

ROOTED IN LOVE

The Tale of Briar and Sunny

A Novelette

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Cover Art by Hannah Oechsle
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Exhibit, Rooted in Love*

I

*There were once two divided flower
fields. For years the roses and
sunflowers have quarreled in their fair
gardens,
their anger breeding discontent and
turmoil year after year, but through these
perilous circumstances love always
manages to bloom.*

The sun shone through the panels of a large greenhouse, yellowed on the edges of the panes from age. Illuminated inside, a gardener was hard at work at one of the many workbenches lining its walls. Stacks of clay pots filled with plants were placed on every available spot, and a layer of dry leaves rested on the floor, crunching underfoot. The scent of soil and fertilizer permeated the air, combined with the sweet perfume of dozens of blossoms. The damp heat only intensified the odor. From the outside,

the greenhouse was surrounded by fields of flowers; the only thing breaking up the sea being a stone path running directly through the middle. On one side, vibrant reds and pinks on delicate petals danced in the crisp breeze, creeping along the earth floor and tangling their branches with one another. On the other side, plants stood tall and stretched their faces to the sun, with their buttery yellows and sunset like oranges, basking in the sun's brilliant rays and shading the ground beneath them.

This garden was filled with whispered secrets and burning grudges, keeping the two flower fields separate and inhospitable towards one another. From arguments over water, fertilizer, and beauty, the feud only continued to grow, with no peace in sight. Perhaps it all started from the yearly competitions that the gardener placed them in, usually placing her best grown flowers, the roses and the sunflowers, into two separate exhibits. The roses, a prideful clan, were aggressive and sharp spoken, ruling their fields with thorny fists. Their side was

-what they believed- a proper garden should look like, with neat little rows and more traditional flowers like tulips and dahlias gracing their land. The sunflowers, on the other hand, had a more laidback disposition until they were angered and pulled out their shady tricks. A chaotic mess of wildflowers and grasses filled their side, an invitation to pollinators everywhere.

However, behind the greenhouse is where our story begins. Often the two sides would meet here to clash and settle disputes. The ever growing pile of compost in the large wooden bin leaning on the back of the greenhouse gave the area, at least to the plants, a dark and ominous feeling. After all, that is where cuts of leaves and roots and eventually dead plants would end up, completing the cycle by providing soil to the next young shoots. With shade offered from a nearby oak tree, it was the perfect place to not get caught.

Just then, a large Echinacea plant, commonly known as a coneflower, was threatening to attack a small single

blossom peony for rigging the hose to give more water to the rose fields and not providing enough to the meadows. The two were being urged on by an assortment of plants, all willing to spill their chlorophyll to engage in this fight.

“You have enough water on your side, you don’t need to steal ours. In fact, some of your delicate little leaves have been looking a little overwatered recently.” The coneflower smirked, towering over the peony.

“Wow! What an insult! It’s a shame that you wildflowers don’t have enough roots to come up with any better ones,” sneered the peony, managing to look dignified and regal even staring straight up. “If anyone is hoarding water, it is you who have all the rain barrels on your side of the greenhouse!”

“Keep it up, ant-infested freak!” In anger, the coneflower pushed the peony back, putting a few holes into its petals with its spiky face. A gasp resounded around the quarrel as the crowd tittered back nervously. If they

were not careful this could turn into an all out brawl.

The peony wailed as his petals were stripped; it had taken so long for his beautiful bud to bloom, and now he would have to wait for another one to grow. “You’ll pay for that, you rotting stick!” he yelled, grasping the coneflower tightly by its stalky stem. Suddenly, the two sides surged forward and clashed, using their thorns and leaves to strike and strangle one another.

Close to the original quarreling duo, a group of daisies were keeping a lily off the ground, its roots away from the earth as it feebly tried to escape the mass. A few feet away, a large barberry bush was pressing its barbs into a single cosmos. The original fight had given these flowers a reason to release their pent up frustrations and hatred towards their foes.

“Stop! Stop! The gardener is coming!” a lookout screamed, running onto the scene. In what seemed like no time at all, the fighting ceased. Instead everyone was scrambling to find a free

pot or patch of dirt to plant themselves in for the time being. As the gardeners boots were seen coming just around the corner of the greenhouse, a slow growing succulent just manages to duck into a small urn.

The human sporting a dirty pair of overalls with a thick braid of chestnut hair appeared, humming a tune. Carrying a large pot in both hands, she stopped in confusion upon noticing all the plants around her. She was sure there hadn't been that many the last time she had come back here. Shrugging it off, she set her load down and headed back into the greenhouse.

Upon her exit the plants slowly came back to life, their hate-filled glares just as burning as before. The revengeful peony even managed to slyly grab a pair of rusty gardening shears and was making a path of destruction back towards the coneflower. All in vain however, for the commotion had drawn the reigning families of each side to the scene. A menagerie of plants had exploded out of the fields.

“By my thorn, what is going on here?” An old rose bush thundered, its stems quivering from the load of its many flowers. The many roses and related plants seemed to straighten up at his presence, trying to regain the air of sophistication they had before the fight. The peony plant was very quick to throw down the gardening sheers, once catching the eye of their leader.

“No doubt a fight started by *your* subjects,” a tall orange sunflower snidely commented, all the wildflowers unconsciously leaning their faces towards him. Their presence seemed to calm down the masses, leaving them with smiles, although still wary. Nodding their heads to their people, the sunflower known as Apolla sent a quick look of disdain to the aghast rose across from him.

“Ah Apolla, of course you would be only one patch of dirt away from wherever you sent your simple-minded followers.”

“I was about to say the same to you, my dear Rosevelt. I knew you

would try to pull a stunt like this so close to competition day.”

“A stunt like this!” He sputtered, “Is it not my kin who is now sporting hole-ridden petals?”

“All undoubtedly done in self defense,” said Apolla calmly, sending a small smile to the coneflower sporting a bruised neck.

“I wouldn’t trust such tall tales coming from weeds and grasses.”

“Let us agree to disagree then, shall we?” came the sunflower’s short reply as she promptly turned and headed back towards the fields she called home.

Rosevelt, feeling as though he had lost an argument, heaved a sigh and turned to face his people. Maybe it was for the best that there had been no bloodshed this time around, after all, he needed to make sure his lovely Briar Rose was ready for her debut.

Oh Briar, the beauty of the fields. With her soft velvet petals and vivid green leaves, she would have already been considered beautiful. However, alone she had sat rooted for all these

years, forbidden from leaving the safety of her plot. Because of this, she had no missing petals or snipped off stems, her leaves were kept away from chewing insects, and had no signs of damage. She was the epitome of perfection.

Though she had everything a flower would want; water, sunlight, and pollinators galore, she yearned for meaning in her life and hoped she would find it at the upcoming competition which she was surely going to win. After bringing home the prize and making her family proud, maybe then she would feel as if she had a purpose.

