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Beyond the Briar

A pathway of creeping thyme, vivid and lush against the barren forest floor, guided me through the woods that were once as familiar to me as my own name, and straight to a seemingly endless hedge that to my knowledge had not existed before today. A dark wooden door was set into the hedge and adorned by shiny hinges and an ornate knob. For all I knew, I was the only person to venture into this part of my grandfather's land in a decade, yet the door was pristine, no weathering in the wood, no rust on the metal. The wood was warm to the touch, even while bitter autumn winds tore through the trees around me. I grasped the handle and gave a hesitant turn, expecting resistance yet finding none. The door creaked as it swung open, and I was greeted first by bright sunlight that shouldn't exist on an overcast October day. The forest around me had been oddly quiet, a silence that felt even more eerie as sounds of all kinds spilled through the cracked door. Sounds of trickling water, singing birds, and a distant noise I couldn't quite identify. It sounded like a tinkling and a murmuring, and my curiosity blossomed in my chest until I found myself already standing on the other side of the strange door.

What awaited me was beyond my imagination. It was a garden, but the vivid flowers and trees surrounding me were unlike anything I'd seen before. Growing up on this land with a horticulturist grandfather, I knew plants, but not these ones. There were blooms in shades of blue and purple that I'd never seen before, some even seeming to glow from within. One bush, a briar

full of wild roses, drew my eye. These weren't regular roses; they were each easily the size of my face and a stunning shade of mauve, surrounded by deep blue leaves. I didn't know what to think. Had I just stumbled onto an alien planet or something?

Two little voices began arguing in my head. One told me I should turn back and forget what I saw; I felt like an intruder in this strange place. The other voice urged me to venture further into this magical garden; lulled by the wondrous beauty around me. My feet began moving on their own, but I did nothing to stop them. Down paths of sparkling blossoms and beneath trees with bright pink leaves that fell upon my shoulders, I eventually wandered upon an ornate fountain in the middle of a hedge maze. This fountain was clearly the source of the water sounds I'd heard, as clear water spilled from the hands of two figures entwined in an intimate embrace, water pouring over them and down to the basin below.

Just beyond the fountain was a set of wide steps, curving their way around and out of sight beyond the hedges. It was just past this turn that the strange sounds I hadn't identified earlier suddenly became louder. They were the sounds of a party. The steps led to a courtyard, glimmering flagstones spanning the entire length of a massive manor. I felt in that moment like I'd stepped into a fairytale. Tall, ethereal, human-like beings, though clearly not actually human, twirled across the ground. They wore a colorful array of beautiful clothes; flowing ball gowns and crisp waistcoats. It occurred to me then that I was an outsider to this beautiful ball, all while my heart ached in my chest for me to join them, to dance the night away and revel in all that beauty. I was ready to turn and flee, when one of the dancers spotted me and shrieked. It wasn't a sound of fear or anger, but one of pleasant surprise.

In a flash, I was surrounded. A crown of flowers was placed on my head. They touched me with reverence, familiarity, as I was twirled around from dance partner to dance partner.

Their faces became a blur of pointed ears, sharp teeth, eyes the color absinthe or lavender or carnelian. I was getting dizzy, a heady feeling that made me feel breathless and weightless, until the whirlwind of jubilant faces suddenly halted as I was thrust into a final pair of arms. I looked up into eyes the color of autumn leaves, warm and bright in a face too handsome to be human.

“May I have your name?” the beautiful man asked. I found myself unable to look away from his enchanting eyes.

“Briar,” I answered on a breathy whisper.

