

Buds

A short story to accompany
the novel *Roses*

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Onaii had been told to ignore the silver girl, but she could not help but stare. She had never seen anything like it. Hair as white as bone, eyes violet like the bruised underbelly of a storm and skin that shone like pewter in the fading light. The girl did not wear Hilland clothes but a homemade, uneven dress and her head was unadorned. She sat apart from everyone else and appeared not to care. The other villagers treated her with equal indifference, laughing and cheering for the celebration, but never looking her way.

Onaii knew that the silver girl was called Beauty. She had been told so by her new mother-in-law after the wedding ceremony that morning in the temple on the hill. Duna had said, “new child of mine I am happy to welcome yur to our village. Come now and see yur cottage. I made it so fine!”

Then Onaii had caught a glimpse of silver at the back of the temple through the milling crowds of villagers and the departing huddle of her family and she had gasped.

Duna had followed the direction of her daughter-in-law's gaze and her eyes had narrowed. "That be Beauty," she had said through clenched teeth. "Keep away from her."

"So the rumours are true?"

But Duna had not been listening and Onaii's question went unanswered; lost in the bustle of the wedding celebration. Before she knew it, Onaii was being led around the village and introduced to her new home. She was wife to the Head Man's youngest son and many had come out to wave and cheer at her wedding procession. "I invite yur to dance with me tonight and eat around my table," she had said to their smiling faces, as her mama had taught her. "Please come and drink to our health."

The rest of the afternoon had been filled with meeting her new family and unpacking her things. Onaii had all but forgotten the silver girl until she was sorting through gifts from the villagers with her father-in-law, Hally, and she had come across an unusual present.

"What's this?" she had asked, holding up a small pot with a scrubby plant in it.

"It be a budding flower," Hally had replied, after inspecting it. "A plant I never seen before. The gift be from my cousin and his daughter, Beauty."

Hally must have seen the expression that passed across Onaii's face because he had quickly added, "she meant no disrespect by it, child. Beauty... ain't like other Hill girls, but she's friends with my son and she gave this sincerely."

Onaii had nodded and carefully put the pot down again.

"Why do yur call her Beauty?" she had asked.

Hally had looked as though he had never asked himself that question.

"Because that's her name," he had replied simply.

Now Onaii found herself sitting at a long trestle table with her husband, Dezgyn, beside her and at the opposite end furthest from everyone, the silver girl called Beauty.

Outside the undulating green of the Hillands was fading to darkness and already the valley in which the village was cupped had waned to lilac twilight. The doors of the barn were thrown open since the day had been unusually sunny, and through them Onaii could see thatched cottages and animals roaming freely across the grassy banks.

With the oncoming of evening, Onaii suddenly felt homesick. Her own village was not so dissimilar to this, but she felt that it was a world away. She had grown up a day's travelling from here, closer to the border of the Forest Villages, and her own cottage that she shared with her family could have been any of the identical thatched houses before her, but she felt that it was markedly different. In her village the women wore shorter anths and a tasselled shawl across their shoulders. The population was much larger and a waterfall stood nearby so that wherever you were you could always hear its humming crash. She longed to hear such a rumble now and feel the cool kiss of foamy spray on her cheeks. Instead she looked out of the barn doors and saw the dark forest. She quickly looked away.

"A toast to my son and his wife!" cried Hally, pushing back his chair.

Onaii turned to her father-in-law seated beside her and a hush fell about the villagers as they waited to hear what their Head Man would say.

"I thank yur all for being here and welcoming our new daughter, Onaii," said Hally, inclining his mug of cider in her direction.

All eyes turned to Onaii and she blushed.

"I hope my son makes yur happy. Thanks be to the gods."

"Thanks be to the gods," the rest of the village chorused.

Onaii looked down the table at Beauty. The silver girl raised her hand like everyone else and pressed her thumb and index finger together in the sign of the gods. Then she turned away again and looked out of the doors.

She can't be much younger than me, thought Onaii, staring at her once more. She did not understand how all of the other villagers were not fascinated with the creature in their midst. She did not understand how they all went about as normal when the silver girl sat before them staring into the forbidden forest.

Onaii's older sister had told her stories of the silver being that lived in Imwane. The women from her village often whispered about it and scared each other with rumours. They said that the silver girl was the reason Imwane had prospered of late after seasons and seasons of barely scrapping by. They said that it bewitched you with its eyes and rode a warhorse across the hills at night, searching for Magic. Upon hearing that she had been chosen to wed Dezgyn and move to Imwane, Onaii's older sister had told her that the silver girl came from the forbidden forest and communed with the monsters that lived in its depths. But Onaii had only ever thought these silly, spooky tales intended to frighten children. Hillanders did not travel and so she had never met anyone who had actually seen the silver girl. Now she saw her with her own eyes.

