her wits.”

Once outside Fairuza’s grandmother shook her head. “We cannot allow her to throw her life away like this.”

“We won’t. She’s mourning the loss of her anam cara, Mother. Allow her time to come to terms with it, then she’ll return to us. We can easily guide our world until she’s healed. Then it will be her world to oversee,” Fairuza’s mother said quietly to Fairuza’s grandmother.

“How can you be so sure?” her grandmother asked, still entertaining ideas of destroying the entire castle and all who lived in it.

“She’s our blood, Mother. She will persevere. She just needs time.”

Moments later Fairuza’s mother stepped back inside Fairuza’s small home. “Fairuza, we understand. We’re going home on one condition. You must actively continue to watch over the castle and its occupants. You must be prepared to attend to any who may stumble on it. You know well the result of any who may become poisoned by the thorns. You cannot have innocents dying from Fae magicks. You must return them to health.”

“They’re not innocents if they’re trying to get to the castle which is clearly protected by the thorns,” Fairuza said.

“Technicalities, Fairuza,” her mother answered. “If you truly wish to watch over Phillip’s resting place, you must take all responsibility. You can’t do that if you’re sleeping your life away here,” she said, looking around the small shelter. “You must get up and rejoin life. If you do this, we’ll leave you to



oversee your Phillip and his condition. For now anyway. Can you do that?"

Fairuza nodded. Then she got up on shaky legs and walked toward her mother who lifted her arms to embrace her daughter. "I love you, my sweet girl. I know you will overcome all the heartbreak. I know you will once again be my happy, lovely girl. Call for us if you need us. We will check on you if we don't hear from you."

"I understand," Fairuza said.

As both women prepared to leave Fairuza to her choices, Fairuza simply waited to see them off. Once they were gone, she returned to her bed. "Tomorrow. I'll start tomorrow," she whispered, as she allowed herself to wallow for just one more day.

## Chapter 6

The next morning Fairuza awoke to the sounds of birds chirping, squirrels chattering, and the scent of freshly bloomed flowers. It made her sick. She wanted no part of any beautiful thing any longer. All she wanted was Phillip, and since she couldn't have him, she wanted nothing. Her mind thought back to the bargain she'd made with her mother to oversee all that she'd put into motion, and she knew if she didn't keep her end of the agreement, her mother and grandmother would come to force her back to their world.

Sighing she swung her legs off her bed, and got shakily to her feet. The first thing she needed to do, in order to do what she had to do, was to feed herself. Making her way slowly, she walked across the one room of her small home and stepped through the opening into the sunlight. Fairuza squinted as the brightness of the day flowed over her. The animals seemed to greet her, and the birds seemed to sing more proudly, and Fairuza scowled at them all as she set her path for the small fruit orchard she'd grown for herself and Phillip. There she'd find apples and blueberries, and without much effort she'd have a meal before she mounted Phillip's horse and rode out to survey the castle and assure herself that all was as she'd left it. Then she'd ride through the village and make it known that the castle was off limits, the thorns deadly, and warn them all away. This would be her life now, protectress of the sleeping castle.



Prince Claude strode confidently through the large gallery on the main floor of his family's castle. He'd been summoned by his mother and father, the King and Queen of their lands and all peoples on them. The fact that he'd been summoned by his parents was an extremely unusual thing. He'd not spoken to them since he'd declared his intention to join the priesthood and become a member of the clergy the previous year. Since then, he'd been left to his own devices, leaving his brothers to carry out any official business as it may arise.

Claude paused outside their official throne room, taking a moment to breathe easy, to center himself and prepare for whatever task awaited him on the other side. He cast a glance to his left and then to his right, acknowledging both knights standing guard. Then he took both door handles in his hands and pushed them open before him, stepping confidently inside.

The Queen noticed him at once and leaned closer to her husband, whispering in his ear. The King looked up and acknowledged him by a slight inclination of his head before returning his attention to the farmer standing in front of him. The farmer finished explaining his complaint, then waited for the King to speak.

"What exactly is it that you would like me to do?" the King asked the farmer.

"They're using our grazing land, and without our permission. When we need to turn our sheep out, there is nothing left for them to eat," the farmer said. "We've lived on this land for years, your highness. It's not fair to allow them to access land that we've worked into good grazing land simply because it's convenient for them!"

The King turned his attention to the other farmer standing just a few feet from the first. "And what say you?"

"Your highness, there is no other grazing land nearby. Our goats will starve without access to the grasses that grow there."

"It's our land!" the first farmer exclaimed.

“It’s not fenced! It’s there for the taking!” the second retorted.

The King raised his hand and both farmers quieted. “I will supply fencing to you to enclose your land,” he said to the first farmer. “I suggest you split it in two temporarily.”

“But, your highness!” the second objected.

“And you will not help yourself to what is not yours. You will instead request permission to graze upon the land, only on the portion you are given access to. When granted, and it will be granted, you will reimburse the land’s owner for its use. Whether it be by coin, trade, or service, I will leave up to the two of you. But I trust as two humble, hardworking men, simply trying to provide for your families and the village itself, you can come to an agreement.”

“Yes, your highness,” both farmers said.

“You,” the King said, looking at the second farmer, “will look for alternate grazing grounds for your animals for next season. This is a limited arrangement meant to prevent either of you from losing your livestock, and reimbursing your neighbor for the use of his land.”

“Yes, your highness,” the second farmer said.

“Is this acceptable to you both?” the King asked.

“It is,” they both replied.

Prince Claude watched as both men shook hands and left the throne room talking about an acceptable payment for use of the first farmer’s land. His father was always a fair and just King, and his people always trusted him to judge their grievances in a manner which benefited all parties.

“Claude,” his father said, standing from his seat on his throne.

“Father,” Claude responded, approaching his father and mother and bowing his head respectfully.

“Thank you for coming at our request,” the King said.

“Of course, Father,” Claude said.

“I trust you are excelling in your studies, and acclimating to the life you’ve chosen,” his father said.

“I am,” Claude answered. “And all is well here?” he asked.

“For the most part,” the King answered. “It is quiet here with you and Phillip both away,” the King said.

Claude simply nodded, waiting for his father to get to the reason for summoning him.

“In fact, that is the reason we sent for you,” his father said.

Claude looked up at his father, his brow wrinkled in confusion. Surely they’d not sent for him just because they were lonely. They had two other sons still about. “I don’t understand,” Claude admitted.

“We know you are established and on your way to the future you desire,” the King said.

“Yes,” Claude said.

“Phillip has traveled to meet his betrothed. He is to be married to Princess Morrigan, thereby joining our two families and our kingdoms as well.”

“Yes, I was aware before I left to join the priesthood,” Claude said. “Is he encountering difficulties?”

“We don’t know. He’s not sent word of anything at all. We’ve sent several communications to King Lionel and Queen Catherine as well as Phillip himself, but they’ve not sent any reply or acknowledgment of our communications either. We’ve begun to worry that perhaps Phillip didn’t make it to their lands, or perhaps if he did, he’s being prevented from replying.”

“It is unlike him to not remain in contact with us,” Claude said.

“Agreed. And I cannot leave our lands and people ungoverned. I need you to go in search of your brother,” his father said bluntly.

“Me?!” Claude exclaimed.

“Yes, you. It was not so long ago that you wished to take his place as our heir to the throne. This is your time to step into that roll.”

“Father, I was a young boy with visions of greatness. I have found that greatness comes in many forms. I no longer wish to rule these lands and sit upon a throne. I wish to serve a power even greater than yours, and I am studying to that end. I am committed to the priesthood.”

His father stared directly into his eyes. “Very well. But your mother is fraught with worry. I cannot go myself, Henry is in training to take his place as the commander of our knights, and your youngest brother is too young to travel that far alone. It falls to you, Claude. Will you soothe your mother’s heart? Travel to King Lionel’s court and confirm that all is as it should be. Surely as a man of the cloth, you will be welcomed among them and soon report back to us that all is well.”

Claude thought about his father’s request. He wasn’t even finished with his studies. It would be years before he would be considered a priest, a true man of the cloth. But then he looked up into his mother’s eyes and saw them red rimmed and swollen from her tears. His mother had always been very attached to all her sons, himself included. He couldn’t disappoint his mother. He nodded resignedly. “Very well, I’ll go.”

His mother hurried down the steps to the dais that held their thrones above the floor level and threw herself into Claude’s arms. “Thank you, my son,” she said. “I just know something is not right. I can feel it.”

“It will all be well, mother. I’ll return soon with word of a magnificent life for Phillip, I’m sure,” Claude said.

His mother nodded and hugged Claude, her head just barely reaching his chest since he was such a tall man. Claude patted her back and met his father’s approving gaze. What was a few months of travel if it eased his mother’s heart and returned him to his father’s good graces for the first time since announcing he wanted to give up the life of a noble to become a priest?



Fairuza ducked her head as she stepped out of her small home. As she stepped out into the fresh air, she glared up at the sun happily shining its brilliance down on her and everything around her. She reached for the heavy black and purple cloak she'd taken to wearing, pulled it tighter around her, and called for Phillip's horse. The beautiful white steed came without hesitation at her call, trotting up to stop right before her.

"It's time for our ride, Bolt," she said without emotion. She took hold of his mane and swung herself up and onto his bare back, her long flowing cape arranging itself over his back and rump as she pulled it in snugly to keep her body and her head covered. "To the village," she said.

The horse turned its head in the direction she wanted to go, falling into a calming rhythm, without even having to be reined.



Fairuza rode through the village slowly, taking her time, daring anyone to come out and speak to her. She'd ridden through it before, made her case known, and ridden away. But apparently, just stating clearly that the castle was no more, and any who tried to reach it would die, wasn't enough. She'd already had to remove the bodies of two foolish men who'd tried to chop their way through the thorns to reach the riches they imagined lay beyond. So, this time, she rode slowly, her

eyes looking back and forth between the doors that had been hastily closed up tight as they saw her approaching.

Realizing that no one was coming to face her, she raised her voice so that all could hear her. “I know you’re there. Each of you, hiding away in your homes, hoping that I’ll simply leave. I will not. I’ll never leave. And each time one of your menfolk are foolish enough to kill themselves on the thorns protecting you from what was once the castle, I’ll be back to drop their bodies here in the center of your village as I have done twice before. Do yourself a favor, stop trying to reach what no longer lies there. The thorns will spill the blood of any who try to penetrate them. Stay away and allow them to do their job, which is to keep you safe. They protect you from what lies beyond. There is an evil shrouded within them that no one could survive. This is my last warning. Please, take notice. I am trying to protect you, can you not see it and cooperate just a little?!” she shouted condescendingly.

Fairuza waited a few moments to give anyone who was brave enough time to come out and speak to her, but as usual, none did, so she spoke softly to Phillip’s horse. “To the castle, Bolt.”

Without any further prodding, the horse turned toward the castle.



Claude sat tall in his saddle, with knights his father insisted escort him at his sides and back. His mind wandered as he rode, his concern for his older brother not a small thing. It was unlike Phillip to ignore all attempts at communication from his parents. He knew Phillip had been unhappy with the forced mantle of being the first born son, but still, it was unlike him to simply disappear.



“It is just over the next rise, Prince Claude,” one of the knights said.

“Claude,” Claude said. “It’s just Claude now.”

“As you wish, sir,” the knight replied.

Sometime later they arrived at the top of the next rise and sat mesmerized as they took in the sight before them.

“I don’t understand, it should be right there!” the knight exclaimed.

“I’m not sure what I’m seeing,” Claude said.

“It looks like... thorns, sir. Miles and miles of brambles and thorns!” another knight said.

“You’re sure the castle was just there?” Claude asked.

“Absolutely, sir,” the first knight answered.

“We must investigate. Surely it’s still there beyond the walls of thorns. We’ll just have to find a way through them.”



Fairuza left Bolt where she usually did, in the cover of the tree line a fair distance from the thorns surrounding the sleeping castle. She threw her cloak back, unfurled her wings and lifted herself up and over the thorns, setting herself down inside the castle walls, and onto the small path she’d cleared to allow herself to access the huge door which sat at the front entrance of the massive stone castle. She let herself in, then forced herself to walk its hallways and look into each of its rooms every time she visited. It was her duty, and she had to see to it. The sight of Phillip lying asleep in the exact same position she’d left him never failed to break her heart anew. But that part didn’t matter. The security of the castle was something that had to be looked after regularly. After all, it was ultimately security for Phillip as well.

This day was no different than all the others that had come and gone. She walked every inch of the castle, ensuring all still slept, and all was still as she'd left it on her last visit, then she'd allow herself to go to Phillip. She spent hours at his side, stroking his hand, speaking softly to him. She'd long ago worked through her feelings of anger, and now felt only loss. As always, there came a point she couldn't stand any longer to pretend Phillip was even aware she was there, and she tiredly got to her feet and left the castle, locking all the doors and entries behind her as she always did.