Apolla of course returned to her own fields, knowing that with the competition fast approaching, her son must be made ready for when he would be picked. Sunny, named after the very thing that all sunflowers honored above all else, was in her eyes a winning flower. Though he wasn't as perfect as the other flowers, he had a duty to his fields to win the competition.

II

The day before the competition came as it did every year and the gardener made her rounds to uproot the plants she thought would make the most impact at the show. A perennial here, a bulb there, the two sides tittering when one of their own was chosen and groaning miserably when the gardener would venture to the other fields.

It came as no surprise when she carefully lifted Briar out of the ground, gently placing her in a pot as Briar's father watched on in pride. As she was taken into the greenhouse, instead of the usual chatter when someone was selected, there was quiet as they all twisted and turned to catch a glimpse of the acclaimed beauty. Briar was never allowed to leave the field from which she was planted and no one beside her family and close friends had truly been able to see her.

After what seemed like forever, the gardener returned, heading in the opposite direction this time, to the sunflower fields. Apolla's petals beamed a brighter hue in pride when gloved hands dug carefully into the dirt surrounding her own child, Sunny. Standing tall above the rest of the patch, Sunny had petals the color of honey, a strong green stem, and a face without a seed out of place. His few bitten leaves told tales of past infestations that he overcame and did nothing to ruin his features. Many of the flowers were once scared of him, that is until they got to know him. With his friendly disposition and positivity, he rarely thought of himself before thinking of others. A fine addition to the competition, many of the wildflowers stated proudly to the dismay of the more sophisticated plants.

Inside, the chosen plants stayed still and quiet in the eyes of the gardener, but they were desperately trying to contain their excitement for what awaited them at the competition. When the night

came and the stars came out to grace the sky, they were finally left alone.

“We did it!” a zinnia squealed excitedly, while Sunny smiled on encouragingly. At that, many of the wild flowers began to celebrate while the roses and their fellows scoffed and kept to themselves. They remained on opposite sides of the greenhouse, leaving as much space as possible between them. Briar, sensitive to her new surroundings and being around so many other flowers, stuck close to her cousin Rory’s side. He was a pink ranunculus who was one of the few plants allowed to see Briar.

“We haven’t done anything yet, in fact, I bet that half of us won’t even make it into the competition after the gardener creates her final concept for her exhibit.” Rory said plainly to his cousin.

“Really, oh and I was so looking forward to seeing beyond these fields,” Briar said sadly, not wanting to let go of her new found freedom just yet.

“I didn’t mean you, my dear cousin. No, I am talking about the riffraff who have decided that celebrating in

such a manner would do them any good,” Rory explained eyeing up Sunny and the party surrounding him as he talked.

“They seem to me to be having fun,” Briar said weakly, not knowing what came over herself as she stared across the room at the handsome sunflower with the smile that made her leaves wilt.

“Trust me! Their idea of fun includes disorder and disarray. They won’t be winning any ribbons that way. I heard that many of them don’t even keep to their neat orderly plots but instead spread out wherever they want to. I mean can you imagine? And it doesn’t help that they have big oafs like that Sunny over there who steals all the sunlight for himself. Steer clear of them while we’re here, Briar, I wouldn’t want you to get infected by any bugs they may be carrying.”

Briar, no longer listening, continued to stare across. Sunny, she thought, so that was his name. It fit him too. In fact his face reminded her of the

sun leaving its rays on her leaves. Although next to her Rory went on and on, no doubt complaining about wildflowers, she still watched, hypnotized, and it wasn't until her eyes locked with warm amber ones that she was startled into looking away.

Hesitantly she lifted her head, almost guiltily at being caught staring. She found Sunny still looking at her, transfixed. If only she knew that he thought he was seeing an angel.

They stayed like that for a while, gazing at each other, though neither had the courage to walk over and close the distance between them. It wasn't until Sunny was dragged into a conversation with a friendly Black Eyed Susan bush, that their connection was broken.

Sunny found himself walking towards the back of the greenhouse, trying to find the one person who he could confidently tell all about the vision he was seeing across from him, without sounding like a blubbering mess.

“Maurice, who is that flower over there, talking with Rory?” Sunny asked

his marigold friend. Maurice was a beautiful plant with copper colored petals which turned to yellow. He and Sunny had been best friends since they were sprouts; Maurice always trailing after him.

“That would be his cousin Briar Rose, daughter of Rosevelt. What tree have you been living under, Sunny? She is supposed to be one of the most breathtaking plants to have ever graced these fields! It comes as no surprise that the gardener picked her.” The marigold glanced at his friend’s face before groaning. “Did you hear me? Daughter of your mother’s enemy? You can’t fall in love with her.”

Sunny quickly blushed, stuttering out excuses as Maurice’s flowers shook with laughter at his friend’s sorry state.

III

The next morning, the gardener rushed like a woman on a mission, muttering about unconventionality and breaking through traditions. Her eyes were glazed over as if she barely got any sleep at all and her hair was in a quick attempt at what could be considered a braid. In her hands she grasped crumpled papers of scribbles and sketches, clutching them like her life depended on it.

She ran around the tiny greenhouse grabbing pots and then putting them back when she realized they weren't what she wanted. Finally she settled on grabbing Briar, Sunny and some other small plants, leaving Rory and the others behind. Placing the chosen plants on a cart, she ran them out to her cargo van, fumbling with the keys in her excitement.

When she finally did get the car started up, she unloaded the plants with care, making sure they wouldn't fall over

on their trip to the exhibit hall. Once she was pleased with her attempts at safety, she closed the door leaving them in the darkness.

For the first time in her life, Briar was left alone - no family watching over her every move or ordering her to keep away from other plants. Though inside, she knew she should have been terrified surrounded by strangers, but she couldn't help but feel invigorated by her new freedom. Of course she would still try her best to win the prize for her family, but there would be no harm in getting to know the others.

Hesitating on what to do, she felt a small tap on one of her leaves. Twisting around in her planter she came face to face with Sunny.

Seemingly nervous, he said "Umm, hi! I'm sorry I just noticed you were all alone, and well, it's my first time going too and well...", he trailed off, feeling as if he really wasn't getting anywhere with what he was saying. He swallowed, blinking rapidly as he waited for, hopefully, her response.

“Thank you, my plan was to just stay here awkwardly, until you came up to me. I haven’t ever been around this many plants before in my life,” Briar replied.

“Really? This must be really scary for you then,” Sunny stated.

“It is,” Briar admitted, glad to get that off her chest.

“Well, we can stay together then, for now at least, if that’s all right with you, of course. Sunny said quickly, not wanting her to feel like he was forcing her.

“I’d like that very much,” she answered.

“I’m excited to see what the gardener came up with today. It must be something spectacular, if she was coming in like that in the morning,” Sunny started, determined to keep the conversation going.