Onaii raised a trembling hand that fluttered about her head, fiddling with her anth. The starched pleats of lace were as stiff as they had been this morning when she put the headdress on for the first time, but she could not help but feel that it was slipping. It was taller and heavier than she was used to. The anth that she had worn all her girlhood had sat flat on her head and she could not get used to the new weight that pinched her temple. "Soon it'll not feel so strange, child," her mama had said that morning. The thought of her mama brought a lump to Onaii's throat. She had said a brief goodbye to her family at the temple earlier and her papa had looked proud that she

had not made a fuss, but now she wished that she had. She would not see them all until after the long winter and since she had never spent a single night away from her family all her life, she knew that her days ahead would be difficult.

She glanced at Dezgyn, but he was looking the other way and chattering with Hally. When he turned back it was not to speak to her but to announce to the room, “it is time for the dancing!”

A cheer vibrated off the rafters of the barn and the women began clearing away the tables while the men congregated outside, collecting the instruments together. Since it was her wedding celebration Onaii was not required to help, but she noticed that Beauty did not join the Hill women either. She watched as the silver girl slid out of the barn unheeded and disappeared into the twilight. She shivered.

“It’ll be us starting,” said Dezgyn, appearing beside her. “And I’ve not forgot what yur told me,” he added, seeing her bit her lip.

“About my dancing?” she asked, taking his offered hand.

“I’m sure it ain’t bad.”

“Then yur in for a shock.”

He laughed and gently squeezed her fingers.

“All right, we’ll just humour them with the first one and then yur can escape.”

He led her out of the barn and onto a grassy bank where the men and children were waiting.

“I’m glad yur remember I told yur that,” she said quietly.

“Course I remember. We met just three times before today and I remembers every word yur said perfectly.”

Onaii grinned but before she could reply, the pipes began to play and the villagers started clapping in time to the beat. Praying to the gods that she would not embarrass herself, Onaii stood beside Dezgyn and linked her little finger with his. Mercifully it was a simple country step and Onaii wondered if Dezgyn had requested it especially for her. She hoped so.

The two stepped, shuffled and turned in time to the beat which gradually grew faster and faster. All of the villagers stood in a circle around them clapping and shouting and singing in harmony. Onaii tapped her heels and bent her knees in the same manner that she had always watched her mama and sisters dance at harvest time or at celebrations. She found her feet cooperating and she was almost enjoying herself until, as she twirled across Dezgyn, Oanii caught sight of a silver figure in the crowd. Her ankle gave way under her and she lost her footing. The villagers shouted in alarm as she fell and Dezgyn tried to catch her, but missed her arm by an inch.

“Are yur all right?” he asked as she hastily dragged herself upright again.

“Yes,” she said, but winced as her ankle throbbed. “I told yur I was bad at dancing,” she added.

Dezgyn smiled and led her to his mother who clucked and fussed over her until her cheeks were very red.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. “Please go back to dancing. I’d like to watch.”

Dezgyn nodded to the band and the pipes began again as droves of villagers young and old gravitated towards the middle of the circle to form row after winding row. Oanii limped back into the shadows, keen to hide her humiliation and luckily, Duna also rushed into the middle of the circle to take part, so she could stand alone.

It was not until they were halfway through the third dance that Onaii realised the silver girl was standing right behind her. She turned with a jump to see Beauty staring off in the direction of the forest.

“The sight of yur tripped me!” she blurted.

The silver girl turned her head in Onaii’s direction as if just realising that she was there and then a deep frown creased her brow. All at once she did not look so ethereal, but like Oanii’s younger sister when their brother tried to steal all the puddings.

“If you cannot dance then you should stand and watch,” she said.

Her accent was hard and straight with none of the lilting vowels of the Hilllanders. Onaii had never heard anything like it.

“Yur voice is strange,” was all she could think to say.

The frown deepened.

“No, *your* voice is strange.”

“Where do yur come from?”

A pair of amethyst eyes swept across Onaii’s face, needling her with their intensity.

“I was born in Sago,” Beauty replied at last with a sigh. “That is why I sound different to you.”

“The capital?”

Onaii could not even fathom the distance between the Hillands and the Forest Villages let alone the capital, which was on the other side of the country.

There was a soft thudding sound and out of the shadows loomed a huge creature. Onaii gasped and stepped back onto her twisted ankle, barely registering the pain that shot up her leg.

“The warhorse!” she hissed.

Beauty shook her head and rubbed the bay stallion behind his ears.

“He is just an overgrown lapdog. He is not a warhorse.”

Onaii stared at the tallest beast she had ever seen. Instinctively her thumb and index finger pressed together and she glanced at the rest of the villagers who were still dancing and clapping in a circle, oblivious to all else.