On her way back through the thorns, she stood in the small, narrow path she'd made for herself and looked up at the sky. It was late afternoon, she'd been there longer today than she'd planned. At first it concerned her, then she shrugged. It mattered not. She had no one to know if she was late, or if she'd even return to her home at all.

Hesitating no longer, she sighed as she unfurled her wings, prepared to leave the castle and its sleeping occupants behind until the next visit.

## Chapter 7

Fairuza kept her hooded cloak up over her head as she lifted herself into the air, not looking in any direction as she went, just leaving behind the heartbreak that seeped into her soul anew each time she visited this cursed place. Setting her feet back on land beyond the thorns that surrounded the sleeping castle, she started toward the small clearing she always left Bolt in, but she'd gone no more than a few steps when voices caught her attention.

“Wake!” a male voice shouted. “You must wake! Tell me what ails you, that I might save you!”

Fairuza's first thought was that another foolish villager had thought to hack his way through the thorns, ended up poisoning himself, and now his friends were trying to save him.

“Sire, they are all dying!” another voice called out desperately.

“Do your best to make them all comfortable while I retrieve the last of them,” the first voice instructed.

Fairuza's curiosity was piqued. From the sound of it, someone with servants was trying to penetrate the thorns shrouding and surrounding the castle. She mounted Bolt, and turned the stallion toward the voices she could hear.



As Claude hacked his way through the thorns, he turned at a disturbing sound behind him.

“What happened?” he shouted, as he rushed back to those of his knights who were lying on the ground. The moment he arrived at their sides, he began to try to rouse them.

“What is it? What has happened?” he asked worriedly as the last conscious man reached toward him, his eyes rolling back in his head as he fell forward into Claude’s arms. Claude lifted the man over his shoulder and carried him until they were clear of the brambles and thorns, then he placed him on the ground, left him in the care of the one knight who’d stayed behind with their horses, and went back for another man.

When he returned with the second unconscious knight, he placed him on the ground as well, and knelt beside him, trying to wake them again. “Wake!” Claude shouted. “You must wake! Tell me what ails you, that I might save you!”

“Sire, they are all dying!” the one knight left awake called out desperately.

“Do your best to make them comfortable while I retrieve the last,” Claude instructed. It wasn’t very long before he was back with the final knight who’d fallen unconscious as they tried to hack their way through the overgrowth surrounding the castle. He laid the man next to the other three and looked up at the remaining knight, who stood watching him. “Get our skins. We’ll use the water to try to wake them.”

The knight turned to do as he was told and stopped in his tracks.

“What are you waiting for?! Bring me the water skins!” Claude ordered. He looked up to find the knight standing still, his eyes pinned to a small figure on a horse. A horse he knew well. Claude got up and strode past the knight. “Who are you?!” Claude demanded. “Where did you get that horse?”

Fairuza didn’t answer him, she merely watched him from beneath her hood, her face still hidden inside it.

“Did you not hear me? Where did you get that horse? That is my brother’s horse!” Claude shouted, and started walking toward Fairuza and Bolt.

“Come, Bolt!” Claude called out, clicking his tongue and holding his hand out toward the animal.

Bolt took a few steps forward, but then stopped, shifting his weight and clearly indicating that Claude was no longer considered his master, despite the fact that he recognized him.

“Who are you?” Fairuza asked.

Claude hesitated once the voice that spoke to him identified the rider as a woman. He looked intently at the rider, trying to see beneath the hood. “The question is, who are you, and where did you get my brother’s horse?” Claude repeated.

Fairuza looked past Claude at the knights lying unconscious on the ground, and at the one knight who’d walked forward to stand at Claude’s side. Then she took her time studying Claude. She could see some resemblance between her beloved Phillip and Claude. Claude’s hair was lighter, and Claude was taller and thinner, but they had the same eyes, the same lips, and they carried themselves the same way.

“Who is your brother?” Fairuza asked.

“Prince Phillip is my brother. How did you come to have his horse in your possession? Where is he? Is he well?”

Fairuza looked down at the knights again. “I will have to help you, or they’ll die,” she said.

Claude looked over his shoulder at his knights, assigned to escort him but now lying unmoving on the ground. “What ails them?” he asked.

Fairuza lifted one leg over Bolt’s back, and allowed herself to slide off his back. As she began walking forward, she pushed the hood of her cloak back off her head, revealing her long, blue-black curls and beautiful face. “They’ve been poisoned.”

“By whom? That’s impossible, they’ve not left my side!” Claude said.

“By the thorns, and it’s very possible,” Fairuza answered tiredly, walking past him.

“It’s not the thorns. They pricked my flesh, too, but I still stand,” he said, falling into step with her.

Fairuza stopped walking and looked at his arms which did indeed show small tracks of blood where the thorns tore his skin. She met his gaze and shrugged unemotionally. “You’re pure of heart.” Then she resumed her path to the downed men, and knelt beside the first of them. “I need to touch their chests,” she said.

“You can’t be serious,” Claude remarked, still unconvinced of what she claimed.

Fairuza looked up at him again. “You will remove their leathers so that I can heal them, or they will die,” she said simply.

Claude didn’t move to do her bidding, so she got up and started to walk back toward Bolt.

“Wait! Are you sure they’ve been poisoned?” Claude asked.

“Very,” Fairuza answered.

“How can you be so sure?” Claude asked.

“Because I put the thorns there to do just that,” Fairuza explained tiredly.

Claude’s mouth dropped open in surprise.

“Will you allow me to heal them, or not? I don’t have all day,” Fairuza said, her tone short and impatient.

Claude looked from her to his knights and back again. Finally, he nodded and went to the men to start removing their leathers. Once the first man’s chest was exposed, Fairuza knelt beside him and placed her hands on him. She raised her face to the sky and closed her eyes, her lips moving rapidly as chants rushed from them in hushed whispers.

As Claude watched, a sticky dark brown substance began to gather on the surface of his skin, then after a bit more chanting, lifted into the air and hovered briefly before it seemed to be absorbed into Fairuza’s body.

Claude caught his breath and stepped back. “What magick is this?” he rushed out.

“The kind that will save your friends,” she answered. She got to her feet and moved to the next knight. “Stay clear of me lest the poisons enter you. You, too,” she said, looking at the one unharmed knight. “I have no way of knowing if these poisons will stay with me, or try to move to another.”

The knight’s eyes widened and he moved quickly twenty feet away to watch from a distance.

“I will stay near. I was not harmed by them to begin with,” Claude said.

“You are brave,” Fairuza said with no emotion at all as she knelt at the next man’s side.

“I am pure of heart,” he said, remembering what she’d told him.

She paused before she laid her hands on the second man and looked up at Claude. She gave a single nod of her head, then closed her eyes and began her whispered chants again.

Claude watched in awe as once more the poison lifted from his knight’s body and was absorbed into the small female determined to save him. He watched as she finished with the second knight, then took a moment to breath deeply, pushing her fingers deep into her beautiful hair to rub at her scalp, and let her head fall back on her shoulders for a brief rest before she went to the last knight and again removed the poison from his body, taking it into her own.

“Here,” Claude said, holding his water skin out to her.

Fairuza opened her eyes and realized he was standing beside her, offering her water. She took the skin from him and drank deeply before handing it back to him. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” he said. He looked back over his knights still lying unconscious, then at Fairuza. “Are they well, now?”

“Yes. They’ll wake eventually. Then you need to take them and leave this place forever.”

“I’m not leaving without seeing my brother. I must see that he is safe and well. Then I can return home with the news that he is accounted for.”

“You can’t see him. Just go. Tell your family that he is being watched over, he is no longer suffering, and take solace in that,” Fairuza said, standing and beginning to walk away.

“Suffering? From what? And I will not just leave! He is my brother! He will want to see me!” Claude exclaimed.

“Maybe once he did. But no more. He won’t want you to see him. Just go back to where you belong. Don’t come back. I won’t heal any more of your men.”

“You can’t take that horse!” he called out when she swung herself up onto Bolt’s back.

Fairuza looked down at the horse she was sitting astride, then at Claude. “What is your name?” she asked.

“I’m Claude, brother to Phillip. Who are you?”

“I’m Fairuza. I watch over these lands,” she said, looking out over the seemingly endless thorns. Then she looked back at Claude. “And this horse is all I have left of Phillip. We take care of each other. He no longer belongs to anyone but me.”

“All you have left of Phillip... where is he?” Claude demanded.

“You are better off not knowing. Go home, Claude, know that he is protected.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Where is he?” Claude said, stalking forward. “I refuse to leave until I see for myself where he is and speak to him personally! I have no way of being assured of his welfare without speaking to him myself!”

“You can’t speak to him. No one can speak to him,” Fairuza said.

“You do!” Claude said.

Fairuza turned her eyes from the immense overgrowth of thorns back to focus on Claude. “I do. But he never answers.”

“I don’t understand,” Claude said. “Take me to my brother. Please. I must see for myself that all is well, and he wishes to remain here. Then I’ll go.”

Fairuza watched Claude silently as she considered his request. If she had a sister who’d gone missing, and was told



to just go home, there was no way she'd leave without confirmation of welfare, or proof of life or death. But taking him to see Phillip was a dangerous thing. If he lost control and decided to kill everyone inside the castle, it would be the death of Phillip as well. "If I take you to Phillip, you must promise to do exactly as I say. If you break your promise, I will leave you there and you will both be lost to your family forever, without explanation."

Claude considered her words for only a second. "I give you my word," he said without hesitation.

"Very well," she answered, sliding off Bolt once again.

"Where are you going? I can simply follow you," he said, intending to mount his own horse and follow her.

"You can only reach him one way," she said, throwing back her cloak and extending her wings in preparation of flight.

Claude's eyes widened. "You are Fae!" he said.

"I am. Clearly I was otherworldly. What did you think me to be?" she asked irritably.

"Witch," he whispered.

Fairuza shook her head and sighed. "Do you wish to see him or not? I grow tired of all this," she said.

Claude gave a firm nod. "I do." He stepped closer to her and she held tightly to him. "Hold me," she said. As soon as he held her in his arms, she flapped her large, glossy-black feathered wings and took to the sky, with Claude in tow.

Claude dared to look down at the miles of thorns surrounding the castle, then at the mountain of overgrowth that covered the castle itself. "Why would you hide the castle away like this? Surely there are better ways to protect it from visitors who might wish it harm," he said.

"I'm not protecting the castle from visitors. I'm protecting visitors, as well as everyone else from the castle," she answered.

Claude looked at her, shocked at her answer, then glanced down as she began to lower them toward the thorns. He was a

little alarmed, until he noticed a small clearing near the center of them. The moment she set them down safely, he took a step back from her.

“I’ll take you inside to see for yourself. But you can’t touch anyone. You can’t disturb anything you see. And the moment we leave here, you must go home, take all your knights with you and never return. Do you give me your promise?”

“I do,” he answered.

Fairuza turned to the huge doors and began to pull them open.

Claude pitched in, and moments later they entered the quiet, dark castle.

“It’s deserted,” Claude said, looking around at the dust everywhere.

“Not exactly,” Fairuza said, as she led the way to the bedchamber Phillip rested in.

Claude made sure to keep up with her, following her without further question, his hand on the hilt of his sword as his boots echoed off the stone floors and walls of the silent structure.

Fairuza paused outside a door and looked over at him. “I’ll have to unlock the door from the inside. It’s barricaded. Wait here.”

Before he could respond, she disappeared in a wisp of dark mist. The next moment he heard the barricade being lifted on the other side of the door, then it swung open and Fairuza stood there, waiting for him to enter. Claude spied the long blonde hair of the female lying on the floor unconscious across the room. “Has she been poisoned?!” he asked, alarmed that yet another had fallen victim to the poison of the thorns, as he rushed toward her.

“Don’t touch her! I told you not to disturb anything at all!” Fairuza snapped out.

Claude paused and looked back at her. “But she needs our help!”

“She’s beyond anyone’s help,” Fairuza said.

“I don’t understand!” Claude exclaimed, his face reflecting his confusion.

“She’s a vampire,” Fairuza said simply, then walked away, leaving him standing there as she opened another door and disappeared inside the room it led to.

Claude looked back at the female lying in a heap on the floor, then backed away from her to follow Fairuza. “Vampire! You’re telling me that female is going wake and drink our blood?” he asked.

Fairuza didn’t answer. She was standing beside a bed, holding the hand of the man who was lying before her. She was sobbing as she spoke to the man, telling him that she’d brought his brother to see him.

“No!” Claude hissed out, finally hearing and understanding the words she spoke to the sleeping man. Slowly Claude approached the bed, not wanting to see Phillip lying there unconscious. “Surely, you’re mistaken. It can’t be Phillip.”

“It’s my Phillip. I was too late to save him,” Fairuza said.

Claude looked down at his brother, seemingly peacefully sleeping. He was deathly pale, his eyes closed in slumber, his hand clasped in Fairuza’s. Claude looked at Fairuza’s face, saw her trembling lips, her tear stained cheeks, her wet lashes. She was truly pained. “What was he to you?”