“I agree! Though I almost laughed when I saw her. Her hair looked like one of the bird's nests I see near my field,” Briar laughed. It was easy to talk with Sunny and she couldn’t help but

wish she could spend more time with him after they returned home.

“We are coming up to the competition center hall I believe,” a Salvia plant warned the group. This was not their first time being put on display by the gardener.

Sunny turned back to Briar and shyly said with a smile, “I’m sorry but before we part it seems I have yet to ask about your plot.”

Briar’s heart sank, so he hadn’t realized that he was talking to one of his field’s sworn enemies.

“Oh, I’m Briar Rose and I reside in my father Rosevelt’s fields.” She said softly, already planning on moving away before he had the chance to shun her.

“Well, Ms. Briar Rose, I am Sunny and my mother is Apolla. It is a pleasure to be in your acquaintance fully.”

And with that he leaned down and left a soft kiss on one of her outstretched leaves. Briar was relieved and stunned at his actions, but couldn’t help but blush at his gaze. She breathed

out, her lips opened in reply, but the door to the truck was suddenly opened, and she returned to her perfect frozen state.

The gardener unloaded and pushed her cart into the building, searching for any familiar faces that could point her in the right direction of her designated section. She finally spotted one of her workers and headed over to a small corner spot. Quickly putting a brake on the cart, she handed her papers to him and got to work with no explanation. If she was to try something so experimental, she would need to start right away in case she was forced to pivot to a new direction later.

Carefully she took Briar Rose from her container and kneeling down, placed her in the middle of the circle of mulch that was already prepared. Once she finished patting down the earth around her, she returned to the cart and to everyone's surprise grabbed Sunny. Usually the gardener would submit two separate exhibits, one for her more sophisticated roses and another for her wildflowers. That was a large part of the

reason why the two fields never truly got along. What she was doing now broke any thought of upholding tradition.

Sunny was positioned right behind Briar, leaving a trail of beautiful roses to the yellow petals of Sunny's face for the eyes to follow. The workers looked up from placing the remaining flowers and plants around the focal area, pausing their work from what they were seeing. It was very different from what they had normally done at past competitions, but it might be what could help them win a ribbon this year.

Too soon, it seemed, time was called and all exhibitors had to step away from their displays. The gardener let Briar's soft petals stroke her hand one final time before she got up and joined the others in grabbing lunch. There was nothing else for them to do except rest and think about everything they wished they could change while the judges scored them.

The judges, mercilessly slow in their inspections, forced the plants to stay absolutely still when they came to

observe them: a raised eyebrow here, a quick smile there, and always always, scratching away with their pens at the clipboards they carried.

Briar and Sunny beamed in pride as the blue ribbon was placed on their bed. Sure it wasn't the conventional prize they believed they were going to win when starting this day. But winning it together somehow made the prize even better. It wasn't until they were on their way home and the door was swung closed that the plants were able to celebrate. Though the others partied around them, the two remained together, enjoying one another's company.

"Congratulations!" they said to each other at the same time, turning into a laughing mess when their voices overlapped.

"I still can't believe that I'm even talking to you. I mean your beauty is a kind of legend among the other plants, but I must say that their stories don't do you justice. I feel as if I am unworthy to even be in your vicinity," Sunny said as

he memorized her features. He had never seen a plant as beautiful as she.

“I am just myself, and to me, it is a miracle to speak to you. Before this, I hadn’t spoken to anyone beyond my plot. You have filled this day with a happiness that I hadn’t believed achievable.”

Sunny moved his head closer to hers. Briar could see the individual grooves and colors on his face. “May I?” he pleaded, delicately cupping her petals in his leaves.

She nodded and they shared a tender kiss unlike anything they had ever experienced.

The sound of a motor turning off, and as soon as their lips touched, they were once again broken apart. The creak of metal and the starry night sky displayed the couple to the heavens, as the gardener smiled down at her now prize winning plants.

IV

“My dear cousin, I saw the gardener bring in a blue ribbon. You have won the prize for our fields, have you not?” Rory quickly asked, as soon as the door closed in the greenhouse. His eyes searched Briar’s for any sign of potential failure.

“It was a joint prize,” she said simply, “but yes we did win the competition.”

“A joint prize! Just wait until uncle hears of this. Don’t tell me you had to share with that sunflower.” The idea of sharing the win with such an obnoxiously big flower was incomprehensible to him.

Briar, at his words, let out a quick nod, not trusting her voice to not speak out against her cousin's cruel remarks.

“How scared you must have been, to be with the son of our greatest enemy.”

Briar hummed in agreement all the while staring out across the room at Sunny. Her love had bloomed amongst her deepest hate. A treacherous fate she would have never believed to have existed.

Sunny was still in wonderment at having been able to talk to Briar Rose. This day beyond his fields and his mother's sometimes overbearing rules, had left quite an impression on him. That maybe, the bitter feud and the danger of the other field that his mother always warned him about, was nowhere near true. He had found a new friend, though he couldn't deny that he felt something more.

"Sunny, Sunny? Are you even listening to me? I was asking to hear how the competition went," Maurice interjected, waving one of his leaves in front of Sunny's face.

"Oh yes. Yes, sorry. Well, we won," he said, still distracted by Briar, who kept glancing at him.

Maurice, confused, followed his friend's gaze before sighing, "Please tell me you didn't. You know you can't be

talking with her let alone looking at her like a lovesick sprout.”

“I know, I know, but she looked so scared on the way there so I talked with her and she’s just so nice, and thoughtful, and pretty and...” Sunny stopped, contemplating, “I’m doomed, aren’t I?”

“I think so.”

“You have to help me see her again! There was a connection between us, She had to have felt it too!” Sunny pleaded desperately.

“Slow down, my friend. You need to get some sleep, try to get some rest and then we will figure it out tomorrow, ok?” he said, looking at Sunny sternly until he gave up and started shutting his eyes.

At last the sun rose, with the sunflowers following its path through the sky, well, all but one, who instead was gazing longingly at Briar opening her delicate petals to the first morning rays.

The plants were to return back to their fields, the competition having been finished, and continue growing among their fellow flowers. Many of them

would probably not last the harsh winter that was to come in the next months. Their time dwindled slowly towards the end until they would join the dirt and bring to life the next year's sprouts.

But before that the gardener inspected them, cutting off old leaves or leaving light coats of fertilizer. And for some, who became too weak in their trip beyond the flower fields, placed them in the growing compost bin in the back of the greenhouse. When the gardener turned to Briar Rose, Sunny tensed but soon relaxed when only a white band with indecipherable words was placed upon her stem. Similarly, when it was Sunny's turn, a white band was also placed on him, the only other plant to receive one. When the roses and others were taken out of the room to return to their rich earth, Sunny silently wept, knowing that he would probably never see his sweet Briar Rose again.

But Briar wasn't taken back, in fact, she, and later Sunny, became the only plants to be left behind in the greenhouse. After lots of tests and being

placed in different pots, Briar was placed on a high shelf and Sunny was left on the table. The gardener left shortly after, the click of the lock signaling her departure.

