Early to Bed [Draft 1]

by superfluouskeys

Summary

Briar Rose has never known anything but love and kindness. Now, with all the evil of the world placed upon her shoulders at once, she finds herself terrified, ill-equipped, and completely fascinated.

Notes

I'm currently reworking this piece pretty drastically, because, although there are a lot of things I like about it, there are equally as many things I feel could be much better. The first draft works pretty well in a lot of ways, though, and so I'm leaving it available for posterity, and hopefully for feedback!

Also apparently Phillip's name is spelled with two I's. So. Sorry in advance.

If you'd like to read what exists of the second draft, you can find it here:

http://www.fanfiction.net/s/6577499/1/Early-to-Bed

So far I'm much happier with it.
I cannot move.

It is perhaps the worst feeling in the world to be completely aware of one’s miserable circumstances and completely unable to do anything about them.

I want to run. Pace. Beat against the walls of my prison. But I cannot even see where I am. All I can see is the back of my eyelids. It is as if I were asleep.

I do not know how long I have been here. I have only a hazy recollection of how I came to be here. But I know that if I am here for very much longer, alone, unmoving, in the dark with time ticking ceaselessly by, I will go completely mad.

Perhaps I have already begun to lose my mind. Perhaps it is already irrevocably lost and this endless stillness is my eternal damnation. Never peacefully dead, never torturously alive, always somewhere in between: body asleep, mind awake and wildly beating against the bars of its unwitting captor.

I am almost positive that I came here because of a spinning wheel, and that in itself sounds like the musing of a madwoman. I recall following a most entrancing green light down many corridors to the spinning wheel, and I recall a voice, low, resonating, powerful, yet very gentle, sweet, convincing, murmuring into my ear that I must prick my finger upon the needle.

I remember another voice, small, weak, familiar (for it is my own and the other most certainly is not) suggesting that pricking one’s finger does not sound like a very good idea. But this strange voice is certain that it is perhaps the best idea ever fathomed, and I cannot resist its power for long.

It was not a stranger’s voice, after all, and I had had dreams like that many times before. If I didn’t know in my waking hours that a voice which encouraged me to hurt myself was most certainly not a friendly one, that voice would have become dear to me—as dear as the nameless, faceless, voiceless prince who kept me company in my more pleasant dreams.

After all, when one has only ever known three names, three faces, and three voices, all of which belong to one’s dear, but overbearing aunts, one becomes rather fascinated by anyone else one encounters, even if it is only in dreams.

I begin to wonder what the owner of that voice looks like, for she has been in and out since my aunts left me alone. Oh, it is undoubtedly the voice of a woman. She is older than I, but not as old as my aunts. She is not warm and kind, but neither is she cold nor cruel.

As I am wondering about the corporeal form of the voice which has haunted my dreams for as long as I can remember, she addresses me for the first time.

“Good evening, Princess,” she says. I am certain that my body would have convulsed itself off of the bed in fear and shock, had it been able. I cry out in my mind, and it is unsatisfying and disquieting, as though the scream has died on my lips for lack of air.

“No need to fear, dear child; your loved ones are all quite safe,” she chuckles. Her laughter incites another uncomfortable feeling: chills down my spine with no way of shivering to release the tension. “For the moment.”

For the moment? The voice in my mind shrieks. Who are you? Why did you take me from my aunts? Where are they? Where am I? Why am I—
“All in due time, Princess,” she cuts me off and I think a combination of Oh, I wish she wouldn’t call me Princess and Can she really hear my thoughts?

There is a short silence, then a chuckle which would be warm if it were not so chilling. “Of course, child. It is my spell, after all...or it was. What shall I call you, instead? Briar Rose, perhaps?” Her voice grows nearer. “Such a cliché name for you to borrow, but then, I would expect nothing subtler of the fairies you call your aunts. And I do love irony.”

I feel the unsatisfied urge to begin sobbing uncontrollably when I think of that most recent and awful series of revelations.

“There, there, Briar Rose,” the voice is very near now. It is agony, being unable to cry, unable to run away, unable to seek comfort in this menacing, yet strangely comforting presence, unable to even try. “I did not mean to upset you further. It is much to bear, I know.”

The women you thought were your family are not even human. The name you answer to every moment of every day is not yours, but merely borrowed. The life you have always known is some sort of sick game these women have been playing at. Then you find you cannot even keep playing it, but must become a princess, the fabled Princess Aurora. Then you find you cannot even do that, and may never be able to move or speak again. Much, indeed. It is too much.

Cold fingers touch my temple lightly and my thoughts are silenced, drowned out by the ache of being unable to react. The fingers run through my hair slowly: a comforting gesture, but I ache all the more for it. And then it is gone and I long for its return.

“Now,” the voice begins to move away from me again and I want to cry out—to reach for the gentle hand to which it belongs. “On to your earlier slew of questions. I am the wicked fairy Maleficent, Mistress of Evil. You are under my spell, but of course, you have been for just over sixteen years now.” The wicked fairy Maleficent. All sorts of wild images begin flooding through my mind: fairies like my so-called aunts, pixies, shadowy creatures, and mythical animals, and the only thing that draws me out of my unbidden musings is Maleficent’s low, chilling chuckle. “All quite incorrect, I assure you, my dear. I took you from your aunts because I would like for you to remain under my spell, tampered with though it has been.”

Of all the many questions that swarm my mind chaotically, one makes itself most clear. What do you want with me?

“Unfortunately,” Maleficent replies, “you were but a pawn in a much larger game of chess, Briar Rose. Were.” The smile in her voice is absolutely terrifying. “But it seems that over the past sixteen years, you have steadfastly plodded across the chessboard. And as of late, the game has become far more interesting.

“A beautiful fairy tale, complete with a twist of fate!” she explains, and her voice suddenly sounds very syrupy and sincere. “A peasant girl falls in love with a mysterious man. A prince falls in love with a peasant maid. It can never be, but wait! That peasant’s blood runs blue, and the royal Daughter of the Dawn has been betrothed to her handsome stranger since birth.”

My love-at-first-sight? The nameless man I thought I’d lost before I really had him at all?

“The very same.” My mind begins to spin with furious questions, but before any of them can present themselves, the voice ends their battle. “Fear not, Briar Rose. As I have told you, your loved ones are all alive and well. Your aunts are busying themselves putting the kingdom to sleep so that they will know nothing of your absence. Rather cruel to you, if you ask me, that your family should not even miss you in your most traumatic absence, but then, they never really have paid your feelings any
My mind begins to protest fervently, but she is quick to silence me, “I beg you, Rose, spare me. They kidnapped you when you were but a babe, that they might live out their odd maternal dreams, then as you grew, they allowed you no contact with anyone other than themselves, and!” she chuckles, “Did not even bother to warn you that a wicked fairy was after you! Scouring the kingdom and countryside for you, in fact, and believe me, Rose, it is very difficult to hide anything from me.” The voice grows nearer again. “And then after they’ve spent all this time and effort doing just that, they blow their cover on your sixteenth birthday!” she laughs now, and it is a cruel sort of cackle. I would have collapsed into myself if I had been able.

“I might add, Briar Rose,” she says, sobering, but still deeply amused, “that your sixteenth birthday was the date specified in the spell I mentioned earlier.”

Of all the questions my mind offers, of all the requests I could make, the only one I really need granted, the only one that makes me ache all over, is the need to react. Everything I’ve ever known has suddenly turned upside down, and keeps spinning and spinning and breaking into irreparable pieces, and I cannot even properly grieve the happiness I have lost.

“I’m afraid that would require some mixed magic, Briar Rose,” she says, and the coldness is gone from her voice. “And this spell has been muddled enough by your beloved aunt. As it stands, you can only awaken with true love’s kiss, of all the bothersome things.”

Muddled? I ask, trying to get my mind off of my damnation, I suppose.

“Yes, muddled; didn’t I mention that already?” she says dismissively. “What use would I have for a sleeping sixteen-year-old girl awaiting the kiss of some foolhardy prince?”

What did she—I mean, what was the spell originally?

“When I cast the spell, I meant for you to die.” A pause and then, conversationally, congenially, she adds, “No personal offense, I assure you, Rose.”

My mind is silent. I cannot think. All I want to do is swallow the lump in my throat, but I can hardly even breathe.