“My anam cara. My love. We were going to marry and spend forever together. But he had to end the betrothal his father arranged first. He said it was the honorable thing to do. When he told the princess he loved another, she attacked him. She changed him. Stealing his life from him,” Fairuza said tearfully.

“The princess lies on the floor in the other room?” Claude asked.

Fairuza nodded. “King Lionel and Queen Catherine are in their chambers, and all their attendants are wherever they happened to be when I spelled the castle. They’ll sleep forever.”

“But, how are they vampires? How could this possibly happen?” he asked, growing more and more upset.

“I don’t know. We believe she and her family had help to hide from those of us who would have driven them out or destroyed them. It doesn’t matter anymore,” Fairuza said.

“It does matter! We must kill her, kill them, and all those like her! Phillip will wake when they no longer have a hold on him!” Claude insisted.

“She’s made him like her, Claude. She created him. He’s tied to her. If we kill her, he’ll die, too. It’s the only reason she still lives. He begged me to kill him, I just couldn’t do it. I can’t. So instead, I spelled them to sleep forever. I watch over Phillip. I make sure he’s never disturbed, and that all outside this castle are safe from those who are inside it. As long as no one tries to penetrate the overgrowth outside the castle, they’ll remain alive and well. It’s the best I can do.”

Claude fell to his knees beside the bed, looking down at his brother. “I don’t know what to do, how to fix this,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry, Phillip.”

Fairuza watched Claude talking to a brother who couldn’t hear him and would never respond. She watched as Claude’s tears began to roll down his face, and she knew his heart was mourning a brother he’d have to learn to consider dead, though he never really would be.



## Chapter 8

An hour later Fairuza and Claude were in the clearing where she'd originally met him, her astride Bolt, and him watching her with a dazed expression as she prepared to ride away.

“What can I possibly tell my parents?” he said, still in a fugue.

“Tell them he is safe, and at peace. Tell them it is not possible to contact him, but he is as well as he could possibly be,” Fairuza said. “Let them rest,” she said, gesturing toward the men still lying on the ground, “then go home, and tell them whatever you have to, to be sure they never come looking again.”

Fairuza turned Bolt away from them, and spoke softly to the horse. “Take us home, Bolt,” she said.

The horse did exactly as she asked, and Claude stood there, watching silently as she rode out of his life.

He turned and looked at the sleeping knights on the ground, and the one knight who still stood watch over them. Then he sank to his knees where he stood and pressed his hands together as he began prayers that he'd repeat over and over for hours as he prayed for peace for his parents and himself, for the soul of his brother, and for the soul of the strange little female who'd vowed to watch over him all of her life.



Two days later Claude stood outside the small, dank building that the villagers called an inn. He handed one of his knights almost all the money he had, keeping just a bit of coin for himself, and stepped back away from them. "Tell them I'm well. Tell them I've decided to stay here, and that I'll send word when I can. Tell them Phillip is lost, but at peace. Tell them I'm staying to watch over his resting place. Tell them all is well and not to come after us."

"You should return home and tell them yourself. They will not believe us," the knight said.

Claude turned his attention to the one knight who'd witnessed Fairuza healing the other three. "You saw," he said simply.

"I saw her heal them. I didn't see Phillip," he answered.

"Phillip is lost. Tell them that," Claude said.

"I will do my best," the knight answered.

Claude inclined his head and stood even further back from their horses. "Ride safely. Godspeed," he said.

The knights turned their horses away from him and the inn, and in a matter of minutes were no more than a dust cloud on the horizon as they rode away.

Claude walked back into the inn and looked around. There were only a few people inside. The inn keeper tending the bar, his wife who was cooking and serving the few customers, and a couple of ragged looking travelers. He walked over to the bar and ordered a pint. Once served, he struck up a conversation about the countryside.

"I've been on the lookout for a place to settle," Claude said. "What can your village offer?"

The innkeeper laughed. "It's more of a what can you offer the village!" he said. "It's been hard times, hereabout."

"Has it always been, or has something changed?" Claude asked.

"Aye, something's changed! The castle is gone! There's no King to protect us, no castle to work for and no wage to be

earned. I'm just lucky my wife insisted we open an inn when we married, otherwise, we'd be in the same way as everyone else. Just struggling to get by."

"I don't understand. How could a castle just disappear?" Claude said.

"It's not gone, really," the innkeeper said, looking left and right and lowering his voice so only Claude could hear him. "It's there, you know. Behind the thorns and the overgrowth - it's still there. Rumor has it the whole thing's still just sitting in the middle of all that — people and all, waiting for someone to find them."

"Do you believe that?" Claude asked.

"Me? Not likely! I think the witch killed them all. They're dead now, and the witch is just keeping all the riches for herself."

"The witch?" Claude asked.

"Aye, the witch. She's as beautiful as you've ever seen, long black hair and a pretty face. But her insides are cold and unfeeling. You'll know her if you ever see her. She rides a big white stallion and threatens all to stay away from the castle or die. Don't look at her for long, though. Some say she's keeping the King and Queen locked away, drinking their blood."

"Why would anyone say such a thing?" Claude asked, his face showing his disgust.

The innkeeper shrugged. "We found a few dead over the years, and even more disappeared without a trace. Those we did find, all the blood was drained from their bodies. Then the witch shows up, and suddenly our King and Queen go missing, the castle is surrounded by deadly thorns, never to be seen again, and the witch warns everyone away. Just seems to fit, if you ask me."

"I can't believe a man of your intelligence would believe such a story," Claude said, hoping to dissuade the innkeeper from repeating it to anyone else.

"I've seen the bloodless bodies!" he objected.



“Surely there’s another explanation,” Claude said.

“Like what? That our King and Queen were killing their own people?!” he guffawed. “Not bloody likely! They made the village what it was. We were successful, the envy of all those who passed through.”

Another villager came in and ordered a pint so the innkeeper went to get him his drink. When he came back to Claude, Claude decided to ask what he’d been after all along anyway. “So, where can I find this witch?”

“You can’t go after her! We’ll be burying your dead body next!” the innkeeper said.

“I think I can. I shall find out the truth. Just point me toward her,” Claude insisted.

“If you die, it’s on your own head. I can’t stop you if you’re that foolish,” the innkeeper said.

“I can take care of myself,” Claude said. “I’m a man of the cloth. I have our Lord on my side.”

“Well, it’s your funeral,” the innkeeper muttered.

“How do I find her?”

“No one knows exactly where she goes to, but, like I said, she rides a white horse, and the beast surely leaves prints. She comes from the north when she rides in. Go north, start looking there. If you find her, and we happen on your body, we’ll bury you with all the rest.”

~~~

Claude spent days traversing the surrounding countryside, looking for any trace of Fairuza. He easily enough found the hoof prints made by Bolt, but they seemed to just stop, as though the horse and its rider disappeared into thin air. But,

unwilling to give up, he simply returned to the village to wait for her to reappear.

No more than a week later, his patience paid off. One early evening, just before dark, two boys burst into the inn, shouting, begging for help. “Help us!” one of them shouted. “Our brother won’t wake!”

The innkeeper shook his head. “And another falls...” he mumbled, setting down the towel he polished the bar with and striding out from behind it. “Have you been at the castle?” he asked.

“We didn’t even have the chance. William started through the thorns first, not a minute later, he fell forward! Please, hurry back with us and help him!”

“There is nothing to be done. He’ll die now. Have you not heard the witch’s warnings? Stay away from there, or you’ll end up just like him!” the innkeeper shouted.

“We can’t just leave him to die!”

“She’ll heal him,” Claude said quietly.

“What?” several men turned to ask.

“She’ll heal him,” Claude repeated more slowly.

“You’re out of your mind,” the innkeeper said.

Claude shook his head. “She healed my men... the knights you saw with me... she healed them. They live because of her.”

“I’d not be asking the witch for any favors! What will you have to trade for her magicks?!” the innkeeper asked.

“Where can we find the witch?” one of the boys asked, willing to do just about anything to save his older brother.

They heard the sound of a horse outside, then Fairuza’s voice called out. “Will you never learn?” she shouted, as something heavy hit the ground with a thud.

The innkeeper, both boys, and Claude all hurried outside.

“William!” one of the boys cried, running to kneel beside the body of his brother. He lay in a heap where Fairuza had dropped him from the back of her horse.

“Will it take all of you dying before you’ll stay away?!” Fairuza demanded. “The thorns will draw blood! They will poison your bodies and you will die!” she shouted.

“Please! Please help us! Help us save our brother,” the boy on his knees beside his brother begged, looking up at Fairuza. “Please, witch! I’ll give anything.”

Fairuza’s eyebrow raised as she looked down at the boy. Then a voice caught her attention.

“They think you’re a witch. Prove them wrong.”

Fairuza looked for the man who spoke and was surprised to find Claude standing among the small group of villagers who’d come out at her arrival with the unconscious man. “You should be far from here,” she said.

“I’ve decided to stay a while.”

“You’re a fool,” the innkeeper said.

“Save their brother. Prove to them you’re not a witch bringing evils down on them,” Claude said.

“Why would I do such a thing?” she asked.

“Maybe if they see you’re only trying to protect them, there wouldn’t be so many dying. Maybe they’d heed your warnings,” Claude answered.

“Please!” the brother still trying to rouse his older brother begged. “Please, he’s the eldest! Without him, our mother won’t be able to work the farm. Please help us!”

Fairuza looked down at the boy, then at the young man he tried in vain to wake. “He’s paid the price. He shouldn’t have gone to the castle. I warned you. I warned you all.”

“He’s learned his lesson,” the boy said, tears beginning to spill down his cheeks. “Please!” he begged again.

“Fairuza, you know you can save him. Give him another chance,” Claude said.

Fairuza looked at him with no emotion on her face at all. She was practically a shell of her former self. “I’m tired,” she said.

“We’ll help you keep others from the castle! We’ll guard it and warn others away!” the boy called out.

“You see. Save his brother and the villagers will help you keep the castle safe,” Claude said.

Fairuza glanced down at the unconscious young man and the boy cradling his head. She didn’t believe for a moment that they’d actually help her do anything at all, but the boy’s heartbreak touched something long dead inside her. She swung her legs over Bolt’s back and slid off, landing on her feet. “Move aside,” she said.

Claude stepped forward and knelt beside her, using his blade to slice the shirt the man wore, then he stood back to give Fairuza room.

She laid her hands on the man and closed her eyes, then opened them again and looked around. “They have to move back.”

“Move away! Everyone move away, else you’ll become poisoned as well,” Claude shouted.

The small crowd moved back, then Fairuza looked up at Claude. “You, too.”

Claude moved back to where the innkeeper stood watching.

Fairuza placed her hands on the young man, closed her eyes and started chanting. A gasp went up when the inky brown poison began to lift from his body and swirl in the air briefly before seeming to be absorbed into Fairuza. Fairuza continued to chant until the air around her was clear, then she fell back on her heels, her eyes closed, her hands trembling.

Claude rushed to her side and supported her from behind. “Fairuza!” he said quietly. “Tell me what to do for you.”

She shook her head. “Just get me back on Bolt. I want to go home.”

“The witch is dying!” one of the bystanders whispered to his friend.

“She’s not a witch! She’s just healed the man! And she’s not dying,” Claude snapped as he settled Fairuza on Bolt, then

swung himself up on the horse's back behind her.

"I won't forget my promise!" the young boy said, falling to his knees beside his brother who still slept.

"Me either!" his younger brother called out, finally finding his voice.

"Just stay away from the castle," Fairuza said quietly, "it is the only promise I need."

"She said to just stay away from the castle. Tell everyone to stay away," Claude repeated since her voice was so weak.

"There are no reins," Claude said, as he cradled Fairuza's body against his.

"Go home, Bolt," she said. The horse turned in the opposite direction and took them North, away from the village.

~~~~

Claude watched in awe as the horse turned right, seemingly into a stone cliff, and walked straight through it, coming out on the other side in a lush, hidden forest. Claude looked around at the lush green of the trees and grasses, the myriad colors of the flowers, the waterfall spilling into a crystal clear lake, the birds and animals flitting about without fear. "This is magical, absolutely wondrous," he said.

Fairuza didn't respond as her eyes opened to take in the sight he was seeing.

"No wonder I couldn't find you," Claude said.

"Why did you try to find me?" she asked, lifting a hand to rub at a spot just behind her temples.

"To help you," he answered.

"I don't need help. I just need to rest," she said.

Bolt took his time bringing them to the footpath that would lead them to her home. Once he came to a stop, Fairuza tried to sit up to get off his back, but Claude gathered her in his arms and jumped down. “Through there?” he asked, spying a worn path that disappeared between two large trees.

“Yes,” she answered.