V

With the lights turned off, the sole remaining light source came from the brilliant moon hanging low in the sky. Sunny gazed wordlessly up at Briar sitting gracefully on the shelf, her leaves glowing from the delicate lunar rays. The dark oak plank underneath her complimented her rosy complexion and her perfume filled the air with a soft sweetness. She smiled down at him in his frozen state, stunning him even further. To live in a world where such beauty existed used to seem unthinkable in his eyes. How wrong he had been!

To be in her presence without anyone keeping them apart was a gift, for at least one night. But still separate they were, as Briar was placed just out of reach on the shelf above him, unable to look down at him from her pot.

“Oh Sunny, please tell me you are still there and haven't returned to the fields!” She cried out desperately trying

to peer over the edge of the shelf.

“Perhaps you have realized we are meant to be enemies, a rose and a sunflower can not be. But aren't we built of the same stem, the same leaves, roots and petals that adorn each and every other flower. We are both cared for and enjoyed by the very same hand. Only a difference in plot keeps us apart.”

In haste, Sunny answered, determined to quell her fears, “Oh my sweet Briar Rose, at your word I would drop every part of myself that marks me a sunflower. No longer will I follow the sun, but your breathtaking light. A brightness that puts even the most beautiful sunrise to shame.” Moving closer to the edge of the table, he appeared once again in Briar’s line of sight.

Briar leaned back, now relaxed, though her petals were dusted with a light pink shade on her red velvet face.

“Your word is reassurance and compliment both. But what say our families when they find us once more together? In fright, I look at these clear

walls airing out our secrets in the moonlight. If the roses found out they would surely pluck your soft petals and strip you with their thorns right before me.“

“A fate I would face for even one more moment with you, which the night and these walls grant us,” Sunny said soothingly, but his face betrayed his inner fear that if they were found, they would be driven apart.

“My Sunny, are we foolish to believe that we can make this work? If you have no true feelings for me, answer quickly and save me from this madness. But if you love me as I love you, speak the truth.” Briar said suddenly, leaning away from edge and no longer in Sunny’s line of view.

“My dear, my love for you grows stronger with every moment, and I shall swear it on the deep rich earth that provides us comfort and warmth,” trying desperately to have sight of Briar once again.

“I wish you not to swear on the dirt, for its ground can easily be poisoned

and made invaluable, with hidden pests to gnaw on our love's roots and nutrients long taken away."

"On my own un-wilting green heart, then?" Sunny replied, a smile on his lips.

"If you wish to swear at all, then that will do best. Or perhaps we should not make this vow tonight. We must wait for this bud to soon blossom into something more."

"Why would you withdraw this way so soon after giving me your word?"

"So that I shall be able to give it once again, for my love will not falter. Rather it will grow, its vines reaching out and entangling, growing in multitudes around my heart, which now only beats for you. The more your sunlight looks upon it, the more there will be." Briar entreated adoringly just barely able to reach down below and softly touch one of Sunny's topmost petals.

Little known to the two sharing each other's company was a presence watching them through the paned glass. Out on a midnight stroll to check on his

cousin's safety, the hotheaded Rory peered on the scene in anger. His flowers dropping, once pink petals, now splotchy purple and red, in his rage.

“My love, I know what we can do. My friend Ferdinand can help us keep our vows and can come up with a plan for us so we won’t have to hide. I can leave once dawn comes and return with him!” the idea popping suddenly into Sunny’s head.

“That could work, but I’d hate for you to be away so long, and what if the gardener comes back in that time?” Briar nervously queried.

“Don’t worry! I’ll be quick as a bee. In fact, maybe I should leave right now, so I can return to you as soon as possible.” With some strain, Sunny pushed himself to his full height so he could plant a kiss on Briar’s awaiting lips. With that he was off, hopping off the table and giving a farewell wave before departing.

VI

Once leaving the greenhouse, Sunny began his journey to the abandoned tool shed on the outskirts of the flower fields. It was used for keeping extra supplies, but over the years it had become a graveyard for broken pots and old rusted cutters. It was once painted a beautiful clear sea blue, but seasons of wind and rain had stripped it of its color leaving behind only hints of its former glory. The small windows on the side were broken and the door rested slightly off its hinges. Despite its state, it still provided enough comfort for the one plant that called it home. A friendly fern who had long since departed from the arguments and fights of the roses and sunflowers.

He had been around for many years, witnessing decades of fighting between the flora. Although all of the plants looked up to him because of his age and wisdom, they had long ago stopped listening when he tried

mediation between the two groups. Having failed in his attempts to deescalate the animosity, he had secluded himself, but he was still more than helpful when plants came asking for advice.

“Sunny, my boy, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be out celebrating your triumphant win?” a deep voice said upon seeing him.

Sunny smiled as he turned to find Ferdinand right before him. He took up a large area in the corner of the room, his green fronds unfurling and reaching out in every direction.

“Hello sir, well I came here to ask for your help,” Sunny hesitated.

“Help? You’re not in any kind of trouble are you?”

“No, I mean, not trouble per se, but it is rather difficult to explain,” Sunny gazed around the room and twisted his leaves.

“Ah! I think I know what it is,” Ferdinand said smiling. “Come closer and tell me who is the flower that has captured your heart.”

“It’s Briar Rose. We met at the competition and well, have fallen in love. We want you to come to the greenhouse and help us recite our vows!” Sunny blurted out, trying to get it all out at once so he couldn’t stop himself.

The old fern stayed silent a moment, aghast by what he had just heard, his mind reeling with the possibilities. “You both will be in incredible danger if you are found out, but perhaps... yes, perhaps... this may be exactly what your parents need to stop their foolishness.”

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Briar, left alone by Sunny in the confines of the greenhouse, eagerly awaited his return. In the meantime, however, she was greeted by a visit from Rory who came in disheveled and troubled from what he had witnessed the previous night.

“What is it, my dear cousin?”
Briar asked, smiling gently at him.

“I swore my eyes were betraying me but as I continued to watch, the truth remained. You and the bumbling sunflower together in the greenhouse.”

“No, you are mistaken, the gardener only was taking care of us from any damage that occurred while we were out, nothing more.” Briar said quietly with a forced laugh.

“Then I did not see you both, leaves entwined, gazing at each other?” Rory roared, his attempt at calm disappointment having receded once Briar continued lying to his face. “You have been sheltered here so perhaps you can’t fully grasp the nature of his kins’ actions against us, but still, what you have done is altogether treasonous. I have half a bulb to go to your father at once!”

“No, you don’t understand. My love for him and his for me is strong enough to break through the hate of our ancestors,” declared Briar, gaining confidence with every word.

“I will give you one more chance since your time outside our borders has

left you ill and confused. But if I see you once more in correspondence with him, you will regret the course of actions that is bound to occur,” Rory warned ominously, his eyes glaring out at her. “Do you understand?”