“But that is another story entirely,” she says softly. “What is important to you is that Merryweather, the Mistress of Misplaced Aggression, used what little power she possesses in these matters to weaken my curse. Unsurprisingly, our magic does not mix well, so here you are, unable to sleep and unable to wake. Why she didn’t give a less volatile stipulation than true love’s kiss is beyond me. I suspect that she is either a hopeless romantic or fancies herself a poetic soul of some sort,” she chuckles to herself.

“Nonetheless,” the voice moves away, “it appears you are taken with Prince Phillip, who currently resides in one of my dungeons. You can’t very well fall in love with anyone else anytime soon, as every other likely candidate in the area is falling into a much more restful sleep than you have been allowed. So,” the voice turns back in my direction, and it is tinged with amusement, “unless you fall in love with me, it seems you will be in your current state for awhile yet.”

Before my mind can wrap itself around even the first bit of information she has offered me, she is gone. I sense her absence, though I am not sure how. I wonder if it because the room has grown warmer, or perhaps colder, and am then stunned that I cannot tell which it is.

At least I have some things to ponder before the silence threatens to take my sanity again.
A Taste for Irony

As she gently stroked the feathered head of her dearest (and only) friend, Diablo, Maleficent quietly admitted to herself that one of the only unappealing aspects of her dominion over all things Evil was watching the revels of her underlings.

Foremost in her objections, she didn’t understand them. And as a woman who understood most things to a minute degree, Maleficent very much disliked things she did not understand.

Admittedly, the first revel she had witnessed in her youth, and perhaps a few after that, had been entertaining. At that time, she had understood the reasons her elders offered her, that these revels were a celebration of the ancient evil spirits which would one day bow to her will. She had accepted this explanation readily because it made her feel important, and in the way of most brooding children on the cusp of their teenage years, she had liked that feeling very much.

However, when she had discovered that these evil spirits were only metaphorical and not actual sentient beings of any sort, she had quickly grown irritated and befuddled. When she learned that not to oversee these revels was considered frightfully bad form, Maleficent completely lost her sense of humour regarding the matter.

When she had established a permanent residence in the Mountains of the South, which, since her arrival, had been renamed the Forbidden Mountains, she had fashioned herself an army of underlings out of hogs. Her other option based on the surrounding wildlife had been rats, but she had only been able to grow them to the size of rabbits at the time, and unusually plump rodents were not intimidating to anyone over the age of ten, or ravens, but she was rather fond of ravens as a species, and saw no reason to enslave them. Ravens generally returned her fondness for them, and did her bidding without any extreme measures.

Her first minions had been large, clever, and brutish things. She hadn’t had any immediate use for them at the time, and so, as sort of a nostalgic gesture, she instated the expected Revels of Darkness. Though Maleficent usually considered the complete incompetence of her current generation of minions a curse and an insult from the universe, she found that she had a very different opinion of this unfortunate circumstance when she was able to come and go from the ridiculous displays of green fire and dancing at will, which time she used to contemplate why in Hell’s name she would ever have willingly begun such a ritual.

Maleficent had recently decided that she must train the next generation of underlings, herself, or perhaps kill all of these creatures and start afresh, but she had absolutely no intention of reinstating the proper decorum regarding ritualistic idiocy.

Maleficent had been assuaging her boredom while sitting atop her throne this evening by contemplating how to handle her latest diversion: toying with the royal families of Kings Stefan and Hubert.

The toys in question had fallen into her lap, really, and that was the best part. She would have to thank her bumbling fairy kin someday. Where she had simply meant to enact a bit of good, clean revenge and leave it at that (a rare bout of generosity if she did say so), the good fairies’ upbringing taught them that death was the worst thing that could happen to a person, and their eternal fight to save the good and the valiant from such a fate, while most irritating for about sixteen years, had in the end paid off in countless hours of amusement for the wicked fairy.

She thought at first that she should simply let the Prince kiss his Princess. There was no way that
could end well, anyway. Aurora—Briar Rose, she corrected herself—had grown up a sheltered peasant, and though she was good and kind and likeable, those things did not make the life of a Queen any easier. Aside from that, though Briar Rose was now taken with Philip, she was also becoming fond of Maleficent, herself—a laughable thing, indeed—and Maleficent suspected that the lonely girl would be taken with any stranger who offered her a kind word and a pat on the head. Philip, though a pleasant fellow, was a royal, and could only be expected to conduct himself in the overbearing, yet unfaithful way of royals since the beginning of their existence.

As an added layer of vengeance, the two had no choice in the matter of their marriage. The plan was to unite the two kingdoms through the wedding of Philip and Aurora. All of that was rife with opportunities for resentment later in life.

While Princess Aurora’s life of misery would have been quite enough to satiate Maleficent’s thirst for retribution, Briar Rose’s life of misery was something of a different matter. A few simpering thoughts found their way into Maleficent’s subconscious, such as What has Rose done to deserve a life of misery? and Rose has already suffered enough—I have seen it, myself! Who am I to inflict more pain upon her existence? Those thoughts curdled her blood. Maleficent’s line of work had nothing to do with Justice and everything to do with inflicting unnecessary pain upon the lives of good people.

The truth, though somewhat more embarrassing and revealing than Maleficent preferred her motives to be, was at least much less sickeningly noble. The issues of Princess Aurora and Briar Rose were separate because Maleficent had spent time with the Princess and liked the Rose, and so she did not want to make her suffer anymore.

Along that vein, she could not simply kill the prince, for then how would Rose awaken? Though she would sooner die than admit it to anyone else, Maleficent knew she could tell herself all she wanted that she would find a way around that idiot Merryweather’s spell, but she could not be sure unless she had Philip at her disposal. Aside from that, killing Briar Rose’s love interest would probably not put her in a chatting mood.

Another factor that might have been inhibiting her ability to think clearly was the fact that Maleficent did not want to lose Rose’s company just yet. If she let Philip awaken the princess now, Aurora would be expected to marry him and to assume all the duties of a princess immediately. Not only would Maleficent never be granted her company again (assuming Rose would even want her company, which was dubious in itself), but Maleficent suspected she would be hunted down ceaselessly if Flora or Merryweather had anything to do with it. And though she could of course thwart any such tireless siege the King sent her way, it would be most annoying.

Suddenly, a smile began to play at the corners of the wicked fairy’s ruby red lips. Diablo perked up immediately, embracing this favourable shift in his mistress’s dark mood.

“What a pity,” she told the bird, “that Prince Philip can’t be here to enjoy the celebration. Come!” she stood from her throne. “We must go to the dungeon and cheer him up.”

Diablo flew eagerly about her shoulders and she offered him a smile of approval as they made their way into her dungeons. He was her dearest and only friend because he was the only creature to whom she had ever felt particularly similar. He shared her short attention span and her taste for irony. He was ever-vigilant and had a sharp mind, assessing a situation and how to react quickly. Diablo delighted in carrying out Maleficent’s will, as it often matched his own.

Maleficent unlocked the door to the dungeon in which Philip resided, then the door to his individual prison. While she was quite positive he would not escape even if she allowed him to roam freely about her castle, Maleficent was not one to flaunt her prowess in the face of unlikely happenstance.
Prince Philip sat, chained to the walls, eyes downcast, expression morose. His misery only fed Maleficent’s mirth.


He looked up at her, his expression conflicted as he tried to determine whether she was only mocking him or whether she was truly about to tell him something that would cheer him. Her smile widened. The kind-hearted fell so easily for the tricks of her voice.

“Behold,” she said softly and twirled her fingers about her staff, willing it to show Philip her brilliant idea. “King Stefan’s castle, and in yonder topmost tower, dreaming of her true love, the Princess Aurora,” the name was like silk on her lips. “But see the gracious whim of fate! Why, ’tis the selfsame peasant girl who won the heart of our noble prince but yesterday!” Maleficent’s smile softened as she looked upon the sleeping form of the princess and the warmth in her voice was genuine as she continued.

“She is, indeed, most wondrous fair.
Gold of sunshine in her hair,
Lips that shame the red, red rose.
In ageless sleep, she finds repose.”

The prince was smiling, too, enchanted, completely won over. This was too easy. Now for the twist.

“The years roll by, but a hundred years to a steadfast heart are but a day!”

The prince’s smile faltered and his eyebrows furrowed.

“And now, the gates of the dungeon part,
And our prince is free to go his way!
Off he rides on his noble steed
A valiant figure, straight and tall…”

Maleficent’s sweet voice became sickly and sing-song, and Philip’s face contorted in anger and disbelief.

“To wake his love with love’s first kiss
And prove that true love conquers all!”