Claude walked between the trees, holding Fairuza against his chest and was surprised to find a small hut with a thatched roof and door. He opened the door and ducked his head as he carried Fairuza inside. He smiled to himself as he took in the small, yet tidy home. Noticing her bed in the far corner, he carried her over to it and laid her down.

Fairuza sighed and snuggled into her pillow.

Claude reached out and gently removed the cloak from her head, then untied it at the neck and pushed it off her shoulders. “Rest as long as you need. I’ll keep watch.”

Fairuza didn’t answer, she was already asleep.

## Chapter 9

It was the next day before Fairuza woke enough to actually consider getting out of bed. She rolled over and her thoughts turned to Phillip, as they always did. She spent a few minutes crying quietly, before she pushed the covers off her body and got out of bed. She walked across her small one room home and was surprised to find apples and a portion of her round of cheese laid out for her on a small table along with a fresh pitcher of cool water.

Her brow furrowing, she walked outside, curious to see who'd found her home and was leaving food and drink out for her. She heard splashing and knew whoever it was, was swimming in her lake. Coming to a stop on top of the rise overlooking the lake, she watched Claude swimming with strong strokes back and forth across the still, clear waters. At first her heart leapt thinking it might be Phillip, but then she remembered Claude bringing her home the day before.

Claude saw her standing atop the small rise and waved before swimming toward her. He got out and pulled on his tunic and breeches before approaching her. "You rested well?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Thank you for bringing me home."

"You're welcome. How are you feeling?"

"Tired, but better," she said.

"You have a beautiful home here," Claude remarked.

Fairuza looked around the forest, then back at Claude. "It is. I don't really take much notice of it anymore, but it is a beautiful place, I suppose."

"I left breakfast for you," he said, using one hand to shake the water out of his hair.

“I saw. Claude, why are you here?” she asked.

Claude looked at her, hesitant to answer, yet firm in his decision. “I’ve decided to stay and to help you keep Phillip safe.”

Fairuza shook her head sadly, then turned away, walking back in the direction she’d come.

“You just walk away?” he asked, falling into step behind her.

“Go home, Claude. Your family has already lost one son, they do not need to lose another.”

“They let me go long ago when I chose to follow the priesthood. They will not miss me,” Claude said.

“Go home, Claude. There is no place for you here,” she said again, walking between the two large trees that hid her small hut from view.

Claude kept pace with her. “You cannot do all that is needed on your own. You need assistance. I’ll be that assistance.”

Fairuza spun on her heel and looked up into his eyes. “I’m perfectly capable of handling all that needs to be handled on my own. I’ve done so for a long time, and will continue to do so.”

“You were so exhausted after healing that young man yesterday, you needed my help to get home. The villagers call you a witch, you visit your practically dead lover and speak to him as your only friend. You are alone, Fairuza! Why shouldn’t I stay with you, pledge my loyalty to you and your mission, and stand with you when you need?”

“I’ll never take another. Phillip was my only love. I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure he is resting peacefully. There is no reason for you to do the same. Go back and live your life, Claude.”

“I don’t want to love another, I never have. I can live my life in a monastery, a life of quiet and peace that I longed for, or I can live my life here with you, doing the same, only watching over the woman my brother loved, as she watches



over him. Either way, I get the solitude and quiet I longed for. I'm not sacrificing, Fairuza. I'm trading one life of service for another, a better one. Allow me to stand guard beside you, protecting Phillip, and you."

"I have nothing to offer you in payment, Claude," she finally said, knowing no other argument would suffice.

Claude smiled at her and lifted his hands, palms up and gestured to all the beauty around them. "What else could I possibly wish for?" he asked with a smile.

She sighed, her fatigue and lack of will to argue becoming clear. "I won't forbid you from staying here, but when you tire of it, go, you are not bound here," she said, turning to return to her home. Once she reached her door, she walked inside, leaving the door opened for Claude to follow if he chose to.

Claude did indeed follow her inside, then walked over to the table and sliced the apples, then the block of cheese and tore a piece of bread from a loaf sitting in the cupboard. He placed them on a wooden platter and set them in front of her. "Eat breakfast, Fairuza. Then talk to me. You have much to teach me about this new world."

"It is as you see it. And I will ask you every day if this is the day you return to your people," she said sadly.

"And every day I will tell you I am where I belong. This is too much to bear alone. I will bear this burden with you."

Fairuza rubbed her fingertips over the spot just behind her temples again, wincing and pressing harder.

"Are you hurting?" Claude asked.

She shook her head, and let her hand drop, but when she did Claude saw a small, dark spot beneath her hair just before it fell from her fingers as she pulled them away.

"What is on your head?" he asked, concerned.

"Nothing," she answered, picking up a piece of bread to nibble on.

"Fairuza?" he asked again, as though he was shaming a child into telling him the truth.

She raised her gaze to his. "I'm not sure."

“May I look?” he asked, stepping forward.

“No,” she answered.

“Have you always been so difficult?” he asked. He watched as a ghost of a smile touched her lips.

“Probably,” she answered.

“Let me see. We can’t have you becoming ill,” he said, moving closer.

Fairuza sighed in frustration, but allowed him to examine her head. She felt him push her hair back, and then run his finger against the sore spot she’d been aware of since she’d first healed his knights.

“Has this always been here?” he asked.

“I noticed it after I healed your knights. It seems larger this morning than it was before. And there’s another on the other side,” she finally confessed.

“It looks like a small, tiny horn,” Claude said.

“A horn?” she exclaimed, getting up and walking away from him, rubbing at both spots.

“It’s the same color as the poison you removed,” Claude said, an idea beginning to form. “Perhaps it’s the poison, finding a way to leave your body unharmed, yet stay attached to you.”

Fairuza looked at him for a moment with her mouth opened in surprise, then shook her head irritably as though she was done with the whole conversation. “It doesn’t matter. No one sees me anyway.”

“It does matter.”

“Not really. Perhaps if I actually grow horns the villagers will fear me enough to do what I say,” she said, doing her best to make a scary face as she raised her fingers to claw at the air before her.

Claude chuckled. “Perhaps, perhaps not.”

Fairuza took another bite of bread and gazed out of the window.

“So, what do we do now, Mistress?” Claude asked.

“Whatever you wish. We won’t go to the castle again until tomorrow. The day is yours. And I’m not your Mistress. I’m simply Fairuza.”

“You are my Mistress, from this day forward. I pledge my loyalty, my fealty, to you and our mission,” he said.

“Our mission?” Fairuza asked.

“To keep Phillip resting safely, and all others from the horrors of the castle he rests in,” Claude said.

They shared a silent look, until finally she gave him a single nod of her head. “As I said, you are not bound here. Go at will.”

“Then I shall stay at will,” Claude answered.

“Do as you wish,” she said. “I’ll rest, and try to become myself again before morning.”

“I’ll explore,” Claude said, though she’d not asked what he’d do that day. “I’ll find a clearing, maybe build myself a small shelter. And make myself a bed, I think.”

Fairuza nodded. “Or you’re welcome to stay here. There is room for a small bed there,” she said, looking at the spot near his feet.

Claude smiled at her and nodded.

“Can you whistle?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, her expression showing her confusion at his question.

“If you need me, whistle. It was how Phillip, our brothers and I called for each other.”

Fairuza nodded. The idea of Phillip as a happy, innocent child washing her in another wave of sadness. “I will,” she finally managed to answer.

Fairuza watched from her seat beside the window as Claude walked away from her home. He smiled as he looked with wonder at everything he passed. He didn’t seem interested in her. It was more about her chosen path in life and helping her oversee the resting place of a man who was very

important to both of them than any kind of relationship with her.

Claude looked over his shoulder and found her watching him. He smiled at her and waved.

She lifted her hand and returned the gesture.

This just might work, she thought to herself. It would be good not to be alone anymore. Someone who understood her unending grief could be a welcome companion.



As time passed Fairuza and Claude fell into an easy routine. They'd go to the castle at least every other day, inspect it to be sure no one had tried to get through the thorns and brambles around it, then walk the castle itself to be sure all was still secure and Phillip still asleep, then they'd return home. They'd forage for food, and after only a few weeks, Claude had managed to barter with some of the villagers for meat and other staples they'd not otherwise have.

From time to time, some foolhardy treasure seeker would try to find their way through the overgrowth to the castle. Occasionally, Fairuza would heal them. Other times she would not. As the years wore on, the villagers grew older and died. As they passed on, their children grew into their places, taking over the inn, the bakery, and all the positions of everyday life in a small village. But Fairuza didn't age, and for the most part, neither did Claude. She was immortal, and he lived his life beside hers. He simply existed in the enchanted forest she'd created, drinking the waters and eating the berries and fruits, and those alone slowed his aging process almost to a standstill, as they did for all the creatures who lived there.

Claude did all he could to keep her safe and healthy, more often than not begging her not to save those foolish enough to poison themselves on the thorns surrounding the castle. Each

time she did heal someone, the horns at the side of her head grew, and it took her longer and longer to wake from the sleep that overtook her with each bit of poison she removed from the victims and took into herself. He'd spend days watching over her, waiting for her recovery.

Eventually, the village became more and more destitute, and the legend of the sleeping princess morphed into one that was not even close to the truth. As the generations of villagers passed they'd become poorer, and poorer. Those who didn't move away, grew resentful of Fairuza. They'd turned the story of the sleeping castle into one of fantasy about a beautiful young maiden trapped in an eternal sleep and the man who loved her at her side, cursed to sleep forever out of jealousy the evil witch Queen had for their love. They began to believe it was that same jealousy that caused the village to fail because after the witch's selfish actions, they had no castle to support them.

On learning this, Claude convinced Fairuza to create a castle the villagers could work in, in exchange for pay, and trade for goods and services in and around the castle. He said it would make a wonderful gesture to the village and all those who still lived there would be grateful for the chance at a better living than they had now.

He was wrong.

The people simply felt more intimidated by the 'Fae Queen's' show of power, as they saw it. Fairuza's castle sat alone far up on a hillside, overlooking the miles of overgrown thorns, and the small practically deserted village between the two. No one except Claude and Fairuza ever ventured to her castle, with the exception of the random individual who learned of Fairuza's ability to heal those who fell unconscious from the poisoned thorns.

Fairuza didn't even resist anymore. Nothing mattered to her. If they came to her, she healed them. If they didn't, they died. She didn't even travel to the sleeping castle as she once did. She was able to see it from the parapets of her own castle, and knew it was still as it ever was, sleeping soundlessly, undisturbed.

She and Claude went about their quiet existence without a thought, just doing what needed to be done. The only time they ever really disagreed was if someone came to their castle for help too soon after she'd healed another. Each incident of healing took more and more out of her, and he feared it would one day kill her. Her horns even grew thicker and longer with each human healed of the poisons her thorns produced. Her horns were dark, wood grained in appearance, now longer than they'd ever been, extending several inches above her head and at least three inches in width at their base, slimming as they extended, and curling gracefully up and above her head.

Claude was very protective of her. There were even times he took it upon himself to send those who would be saved away, preventing his mistress from endangering herself any further than she already had. He'd begged her to stop using her magicks to save those who poisoned themselves by trying to reach the castle. He even told her of the rumors they spread of the evil Fae Queen who killed the beautiful, kind princess and her new husband out of jealousy, thinking the story would convince her to stop putting herself at risk. But it didn't matter.

Fairuza wouldn't listen. She'd grown bitter over the years, and simply no longer cared. For her now, it was a matter of responsibility. She created the risk the humans kept trying to conquer, so she continued to cure those brave enough to come to her. And those who believed treasures were hidden deep within the sleeping castle continued to try to penetrate its barrier of thorns. Thus a never-ending circle was born that carried on for centuries.



Alexi sat astride his trusty stallion, and gazed excitedly out over the expansive countryside before him. He'd been riding for weeks, stopping in every small village and township he came across, eagerly soaking up every bit of legend he

could find on the story of the sleeping princess. Every word he heard was like food for his soul. He'd grown up with the story embedded in his memory by the tutor he'd admired as a child, and he'd been thrilled to find that some still believed it was true.

Luckily for him, he was the fifth son of a King, unnecessary in the grand scheme of things, and free to set his own life course as opposed to being forced into the royal household as his older brothers had been. The romanticism, the mystery of the sleeping princess and the question of if she really existed had lured him away from home and to the adventure he both hoped awaited him and now found himself on. It was just as he'd always planned as a boy; but now, he was older, established, capable and brave. As he'd grown and gained experience, only his heart remained pure and untarnished, keeping the dream of finding a beautiful sleeping princess alive.

So today, when he topped that last rise and looked out over the surrounding area, his heart skipped a beat at the miles and miles of overgrown thorns and brambles that lay before him. The expanse of thorned bramble was so much larger than he expected. Though, if the stories were true, they'd had centuries to grow. Believing he'd found at least the source of the stories that led him to this place, Alexi started down the rise, his horse confidently taking each step giving a wide berth to the edges of the brambles, as he descended into the valley.