Briar nodded mutely, but inside her heart sank with anguish. Tears filled her eyes as her cousin departed, knowing that although the punishment would be great, she couldn’t dare try to live without her Sunny.

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Sunny returned with the fern and once Briar spotted them she nearly jumped out of her pot. Unfortunately, she was still high up on her shelf. With some difficulty, the two of them managed to help Briar down safely. The pair immediately embraced one another when they were both on level ground. Ferdinand smiled when he saw this, hoping with all his heart that this was the first step in the right direction for the fields.

“Sir, thank you so much for agreeing to help us,” Briar said, bowing slightly.

“No, my child, thank you. For as a pair united, you may be strong enough to cast aside years of hate and turmoil,” returned Ferdinand.

VII

Just about as they were to start the ceremony, the gardener came in, carrying a large cardboard box which made clinking sounds whenever moved.

Wearing a pair of jeans and an oversized green t-shirt, she set down her boxes on a nearby side table, and began to tie her hair up into a ponytail, only pausing a moment, having noticed that Briar was no longer on the shelf. She shrugged it off though, thinking that she probably moved the plant before she left the night before and had forgotten.

She moved to grab some cutters and a knife and nearly tripped over a large fern blocking her path. Muttering about people stuffing plants anywhere when they didn't know what to do with them, she picked the plant up, and found Brian and Sunny. She placed the fern in a corner where it wouldn't be as distracting, and brushing the dirt off of her hands, she set to work placing Briar

and Sunny next to each on a workbench. When she was satisfied with her set up, she sat down, her red notebook open across her lap.

Taking Briar first she delicately raised a small knife and cut off one of the lower stems, leaving a clean cut. Setting it aside she did the same to sunny, cutting a small stem of his major trunk. With the two pieces now cut off, she sliced a small cut across the middle of both of them, not enough to slice them in half. She then wrapped the two stems together, nursing grafting tape, keeping them stable as she dipped them into rooting powder.

Excitedly, she grabbed a small clay pot, filled it with some soil and inserted the conjoined stem into the earth about 2 to 3 inches. Just before she was done, she cut a small divot at the top of where the two stems met, leaving room for new growth.

Now all she had to do was keep it monitored and hope that her experiment would pay off. It was a long shot but if it did work, it could revolutionize the idea of traditional types of flowers.

Consulting her notebook one final time she glanced through the worn pages before closing it shut. She had worked into the late afternoon, not eating or drinking anything and not taking any breaks along the way. She sat up straight in her chair admiring her handiwork as she stretched, her joints cracking. As she got up from the chair, she rubbed the tension from her sore muscles, and carrying the pot out with her, closed the greenhouse, turning off the lights behind her.

Shaking off from being frozen for so long, Briar and Sunny smiled at each other before wincing and checking their new scars. They weren't deep cuts, but it would still take time for their new cells to grow in its place.

From his new place in the corner, Ferdinand hobbled forward, ready to continue the ceremony that got interrupted.

“Sunny, Briar, please step forward and take each other leaf in leaf.”

Sunny held out his hand for Briar and she accepted, giving it a little squeeze as they stepped forward.

“Today I unite these two plants that were never meant to grow together. Sunny, a loyal and handsome Sunflower and Briar, a kind and beautiful Rose.” Taking a breath, the large fern, paused, overwhelmed by emotion, “The two individual plants in front of me, will now become one, sharing light, water, soil and love for the rest of their days.”

The two kissed, enjoying each other's presence as the fern looked on in happiness. None knew that Rory had also bore witness from outside the greenhouse, and had run off in anger. As he headed towards the sunflower fields he smirked, he was going to make Briar wish she had taken his warnings to heart.

VIII

The sun has risen, and the pair, side by side, awakened from their slumber. Sunny, having woken faster than Briar, watched as she slowly woke up, adoring her slow movements and sleepiness. Briar softly groaned at the thought of leaving his warm side, cuddled closer, not wanting to get up.

Their blissful morning was, however, ruined by a bright red zinnia dashing into the room, the door left open in her haste.

“Sunny, Sunny, come quick! It’s Maurice... he’s been poisoned with weedkiller!” The zinnia gasped, out of breath after running the distance of the sunflower fields.

Immediately Sunny sprung up from beside Briar, planting a delicate kiss on her temple, and assuring her that he would return.

“Lead me to him,” Sunny spoke, devoid of his usual cheery demeanor and cheerful smile. In its place were

determined, sharp eyes and a quiet anger.

“Yes, yes, we must hurry, when I left he was barely hanging on” the zinnia replied beseechingly and the two raced out of the room.

The two quickly arrived and already there was a large crowd forming. They parted immediately when Sunny was in their sight.

There lay Maurice, a shell of what he used to be, the poison had raked through his body, leaving him shriveled and discolored. Though there was a chance he could still be alive, no one wanted to take the risk to check and touch his infected form.

Sunny ran to his side, fighting the urge to sweep up his friend into his leaves and hold him close. Childishly he believed he could still hear Maurice breathing, but deep down he knew he had arrived too late. He knelt his leaves reaching out and stroking the air just above his friend’s body.

“Who did this?” he quietly demanded. Upon receiving no answer,

his eyes trailed upwards and he stared at the onlookers. "Please tell me, who did this?" His voice broke as he pleaded once more.

Murmurs grew among the crowd until one lone brave straw flower bush stepped forward. "Please, sir, understand that the answer may lead to your own rash actions. Do you truly wish to know?"

"Yes!"

The straw flower looked at him sadly in pitiful understanding, "Some of us saw him, sir, creeping away in the middle of the night. His petals shining and a face smiling in glee. It was that weed Rory, the nephew of Rosevelt."

Sunny sat still for a moment upon hearing Rory's name, before promptly standing up, his petals glowing a fiery red orange. "Where is he?"

"I don't think that would be wise in your..."

"Where is he?" Sunny cut the flower off, his voice growing louder but still contained, not yet yelling. He knew

not to misplace his anger, no, that he would save for when he found Rory.

“He’s behind the greenhouse.”

And just like that Sunny was off, whenever he crossed paths with another flower or plant that immediately stepped to the side to give him room, not wanting to be in his path of destruction.

Finally, he reached the back of the greenhouse, finding Rory talking and laughing with a few of his friends, looking not at all remorseful for what he had done. Sunny, leaving little time to react, marched right up to him and punched him squarely in the face, a single petal falling off of a flabbergasted Rory.

“You killed Maurice.” Sunny stated. It was not an accusation or explanation for what he had done; it was simply a statement of fact. “Why?”

“I warned her. I warned her about what could happen if she didn’t stay away from you. But last night, once again, right in your arms, I had to do something. And I’ll do something to you right here and now if you don’t promise

to leave my cousin alone,” Rory threatened, nursing his face as he glared up at Sunny.