She laughed maniacally, so pleased with herself and her plan was she, and Diablo circled her, crowing happily in agreement. “Come, my pet,” she said as she sobered, “let us leave our noble prince with these happy thoughts.”

She exited the dungeon, locking both doors behind her and enchanting them before ascending the stairs. Tonight, she thought contentedly, for the first time in sixteen years, she would sleep well.

However, before she could even clear the first flight, she sensed something amiss. Shortly after turning on her heel and making her way back down the stairs to check on her royal guest, Diablo crowed an alarm and shot in the direction of what appeared to be three small specs of coloured light disappearing into a crack of the dungeon wall.

Maleficent smirked gleefully. This day just kept getting better!

“Well, well!” she remarked. With a wave of her hand, the three specs ceased their attempt to escape and began growing into their properly-sized good fairy selves. “This day has been full of
unprecedented surprises! What brings you three to my humble abode? Come by for a spot of tea?”

Merryweather made to charge at her, but she and the other fairies of course found their feet resolutely rooted to the ground.

“I’m afraid if you’ve come to see the prince, you’re a bit late. It is well past visiting hours, you know,” she absently twirled her fingers about her staff, contemplating. “You must forgive me for being such a poor host. It has been quite some time since I have entertained so many guests at once and I find myself at a bit of a loss. What to do, what to do?”

“Where is the princess?” Flora demanded to know.

“Why, in the tower where you left her unguarded, of course,” Maleficent answered dismissively. “A fortuitous surprise, indeed. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought you had no interest in hiding her from me.”

“Why, you—” Merryweather barked, “What have you done to her?”

“The more important question is,” Maleficent retorted, quickly growing bored with the conversation, “what have you done to her, O Mistress of True Love’s First Kiss?”

“I was saving her life!”

“What did she ever do to you?”

“We were only protecting her future!”

“What did you mean, sentencing that poor baby to—”

Maleficent had already turned her back on the fairy sisters, and soon intended to depart, when a third voice caught her ear.

“Would you really rather she had died, Maleficent?” asked Fauna.

Maleficent stood still. She refused to turn around for fear that her face would give her away, and she knew she couldn’t leave for fear that her silence would be her betrayal. “No,” she answered honestly, composing herself before she turned around. “This,” she chose her next words carefully, “is infinitely better.”

Flora and Fauna were flabbergasted. Merryweather was distrustful, “What do you mean?”

“No peaceful rest, no peaceful life for her now. I could not have done better, myself,” she smiled and the three sisters cringed. “I had already forgotten that I meant to thank you for the amusement you have provided me.”

And then with a wave of her staff, Maleficent disappeared in a burst of green flame.
When Briar Rose thought about it (and lately, she found herself with much time for thinking) she realized that she might have seen the owner of that haunting voice before.

Not in the flesh, of course, for she was certain she would not forget something like that. However, throughout her early childhood and a bit of her early adolescence, she had occasionally had a very disturbing dream. Where all of her other dreams were pleasant and varied, this was the only nightmare Briar Rose ever had.

The dream was much the same every time. Only the minor details varied. It always began with a spinning wheel surrounded by eerie green light—or perhaps the light was emanating from it. Then that voice, low, rich, powerful, urged her to prick her finger on the spindle. The source of the voice murmured in her ear. It was behind her, just over her shoulder, but she could never bring herself to turn away from the spinning wheel.

When she finally relented and pricked her finger, she felt a sense of peace wash over her, as if all she had ever needed to do to relieve all of the pain and suffering in the world was to draw blood by that spindle. She sank to her knees, then to her hands, then completely to the floor, and sometimes before blissful sleep could claim her, she caught a glimpse of a figure in the shadows.

Briar Rose racked her brains for the details, but such is often the case with dreams: we forget important details when we try hardest to recall them. It was a tall, dark shadow and it carried a staff. If she had been able to squint and furrow her brow, she would have done so, for she thought that she could make out devil’s horns on the top of the figure’s head.

Since she had been here, she had been plagued only by gruesome nightmares. Even when she thought she had been granted a reprieve and saw her handsome stranger before her instead of green and blood and spinning wheels, those dreams ended perhaps least pleasant of all.

Between nightmares, Rose contemplated the things the wicked fairy Maleficent had told her, if that was not itself a dream.

The three good fairies had told her many lies. First, that they were her aunts. Second, that her parents had died. Neglecting to tell Rose about Maleficent had been a lie of omission.

They had not even bothered to tell her about Maleficent when they felt the sudden urge to divulge a plethora of other unpleasant surprises. That she could not choose her own love. That she had been engaged to be married since birth. That she was a princess. That the Princess Aurora of myth and gossip was real, that Princess Aurora and Briar Rose were one and the same, that Princess Aurora eclipsed Briar Rose. Briar Rose would henceforth be Princess Aurora.

Even forgiving them all that, they had not done a very good job of protecting her. They had given away her location on the very day that was to be her undoing, and even if that had not been their fault, they had left her alone in her grief at the castle where they must have known Maleficent would
be lurking. Even forgiving them that, they had left her unattended when she was sleeping!

The fairies had seemed so surprised, Rose remembered suddenly, that she had not been elated by the news they had shared. They had left her alone to grieve and whispered outside the door about her lost love. Did they not see that he was but a fraction of her despair?

Rose stopped herself. Were her non-aunts not good fairies? And was Maleficent not the self-proclaimed Mistress of Evil? What if Maleficent was the one who was lying to her, or using her evil powers to persuade Rose to believe that the good fairies had only their own interests in mind? Trying to draw Rose to her side so that she could…so that she could…what?

It didn’t make sense. And everything Maleficent had said did make sense.

On that note, what of her parents, King Stefan and Queen Leah? Rose had known their names and faces, but they had had little impact on the life of a happy peasant girl who had never known the feeling of having parents, so could not know what she was missing. Now she considered this new development, her living parents who—as she had thought many times over now—had ostensibly lived sixteen years not knowing where she was or whether she was alive, waiting for her to show up on her wedding day.

If this was indeed the case, did she have any family at all? Did anyone in the world really care whether she lived or died, beyond what they could gain or lose in the matter?

This was the question that was beginning to gnaw at her brain as time ticked by. She fantasized about everyone she had ever known (which was admittedly limited to a handful of people) caring about her, then she systematically picked apart why these were just fantasies and why no one cared about her at all. Then she systematically picked apart her picking apart so that she built up false hope only to shatter it again when some new bit of logic came to her.

This was how Maleficent found her.

“You should feel fortunate that you cannot hear my thoughts,” Maleficent said simply.

It was perhaps the strangest sentence Rose had ever heard, and for a moment, her mind offered up no response, until finally, What do you mean?

“It’s very confusing,” she responded. “Your voice forever weaves in and out of my own thoughts. It’s also tiresome, but I suspect that is because I am unaccustomed to worrying in such intricate detail about whether anyone cares about my well-being.”

Again Rose’s mind offered no response except to wonder how long she had been here. Time seemed to drag on forever when she was not overanalyzing her life or having gruesome nightmares.

“Almost a fortnight, I’d say.”

A fortnight! And what had Maleficent been doing all this time?

There was a pause, which was made extremely uncomfortable by Rose’s realization that Maleficent had heard this question as clearly as though she had said it aloud.

“I apologize for leaving you unaccompanied for so long.”

And as strange as it was, Rose was glad for the apology.

“And I am sorry to hear that you have been having nightmares,” she amended.
Have you not had them, as well, if you can hear my thoughts?

Another silence. “That had not occurred to me. But dreams are a different matter than thoughts.”

But how?

“It’s not as though I can hear every thought you’ve ever had,” she replied, and Rose heard a faint rustling. She realized that Maleficent was sitting down by her bedside. “Only the ones you’re having right now. Dreams, I believe, are far deeper than that.”

I heard once that a dream is a wish you make while you’re asleep.

Maleficent scoffed, “What utter nonsense. How do you explain nightmares under that theory?”

Rose would have nodded if she could. _Or bizarre dreams that make no sense._

“So you agree that it’s nonsense?”

_It’s just something I heard once. I’ve also heard that if you dream something more than once, it’s sure to come true._

“Who tells you all of these things? I was under the impression that you hadn’t much opportunity for idle chitchat with strangers in your sixteen years with the Righteous Three.”

I didn’t. I read the last bit in a storybook, but I’m not very good at reading, so maybe that’s not quite right. The wishing…that was the boy…I met in the woods. Who is…Philip, I mean.

A pause. “Hmmm. And how did that come up?”