As he approached the valley, through the heavy gray mists cloaking the surrounding land, he spied the remains of a small village. He rode closer, marveling at the old village and the misty fog that kept it hidden from any casual passersby. At one point, he looked back toward the South, toward the spot the thorns began, and realized the foggy mists didn't carry to the thorns themselves. When he was almost to the village, he realized the mists hanging heavy in the air were hiding another secret. Tucked away on a rise even further to the North, on the opposite side of the village, was a castle — this one dark and forboding in stature. He paid closer attention, realizing its walls were black and appeared slick, either with dampness from the mists or the stone it was built from, or possibly even

both. He stopped his horse several times and gazed thoughtfully between the thorny brambles behind him, the village he was on the edge of, and the dark castle ahead and wondered if the dark castle was actually the castle the sleeping princess sheltered in. The logistics didn't quite match with the legends he'd heard, but there had been many, many years to be altered in each retelling, so it wasn't impossible.

Riding slowly toward the dark castle, he soon discovered that it was wasn't as close to the village as it appeared to be. It was actually set high up and away from the village, sitting opposite the thorns, and miles away, yet giving the illusion through the mists and fog that clung to it that it was closer to both. It looked out over the village and the thorns that had drawn him to this area. Stopping his horse once more, he considered his options. He had two choices now. He could go back through the village, and search for a place to stay, or he could continue on to the dark castle and see what he'd find there. It might be the resting place of the beautiful princess, but it may not be.

Looking up at the sun, he realized how late in the day it actually was, and chose the village. It was late to start his exploration today. Tomorrow would be soon enough. This evening he'd see if there were villagers he could speak to, so he could determine his next step for the morning. It would be either the dark castle, or the thorns. He had every intention of approaching both, but in which order he'd yet to decide.



## Chapter 10

Alexi walked into the run down inn, glancing at the dingy, dirty walls and floor as he went.

A woman behind the bar looked up at him. “Will you be staying for a meal, or simply a drink before moving on?” she asked.

“I thought I might buy a room for myself and a stall for my horse,” Alexi answered.

“Oh, well, welcome!” she called happily. “We don’t have many travelers staying the night anymore.”

“Why is that?” he asked.

“Nothing to stay the night for,” she answered.

“Surely there’s something in your township worth seeing,” Alexi said, attempting to keep the banter friendly.

“Not unless you like thorns,” she muttered.

“I saw them!” he said. “So many, they go on and on and on.”

“Miles of them,” she said.

“Have they always been there?” Alexi asked.

“As long as I’ve been alive, and my parents before me. But legend says there was a time centuries ago a beautiful castle stood there.”

“Is it still there?” Alexi asked.

The woman shrugged. “Some say it is. Others say it’s just an old tale from long, long ago, meant to frighten the children into staying away from the poisoned thorns.”

“That’s a tale I’d like to hear,” Alexi said, tossing two gold pieces on the bar top as he waited for her to pour him a

cup of ale.

The woman served him his ale, got him a plate of stew, then settled in across the bar from him to tell the story he'd asked for.

“A very long time ago, so long ago that no one really knows for sure anymore, it's said that a beautiful and kind princess once lived in a glorious castle on the hill. She was betrothed to a handsome prince from a province far from here. The prince set out on a journey to meet his betrothed, and along the way he met a beautiful faerie Queen. She fell in love with him, but true to his promise to his betrothed, he left her to marry his intended. This made the faerie Queen insane with jealousy. In a fit of rage, she went to the castle intending to kill them all, only she couldn't bring herself to kill the prince she loved so well. So, instead she put a spell on all who were inside its walls to sleep forever. Then to be sure they could never escape even if they woke, she surrounded the castle in poisoned thorns. The handsome prince and the beautiful princess sleep there to this day, and all the princess's family and courtiers with them, just waiting for the day that someone brave enough, and strong enough will stumble upon them and save them.”

“They would be rather difficult to stumble upon, what with the miles of thorns surrounding them,” Alexi said.

“Which is why the evil faerie Queen placed them there,” the woman explained.

Alexi thought about it for a moment as he ate a bite of his stew. “Has anyone ever been able to see what is actually in the middle of the thorns?”

“No one has made it all the way through, that we know of anyway. Those that have tried to reach the princess and her castle are usually carried out, more than half dead. If they're lucky, the evil faerie Queen will save them.”

“Do you know this for a fact?” Alexi asked. “Have you seen them be healed?”

“Yes, I have. A time or two at least. Oh, I don't see them actually healed, but I see them almost dead, then I see them

alive after and hear the stories their families tell.”

“That’s amazing,” Alexi said thoughtfully.

“It doesn’t happen as frequently in our times as it did when our great-grands and grandparents were children. There was a time that many tried to reach the castle, but not for the princess... they wanted the riches still inside the castle. And I’m not surprised. If the castle is really there, there could be untold riches there. Our village is almost fully deserted. There are some who would take any chance to better their positions in life.”

“But to risk your life against known poisons for riches...” Alexi said.

She shrugged. “I wouldn’t. But it’s as I told you... there are those who’ve tried to hack their way through the thorns and reach the sleeping castle inside. They fall ill with the first prick of the thorns. Their friends drag them home and if they’re still breathing, if their families are brave enough, they take them to the evil faerie Queen to beg for their soul as well as their lives.”

“Does she intercede? Saving their lives?”

“She has,” the woman said, indicating that it wasn’t a guaranteed thing. “There are two men here in the village that try to dissuade all to stay away from the thorns. When they’re not working, they even make a show of keeping others away from them if they wander too close. They say it’s a promise they made to her in exchange for their brother’s life.”

“So the brother was poisoned by the thorns... has he ever told his story?” Alexi asked.

“He drank himself to death a long time ago, but the brothers still keep their promise. Then there’s a farmer on the outskirts of town. Every year when the weather grows cold and bitter, he’ll load his wagon with supplies for the coming winter. Everything from preserved foods and dried meats to firewood and a couple of good woolen blankets. He’ll hitch his oxen to the wagon and lead the animals up the rise to the dark castle to deliver them to the witch and her servant.”

The woman started laughing heartily. “It makes his wife batty!” she exclaimed, still laughing. “She’d rather keep all they have for themselves — she’s the selfish type, ya know. But he never listens. He says that she saved his son for no other reason than he and his wife begged her to. And because of that, he’ll never stop being grateful. He does what he can for her, sometimes it’s more than others, but it’s always something.”

“Then some of the people here have witnessed her powers. She’s doubtlessly a witch.”

“Or something. She’s not like you and me, that’s for sure. Those who’ve seen her always say she is beautiful and no more than twenty years of age. To me that confirms that she can’t be the same witch. Maybe the secret of how to heal those affected by the poisons is handed down through the generations of her people, just like the story of the sleeping princess tucked away inside those thorns of blood is handed down through ours. Some say she’s a faerie Queen. Others say an evil Queen, and some say she’s just a witch. But they all say she’s overcome with jealousy and bitterness, and after it eating away at her all these years she’s become evil. I don’t see how it could be the same woman, no matter what manner of creature she is. How could she be alive all these years later? Everything dies, does it not? Mind you, though, if it is the very same witch, she’s certainly got powers unlike any others — to still be alive all these centuries later and still be able to heal those who go to her for help.”

“You make a good point. But, why would she heal those who didn’t heed her warnings?” Alexi asked. “Wouldn’t she just let them die?”

“I don’t know. But I do know the thorns are poison. If you are pricked by one, you’ll fall asleep, and soon you’ll die. Unless someone takes you to the witch and she agrees to save you. We call them the thorns of blood. Once they draw your blood, you’re done for.”

Alexi shook his head. “It is certainly a confusing story. This witch goes so far as to place poisoned thorns around the

sleeping castle, yet heals those who go against her and try to reach it despite the thorns she placed there.”

The woman agreed with him. “They say she used to ride through the streets of town shouting to stay away, that if we didn’t, we’d die. This was before me of course. But some have said that she told someone once that you could only survive the poisons in the thorns if you were pure of heart. I guess people have different definitions of pure. I for one, would never attempt it. I’m not that pure!” the woman said on a hearty laugh. “Besides, whatever was once there, is now surely fallen to ruins. It’s been centuries at least.”

“It’s a fascinating story as well,” Alexi conceded.

“I suppose, to someone who’s not lived with it as local lore it could be,” the woman said.

“Perhaps I’ll be the one who is able to finally wake the sleeping princess,” Alexi said, lifting his cup in salute to the woman.

She shook her head in disappointment. “I’m not sure about the hows and the whys of it. Nor am I sure about a sleeping castle with a beautiful princess, or the existence of an ever young yet bitter hearted witch, but I do know those thorns kill. And they kill quickly. If you’re foolish enough to tempt your own fate, just leave the names of your next of kin so we can send word of where to pick up your body,” the woman said, still shaking her head as she gathered his empty bowl and walked toward the kitchen.

“Would you not even take me to the witch for healing?” he called out jovially.

“If you live that long, I’m sure someone might try to. Leave an extra gold piece on the bar and I’ll send it with your body when it’s taken to her.”

“You don’t seem to think the risk is worth it,” Alexi said.

“If there ever was a castle, it’s been deserted for so long those inside are surely bones and dust by now, and any riches are long since gone.”

“But the witch and her castle... it’s hard to ignore the fact that an actual witch has lived here all these years, warning

away those who would disturb the sleeping princess, and healing those who try to reach her anyway,” Alexi said.

“Or maybe the castle we see was the only castle all along. The witch could be the original witch’s daughter’s daughter’s daughter. The poisoned thorns just a patch of thorns that only grow here. The stories something thought up to keep little ones from wandering too close to the thorns and dying themselves.”

“What about the farmer who takes her supplies every winter?”

“Maybe he’s just a kind man.”

“And his son?”

“Moved away a long time ago, and refused to speak of any of it long before that.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Maybe it’s just a collection of coincidences, and stories people have told and handed down through their families. But what would explain the going to her for help?”

“She’s able to help those who are sick from the poisons. I’d go to her if someone I loved was dying from the thorns.”

Alexi nodded. “Maybe the truth is a little of all of it, the tale growing larger as it’s retold generation after generation. If there is another castle, and a beautiful princess lies inside it, waiting to be awakened, I should like to be the one to free her from her curse.”



Alexi was up and about before just about everyone else the next morning having barely been able to sleep the night before. He had an early breakfast and made sure his horse was fed and watered early as well. Then he set out with the dawn, his intent to try his luck against the walls of thorns that hopefully hid the sleeping princess inside a castle long ago

forgotten. Finally on his way after years of hope and planning, he was unable to take his time and urged his horse into a trot to reach the thorny overgrowth as quickly as he could. Arriving at the outermost edge, Alexi dismounted his horse and stood looking out over the thorns and brambles stretching as far and high as the eye could see. He had no way of knowing if he'd find a princess inside. But he knew that he stood a better chance than any at reaching her if she was there.

He was pure of heart, pure of mind, pure of body. He'd prepared for this day all of his life. Realizing he stood at the precipice of the adventure he'd lived his life to undertake gave him a rush of exhilaration unlike any he could have imagined. With the time to discover the truth finally at hand, he walked confidently toward the thorns. Reaching the outermost edge, he reached out and intentionally pricked his finger on one of them. He waited, standing there looking down at the blood pooling on his finger, but nothing happened. He didn't feel the least little bit faint or ill in any way. He was not sleepy, he was not weak. Assured now that all would be well, he drew his sword and hacked away the outer edge of the first wildly growing thorn bush, then stepped forward to the next. Visions of a beautiful, kind princess, waiting in her tower rooms for centuries for him to come save her filled his mind as he chopped away one bush after another. It took all day and into the night before he finally paused and looked around him. He'd made good progress, but as he looked overhead he realized he was only chopping from ground level to just above his head. When he raised his head he expected to find the moon above him, but all he saw was a ceiling of thorns. He'd in effect created himself a covered walkway. Smiling at his unintended good fortune, he realized no one could see him as he fought his way through the thorns. Satisfied with his first day's effort, he went back to his horse to settle him in the woods where they'd bed down for the night.

Rising early again the next morning, he hurriedly ate his meager breakfast of dried meat, then reentered the covered path he'd created the night before to resume his attempt to reach the castle. Two more days of this ensued, before he finally reached the castle wall.

Thrilled that a castle actually stood within the thorns, he had to calm himself and force his hands to continue their work of removing the thorns as far as he could reach them. Following the perimeter of the wall for hours, he cut away the thorns until he reached the small door set beside the portcullis. Barely able to contain his excitement, Alexi examined the door and found the hinges of the ancient door to be badly rusted. Alexi put his shoulder to the door and shoved with all his might, and to his surprise, the hinges crumbled to the ground. With nothing left to secure the heavy wooden door into place, the door followed suit, granting him entry to a courtyard — filled with more thorns and brambles.