“Well, I guess you have no choice but to kill me, for I will never again leave Briar.”

Rory jumped up at him as soon as the words left his mouth, the pair toppling to the ground. Sunny wiggling out from underneath. Rory ran into the greenhouse, away from the crowds who had gathered around to watch the fight.

“Scared of me, Sunny? You should be!” Rory shouted at him hot on his heels.

“No. Now it’s just you and me,” Sunny said, jumping up on an open table with Rory quickly following. He turned around to face the Ranunculus, immediately receiving a hit to the stem.

“We are brothers now, I can’t fight you, nor will I forgive you for what you have done,” Sunny said tiredly, leaning back from one of Rory’s swinging leaves.

“I have no such reservations and we are not family!” Rory yelled, hurling himself at Sunny and gripping his stem.

Just then the door to the greenhouse opened and the fighting pair had to dive into two nearby pots. Sunny found a light purple pot settled up against the glass, while Rory picked a ruby red one that was leaning slightly off the edge of the table. Meanwhile, the gardener stepped through the threshold, not noticing anything out of place, and quickly grabbing a leaf stripper before exiting.

The fighting resumed as Rory, still in his pot, jumped up at Sunny. Out of instinct, Sunny pushed him back, sending the *Ranunculus* tumbling off the side and crashing to the hard floor.

“Rory?” Sunny whispered hesitantly, “Are you ok?” Receiving no response, Sunny slowly pulled himself out of the pot and peered over at the ground, flinching at the scene he saw. Rory’s body bruised and cut from the sharp shards of pottery that had broken in his fall. Flower heads snapped at odd angles and petals spread out everywhere.

There would be no reviving this once lively perennial, no amount of nutrient rich soil or care would fix him. A fall like this he may have survived, if his roots hadn't kept him trapped in the death grip of the pot.

Climbing down to the floor, Sunny knelt by Rory's broken form, tears falling down his face as a sob built into the back of his throat. He hadn't meant for this to happen, especially since he was Briar's cousin. Oh his sweet Briar Rose, what will she think of him when she learns what he had done? Call him a monster and refuse to see him anymore?

A moment later a look of horror showed on his face, he had forgotten she was there. His eyes trailed up to the table he had slept on just that morning. There she sat, frozen, tears staining her beautiful petals. But still he could hear her sweet voice whispering his name, begging him to run before it was too late.

The door opened once again and racing in, the crowd who had watched the fight from outside. They had run to get Apolla and Rosevelt, knowing a fight

between the pair would have serious repercussions, but they were too late. Upon gazing upon Rory's corpse, The rose patriarch screamed in anger and mourning, leaving just enough time for Apolla to sweep her son behind her protective frame.

"A flower for a flower!" Rosevelt roars, trying to get to Sunny and no doubt strangle him.

"A flower for a flower? Was it not your nephew who went and took dear Maurice from our fields? By your logic, vengeance has already been served."

"You mean that stupid marigold, you truly believe that Rory's life weighs the same as that weed?"

"Rosevelt, I have been patient with you all this time, but if you dare touch my son you will find yourself at war," Apolla warned sternly, glaring at the rose as if daring him or his people to try anything.

"There must be some punishment, I will not allow my nephew's killer to get away with no punishment."

“If I may, my lord and lady, I may have a possible solution.” Ferdinand spoke from the doorway, his voice echoing through the room and silencing the arguments. He hobbled forward until he was directly in front of both Rosevelt and Apolla. “Let Sunny come and live with me, he will not be able to return to the major fields but can still be visited by those he loves.”

Feeling as though the last of Ferdinand's speech was meant for him, understanding washed over Sunny's face at the fern's words. Briar could still visit him, all hope was not lost.

“Yes, I am remorseful for my actions today, and though I may not be able to return Rory back to your soil, I hope my exile gives you a measure of peace in your mourning.” Sunny said slowly and respectfully, knowing it was crucial in order for his exile to be negotiated smoothly.

“Bah! This is still unacceptable, but I suppose it is the only alternative,” Rosevelt replied gruffly, reaching out to shake Apolla's outstretched leaf. “I will

give him until sundown to leave, but if I catch him anywhere after that, there will be no forgiveness.” And with that he turned abruptly and headed outside, followed by a pair of *Lisianthus* carefully carrying Rory’s lifeless body.

Ferdinand watched them leave before turning to Sunny, “You must say your goodbyes to your mother here, then go to the toolshed. I will be along in a few days, but first I must stay and help the fields grieve their losses.”

“I’m sorry mother, I should not have gone after...,” Sunny began before he was cut off by the force of his mother hugging him tight. They stayed like that for a while afterwards, no words could express the heartache and the fear Apolla was feeling for her only son going so far away from her fields. She could only thank the sun above that he was still alive and had only been forced into exile.

Briar watched this exchange from the table above, knowing that she could not run to Sunny when his mother was still there. Still, when he was leaving she nearly called out for him. Sunny, before

exiting, glanced up at her and they locked eyes - his trying to convey his sadness and pleas for her to still love him, while hers screamed out that he was forgiven. But that was only for a moment before Sunny was pulled away from Apolla.

IX

Briar continued her misery long after everyone had left her. All alone in the greenhouse she cried until the pot she had inhabited was filled with her tears and she had to find another. In her sadness she hadn't noticed her father, Roosevelt, walking in and calling her name, until he was right upon her.

"Come now daughter, dry your tears, your cousin Rory has been laid to rest. It will do you well to hear the good news I have to deliver," Roosevelt said, uncomfortable with her tears.

"What good news could there be. With my cousin dead and that villain Sunny sent too far away to reach?" Briar sobbed.

"Well, it is a happy day. I have heard news that the gardener has plans to pick some of her plants to showcase around the country! To California, Florida, Philadelphia and all over, perhaps even one day you will cross to London and Paris! And of course you

will be chosen, it will be good for you to escape these treacherous conditions.”

“No, I can not leave or allow my own happiness when Rory is no longer here,” Briar wept, growing concerned at what her father was saying.

“You must go, with your cousins death at the hands of that sunflower, your safety is all that I care about. I must send you away and that is final.” Roosevelt decreed before leaving Briar just as she was before.

Her tears continued, but this time in panic at her situation, at least before she had a chance to be with Sunny, and now all hope was lost.

“What am I to do? I may never see these fields or my dear Sunny ever again,” Briar wept, her petals tilting sadly to the floor.

“My child, wipe your tears, we will figure something out, you will see your love once more,” Ferdinand comforted, offering a reassuring pat on one of her leaves. Internally, he saw her options as bleak, but he wouldn’t rest until he found a solution for the poor couple. Sunny he

saw as his own, and whenever he visited the fields, Briar wouldn't hesitate to ask him to visit her plot. No, he would not let them be torn apart. In his brainstorming, he glanced briefly at Briar's sad state, before lightning struck and an idea formed.