_We had…there is a song I’m fond of._ Rose found that she felt very flustered, talking about the boy in the woods. ‘I know you; I walked with you once upon a…’ …that is to say, I always had dreams about meeting a…a prince. And I was only playing make believe when he actually showed up.

Maleficent was silent, and Rose felt even more embarrassed. The heat of a blush burned like a fever, and she wondered if her cheeks were red, or if she could only feel and never show anything she was feeling. That was dreadful.

It struck her as almost funny what her concerns had been little more than a fortnight ago. She had felt so lonely with only her aunts to talk to, especially since they never answered any of her admittedly plentiful questions, and as she grew older, she found that they made less and less suitable companions, for they wanted very badly for her to remain a child. She dreamed of meeting someone as mysterious as they came. She had never met a man before, she was certain she would never meet a prince, and so the figure her mind supplied her had not needed too many specifications to satisfy her need for hope.

She had only ever read simple stories where the prince rescued the princess from the dragon and they lived happily ever after, and so her dreams had been based on that. It hadn’t stricken her as limited knowledge at the time, but now, faced with someone who was clearly very clever, worldly, and, no doubt, conniving and manipulative, and who was deigning to have what seemed to be a civil conversation with her, she felt quite ill-equipped in every way. She felt as if everything she could possibly say would be stupid, everything she had ever heard might be a lie or ‘utter nonsense,’ and she could not be blamed for that, could she?

Her onslaught of unhappy thoughts was cut short by a menacing chuckle. “You do realize that you’re talking to a wicked fairy who tried to kill you, and you’re worried about not impressing me
with your conversational skills?”

Rose wanted to cry. My point. Even everything I think is stupid. Am I amusing you with how little I know? Is that why you’re talking to me?

“Idiots do not amuse me, and I have neither time nor patience for them.”

Then why do you have the time and patience for me?

“I spent sixteen years looking for you. It seems a worthwhile venture to learn why I cared so much.”

Well, I can answer that one for you. Wicked fairies aren’t really known for letting things go.

“If you’re insinuating that I am but a common, mischievous sprite, I should remind you that I don’t need to keep you alive at all.”

Then kill me! It would be better than this. I can’t move, I can’t see, I can’t even cry because I can’t do either of those things!

Maleficent was silent, and the weight of what Rose had thought—wished, just for an instant—began to sink in. She felt her stomach trying to contort, her heart trying to pound, but all that resulted from either was a dull ache.

Please don’t kill me. I haven’t even lived yet.

“An instant is all it takes to change a life. To make a wish come true. To make a decision that can never be undone.”

Rose didn’t know what to make of that. Maleficent could prove her point whether she decided to kill her or let her live.

“I certainly could, couldn’t I? But I’ve no interest in proving things to people when I know I’m correct. To answer your question in a more direct manner, Briar Rose, I am here because I feel that I may have acted rashly where you are concerned on multiple occasions.”

But…I still don’t understand why you care. Isn’t it…well, I mean…sort of your job to act rashly? Wreak havoc, cause trouble, that kind of thing?

“It is,” Maleficent replied, and Rose thought she might have heard the faintest bit of…something…in her voice. Warmth wasn’t right, nor was kindness. “And while I am fond of my freedom from moral obligations to society, the greatest benefit of my title, which I will protect before all else, is that I never have to do anything I do not want to do.”

You do not want to kill me?

“Correct.”

Rose was still trying to place the tone of her voice. No one had spoken to her that way in quite some time. It was as if she had gotten something right: done a chore especially well, practiced her reading instead of running outside to play…approval. Pride.

“Have I mentioned that I do not suffer fools well?”

Yes.

“You, Briar Rose, are no fool.”
I feel like a fool. Especially, she thought, forgetting momentarily that the wicked fairy could hear her even when she didn’t focus her thoughts into sentences, compared to someone so clever as Maleficent.

“Youth,” said Maleficent, accompanied by a faint rustling which must have been her rising from her seat, “innocence, naïveté…these are not foolishness.”

Where are you going? Rose felt faintly panicked. She did not want to be left alone again. When she was alone, she could not tell when she was asleep and when she was awake. When she could not answer such a basic question, she wondered what other basic questions she could not answer. Before long, she felt as though she might lose her grip on…well, on anything. On everything.

“I have much to ponder, Rose,” said Maleficent. “I find myself at a bit of a loss at the moment.”

Oh. Well. Rose did not know what to say to that.

“Sweet dreams, Princess.”

Wait! Rose’s mind cried out. She tried to make out Maleficent’s footsteps, but could not, and so she could not be certain as to whether she was asking this question of no one. What do you dream of?

No response came, and Rose began to think that she had left, after all. Then, at last, “I cannot recall the last time I had a dream,” she said softly.
A bolt of lightning split the early morning sky.

It was no ordinary lightning. It was not accompanied by the warm rumble of thunder and would not be followed by the healing patter of rain. This lightning bolt was an eerie shade of green, and its only companion was a cry of frustration.

The hours following midnight had been peaceful ones, and Maleficent had enjoyed many such hours before. In fact, the darkest hours before the first traces of dawn were among Maleficent’s favourites times of day. It was a time reserved for nocturnal creatures, when even the most restless of restless sleepers had at last succumbed to slumber. The air was crisp and chilly, the ever-moving, ever-changing world almost entirely still.

A pristine thing indeed, unless one was not enjoying it by choice. Try as she might on this evening, Maleficent had been absolutely unable to reach even the least restful fringes of unconsciousness. And as a woman who was, for the most part, very much in control of her person, her inability to sleep was more than simply irritating—it was unsettling.

The wicked fairy traced her fingers over the tip of her staff, creating little shocks of electricity now and then when her thoughts became particularly vehement.

Of all the simpering—crackle!—ridiculous things! Losing sleep because of one inane—crackle!—question from a—crackle!—from a mere child! An infant! Why, she should have finished the little milksop off sixteen years ago when she truly was an infant, and then she would be sleeping peacefully instead of pondering the oh-so-important question of when she had last had a dream!

Maleficent’s slumber as a child had been deep and dreamless. And why shouldn’t it have been? Her mother held dominion over all things Evil, and someday, so would she. She had nothing to fear—she was the stuff that nightmares were made of! She had never known her father, nor did the subject hold any interest for her. Male fairies, particularly of the dark variety, were nomadic, faithless, and often quite volatile. They typically did not hold dominion over things like their female counterparts, and they most certainly did not form family units with them.

Nor did she have any controversial aspirations. The idea of becoming the Mistress of Evil had always appealed to Maleficent, and she had the temperament for it. She understood that there must be balance in the world, and she was more than happy to learn to be the one to make sure the do-gooders of the world respected that balance, even if they refused to understand it.

Maleficent’s temperament was actually far calmer than that of her mother and sisters, and it had saved her life and legacy in the end. Her mother had become obsessed with the destruction of a family of royals, then their servants, and finally the entire kingdom due to some wrong she perceived against her. She had been merciless, slaughtering simple peasants in the cruelest and most calculated of ways, and the kingdom—and, admittedly, her daughters—had been terrified of her.

Her volatility had been her downfall, for in one of her calm spells, the kingdom’s guards crept up on her, captured her, and sentenced her and her daughters to death.

Maleficent’s younger sisters had panicked. They shrieked and wailed like banshees. They lunged at the guards and tried to free their mother. They hit the armed men with every bit of useless, untrained magic they possessed. And while the guards were busy chaining her sisters up alongside their mother, the awkward, gangly adolescent Maleficent emerged from beneath her bed, took five deep
breaths, and concentrated with all her might on going Somewhere Else.

And it worked.

In the first years after her family’s demise, she rarely stayed in one place for very long. She lived as one of her male kin—and in fact spent a stint travelling with a pack of male fairies—practicing the art of teleportation, and with it, the arts of transience, of never allowing herself to be caught unawares.

These years had been plagued by fitful sleep riddled with bizarre, abstract nightmares. She couldn’t have recounted the concrete details, except that she always awoke in a cold sweat, near tears, and remained disturbed all of her waking hours.

She could recall one dream near the end of this phase of her life—the details were vague. She hadn’t thought about it in a long time, because it had seemed so naturally prophetic at the time. She had evaporated herself, leaving behind what she now considered her signature cloud of green smoke, and when she materialized, found herself roaming aimlessly through a lush countryside, not practicing anything, not seeking anything, not trying to learn or do or see, but simply to enjoy the scenery. That evening when she lay down to sleep, she dreamed of three large kingdoms. Without knowing, she knew that they surrounded this land where she found herself. Not far away, the dream showed her, there was an abandoned castle in ruins on the side of a tall mountain. And when she woke, she knew that this, with a little help from her now-powerful magical prowess for repairs, would be her new home.