Undeterred, Alexi left the place he'd finally reached, and once again returned to his horse to bed down for the night. He fell asleep that night with visions of a beautiful princess, gratefully giving him her hand in marriage.

The final morning was the same as before, except for one small difference. His excitement was immeasurable — today would be the day he'd realize a lifelong dream and wake the princess.

After rising early Alexi led his horse to the nearby stream and let him drink his fill before leading him back to the small clearing they'd made a temporary home in — then he made his way back to his covered path to the castle, and began chopping at the thorns and brambles filling the courtyard. By midday he'd reached the main door of the castle keep. It was apparent that this door was not fully encased by thorns as the other accesses had been. In fact, this door seemed to have been used recently, and kept clear of the overgrowth of thorns in the other areas of the castle. It didn't take much effort to gain entrance.

He stepped inside the darkened, dusty, cobweb covered castle keep and looked around himself as he allowed his eyes to adjust.

“Perhaps I was wrong. No man has been to this castle in hundreds and hundreds of years,” he said to himself aloud. He looked around himself several times, unsettled at having actually found the castle, and apprehensive at what may



possibly lie in wait since there'd been no one to keep it safe. Any kind of beastie could be living here. Deciding that it was prudent to check the castle and its occupants before he went straight to the sleeping chambers in search of the princess, he began making entrance into each room he found.

It wasn't until he entered the washing room that he located the two servants who'd centuries before tried to warn Fairuza away. They'd collapsed where they stood, sound asleep, or dead. Alexi hurried to one of them and knelt beside her, pressing his hand to her throat. He closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to feel for any type of pulse at all. He waited almost a full minute before a very, very faint thump bumped against his fingertips. He opened his eyes and looked down at the woman, and he waited. Again, almost a minute later, thump... Encouraged and spurred on to hurry and find the sleeping princess, he ran from the washing room, and simply peered into every room he passed.

Eventually he found his way down the main corridor of the upper floor, its dust covered opulence a sure indication that he was on his way to locating the beautiful woman who slumbered here, unaware that her prince, her true prince, was finally coming to save her.

He opened every door along the way until he came to one that was barricaded from the inside. Surely this was the room he searched for. Unable to open it any other way, he attacked it with his broadsword, weakening the wood until he was able to break away the boards and squeeze through. When he finally peered into the room, his eyes made out the soft glow of golden-blond hair, spilled across the stone floor. Alexi's breath caught. Surely this woman was the princess he sought. Approaching her cautiously, he looked down on her sleeping figure. His brow wrinkled with concern when he saw the chains wrapped around her delicate, graceful body, and the dust collected on her beautiful gown, face and hair.

"My poor princess," he murmured. "Who has treated you so atrociously? It was the witch, I have no doubt," Alexi said, kneeling beside her. He gently turned her over to lie on her back, then he smoothed her hair from around her face, using

his own hands to remove the dirt and accumulated dust from her cheeks, beautiful still after all these years of slumber.

His hands moved to the chains binding his beautiful princess and his heart ached at all she'd suffered for so long. He could only pray that she'd already been asleep when she'd been bound. Examining the lock securing the chains around her body, he decided to try to pry it open with his dagger. The lock was made much as the hinges on the door of the castle wall, so hopefully, it too would give after enough force was applied to it. It took almost an hour of prying and forcing the dagger against the lock, but it finally snapped under his assault.

Alexi patiently removed it from the princess, unwinding it and tossing it away once it was free from her body. "Now, to awaken you," he said. "The story says, only the kiss from one pure of heart can break the spell and wake you. There is none purer of heart than I. I'll wake you, now, beautiful princess." Alexi leaned forward, and pressed his lips to the lips of the sleeping woman.

There was no response from her, so he did it again. Then he sat back on his heels to wait. The first thing he noticed was the gradual rise and fall of her chest as her breaths became deeper and more regular, then her eyes began to flutter before they opened and she looked at the ceiling above her.

"Do not fear, beautiful princess. I've come to save you. To awaken you from your eternal sleep," Alexi said, from where he still crouched only a foot away.

Morrigan slowly turned her head toward the man kneeling beside her. She swallowed and tried to lick her dry lips. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Prince Alexi. I've heard tell of you and your sleeping castle since I was a child. It has always been my dream to find you, and awaken you so that you might live a happy life."

Morrigan lay still, thinking about what he'd said. This prince had no idea of her true nature. "How did you find me?" she asked.

“There have been stories told of the beautiful, kind princess, cursed to sleep forever by a jealous, evil witch, for as long as I can remember. My father and his father heard the same stories. But none was as brave as I as I searched you out, determined to set you free,” Alexi said.

“It has been that long?” she asked, closing her eyes again as she tried to move her arms and legs.

“I’ve removed the chain. You are no longer captive, beautiful princess,” Alexi said.

She opened her eyes and looked at him again. “Will you help me sit up?” she asked.

“I am your servant. I will do anything you ask,” he said, his foolish heart already believing itself in love with the storied princess. Alexi moved closer to Morrigan and helped support her as she struggled to sit. “Move slowly,” he said. “Take care that you do not do too much too soon.”

Morrigan nodded and took a moment to look around the room. “Why am I in my sitting room? Where is my husband?”

“I’ve not found him. I fear he may not have survived the sleep, or perhaps he was already freed by the witch, leaving you behind,” Alexi said.

Morrigan’s eyes snapped up to look into his, and he shushed her before she could speak. “Fear not, dear one. I am here in his stead. I will not fail to protect you. If you wish to claim me, I will be your husband. Together we will defend your honor and take our vengeance on the witch who left you to perish here alone.”

Morrigan quickly shifted her gaze from his so he wouldn’t see the red shine of her eyes as her anger manifested. “I should have chosen a man as brave and chivalrous as you from the start. Perhaps I wouldn’t have lost so much time,” she said, making an effort to keep her voice low and her anger under control. Not only had the damned Fae Queen stolen away hundreds of years, she’d awakened her own husband and stolen him away, leaving her to rot in an abandoned castle. “Why has no one come for me before?” she asked.

“The castle is buried under an overgrowth of thorns and brambles. It grows for a mile in any direction, and tops the walls and towers as well. I am the first to be able to make it through. All others have fallen in their efforts. The thorns are poisoned and cause immediate sleep and eventually death.”

“But you are unaffected,” Morrigan said.

“I am pure of heart, pure of mind, pure of body. I’ve prepared to come for you all my life,” Alexi said.

“Then you are exactly what I need,” Morrigan said, reaching for the young man, preparing to drain every bit of blood from his body in order to strengthen herself.

Alexi’s heart was warmed that his princess was reaching to him for comfort and he leaned forward to take her in his arms and hold her close.

Just as his arms closed around his princess, he was struck without warning and he was knocked backward away from the princess. He was slammed into the stone wall behind himself as he began struggling to regain his footing and fight this unknown assailant.

“What have you done?!” a feminine voice screamed at him in what could only be described as outrage.

## Chapter 11

“Mistress!” Claude called out as he did his best to race up the stairs toward Fairuza’s tower room. “Mistress! Come quick!” he called.

Fairuza lay on her bed with the sunset pouring through the window. She didn’t see it, didn’t notice the brilliance of the colors painting the sky. She didn’t take pleasure in much anymore. Her world had become cold and gray, both figuratively and literally. Every day was the same to her, one gray, unfeeling conglomeration of days. And by comparison, so had the land she kept watch over.

Her door burst open and Claude rushed into her bedroom. “Mistress!” he said, coming to stand beside her bed.

“I’ve told you for so long I can no longer count the days, to stop calling me Mistress,” she said calmly.

“They’ve broken into the castle!” he said.

“What?!” Fairuza exclaimed, bolting up in her bed. “How?” she asked as she hurried to stand, reaching for her cloak to wrap around her shoulders and bring up over her head and the magnificent wood-grained horns adorning it.

“I know not! I only know I ventured out to make our usual rounds of the countryside late this afternoon. I found a path cut into the thorns and followed it to the castle itself. The door has been thrown open. I believe they are still inside.”

“We must hurry before the fools awaken the evil that sleeps there!” she exclaimed, running from the room and taking the stairs leading from her tower to the ground level two at a time in her haste.

“Surely no one who seeks to reach the castle is pure of heart. They won’t be able to awaken her!” Claude called to her

as she ran ahead of him.

“They must be, otherwise they couldn’t have gotten through the thorns!” she answered over her shoulder, not breaking stride.

Fairuza didn’t pause at all as her feet hit the floor of her castle. She ran straight for the door, running as quickly as she could out into the open land surrounding her. She threw back her cloak and lifted her glossy, blue-black wings into the gradually darkening evening sky, and took to the air. She didn’t look back. She knew without a doubt Claude would be mounting his horse and following as quickly as he could.

Fairuza flew rapidly over the land between her castle, the village, and finally the thorns protecting the sleeping castle. Once the small opening amidst the thorns she’d kept navigable over the years was visible she set herself down within it and saw that Claude was right. The door had been left ajar. Someone was inside.

Fairuza quietly entered the building, looking around for any evidence of an intruder. Deciding that the most dangerous place to be was with the princess herself, Fairuza went straight there. She paused outside the door to listen to the conversation inside and realized her greatest fears had come to fruition. Some fool, in his quest to save what he thought was a sleeping princess, had woken the evil that had cast fear and danger across this land since a time long before he’d even been alive.

Then she heard the words that she knew heralded the last moments of his foolish life.

*“Why has no one come for me before?” Morrigan asked.*

*“The castle is buried under an overgrowth of thorns and brambles, princess. It grows for a mile in any direction, and tops the walls and towers as well. I am the first to be able to make it through. All others have fallen in their efforts. The thorns are poisoned and cause immediate sleep and eventually death.”*

*“But you are unaffected,” Morrigan said.*

*“I am pure of heart, pure of mind, pure of body. I’ve prepared to come for you all my life,” Alexi said.*

“Then you are exactly what I need,” Morrigan said, an unnatural guttural purr tainting her voice as she reached for the young man, preparing to drain every bit of blood from his body in order to strengthen herself. The blood of an innocent was so much stronger than the blood of the ordinary human.

Fairuza knew she could wait no longer. She dissipated into the mists that allowed her to travel through any barrier and rushed right at the male willingly leaning into death’s arms, knocking him off balance and away from Morrigan’s clawed, fanged embrace.

“What have you done?!” Fairuza screamed at him in outrage.

Alexi drew his sword as he regained his balance. “Do not fear, princess! I will protect you!” he shouted, moving to stand between the evil witch taking shape across the room from them and his precious princess.

“Be gone, witch! Else I cut you down!” Alexi warned.

“You fool! She meant to drain your blood! You would be dead now if not for me! Put away your sword and leave this place at once!” Fairuza shouted.

Alexi was caught off guard. The evil witch standing before him was a stunningly beautiful female with hair of blue-black curls, falling carelessly about her shoulders as it spilled to her waist. The wings attached to her back, which she had lifted in an offensive pose were the same glossy blue-black of her hair and the feathers almost had an iridescent quality to them. Her body was young and strong, clothed in a simple cotton gown. Even the horns that adorned her head were beautiful in their own way, though he found it difficult to reconcile them in his mind with his idea of beauty.

“Step away from her!” Fairuza ordered, holding her hands out, prepared to use her magicks to keep them all at bay if necessary.

It took Alexi a moment to snap out of his reverie and realize the female he faced was the evil witch that had spelled his princess. “It’s you who must step away! I will not allow you to harm my princess!”

Fairuza was staring at the foolish prince who'd awakened Morrigan. Her heart had not felt anything at all for so long, she was stunned when her gaze met his and a definite connection fell into place.

"I am no witch. I'm simply protecting the world from the monstrosity you've awoken," Fairuza said. "Go, go now that I might return her to her slumbers and keep us all safe for another three hundred years."

"You will not spell me into another lost lifetime," Morrigan growled as she managed to get her footing and stand, her hands bracing herself against the wall behind her.

"Go!" Fairuza screamed at the prince standing before her.

"My prince," Morrigan said, her voice sweetly calling for Alexi. "Won't you help me. Please, I can't stand," she begged.

Alexi didn't take his eyes off Fairuza as he stepped back and extended his arm for the princess to take hold of.

Morrigan grasped his arm and smiled sinisterly as she pressed her body against his, causing him to curve his arm around her waist.

"No! Don't you see she's the evil here? She will take your life and leave you like my Phillip, lost to every dream and love he may have ever had! She'll steal away your life as your blood spills into her veins!" Fairuza pleaded, begging for his understanding, her voice high-pitched and almost a scream with her emotion filling it. Emotion she'd not felt in so long it frightened her.

"I give you one last chance, witch. You will leave us and never return. I banish you from this land, else I will be forced to take your head," Alexi said, not wanting at all to actually harm this female. The very idea unnerved him to no end, and that alone caused him a great amount of confusion. He'd wanted nothing more than to avenge the sleeping princess and now he dreaded the idea of having to harm the witch who'd spelled her.