"I've got it! Cry and wilt to your hearts content, pretend you are growing ill and weak from your cousin's early passing. Refuse soil, water, or sunlight until the gardener will have no choice but to give up and throw you in the compost bin."

"*Fake my death!?* But good sir, how will I get to Sunny afterwards? I will be too weak to make such a journey without getting caught." Briar was astonished but newfound hope coursed through her.

"Ah, let me see.... After I visit the rest of the fields, I will return to the old toolshed and retrieve Sunny. In the dead of the night we will sneak back and revive you. You are welcome to live together with me for as long as you like!"

“Oh good fern, thank you. You have shown me that all is not lost! I shall see you when you return,” Briar cried, jumping up and tightly hugging him.

“Yes, yes, in the meantime wilt, wilt, wilt!”

Once he left, Briar did just that, allowing her fear that she would never see Sunny again to take over. To others, her sadness looked to stem from her love of her cousin, Rory, but she could care less in comparison to her panic of going on a traveling plant exhibit show. She refused any help or comfort, though her father tried in earnest to care for her. Instead, she sat still on her shelf in the greenhouse, gazing out of the window pane in the direction of where she knew Sunny to be.

Her leaves turned brown and cracked, falling in flakes to the ground. Her petals, once a beautiful shade of pink and red, well kept and hydrated, were now limp and discolored. Her roots grew black and dry, not taking in any of the water the gardener or Rosevelt tried

misting her with in a desperate attempt to keep her alive.

After a few days of fertilizer and trying different sun exposure, the gardener decided to give up and finally Briar was taken out of her pot. Roosevelt watched, accompanied by Ferdinand, as his seemingly dead daughter, once so full of life and grace, was placed carefully into the compost bin. A group of mourners witnessed the event, watching the once famed beauty be laid to rest. Cries at a death that happened so suddenly to one who had such a bright and prosperous future ahead.

The Daisy, upon hearing of Briar's death, went immediately to give the news to Sunny, knowing of their hidden relationship. A light shower made the dirt wet and slick, making it more difficult for the plant to navigate the terrain, but that made the little daisy even more determined to deliver his news.

He arrived at the toolshed out of breath and rapped on the door in quick succession. Sunny answered after the fourth knock, perplexed at who was

calling at such an hour. He had not received many visitors since his exile, except for his mother and some family friends.

“Oh, it’s you. I was wondering when you would visit even if it is this late. Say, are you alright?” Sunny asked cheerfully, although he was concerned for his friend's condition. It was a welcome distraction from his growing boredom and loneliness. He felt as if he was slowly going mad in his time apart from Briar.

“Sunny! Oh, I hate to deliver such news to you, especially with all you have been through these past couple of days. But seeing as I was one of the few to know of your true feelings, it seems indecent for you to learn some other way.”

“Well, there is no point in beating around the bush, if you do mind me saying, spit it out!” Sunny said a little impatiently with a forced laugh.

“Briar Rose is dead.”

“How?” Sunny choked out.

“Her cousin’s death left her in a worse state than we believed, she wilted and died, there could be nothing done to help her.”

Sunny spiraled, his thoughts turning darker and darker. It was his fault that his sweet Briar Rose was dead. He was the one that killed Rory and led her to her death. No matter that it was an accident, his rash decision to seek him out had turned into a fatal one.

Sunny began searching through the old tools and bottles of sprays until he found what he was looking for, tucked away in a far dark corner of the room - weedkiller, and a powerful one too! It could probably kill him in minutes.

Carefully he tugged off one of his old leaves, wincing at the pain. He slowly spilled a little of the weedkiller onto the leaf, just a couple of drops, wrapping it up slowly, he grasped it in his hand and started his journey to the greenhouse.

X

After spending time in the rose fields helping them mourn Briar, Ferdinand started his journey back to the toolshed to get Sunny. Together they would return to retrieve Briar from the compost bin and then he would ensure their safety. He had hoped that the pair coming together would heal the divide and prejudice in the fields, but with Rory's death and Sunny's exile, that future was no longer a possibility.

Pushing open the door on its rusty hinges, he crossed into the tiny room, pausing when he heard the little daisy give a slight shriek and topple to the ground.

"I'm sorry sir, you scared me! I was just catching my breath," the daisy said quickly, giving a small bow.

"Not that you are unwelcome, but why are you here and have you seen Sunny? I must speak to him immediately," Ferdinand said, glancing

around the room as if waiting for Sunny to pop out right in front of him.

“Sunny just left, sir, you must have passed him in the dark.”

“Left, where has he gone?” Ferdinand asked, starting to dread the answer.

“Oh, probably to the greenhouse. I came to tell him of Briar’s death and he ran off right away, even grabbed some of that old weedkiller too.”

“And he doesn’t know... oh goodness, I must stop him!” as fast as he had entered, the old fern left the tiny toolshed, the daisy watching him in confusion.

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The greenhouse was dark as Sunny came up behind it and the only sound that could be heard was the pitter patter of rain on the glass roof. He walked the stone cold pathway, slowing down when he saw the compost bin a

short distance away. This was to be his final resting place, right alongside his love. He felt that with every step he took, it spoke of the love story that bloomed between him and Briar. A love that was never meant to be and cut short before it could truly grow.

He stopped right before the bin, taking a shaky breath. His hands steady as they unwrapped the leaves filled with weedkiller. The liquid sloshed slightly as he stared into it. If he did this there would be no going back. Quickly he raised it above his head and dumped it, the weedkiller sliding down his petals and mixing with his tears.

He staggered into the compost pile, the poison already taking effect. His eyes searched for her over the piles of the dead, until finally, finally in the middle, he found her resting body. He moved quickly, his roots catching and tripping him in his haste to get to her. He collapsed once he was next to her, making sure his face would be gazing at her when the weedkiller finally ended his suffering.

She was in an awful state, her delicate petals were shriveled remnants of what they once were. Her leaves were cut and browning. Her face was gaunt, her lips cracked. She was only a shell of the beauty she had been, and inside he knew that his actions had led to this. She had died of grief because of her cousin. She had died from watching the one she had loved push Rory to his death.

He continued to stare at her, memorizing every change in her form as punishment for what he had done. After a few minutes his eyes grew heavy and closed. This wasn't such a bad way to die, he mused. Next to his love. He only hoped that she had known how sorry he was before her death.

To Sunny's horror he heard a breath from beside him and his eyes snapped open.

"Sunny?" Briar whispered weakly.

"No! I must be hallucinating! You are supposed to be dead! " Sunny wept as he moved to lean over her.

"Aren't you here with Ferdinand? Didn't he tell you the plan? You are here

to take me back to the old shed and then we can run away together,” Briar said, smiling up at him as she tried to sit up. She had been weak before but seeing her love right before her gave her a spark of energy. Reaching up to wipe his tears she grew surprised when he pulled away from her.

“My darling, I thought you were dead. I took weedkiller.”