And that, she supposed with an irritated sigh, had been her most recent dream. But had it really been a dream at all? It had not told her what she wanted or what she should want, it had simply shown her some nearby architecture and suggested she pay it a visit. In its insignificant way, it had marked the end of her childhood and adolescence with a simple, seemingly unrelated indication: take up a residence. Read: Settle down. Stop gallivanting about and shirking your responsibilities. Your mother is dead and your time has come.

So perhaps she had never had a dream at all. Perhaps any pleasant thought she had ever had was only a nightmare in disguise. What had she expected?

What had the little princess expected, for that matter? Oh, I dream of sunny days and a handsome young man-evil-fairy with matching green skin and devil horns. We sing catchy little tunes together and flutter our eyelashes at one another until I wake!

Maleficent cried out once more and sent another bolt of green lightning raging across the sky, and this shriek was accompanied by a menacing screech from Diablo.

Sixteen years ago? She should have finished the girl off a few hours ago for asking such an impertinent question. When was the last time the Mistress of Evil had a dream? The nerve! The audacity! What utter nonsense! How dare she! How dare she!

Maleficent sighed, and her shoulders slumped as she lowered her staff. Slowly, her entire frame sank back into her chair and her head into her hands. Diablo, barely awake, flew lethargically to her side, but, sensing her dismal mood, kept his distance from his usual perch upon her shoulder.

How dare she?

She dared because she didn’t know. Know anything. About anything. How the world worked. How the story ended. Good and evil. Right and wrong. She was so young, she could hardly have had anything more than a vague understanding of these things to begin with, and then her only teachers had been exposed to her as liars.
She dared because she didn’t dare at all.

And when it all ended, in one hundred years, or probably less, Phillip or (more likely) the good fairies would find a way to get past Maleficent and wake Rose, because that was the way these things always played out. Rose would have her prince, the fairies would have their justice, and Maleficent would move on to her next bit of mischief.

That idea in itself honestly didn’t bother Maleficent very much. Sixteen years in the life of a mostly-immortal fairy was not a long time. Maleficent was still relatively young, herself. And perhaps she had become a bit obsessed with the whole affair, and perhaps she had expended a bit too much energy on a lovely little princess, and far more energy on her bumbling family than they were worth. She could move on. There were other kingdoms, other far-off lands that she had neglected, who had had their fill of good fortune in her absence, and Good and Evil must have their balance, after all.

What bothered her, and, she suspected (or perhaps hoped), the true reason behind her sleepless night, was that when they came, it would not be simply to wake Rose.

They would come for her, yes, but they would come to awaken the Princess Aurora. And when Aurora awoke, Briar Rose would die.

It seemed Maleficent had spent all of her aggression for the evening, and so these simple words, which should have sent a hot current of rage surging through her veins, which should have called her to action, which should have driven her to fight for the girl she needed to protect…these words paralyzed her. Her hands dropped to her sides and she blinked several times, staring blankly in the direction of the approaching dawn. Her heart surged, her eyes stung, and she felt oddly empty. As though Rose were already gone. As though there were nothing she could do.

Perhaps there wasn’t anything she could do.

Gentle rays of sunlight crept over the pale green skin of the wicked fairy, but she hardly noticed their warmth. Nor did the wetness of the tears trickling down her cheeks make any impact on her. Diablo fretted and paced, confused and worried for his mistress, unable to offer a solution, and a slender green hand reached out to stroke his head absently. He nudged the hand with his beak, eyes wide, but received no explanation. Maleficent sat, stunned, weeping, and unmoving, and watched without really seeing as the sun rose and dawn reigned over darkness, just as it soon would do in Maleficent’s life, and in Briar Rose’s as well.
“Why, Merryweather!” Flora exclaimed, and Fauna pushed a lock of grey hair out of her eyes. Their youngest sister was crying.

“Whatever is the matter, dear?” she asked.

“After today,” sniffed Merryweather, “she’ll be a princess, and we won’t have any Briar Rose!”

Fauna had gasped, clutching a pile of dough to her chest maternally. No more Briar Rose. That thought hadn’t occurred to her. “Oh, Flora!”

“Now, now, now,” Flora scolded, but it was clear the thought had not occurred to her, either. “We all knew this day had to come!”

Fauna felt tears begin to well up in her eyes, “But why did it have to come so soon?”

“After all,” Flora continued, “We’ve had her for sixteen years.”

“Sixteen wonderful years,” Merryweather gushed, and the three sisters stood together in a rare moment of unity.

As usual, the eldest of the fairy sisters regained her composure first. “Oh, gracious!” she blustered, and the moment was broken. “We’re acting like a lot of ninnies!”

Flora would later argue that this moment of emotional weakness had been the beginning of the end, and she was probably right. However, Fauna believed privately that said end was mostly Flora’s doing, and not Merryweather’s, as Flora stubbornly maintained. However, in the couple of centuries the fairy sisters had been in each other’s company, Flora had never lost an argument, at least in her own mind, and Fauna had no interest in going up against her, especially now.

Anyway, it didn’t really matter whose fault it was. Rose had been under Maleficent’s spell for sixteen years and under her watchful eye for several days, about the same amount of time that Fauna and her sisters had been magically rooted to the floor of one of the wicked fairy’s dungeons.

Fauna was actually quite surprised that Maleficent had put them in a cell together, but it didn’t matter in the end, as her older and younger sister were not speaking to one another.

“This is your fault, Merryweather!” Flora had cried when the dungeon door slammed behind Maleficent.

“My fault? What about you? Let her have a few moments alone? Alone! You should have known that old Maleficent would be roaming about!”

“I should have known? How could I have known, Merryweather? Did you know? Did Fauna know?”

“Don’t you pull that! You should have-”

Fauna was honestly a little glad that the arguing had come to a standstill. It was awkward, and every now and again as time passed, Fauna wanted to say something to one of her sisters, but she was always greeted with a humph! and a You may tell Flora that I…

And so she gave up and tried in spite of the magical bonds on her feet to reach a comfortable sitting
position. Surely, she had thought, three magical beings who had lived without that magic for sixteen years could have thought of a way out of this. Surely they had gained some knowledge from their hiatus, some resourcefulness.

But of course they hadn’t. Sixteen years in the life of a fairy was not very long at all. Raising the little princess had been such a surprise and a joy and an opportunity that none of them had ever even thought possible, and the whole thing had seemed like one big game. And then the years had passed and suddenly Rose was there and not a baby anymore and their time was up and oh, sixteen years in the life of a human girl made so much difference!

Fauna had no idea how the King and Queen had managed. Rose had not even come from her own womb, and she felt as though a piece of her heart had been ripped out at the idea of losing her. They had been so certain that night, willing to do what they must to protect their daughter. They had even contained their tears while the fairy sisters were present. What must it have been like for them, wondering every day and unable to receive an answer, even a simple sign that their child was still alive?

Fauna knew that they would be overjoyed to have Rose back. Rose was, after all, a delight. She sang and cooked and cleaned with the sunniest of dispositions. She was so friendly—it was a shame that she wasn’t permitted to talk to anyone. Fauna hoped that she would enjoy having people to talk to. And she would certainly have a social life once she returned to court.

This seemed overly positive thinking given their current circumstances, and Fauna wondered suddenly why she was so certain that they would make this mess right. Because, she thought simply, good always triumphs over evil. The kingdom is asleep, so we have time. Flora and Merryweather aren’t speaking to one another, but it isn’t as if that hasn’t happened before, and has that ever stopped us coming up with a solution?

Flora and Merryweather actually had much in common. Their stubborn, argumentative personalities were a start. They were not fond of most animals, and though their favourite colours clashed, the shared a distaste for the colour green in any other place than what they believed to be its rightful one: leaves. Beyond that and perhaps most importantly, they believed that the good were always good and the wicked always up to no good at all.

Fauna would never have admitted it, because it was a wicked, selfish thing to think, but she was the tiniest bit glad that the two argued so often. If they had ever realized how similar they were in comparison to their middle sister, Fauna felt she would have led a very lonely life.

Fauna believed that there was good in everyone.

“Hang on, I have an idea!”

“Fauna would you please listen to Merryweather’s idiotic idea so I don’t have to waste my time and patience telling her that it’s a bad one?”