“Oh, congratulations on your marriage,” said Beauty, as if suddenly remembering her manners. “I hope you like the buds I sent. They are pretty blue flowers and I found them far from here.”

Onaii watched open-mouthed as the silver girl clambered onto the warhorse’s back, using the stump of a tree to help her. She sat

astride like a man with no reins and no saddle, her skin almost luminous in the darkness.

“Are yur going to the forbidden forest?” squeaked Oanii, her hands flying to her mouth.

Beauty slowly turned her head and looked at the tangled mass of dense blackness that plagued her night and day. It bled down one side of the valley, its fringes reaching as close as twenty metres to the nearest cottage, and then soared upwards, covering the next mountain in a blanket of dark green. Nobody knew how far it stretched. Nobody knew why it was forbidden to enter it. In Imwane it was never spoken of despite its proximity. The villagers lived and died averting their eyes from its wild darkness. It was an unspoken law that you did not mention the forest and both girls were surprised that Oanii had brought it up.

“What do you know of it?” asked Beauty.

Her warhorse snorted and tossed his head.

“I...” began Onaai, her throat suddenly dry. “Are yur going to the forest?” she repeated instead.

Beauty pulled her eyes away from it with obvious difficulty.

“Not yet,” she whispered to herself.

Oanii gasped.

“Oanii! Oanii come over here, child!” yelled Duna.

Oanii looked over her shoulder to see her mother-in-law approaching at a trot, her face set into a frown. There was the dull thud of hooves and Beauty disappeared into the night; a silver shadow visible only by the reflected light of the pale moon.

“She went off,” whispered Oanii, staring at the empty patch of dark grass where Beauty and her horse had stood.

“It were that thing,” muttered Duna, shaking her head. “I might’ve known. I told yur not to take notice of it, child. Come back to the celebration now and yur’ll soon forget.”

“But the forest—”

Duna froze and there was a long, tense pause.

“The preacher accepts that thing and so does my husband,” Duna said at last, the yellow light from the torches throwing flickering shadows across her face. “But I know there’s something evil in that silver being.”

Oanii thought of Beauty’s indigent frown that had so reminded her of her younger sister.

“Child, yur shaking,” said Duna, grabbing her arm. “Come back over to the fire. Hill girls should be having fun at their wedding celebrations not hiding.”

Oanii limped after her mother-in-law, Duna’s fingers digging into her arm. She peered through the darkness at the tops of the hills, looking for a silver shadow, but she saw nothing.

“Where’s she gone?” she asked, though she knew that she should stay silent.

Duna sucked at her teeth.

“Child, I said not to think no more of her. She’s gone off to do whatever she does. She is a cursed creature, yur hear?”

Oanii thought of Beauty’s large violet eyes looking into the depths of the forest, fearful.

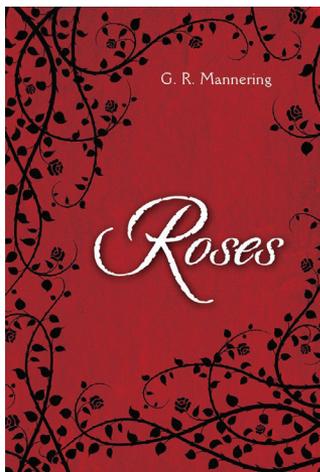
“Cursed!” Duna repeated. “Cursed, do yur hear?”

Oanii nodded.

“Yes,” she replied. “She’s cursed.”

But she did not believe it and for the rest of that night as the villagers danced and sung and celebrated, Onaii found herself searching the crests of the hills for a silver shadow and longing for its return. Perhaps she could see the good beneath Beauty’s freakish appearance or perhaps she had fallen under the silver girl’s spell.

LEARN MORE ABOUT BEAUTY IN
G. R. MANNERING'S FANTASY NOVEL, *ROSES*.



A dark retelling of the classic fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*.

“As the gates clicked shut behind them, she heard the distant roar of a beast.”

She bears no name. Her silvery appearance is freakish to the numerous inhabitants of Sago, the cosmopolitan capital of Pevorocco in a fantasy realm. With her mother vanishing at the instance of her birth, she is sent to live with the cruel, rich Ma Dane, where she is punished daily for something, though she knows not what. Tauntingly named Beauty, she flees Sago in a violent uprising that sets out to massacre all Magics and journeys to the furthest point of the country.

But Beauty cannot hide in the grassy Hillands forever. Before long, the State officials find her and threaten to take her back to war-torn Sago where death surely awaits. In a midnight blizzard she escapes them, running into a deep, enchanted forest to a great and terrible beast who will bargain for her life.

But can Beauty accept Beast? Eternity is a long time.

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**Available for pre-order online and check
out *Roses* on Goodreads**



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