"Do it! Take her head!" Morrigan shouted, trying to urge him on.



“Don’t you see? Beauty doesn’t equate with good. Not all that is beautiful is good and kind. Beauty can be beguiling. Beauty can be misleading. Beauty can kill,” Fairuza said.

“Take her head!” Morrigan shrieked.

Alexi looked down at Morrigan, stunned by the sound of savagery in her voice. When he saw the creature clinging to his body he shouted in fear and tried to step away, but it was too late. She’d already sunken her claws into his shoulder and was lunging for his neck with her mouth open, her fangs on display, ready to pierce the soft flesh there and take his blood into her own body that she might be strong enough to fight Fairuza on her own.

Alexi tried to spin away from her and a battle of shoving and punching, snarling and grasping had them both blind to all else in the room. Fairuza rushed forward, struggling in vain against the hold Morrigan had on the foolish prince. Claude finally ran into the room, screaming as he wielded his own sword high above his head, trying to determine which was the body he needed to slash. Then in the blink of an instant, everything came to a halt.

Morrigan’s attempts to tear out Alexi’s throat stopped, and she became practically frozen in time.

Fairuza was able to shove her away from Alexi, Claude stepped back, his sword at his side unstained with any blood at all since he’d been unable to determine in the struggle which was friend or foe due to the close proximity and constant movements of all involved. Alexi stumbled back, his hand pressed to his bleeding neck. And as Fairuza turned to look at Alexi to determine the severity of his wound, Phillip fell against her.

Fairuza caught Phillip as he fell into her arms, gasping for breath with his mouth open.

“Phillip!” Fairuza called out, going to her knees with Phillip in her arms. “Phillip...” she repeated tearfully.

“My beautiful Fairuza,” he whispered as he held out a bloodied hand to stroke her hair.

It was only then that Fairuza realized what had happened. Phillip had been awakened when Morrigan woke. He'd managed to gather enough strength to take up his sword and make it to where they all struggled against one another. Then he'd sunken his sword into Morrigan's body when her back had been turned toward the door to her chambers. He'd taken the opportunity to save those who battled Morrigan, and free himself at the same time. "Phillip, what have you done?" Fairuza sobbed, holding his head in her lap and smoothing his hair from his face.

"I'm free," he said, smiling at her weakly. "We all are."

"No! You can't die!" Fairuza said, tears streaking her face and her lips trembling.

"You need to live. You need to love. Do not waste your life, my love. Reach for all we lost. Live it for me."

"No!" Fairuza screamed. "No, I can't lose you!" she begged.

"Stop coming to this place. Stop waiting for the impossible. Love, Fairuza. Live," Phillip said.

"Phillip," Claude said, leaning over Fairuza's shoulder so Phillip could see him.

"I knew you were here, too, brother," Phillip said, trying to smile at them both. "Thank you for watching over her."

Claude reached out and took Phillip's hand in his, and Phillip closed his eyes. Claude began quietly reciting the prayers he still said every morning and night. Only this time, he added the prayers for absolution and last rites.

The sound of metal scraping on stone filled the room, joining the sounds of sobbing and praying. Claude looked up to see Alexi standing over Morrigan, plunging his sword into Morrigan over and over again, before slicing his broadsword through her neck with one mighty blow, removing her head from her body, and removing the terror that she was from the world around them.

Phillip turned his head into Fairuza's hands, smiling as he squeezed Claude's hand once more as he took his last breath,

finally free from the horrors he'd somehow managed to survive.

Fairuza cried out and threw herself over his body, sobbing relentlessly as Alexi approached.

Claude looked up and met Alexi's gaze as he walked slowly toward them, his sword held loosely at his side.

"It is done," Claude said.

Alexi nodded and looked at the mysterious, heartbroken female lying across her dead prince.

"It is good. It's time to let it go," Claude said.

Claude released Phillip's hand, then reached out and pulled Fairuza toward him and into his arms. "Hush, now, Fairuza. This is what he wanted all along. You heard him. He knew we were here. He knew you loved him, and he wants you to live the life that was stolen from you. All these tears, they aren't necessary. You should rejoice that he is now free."

A thump sounded to the side of them, and both Claude and Fairuza turned that way.

"He's unconscious," Claude said, releasing Fairuza and getting up to go to Alexi's side.

Alexi had fallen back, his body giving out and losing its battle with the shock of all he'd just seen and endured. He'd crumpled where he stood, the shock and the blood loss from his torn throat making him weak.

"Is he dead?" Fairuza asked through her tears.

Claude examined Alexi. "No. He lives still, in fact his heartbeat is strong. But he's lost blood."

"Is he changed?" Fairuza asked, forcing herself to get up and walk over to the unconscious fool who'd awoken the evil she'd been keeping under control.

Claude looked at Alexi more closely, then looked back at Morrigan's body. "I don't think so. She'd have had to feed him her blood in order to change him after she drained him of his. She only had time to tear at his throat. He is not drained. I don't even think she managed to feed on his blood before we

all jumped in. I know for certain he did not consume any of hers. If she'd been successful, he'd be gone, as Phillip is."

"He's a fool," she said angrily.

"Perhaps. But he's accomplished what neither you or I have been able to for centuries," Claude said. "I'd call him a godsend."

Fairuza looked back at Phillip's body. "We should bury him," she said.

Claude shook his head. "No. We should let the sunlight purify his body. The sun will take care of everything for us. Let us open these windows and allow nature to take its course."

Fairuza nodded tearfully. She and Claude made their way around the castle, throwing open all the windows, making way for the soon-to-rise sunlight to cleanse all it touched in a way it hadn't been allowed to since long before Fairuza and Claude knew of, or even cared to know of this place.

As they stood, with Fairuza hesitating to leave the last place she'd ever been together with Phillip, Claude spoke to her.

"We should take the young man back to our castle and see to his needs, Fairuza."

Fairuza didn't answer, she was staring into nothingness, hearing Phillip's last words, feeling his hands touching her one last time.

"Fairuza," Claude said, placing his hands gently on her shoulders.

Fairuza looked at him as her tears stained her face yet again.

"We should go," Claude said.

She nodded, then went back to the room they'd left Alexi in, gathered him in her arms, and took to the still dark skies with their rosy horizons, as her sleek, black wings took them back to her castle.

Claude watched quietly, seeing them off before he went back downstairs and out through the path the prince had cut

into Fairuza's thorns, taking the extra time needed to search the woods and locate the prince's horse. Having found the animal, he gathered the reins in hand and led it back with him to the castle as well.

Though exhausted already from the battles they'd already had to overcome this morning, Claude was hopeful. This was a new day, with new promises for the future. Evils that threatened yesterday, threatened no more, and words from long lost loved ones now at peace, were healing broken hearts as the minutes passed.

## Chapter 12

Claude reached Fairuza's castle and took the time to house his horse and Alexi's in the stable. He gave them water and hay, then went to the main gallery of the castle in search of Fairuza and the prince.

Finding it empty, he started the climb to her bedchamber in the darkest corner of the highest tower.

He tapped on the door of her bedchamber, calling out before opening it. "Fairuza?"

"Come," Fairuza called out.

Claude opened the door and stepped inside, not sure what he'd find there other than Fairuza. He was fairly certain, though, that she wouldn't have simply dropped the prince as she flew him to her home. Yet on entering, he was pleasantly surprised.

Fairuza already had the prince lying on her bed, a poultice applied to the bandage she'd placed on his neck.

"Has he awakened?" Claude asked.

Fairuza shook her head slightly. "Only to apologize briefly before falling back to sleep."

"Did you spell him to sleep?" Claude teased.

Fairuza shot him a scolding look. "No!" she answered. She crossed her arms protectively over her chest and walked toward the balcony just off her rooms. She stood at the very edge of her balcony, looking out over the dark, cold lands that surrounded her castle. "I've made quite the mess of things, haven't I, Claude?" she asked.

"No, you haven't, Fairuza. You've done the best you could. We both have," he answered.

“Look at all our beloved forest has become. Look at the village beyond. It’s not even a village any longer — it’s just a small group of people struggling to survive in a few decaying buildings,” Fairuza said.

“But they have hung on despite the odds,” Claude said.

“As have we,” Fairuza remarked. “I hadn’t noticed how cold, how colorless it had all become.”

Claude glanced her way before returning his gaze out over the lands surrounding them. “Do you mean this,” he said, waving his hand in a sweep over all they saw, “or you?” he asked.

Fairuza looked at him. “Both,” she admitted. “I have failed in all I set out to do. In so many ways it is I who has been sleeping. I needed saving and didn’t even see it.”

“Maybe in some ways, but in others, not so much. Consider all the people you’ve saved. You took their poisons into yourself, allowing them to live,” Claude said.

“After I put them there to begin with,” Fairuza stated matter-of-factly.

“Look, there,” Claude said, pointing toward the pink and orange on the horizon, “the sun rises.”

Fairuza blinked back tears as she nodded, watching the glorious colors of the sunrise begin to crawl their way across the land, to shine their inevitable light down on the castle in the middle of the thorns, removing all traces of the evil that once lived there.

“It is a new morning,” she said.

“A new start,” Claude added.

Fairuza turned to look at Claude. “What shall we do with it?” she asked.

“Whatever we wish, Fairuza,” Claude said.

“May I have some water?” a gruff voice asked from the bedchamber behind them. They turned and saw the prince still lying in Fairuza’s bed, looking their way.

“A new start,” Fairuza repeated to herself.

“What is your name?” Claude asked the prince.

“I am Prince Alexi,” he rasped out.

“Welcome, Prince Alexi. I’m Claude.”

“You’re Claude? But, how?! I heard of you and half the army you brought with you to search for your brother! How are you still here?”

Claude chuckled good natured. “By free will, of course. And the grace of a kind-hearted faerie Queen. What have you heard of me? Four guards is hardly half an army. I sent them back home with words of both assurance and warning for my family. There was never an army at my side.”

Alexi shook his head in confusion. “So much of what I’ve heard has become so twisted from the truth,” he mumbled.

“Very few take the time to actually discover the truth before they begin casting their opinions about,” Claude said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be right back with some cool water for you.”

A short time later Claude returned with a tray. On it was a pitcher of cool water, some small cakes for breakfast and the tea Fairuza had once been very fond of. He made it for her from time to time but she drank it as she drank water, with never a notice of it being any different.

“Here,” Claude said, pouring a cup of cool water and stepping toward the bed to offer it to the prince.

Alexi lifted his head enough with the help of Claude to be able to sip from the cup.

Then Claude put the cup down and helped Alexi prop himself up against the pillows so that he might still recline while sitting.

“I’m sorry,” Alexi said. “I had no idea what I was doing.”

“No, you did not,” Fairuza answered without turning to look at him. She still stood looking out over the land as dawn broke, filling their world with light and warmth, but she’d moved to just inside the bedroom, looking out over the balcony rather than standing at its edge.



“I’d always been told the beautiful princess was the victim, the witch the bringer of evil, cursing the princess and all she loved out of jealousy. I never even considered it would be the opposite,” Alexi said shamefully.

“Did you not think to even ask?” Fairuza asked, spinning to glare at Alexi.

“I did!” he defended. “I asked everyone I came across in every village and township I traveled through. The tales were all the same.”

“Twisted over time no doubt,” Claude said, as he handed Alexi a cake. “You should eat that. You need to build up your strength.”

“I’ve never been evil,” Fairuza said sadly.

“You’ve certainly become cold and unfeeling, though,” Claude accused with a smirk.

Fairuza shot him a glare.

“I’m simply pointing out how the rumors could have started,” Claude said.

“I see now that you are not evil,” Alexi said to Fairuza.

“Oh, is it easy to see that now that I’ve saved you from having your throat torn out?” she asked.

Alexi looked chagrined as he looked down at the cake in his hand, then back up at Fairuza. “I knew something was wrong with the story the moment I saw you. My plan was to strike you down, deliver vengeance for the princess, but when I saw you, I couldn’t even consider it. So I tried to send you away instead.”

Fairuza didn’t reply, she stood watching Alexi try to explain his actions.

“Since I was little boy, my tutor told me of the cursed sleeping princess, and the evil faerie Queen who spelled her. He even told me of the two brothers, princes who’d gone missing. One bespelled with the princess to sleep forever, the other in service to the jealous faerie Queen for all eternity. I vowed to find them, and save them by ending the faerie Queen. Then as I grew older and traveled in search of the

sleeping castle, the faerie Queen turned to an evil witch, but always the sleeping princess was the same.”

“Here I am,” Fairuza said, extending her arms at her sides. “You wish to destroy me, this is the day. I care not anymore.”

Alexi’s expression became horrified. “No! Never!” he exclaimed. “I will not harm you in any way. I have seen the error of my ways, the foolishness of my beliefs! Instead, I offer you my troth. My vow of loyalty. I shall stay here and help you rebuild your kingdom. We shall make it magnificent again!” he said excitedly.