And evil, too, for that matter. If not, what would explain the awful way her sisters sometimes treated one another?

“Come now, can’t you two stop this? We won’t find a way out of here by sulking.”

She was answered by humph! from her sister in red and ha! from her sister in blue. She sighed.

To further complicate matters, sometimes the best intentions did not lead to good results; for example, Merryweather’s initial attempt to thwart Maleficent’s curse, or the three sisters’ attempt to give Rose
some space, which had led to the fulfillment of the curse, or most recently, the sisters’ attempt to break Prince Philip free, which had not only resulted in Maleficent gaining possession of Rose’s sleeping form, but the incapacitation of the fairies who were trying to help.

“I hope Rose is all right,” Merryweather said unexpectedly, her voice quiet and tremulous.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Fauna offered.

“Fine? Maleficent has her!”

“Well, yes, but she isn’t going to…” Fauna shuddered. “She has some master plan to follow. She won’t hurt Rose right now.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Merryweather responded, sounding somewhat relieved, and Fauna was glad that Flora had not offered her (probably upsetting) opinion.

Fauna knew she was right, but not for the reason she stated. Maleficent couldn’t be all bad. Nobody could. And for some reason Fauna couldn’t pinpoint, she knew Rose was all right. She could think of logical reasons to appease her sisters. Another one was that Maleficent had never meant to exact revenge upon Rose, but upon her parents. But these were not what convinced her.

There was good inside of Maleficent. Fauna was certain of it.

Not that anyone had ever seen any, of course.

“Well, in that case…” Flora said as though continuing the conversation, though Merryweather had last spoken several minutes ago, “we have some time. The bonds Maleficent has placed on us will have to weaken if she doesn’t come back to reinforce them.”

“Right!” Merryweather added excitedly, “And maybe if we all concentrate together we can help weaken them wandlessly!”

“That just might work, Merryweather!”

“What will we do when we’ve weakened the bonds?” Fauna asked. “We’ll still need our wands to do anything useful.”

Merryweather shrugged, “Maleficent probably isn’t carrying them around with her. She might have left them somewhere.”

“We’ll search the castle!” Flora cried triumphantly.

“Oh! Oh! And we need to find Philip!” Merryweather added.

“I’m sure we’ll find him when we’re searching the castle,” Flora sneered.

“Oh, hush. I bet you forgot for a second, too.”

Fauna smiled. This was why she would never admit to her wicked, wicked thought about her sisters not getting along. When they worked together, they could be quite brilliant. Even if she sometimes felt a little useless by comparison, she was happy to contribute what she could.
“Oh… Oh!”

“I’m awfully sorry…I didn’t mean to frighten you!”

“Oh, it wasn’t that…it’s just that you’re a…a…”

“A stranger? But don’t you remember? We’ve met before!”

He was tall, at least compared to all the other people she knew, and he had strawberry blonde hair and the most beautiful blue eyes. His voice was deep and rich, and his hands, which kept grasping hers as she tried to pull away, were smooth and warm. If she had to choose a word to describe him, she would call him handsome.

She felt distinctly uncomfortable, more so than she ever had in her life. Foremost in her mind was that she was trying to get away and this man was not letting her. Second, her stomach felt like it was twisting itself into a knot, a feeling she had never had before. At first she wondered if she had eaten something poisonous, a mistake she had made regarding some berries when she was six or seven, but that seemed unlikely now that she knew all the berries in the forest, and besides that, this feeling was nothing like the feeling of sickness.

Third, she found herself wanting to stop resisting. She wasn’t certain that this was the best course of action. After all, her aunts had warned her that strangers were dangerous and that she oughtn’t to talk to anyone, especially men. She wasn’t certain what that danger entailed, exactly, but she was certain she wanted to avoid it.

However, this man seemed nice, as nice as her aunts, and he was, as she had first thought, quite handsome. Surely he would not harm her. And she did get a little thrill from the thought of talking to someone new, someone who was nothing like the three elderly women who had raised her. One little afternoon chat under the watchful eye of her animal friends couldn’t hurt.

With a small smile, she allowed the man to take her hands.

Rose felt happier than she had in…she had forgotten how long she had been here like this. Because there were so few things she could do, it was so lovely to let out a long sigh and to feel a small smile curl across her nearly paralyzed lips.

Of course, she soon remembered where she was and…how she was. How her dream had ended.

Rose’s sixteenth birthday had been the happiest and most miserable day of her life. In the morning, her beloved aunts had unsubtly hurried her out the door to plan a party for her. By midday she had met the most handsome (and also the only) man she had ever seen, and she had quickly fallen in love with him. She thought at first that she must never see him again, but he was so kind, and she was in love! Surely her aunts would understand!

She had rushed home, singing and dancing all the way, to share the news with the only family she had ever known. And Fauna—she remembered the gleeful look on Fauna’s face as she grasped her aunt’s hands, telling the old woman whom she knew to be a hopeless romantic at heart all about the man of her dreams who had become a reality.

And then her world had come crashing down around her.
How long had she been here? The last time Maleficent had visited her, she had told Rose that it had been about a fortnight. How long ago had that been? A few days? A week? Another fortnight? She had completely lost track of time. Was time even passing, really, if everyone in the kingdom was frozen in it?

Rose felt a little pang of hurt at the memory of Maleficent’s last visit, though she supposed that didn’t make a lot of sense. When Maleficent had apologized for leaving Rose alone for so long, Rose hoped that she would be receiving more frequent company in the future. Then again, she had no idea how much time had passed since then, so she had no reason to doubt the sincerity of the fairy’s apology.

She believed, and again, she had no idea why, that she had upset Maleficent in some way during her last visit, and she found this surprising. Though she had never seen Maleficent face-to-face, and her mental image was quite blurry, she imagined that the woman would have calm, stoic features in keeping with her calm, stoic voice. While she was sympathetic and almost warm when she spoke to Rose, there was a certain formality to it. She kept her distance emotionally, so to speak, even when she was physically near.

Maleficent had not, however, somehow broken her icy composure, and so it was merely a vague instinct that told Rose she was upset. Perhaps it was nothing at all, but with nothing else to do, Rose could not be blamed for fixating on the subtlest quirks in her keeper’s demeanour.

Her keeper. The idea that Maleficent was responsible for her dilemma did not make sense in Rose’s mind. At first, she had blamed the three fairies she once knew as her aunts, but now she thought of it as a sad consequence of many unfortunate things which were not really anyone’s fault. Though if she were being completely honest, she still blamed the fairies just a little.

She was not entirely certain, however, whose fault it was that she was still here. Was she doomed to stay like this forever? Surely Maleficent would not be so cruel to her. She tried to think back on the conversation she had had with the fairy. It seemed like forever had passed since then, and yet it had probably been less than a month.

She remembered that Maleficent had mentioned how cruel it was that everyone was asleep while she was…like this. The way she had spoken, it seemed as though Maleficent didn’t intend to keep her like this forever…like she would be back, because how else would it be cruel that no one missed her if she never saw them again?

The way to break the spell, though, was with true love’s kiss, which would require Philip, her Dream Man, the man she had met in the forest, whose identity was as blurry in her mind as her own had so recently become. Where was he now?

She could not remember…

“…as it stands, you can only awaken with true love’s kiss, of all the bothersome things…”

“…it appears you are currently taken with Prince Philip…”

“But don’t you remember? We’ve met before!”

“…every other likely candidate is falling into a much more restful sleep than you have been allowed…”

“…unless you fall in love with me…”

“You said it yourself. Once upon a dream!”
“…it appears you are taken with Prince Philip, who currently resides…”

“…what use would I have for a sleeping sixteen-year-old girl awaiting the kiss of some foolhardy prince?…”

“…who currently resides in one of my dungeons…”

“I’m awfully sorry…I didn’t mean to frighten you!”

“…so, unless you fall in love with me, it seems you will be in your current state for awhile yet…”

Not sobbing was the worst. The middle of her body contracted as though she were sobbing, but she hardly moved, so her muscles simply cramped and twisted, sending sharp shocks of pain coursing through her. Her eyes stung and the muscles of her face soon joined the twisting, cramping, aching, stabbing onslaught of pain. Her face remained serene and unchanging. Prince Philip could walk in right now and all he would see was the young girl he had met in the forest, sleeping serenely, unaware of the time it had taken him to get to her, waiting with endless patience.