He smiled wider, sharp canines sending a brief flutter of unease through my body. “A good name for a prince.” We stopped dancing, right in the middle of the courtyard, revelers still twirling in time to the ethereal music that seemed to fill the air with no clear source. The man dropped to a knee before me, and the dancers all came to a halt to bend a knee as well. “We have been waiting for you, Prince Briar,” he told me. “Each year we hold this ball on the day you were stolen from us, in the hope that you will come home.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but what could I have possibly said? This was all quickly feeling like a fever dream. My childhood wishes of running away to a magical world, coming to life before my eyes. But this was no Narnia, no Wonderland. This place, these people, were so much more beautiful, and yet a feeling of fear gripped the back of my mind, telling me this felt too perfect, too magical, to not be at least a little sinister.

“I am Prince Linden, your betrothed. I have cared for this land since your parents died. They always held hope that you would return to us, and we would wed, and rule this land together.”

With each word, my fear grew; the whimsical sense of wonderment slipping away. Nothing he was saying made sense, and the wary voice in my head was getting louder, urging me to flee. Prince Linden looked up at me with such earnestness, but my unease only got stronger until flight won over fight, and I pulled my hand from his and fled. Voices cried out behind me, pleading with me to stay. The beautiful prince's voice rang out above all the others.

Back through the magical garden and labyrinth, out the door that started it all, and back into the Colorado woods. A part of me yearned to run right back to that manor and straight into Linden's arms. I felt like I'd just found somewhere I'd been searching for all my life. But another part of me was still scared, still convinced that all that beauty was hiding something menacing.

My skin was itchy as I approached the front porch of our house, where Poppa was already sitting, waiting for me to watch the sunset with him. We did this every evening, sitting in companionable silence until the sun had set beyond the mountains. Not once in all my memories had I ever interrupted that silence too soon. Tonight, however, I couldn't wait.

"I found a door in the woods today." The story came rushing out, frantic words dancing in the cold air before our faces. Poppa's expression remained calm, but I knew him well enough to see the fear and worry in his pale blue eyes. When I'd finished, Poppa sighed, and it seemed as though his body sagged under some invisible weight.

"I thought this day would have come much sooner," he said wearily, then he gave me that smile that always made me feel safe and comforted as a child. "You're too curious for your own good, Briar."

"Is it true?" I asked, my voice choked with emotion. "Did you steal me?"

He shook his head, long-faded blonde hair whispering across his forehead. “No. I did not. I saved you. I found you, alone and scared under a briar patch, and no one was around to protect you. So, I took you home. I couldn’t leave you in that place, it was too awful.”

I could feel the sincerity and love in his words so strongly it was like a blanket against the October chill. But his words didn’t entirely make sense. “What do you mean ‘horrifying place’? It was beautiful.”

Poppa looked confused; his brows furrowed. “There was nothing beautiful about what I saw that day. Everything was dead and dark. There were *people*, but they were all wrong. Truly, I thought one of them would eat you if I hadn’t saved you.”

I said nothing, simply stood there trying to reconcile what Poppa was saying against what I had seen. Maybe the land had been dead but since thrived. But if all he’d seen were monsters, how did I come to be there?

“Briar,” Poppa’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. “Please, promise me you won’t go back through that door. It’s too dangerous.”

I knew what I’d seen, what I’d felt. Sure, there had been an underlying sense of something being off about it all, but that didn’t mean it was dangerous. Then there was Linden, the handsome prince whose eyes had been open and easy to read. He unnerved me, but something inside was telling me I could trust him.

That night, after Poppa went upstairs to bed, I found myself outside the door again, with no clear memory of walking through the woods to get there. My hand was already on the knob, and I gave it a turn even more hesitant than the first time. I knew now, beyond a doubt, that this door led to a faerie world, and from what little I knew about faeries, I couldn’t blindly trust what

I saw. But if I belonged there, if I came from there, if there were people waiting for my return, then it was safe for me, right? Or was everything I saw an illusion? Was I about to walk into the world Poppa described, even if I couldn't see it? I knew this was a gamble. The rational voice in my head screamed at me to turn around. But the voice of curiosity was louder, drowning out everything but my need for answers. Decided, I pushed against the wooden door, closed my eyes as the warm sunlight spread across my skin, and stepped through the open door.

The End