Fairuza didn’t reply. She couldn’t think straight at the moment. All she’d been through in the last few hours had finally taken its toll. Emotions she’d not had in so long she thought they were gone forever rose up and combined with the adrenalin coursing through her body, and it was all she could do to understand the words Alexi spoke.

“Fairuza?” Claude said from just behind her.

Fairuza turned quickly, startled to find him there.

“I moved to the balcony when you were speaking with your prince,” Claude said.

“He’s not my prince,” Fairuza mumbled.

Claude laughed and took her by the shoulders, turning her toward the balcony. “Look,” he said simply.

Fairuza walked out onto the balcony and gasped.

“The sun has done its job. The castle is being cleared of all its darkness,” Claude said, as the mists from those who once slumbered there were lifted into the morning air before being burned away by the sunlight.

A single tear ran down Fairuza’s cheek as she watched the final chapter closing on Phillip and the dreams they’d once shared.

“Do not cry, Fairuza. It’s a happy day. A new day.”

Fairuza gave a nod, then her eyes wandered over the thorns still surrounding the castle. She took a deep breath and raised her arms above her head. She whispered a few words,

that gradually grew into a chant, and as Claude watched, the thorns and brambles began to shrink back a little at a time.

“Oh my!” Claude exclaimed as he watched color begin to gradually take up residence where the brown and black thorned patches once stood.

Rustling could be heard behind them as Alexi got out of bed and slowly made his way to stand beside them. He watched in awe as Fairuza erased the darkness and hopelessness that had encroached on the land.

As the grasses became green, the leaves on the trees turned from brown and orange to different shades of green, the meadows erupted with flowers of all colors imaginable. The waters began to flow and gurgle, and everything around them, as far as they could see took on a fresh new life.

Alexi turned to Fairuza and smiled at her. “You are truly the kind, beautiful princess I’ve searched for all my life.”

Fairuza smiled shyly at him, then turned to Claude who was beaming, smiling happily at her side.

“It is a new day, Mistress,” he said.

“I told you not to call me Mistress,” Fairuza said before hugging him. “Oh, Claude. What would I have done without you all these years?”

“You’d have been quite lonely, I believe,” he said, as he put his arm around her shoulders and they turned their attention again to the land coming back to life.

Together the three of them stood on the balcony, watching not the birth of a new world, but the awakening of an old one. One that long ago stopped hoping. One that would offer all three of them the happiness they’d always dreamed of.

## Epilogue

Fairuza laughed as she ran as quickly as she could through the waist high sunflowers, skipping lightly over the rocks that let her know she was near her favorite waterfall. She ducked behind the sheet of falling water just as Alexi ran into view across the meadow.

“You can’t hide from me!” he called out. “I will find you and I’ll kiss you!”

Fairuza grinned at his threat. It wasn’t a threat at all, it was exactly what she wanted and she remained in hiding.

“Fairuza! We’ll be late love!” Alexi called out as he made his way toward her. He knew her favorite hiding place was behind the waterfall.

“I don’t care!” she called out.

“Ah! I knew you were there!” he teased, breaking into a run straight through the sunflowers, then to the rocks and boulders that framed the waterfall.

Fairuza turned to dive through the sheet of water into the pool below, but Alexi caught her in his arms before she had a chance.

“Got you!” he said, spinning her to look at him. “Now I get a kiss!” he said, pressing his lips to hers to claim his prize.

“Just one?” she asked, flirtatiously.

“It’s all we have time for,” he said. “Everyone is waiting.”

Fairuza smiled up at him. He’d become the anchor in her life. The reason she woke every day with a smile on her face, anxious to start the adventures of each new day.

“Don’t you want to make it official?” he asked, stroking her cheek gently.

“I do. I’m just afraid to let it finally happen. I keep thinking that something will go wrong and then I’ll be alone again,” Fairuza said.

“Nothing could go wrong. Our people are happy and prosperous once more. The village is now a township with more and more people moving to it every day. We receive word from neighboring kingdoms regularly wanting to set up trade between our people and theirs. We are loved and respected by our people.”

“Because we respect them,” Fairuza said.

“Exactly. What could possibly go wrong?” Alexi asked.

“My mother, my grandmother,” she said.

“If they wanted to interfere, they wouldn’t. Not once they see all the good you’ve done,” Alexi said.

“We’ve done. I needed you to heal me. I couldn’t have done it without you,” Fairuza said.

Alexi lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers again. “Come, my beautiful faerie princess. Marry me.”

Fairuza nodded and kissed him back.

“Yes?” he asked. “You’re ready?”

“I’m ready,” Fairuza said.

“Then let’s go. They’re waiting,” Alexi said.

Fairuza allowed Alexi to guide her out from behind the waterfall, and through the magical grasses and flowers of their enchanted forest hideaway. At the edge of the meadow, Fairuza turned and called for Bolt, who trotted toward them with Alexi’s horse at his side.

“To the village, Bolt,” Fairuza said as Alexi placed her upon Bolt’s back, then mounted his own horse.

They rode side by side toward the village, which was no longer a small, struggling, dismal place. Instead, it was bustling, and busy, usually with its inhabitants going about their daily business. Except for today. All was quiet.

Fairuza turned to look at Alexi.

“Perhaps they’re already there,” he said, looking off toward the spires that could be seen on the far side of town.

Fairuza nodded and nudged Bolt into a gentle run, so they could arrive there as quickly as possible.

“She’s here!” several voices cried out as they rode into sight.

“Is he with her?” another voice asked.

“Of course!” came the answer.

Their horses came a stop, and Alexi helped Fairuza off Bolt, then took her hand in his as they walked toward the massive church with its multiple spires and stained glass windows.

Two young girls ran toward them offering a crown of flowers for Fairuza’s hair, and a bouquet for her to carry. Fairuza leaned over so they could place the crown on her head, then accepted the bouquet from them. “Thank you,” she said, smiling as her eyes danced with happiness.

“You’re welcome!” they both shouted in unison as they ran into the church.

Fairuza turned to smile at Alexi. “How do I look?” she asked.

“Like my beautiful faerie Queen,” he said, straightening her flower crown.

“Can you see them?” she asked, lifting a hand to rub at the spot where the remainder of her horns was hidden beneath her hair. They’d begun to shrink in size once their world had changed and the darkness had begun to fade. But a small reminder of them remained hidden beneath the thick curls that adorned her head.

“No. Even if you could, they’re simply as beautiful as their owner,” Alexi said.

Fairuza nodded, then turned toward the church, taking a deep breath before walking toward its large arched doors.

“Fairuza?” Alexi asked, walking at her side, just before they reached the door.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I love you. I will love you forever. Thank you for forgiving me, for allowing me to be a part of your life.”

“I love you, too,” Fairuza said. “Thank you for saving me, for coming to find me and freeing me from the darkness I’d allowed to surround me.”

“You were the sleeping princess I dreamed of saving, no doubt. I love you, Fairuza.”

The doors before them were thrown open and at least a dozen children surrounded them dressed in their finest church clothes. “Come on! We’re all waiting!” they laughed, as they took Fairuza and Alexi by the hand and led them toward the main aisle.

Fairuza took her place at the end of the aisle as the children led Alexi to stand at the pulpit beside Claude who was dressed in his best ministry robes.

She met Claude’s gaze, and he winked at her from the pulpit of his church. Then she started down the aisle toward her best friend who would officiate her wedding, and her prince who had become her world, both of which watched her with loving eyes — though it was two totally different kinds of love.

Halfway there she was surprised when her mother and grandmother stood from the pew they sat in and stepped into the aisle to hug and kiss her.

“You have finally found your way, my granddaughter,” her grandmother said, kissing her cheek.

“I knew you could,” her mother said, hugging her tightly before returning to their pew.

Fairuza stood where she was, watching them with her mouth open in surprise.

“Go! Your prince awaits!” her mother said, gently reaching out and nudging her forward.

Fairuza turned her attention back to Alexi and Claude, and began her walk toward them again. When she reached the

front of the church, Alexi took her hand as she stepped up on the dais.

“I think everyone from every village surrounding us is here,” she whispered.

Claude smiled at her. “Our congregation is a strong one. They all wanted to see their Queen married to her Prince.”

“Now, without further ado, let us begin,” Claude said, his voice deep and rich as he confidently led them in the vows that would tie them forever. Both Fairuza and Alexi repeated his words when they were told to, and exchanged rings when they were told to, until finally, Claude introduced them to their people.

“As these two very deserving souls have been joined in marriage, please allow me to introduce you to your Queen Fairuza, and her King Alexi,” Claude said.

Everyone in the church erupted into applause and cheers.

“Are you ready to dance the day away my Queen?” Alexi asked after he kissed her and pulled her into his arms.

“I am, my King,” she answered, hugging him back.

“And now the celebration begins!” Claude shouted, his arms raised in the air as he lifted one of Fairuza’s hands and one of Alexi’s in the air as though they were champions. Because in so many ways, they were.

This is the true legend, the true faerie tale of the Beautiful Sleeping Princess and the prince who wakes her from the darkness surrounding her.





## From The Author

Thank you for purchasing this book. I hope that my stories make you smile and give you a small escape from the daily same ole/same ole. I write for me, simply for the joy of it, but if someone else smiles as a result, that's even better. Your support is greatly appreciated. If you liked this story, please remember to leave a review wherever you bought it, so that more people can find my books. Each review is important, no matter how short or long it may be.

See you in the pages of the next one!

Sandra R Neeley

Other books by this author:

### **Avaleigh's Boys series**

I'm Not A Dragon's Mate!, Book 1

Bane's Heart, Book 2

Kaid's Queen, Book 3

Maverik's Ashes, Book 4

Bam's Ever, Book 5

Vince's Place, Book 6

**Whispers From the Bayou series**

Carnage, Book 1

Destroy, Book 2

Enthrall, Book 3

Lore, Book 4

Murder, Book 5

Aubreigne, Book 6

Whispers of Christmas, Book 7

Lily's Dragon, Book 8

**Haven series**

Haven 1: Ascend

Haven 2: Redemption

Haven 3: Transcend

Haven 4: AVOW

Haven 5: Bonded

Haven 6: Reclaimed

**Riley's Pride**

Riley's Pride, Book 1

Richie's Promise, Book 2

Travis's Gift, Book 3

Roman's Vow, Book 4

Lazarus's Savior, Book 5

Lucas's Prey, Book 6

**Variant**

Beginnings, Variant 1

Valor, Variant 2

Sin, Variant 3

Two, Variant 4

Brutal, Variant 5

**Standalone Novels**

WINGS

Blessed Curse

**Short Stories and Novellas**

CAT

Only Fools Walk Free

Safe On Base: A Howls Romance (loosely connected to  
Riley's Pride series)

Halloween Treats, An Avaleigh's Boys Novella

**Co-Written Series**

**The Order**

## Revelations, Book 1

## **Sandra R Neeley**

Hi, I'm Sandra R Neeley, and I'm an International Best-Selling Author of Paranormal, SciFi, and Fantasy Romances. I'm 58 and married, with two children, two grandchildren, a multitude of pets, and I'm a Self-Published Author. At a very young age I recognized that the stories and fictional characters living in my head were not something everyone understood. But after deciding to craft them into books, surprisingly, people have loved them. Every story will leave you feeling like you've been visiting with a long-lost loved one during a respite from reality. Every story ends in a HEA, but a bit of a warning, there are some 'triggers' in my stories that certain people should avoid, so please read the synopses and warnings supplied with each book before buying.

I've got six series published at this time, Avaleigh's Boys - PNR, Whispers From the Bayou - Fantasy PNR, Haven - SciFi Romance, Riley's Pride - PNR, and Variant - a dark genetic manipulation romance. I've also got a series I'm co-writing called 'The Order', which is classified as SciFi/PNR Romance. I've published a couple of standalone novels, several short stories, and even have a few under pen names. I've got much, much more to come. I'm always glad to hear from my readers, so feel free to look me up and say hello. My website is [www.sneeleywrites.com](http://www.sneeleywrites.com), where I post snippets of works in progress, and all my links for books and social media can be found there as well.

You can find me at any of these places:

[authorsandraneeley@gmail.com](mailto:authorsandraneeley@gmail.com)

<https://www.sneeleywrites.com>

<https://www.sneeleywrites.com/contact>  
<https://www.sneeleywrites.com/blog>  
<https://www.facebook.com/authorsandrarneeley/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/755782837922866/>  
<https://www.amazon.com/Sandra-R-Neeley/e/B01M65OZ1J/>  
<https://twitter.com/sneeleywrites>  
<https://www.instagram.com/sneeleywrites/>  
[https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/15986167.Sandra\\_R\\_Neeley](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/15986167.Sandra_R_Neeley)  
<https://www.bookbub.com/authors/sandra-r-neeley>  
<https://www.tiktok.com/@authorsandrarneeley>

Stop by to say Hi, and sign up to be included in updates on current and future projects.