Except that he would not walk in right now. He wouldn’t walk in tomorrow, or the next day, or after another fortnight. He wouldn’t walk in when the spring turned to summer, when the summer turned to autumn, or when the autumn turned to winter. He wouldn’t walk in on her seventeenth birthday, or her eighteenth, or her thirtieth.

He might never come. He would never come. He was in the dungeons of the Mistress of Evil, so careful and calculated that she was kind to Rose even though Rose was nothing more than her prisoner.

And Rose didn’t even know why. Why was Maleficent keeping her here? Why did she feel the need to be kind to Rose while at the same time keeping her in agony? Why was she holding Philip prisoner as well? Rose was innocent. She had never even met her parents against whom Maleficent was allegedly exacting revenge. Why? Why, why, why must Rose suffer for the unknown crimes of people she had never met?

“Rose,” a voice filled with anguish whispered, and a new wave of non-sobs hit Rose full-force. In her mind she cried and wailed and cursed as pain coursed through her entire body, from her head to her fingers and toes. Worst of all was the empty ache in her heart.

“Rose…” and this voice was real, present in the room and not an echo or a memory.

Rose wanted to fight and kick and scream and throw every accusation she could think of until the wicked fairy gave up on acting kind and did her the only true kindness she could…by killing her.

“Please,” rasped the wicked fairy, and Rose felt a cold hand on her forehead, yet another unwelcome sensation against the fever she felt in her own private hell. “I am so…so sorry.”

Sorry…sorry…sorry… Sorry for what?

If Maleficent responded, Rose did not hear it. The pain became too much for her, and it slowly began to fade into blissful nothingness.
To Forgive and to Forget

Only a day’s ride on horseback from the sea there lay a lush countryside, refreshing in its sparseness of trees and abundance of other colourful flora. This open flatland was surrounded by a dense forest, and it had once served as a border between four kingdoms.

To the North lay the kingdom of Hubert, to whom Queen Alice bore many sons, the eldest of whom was Hubert II. Hubert II was succeeded by Hubert III, the current King, whose wife, Queen Isabel, had perished shortly after the birth of Prince Philip, whom Hubert III had named in honour of Isabel’s father instead of following the family tradition of Huberts.

To the East lay the kingdom of Peter, who had had a long and prosperous reign, and was succeeded much later than Hubert by King Henry. King Henry was ill-tempered and prideful, and had somehow managed to annoy a passing wicked fairy into cursing his farmlands with infertility.

To the South lay the kingdom of Arthur, who was succeeded by Arthur II. Arthur II’s land was lush and his food was plentiful, and had King Henry perhaps asked more politely and been more skilled in the art of fair trade, the two kingdoms might have gotten along quite nicely, as another passing wicked fairy (clearly a band of male fairies, who were nomadic creatures, had been up to a good bit of mischief recently) had cursed Arthur’s wife with the inability to bear sons.

As it stood, Henry’s arrogance did not do him any favours, and his curse did not teach him a lesson. The two kingdoms went to war, and had Henry not called upon questionable sources of power for help (another wicked fairy who wanted to get back at the original wicked fairy might have been involved, but no one can be certain of these things), he probably would have lost. While it would not have ended altogether well for Henry’s people, Arthur was a good and noble King and would never have sent his men to destroy Henry’s kingdom after they had already surrendered.

However, Henry did just those things, and Arthur’s kingdom lay in ruins for quite some time, until a certain green-skinned female wicked fairy took up residence in his castle and fixed the place up a bit. The curse on Henry’s own land was not lifted until he died. His first son, Henry II, who had also been quite arrogant and generally unpleasant, had been killed in the war, and so Henry was succeeded by his second son, Stefan, who was kind and mild-mannered.

To the West, much farther away comparative to the other kingdoms, lay the kingdom of Robin, succeeded by Gavin, succeeded by Gavin II, who kept to themselves. They, too, had had a rather nasty run-in with the aforementioned wicked fairies, but they had learned their lesson, and stayed out of everyone’s way, especially after they heard the news of Arthur’s defeat, and most especially when a wicked fairy took up residence in the neighbourhood. From this kingdom, however, hailed Princess Leah, whom Gavin II offered to King Stefan in hopes that the two kingdoms could have as little interaction as possible, particularly not of the burn-and-ravage variety.

Stefan had traveled several days with the messenger who had been sent with this offer to meet his promised bride, and was surprised at King Gavin’s generosity. Leah was beautiful and lively, and Stefan fell for her instantly. Years later, he was disheartened that they had not yet conceived a child.

It was around this time, when Stefan was beginning to give up hope, too devoted to his wife to seek out a concubine, yet desperate for an heir to the throne, that the Mistress of Evil Maleficent had received, to her immense surprise, an official summons from the Queen.

The messenger boy had not made it all the way up to the door of her castle. He had fainted dead away before he even came close. Fortunately, Maleficent had been watching him out the window in
amusement, or he might have stayed out there in the cold for quite some time. She came outside and sent Diablo to retrieve his message, then, with a wave of her staff, sent him magically back to his kingdom of origin. It had been amusing to watch him try to approach her castle on shaking legs, but she doubted the fun of watching the boy squirm would last an entire evening.

Though Maleficent had never received an official summons from royalty before, this one struck her as peculiar. Queen Leah asked that Maleficent not make her presence known to anyone on her way, including and especially the King. Such a specific request made Maleficent think that the Queen must have something very shameful or embarrassing to hide, which in turn made her think that it would be quite fun to let someone along the way know of her presence. However, as this was her first royal summons, Maleficent followed her instructions. She transported herself into the castle in disguise, waited until the Queen was alone and had her back turned, and then transformed into her usual shape, that of a tall, green-skinned woman.

“You know,” she began conversationally, and the Queen, to Maleficent’s satisfaction, nearly jumped out of her skin, “I’ve never been summoned by royalty before. At least not of your level of importance.”

“You…I…well…”

“I trust there is something you want from me.”

“I…yes…I mean…”

This was fun. “I trust also that you know my help will not come without a price.”

“Of course. Anything, only…”

“The King cannot know, yes, I read your letter. Hmmm…” she touched a finger to her chin thoughtfully, though she had already pondered multiple possibilities. “Now, what could you want from a fairy like myself? A child, perhaps? I am aware that you cannot conceive, and that it gives King Stefan great pain. What a loyal and noble man, not turning to a concubine for what you failed to provide for him.”

The woman was quite pretty, but in a tired, worn-out way, unbefitting of her twenty or so years.

“I…yes. A child. That is what I… What is your price?”

Maleficent smiled wickedly and approached the Queen, making even more obvious the enormous height difference between the two. “Well, for a start, I’d like an explanation. If you were unable to conceive for natural reasons, or because of a curse, I trust you would not have come to me for assistance.”

“Please…I don’t want to lose my husband because of…”

“Oh, calm yourself, girl. This behaviour is most unbefitting of your position. I’ve already told you, as long as you don’t annoy me, I’m not going to tell your precious king. However,” Maleficent conjured up a chair, sat primly upon it, and then conjured two cups of hot tea, “you are most certainly going to tell me.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?”

“Why am I doing this?” the wicked fairy chuckled darkly. “You, my dear, are in no position to be asking me such a thing. You’ve caught me in a good mood, however. This is, after all, my first visit to the palace. For your information, if your story is what I suspect it will be, I need to know in what
sort of condition I find your body. Additionally,” she took a sip of tea, “I suspect that it will be shameful and embarrassing for you, and I do enjoy watching people feel shame and embarrassment.”

The Queen was glaring at her, her pretty young face twisted in disgust and anguish. This, however, was soon replaced by, given the circumstances, its rightful emotion: resignation. Leah took the cup of tea still hovering in the air in front of her, sat on the edge of her bed, and, eyes focused on the floor, told Maleficent that there was a time when she could conceive.

Quite well, in fact. Over the course of a few years, she called upon the questionable services of a mad old woman living on the outskirts of the village five times. The fifth time, she had become quite sick, and her father had called upon a doctor. The doctor had saved her life, but not the natural ability of her womb, and certainly not her dignity. He informed Leah’s father of the nature of her condition, and in order to avoid scandal, King Gavin had the old woman put to death, and offered Princess Leah to King Stefan in marriage. He hoped that, this way, her secret would never reach his people, and Stefan could deal with her inability to conceive when the time came.

Leah had lived for years dreading the day that Stefan turned to a concubine to fulfill his need for an heir to the throne, but Stefan was a devoted husband and did not want to betray his Queen, even if it meant betraying his kingdom in the end.

“I cannot let this kingdom suffer because I led a shameful life in my youth.”