“No. But Ferdinand... he was supposed to find you... No! You can’t leave me!” Briar choked back a sob as she watched Sunny’s petals grow discolored.

“I’m sorry I led you to this. I’m sorry I killed Rory and left you in such a state!” Sunny whispered shamefully.

“You think I was angry over Rory’s death when you had only acted in self defense!? I was worried about you, about what would happen when you were found! My father wouldn’t have rested until he found and killed you even in exile. That is why we were going to leave and find our own field or garden!”

Briar wailed, angrily wiping tears from her face.

“Another garden?” Sunny said smiling, as he imagined it. The two of them together, far away from their families’ feud, where they could start again with new friends and new lives.

“Yes! We would spend every day together out in the open, we wouldn’t have to hide.”

“That sounds nice!” Sunny breathed out, his body tensing before going limp and falling over.

“No, no, no! Sunny! Can you hear me? You have to stay with me! Please! Please!” Briar said sobbing, scooping up his body into her lap and cradling it. The poison had dried on his body and wouldn’t do much to hurt her now.

“It’s not fair! Why must we pay for our parent’s pointless anger? You were-” She cried, her voice catching. “You are the best thing that happened to me.”

She kissed him before laying his body down gently and hobbling out of the compost bin. Her eyes caught on the

metallic silver of a pair of rusty old shears left out in the rain and she reached out for them. Positioning them around one of her flower heads she cut it off. One by one she cut off all her flowers, almost mechanically, until she finally snapped running the cutters over her whole body over and over again.

She kept going until a hand reached out and stopped her, pulling the weapon away from her and tossing it aside. She stayed quiet, numb, as Ferdinand hugged her. His eyes shining with pity.

“I know, I know... but you mustn’t do this, he would have wanted you to live. To keep growing. Can you do that for him?”

She stayed silent.

“It will be okay. Next year when you come back from the winter, your body will be repaired. It will be hard but after a couple of years you will be good as new,” the fern said hesitantly, not sure what to do now. “I must get your father and Apolla. They must know what

happened, they must hear the truth, the whole truth. From you!”

He left slowly carrying the cutters with him, but once he was gone Briar swung into action. There was no way she was going back to her fathers fields and there was no way she was living without her Sunny. When Ferdinand had been speaking, she had spotted the leaves filled with weedkiller that Sunny had left. She walked over to it, hoping that there would be some left. She opened it slowly, there would be just enough to dip the roots and cut stems into it.

She carried it as she climbed up the pile to where she had left Sunny, trekking the same path he had when he had come to find her.

She patted his cheek before whispering, “I’ll be with you soon, my love.”

She cupped the liquid in her leaves spreading it gently on her roots and the excess on wherever else she could reach. Now all there was to do was wait. She was exhausted from everything. From the fighting, her fathers

expectations, Rory's rules, faking her death, Sunny dying right before her, the stinging of her flowers getting cut off, the unhelpful reassurances of Ferdinand. It was time to rest. Giving Sunny one final kiss, she fell, their bodies side by side.

XI

Ferdinand raced back, closely followed by Rosevelt and Apolla, who had no knowledge of why they were there besides that there was something that they had to see. He stopped short at the compost pile, horrified by what he saw.

“We’re too late!”

“Oh my poor little boy!” Apolla shrieked seeing Sunny’s body. She tried to run up to him, but Ferdinand held her back.

“He mutilated my daughter's remains!” Rosevelt yelled angrily, his family had gone through so much hardship and now for this to happen, it was unthinkable.

“She did that of her own free will, my lord.” Ferdinand said quietly, once more gaining the pair's attention.

“Your suggesting that my dead daughter who we just laid to rest, got up and cut herself to bits? Is this some kind of joke to you?” Rosevelt said annoyed and outraged that someone he viewed as

a friend would say something so preposterous about his daughter's death.

"Not at all. I'm saying that your daughter was never dead before this," the fern having understood that it was a difficult and tragic thing to fathom, but they needed to know the truth.

"And what did my son have to do with this?" Apolla asked, heartbroken as she continued to stare at her only son's lifeless form.

"They were in love. Ever since the competition that had formed a bond that broke through your petty difference and distrust. When Sunny accidentally killed your nephew, and once you wanted to send Briar away, I devised a plan to keep the couple together. Briar would fake her death and Sunny and I would come and retrieve her. Then they would run off together." He glanced at the embraced pair. "That is obviously not what happened. It seems that I did not take into account that someone would speak of Briar's death before I was able to reconvene with Sunny. I would never

have thought they would take such drastic measures to stay together.”

“In love? But Sunny knows better than to-”

Ferdinand silenced her with a glance.

“You both are the reasons for the loss of your children. I had hoped their love would be what allowed you to put aside your differences, but it will be their death.”

Suddenly they could hear footsteps coming up the path to the greenhouse. Alarmed they quickly found open pots on the ground and settled, watching what unfolded inside.

In came the gardener, holding a pot in one of her hands and dragging one of her workers excitedly behind her with the other. She placed the pot on one of her workbenches in view of the group of plants that had just become frozen.

“Look! I didn’t know if it was going to work, but it actually did!” She said, one hand on her forehead and the other pointing to the pot in exhilaration.

“Yes, and what exactly am I looking at?” Her friend asked, amused by her boss's unusual but frequent antics.

“What you're looking at is revolutionary! You see after the amount of compliments from the competition, it got me thinking. What if I could combine my two best flowers to create something new? It was mostly an experiment and I didn't think it would work but I grafted a stem from that sunflower and rose bush I had. And well just look there's already a bud on it! I was planning on leaving it in here tonight and checking if it opens in the morning. But can you imagine, this could totally change the game!” She said all this really fast, obviously expecting a big reaction.”

Her friend crossed her arms unimpressed, “I think you need to take a break from the coffee. Don't get your hopes up, it could turn out to be just a normal rose or sunflower. Will check later, ok. For now I think you need to sit down for a bit,” she said, shaking her head and leading the rambling gardener out of the greenhouse.

The plants came back to life once more. They shared one look before hesitantly entering the greenhouse, all curiously looking at the pot on the table, where the little shoot began to shimmy and move around. The cries of new life filling the room, Apolla and Rosevelt went closer, enraptured by the sound. Ferdinand kept his distance, knowing this was something they would have to see on their own.

The two watched as the little shoot's bud opened, the face of a newborn laughing up at them. It was the perfect mix of sunflower and rose, its face covered with small sunflower seeds, but having a red tint and little petals in the center. Its outer petals were a buttery yellow jutting out at the bottom and turning into a pink rosy color coming together at the top.

They couldn't believe what they were seeing and they glanced at each other, seeming to come to an agreement. Maybe sunflowers and roses weren't so different after all, maybe coming

together is what would make all plants stronger.

Leaning down they whispered softly to the child, promising to never let what now seemed like frivolous arguments destroy the growth of such a powerful display of love and beauty.