

The Starting Point

A Sleeping Beauty Short Story by K. M. Shea

As Isaia walked Briar Rose home, he noticed that she was unusually quiet. It was quite odd, as they had just finished their lessons for the day—which often provided hours of fodder for Briar as she questioned everything and everyone. Today, however, she wore a pensive expression on her face and bit her lip.

Isaia adjusted the position of his sword so his belt did not dig into his hip, then surveyed their surroundings. The forest was peaceful and bright. A few rabbits nibbled on clover, and he thought he saw a fallow deer through the trees, but there was nothing that would endanger Briar.

His worries eased, he turned his attention to his friend. “Is something wrong?”

Briar jumped in surprise. “Sorry, what?”

“You’re too quiet.” He pulled back a branch for her so it wouldn’t hit her in the face. “Are you growing pensive in your old age?” He asked, cracking a rare joke. (Briar was fourteen and often complained that everyone still treated her like a child that needed to be coddled. What she did not know was that Sir Roberto and her guardians—Nonno and Nonna—treated her with such care because she was *the* Princess Rosalinda, not because they thought of her as a baby.)

Briar did not laugh at Isaia’s attempt of humor and instead clasped her hands behind her back. “Just thinking,” she said.

Isaia raised his eyebrows but said nothing. He hopped over a fallen log and turned to offer Briar his hand, but she had scrambled over it right behind him.

“Isaia...” She hesitated and did not look at his face, but stared at his chest.

He waited patiently for a few moments, but she didn’t finish her thought. “Yes?”

She inhaled deeply, swallowed, and then finally raised her dazzling purple eyes to meet his gaze. “I...um...have feelings for you.”

Out of all the things Isaia thought she might say, a confession was certainly *not* among them. He was so surprised, her words didn’t even sink in all the way. “I beg your pardon?”

Briar groaned and blushed a charming pink. “I think I love you!” She accented her words by stepping into him and throwing her arms around his torso, pulling him into a hug.

Very quickly, Isaia became aware of several things. First of all, King Giuseppe would yank him off Briar’s retinue if he learned of this development. Secondly, he hadn’t hugged Briar in two years or so, and it was a *profoundly* different experience now. And lastly, Isaia realized he had miserably failed the Magic Knight mantra to stay detached.

He blinked as his world expanded. He realized that his own feelings had been building towards this moment for a while. He had long prized Briar’s admiration and respect, the extra sparkle in her eyes that flared when she saw him. He took pride in her cleverness, appreciated what Nonna deemed her “shockingly inappropriate sense of humor,” and had long boasted of her playful spirit and sound logic to Sir Roberto. She was young, but he was patient—and he would be with her until death.

It was then that it struck him like a lightning bolt.

Isaia *loved* Briar.

Shocked beyond words, he stared down at Briar, who had tucked her head into his shoulder in her embarrassment.

Warmth flooded him, and Isaia wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around her. Thankfully, his sense of honor and chivalry kept him frozen.

She's fourteen, he reminded himself. *She doesn't know what she's saying—and she's a princess!*

His mouth was dry, but he had to speak—he had to get her off him *quickly*. Isaia put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her backwards.

When she looked up at him with tear-filled eyes, Isaia held in a wince. “I’m sorry,” he said. It was all he *could* say, lest his mouth begin dribbling the same nonsense his mind entertained.

She opened her mouth to say something more, but Isaia couldn’t risk it. He turned his back to her and hurried down the path.

She's young. She doesn't know the real meaning of love. But Isaia did—it was the heat that coursed through him and threatened to make him laugh with joy and sink to his knees in despair.

He paused, wondering if he should accept the hazard and look back at her. But he knew the expression of heartbreak in her eyes would be his undoing, so he forced himself to put one foot in front of the other and keep walking.

I will keep her safe—I will be her Magic Knight until the man who can free her from Carabosso's curse arrives. Because no matter how I feel, she is a naïve princess, and I am just a knight. I would never be allowed to have her...

Four years later, when Isaia stood with Briar on the balcony—newly introduced to the nobles and the citizens of Ciane as a legendary knight and Briar’s fiancé, Isaia realized that in his feelings and belief he had never allowed room for Briar’s cleverness.

Because if Isaia was loyal enough to stay in a sleeping castle for a year for her, Briar was clever enough to move an entire political system for him.

The End