Maleficent nodded slowly. “That, Your Majesty, is the choice of a worthy Queen. Very well. I can grant your request, and my price is small. First, I would like to be invited to the celebration of the child’s birth. The three good fairies will no doubt be invited and will bestow magical gifts upon the child. I would like the opportunity to do the same.”

Leah looked horrified at this simple request. “But…I…you would…? Lady M…Malef…there is no sense in this if the child cannot live to adulthood, to carry on the royal line.”

Maleficent arched one eyebrow and her reply dripped with derision. “My Queen, with all due respect, do not make me regret my decision to offer you praise as a worthy ruler. I am not an imbecile, and therefore I am obviously aware that the point of your request is to give the King an heir to the throne. I will not give you your wish only to take it away days later. Unless,” she said pointedly, “you give me a reason.”

Leah had the good grace to blush furiously and return her gaze to the floor.

“Second, when it comes time for your child to marry, I would like to be consulted. You may send me another private summons.”

Leah bit her lip and said nothing. Maleficent waited until the girl gave her the tiniest of nods before she continued.

“Third, I ask that you cease regarding me with such fear and derision. There must be balance in this world, Your Majesty, between good and evil. I merely see to it that that balance is maintained.”

Maleficent waited for another curt nod, then stood, and with a wave of her staff, disposed of the teacups and chair.

“As long as these conditions are met,

A healthy child you shall beget.

But fail me once, and you shall see
Just how wicked I can be!”

The thought made her chuckle heartily as she conjured up her signature cloud of green smoke and, with an emphatic bang!, transported herself back to her own castle, still engaging in a mirthful laugh as she greeted her only companion, the black raven she called Diablo.

That had been nearly eighteen years ago. Honestly, Maleficent shouldn’t have been so surprised that Leah did not meet her rather simple demands. She wondered how that conversation had gone. ‘Well, the guest list is complete! Are we forgetting anyone?’ ‘What about the Mistress of Evil?’ ‘Oh, yes, of course, let’s invite the wicked fairy to our daughter’s christening! Have you gone mad?’

If it were only that, Maleficent wouldn’t have been so cruel. She would perhaps have cursed the child with something that was more or less harmless, such as an unpleasant disposition or a bad complexion.

However, she was getting ahead of herself. First she had learned that, if the child was a girl (which it always had been), she would be betrothed to the son of King Hubert, whom Maleficent found to be not only the worst kind of royal imaginable, careless, irresponsible, and faithless, but also a complete idiot.

Then there was the christening. And finally, at the christening (which she had of course attended, invitation or not), she had learned that Leah and Stefan, who had no doubt been listening to far too much of the babble of the three good fairies, still regarded her not only with fear and derision, but as something of an unwanted nuisance.

It was particularly irritating because Maleficent had planned on behaving herself. She had admired King Stefan for his just reign, and Queen Leah for what seemed to be a great deal of newfound maturity. And how had they repaid her? By not inviting her to a party.

The spinning wheel bit had been a touch of genius if she did say so, a metaphorical reference to the loss of innocence intended entirely as a jab at the Queen’s shady experiences in that category. The Queen was, however, not especially intelligent, and so there was a good chance that Maleficent was only amusing herself. And perhaps getting a rise out of Flora and Merryweather.

Maleficent had not really thought about all of this in quite some time. For sixteen years, she had searched for the child, fully intending to take it before Stefan and Leah, tell Stefan of Leah’s past, and kill the child, because her conditions had not been met. It was very simple and did not require any pondering.

Over the course of the past day, however, Maleficent had changed her mind at least six times regarding the best course of action.

There was no way Maleficent could get everything she wanted. This was unusual, because the things she wanted generally coincided neatly. She wanted someone to suffer, and she wanted to benefit from it. That was fairly simple. But now, the things she wanted—to exact revenge upon the people who had been on her nerves for the last sixteen years, and to ensure Briar Rose’s happiness—seemed almost impossible to reconcile.

It had become painfully clear to her yesterday, when she visited Briar Rose’s tower, which mattered the most to her. She could not stand to put the girl through this any longer. She did not want to turn her Rose into a shell of herself, forever traumatized by a hundred years of being unable to move, or even cry because she couldn’t move. All of Rose’s troubles could be traced back to Maleficent. Maleficent simply hadn’t expected to care all those years ago.
To further complicate matters, she did not know if what Rose wanted right now would ensure her happiness for very long at all. In fact, it was very unlikely. Maleficent wanted to be nearby, to watch over the girl, and to stand at the ready if Rose decided that something else would make her happy. Maleficent wanted to make Rose happy for the rest of her life.

But if she gave Rose what she wanted now, Maleficent could not stay nearby. It would be intolerable for all kinds of reasons. First, she would be forced to watch as the kingdom rejoiced and thanked the good fairies as if none of this past month had ever happened. Then, the King would attempt to destroy her. It was improbable that he would succeed, but fending off constant attacks sounded tiresome at best. Third, she would not only lose Rose as her companion, but in such close proximity, she would be acutely aware of the loss.

Now, as she paced through the lush countryside where, all those years ago, Maleficent had first found herself faced with the need to take up a residence and with it her duties as Mistress of Evil, she was attempting something that was contrary to her very nature: to let the whole thing go. If she gave Rose what she wanted...if she freed Prince Philip and the fairies, led them to Rose’s tower, and let him wake her...then Maleficent must leave. And she might never know what became of Princess Aurora at all.

The thought gave her an awful, twisting, aching feeling...but then she recalled the image of Rose, lying eerily peaceful as her screams of anguish echoed in Maleficent’s mind, as the clear and well-reasoned, yet so innocent and naïve thoughts to which Maleficent was privy muddled and swirled until they were unintelligible babble, and the feelings that this image conjured up were far worse than anything Maleficent could ever have imagined.

She had to do something. This was her best option. She hoped Rose would understand.
Awakening the Dawn

Flora had always considered herself to be very intelligent. She was perhaps not as freakishly all-knowing as the wicked fairy Maleficent (though of course she would die before admitting that), but compared to her younger sisters, she certainly had the quickest wit and the best mind for planning.

And if she sometimes deliberately kept Fauna and Merryweather in the dark to maintain a little security in her position as leader, well, that was for their own good in the end.

Maleficent’s bonds had weakened surprisingly quickly. They had been imprisoned for little over a month when they felt their toes begin to wiggle. It struck Flora as odd, a wicked fairy being so unskilled in the art of keeping people captive, but she supposed Maleficent was relatively young.

It was, Flora thought fleetingly, almost a shame that she would be slain in the next few days, before she had even fully honed her abilities.

That feisty raven who did much of the wicked fairy’s bidding had been surprisingly easy to overcome. True, he had put up a royal fuss when the fairies had finally found Maleficent’s bedchamber, but with no Mistress of Evil to answer his cries, he was fairly useless. The fairies took no chances, however, once they had found their wands placed almost casually in a trunk under the bed. Flora usually preferred to turn things into flowers, or perhaps a decorative shrubbery, but Merryweather had been the one to strike him in the end, and she had turned the fiendish thing into stone.

The bird had, unfortunately, drawn the attention of Maleficent’s minions. They were gruesome and burly, but-and this Flora found to be most surprising-stupid. Admittedly, she did not know much about the fauna that inhabited the South—perhaps they were simply not very intelligent animals. To find out, however, would require asking Fauna, which she wanted to avoid at the moment. She felt that asking such a question would show weakness in her knowledge, and Merryweather would jump all over that.

And so, the fairies used, as the saying goes, every trick in the book. They dodged behind walls, faked going one direction and went another, caused two or more of the creatures to run into one another, and so on, until they finally made it back to the dungeon to search for the prince.

Flora clucked her tongue and dusted off her hands as the three sisters surveyed Maleficent’s grand foyer, littered with minions who were either assorted flora, stone replicas of themselves, or simply knocked unconscious. “I do hope the princess appreciates what we have gone through to make this fairytale come true.”

There were many things that Merryweather knew.

She knew that she was much smarter than her other sisters, especially Flora, who thought she was the smartest fairy of them all, and made sure to mention it whenever the moment presented itself. And frequently also when it did not.

She knew all about cooking and cleaning and she was very good at sewing. She could have made Rose-Aurora’s cake and dress just fine without magic, but she was smart enough to know that there’s little sense in doing something by hand that you could do so much more easily with a wand.

She knew that Maleficent, the Mistress of All Evil, was by very definition evil, and that anyone who said otherwise—Fauna, for example—was touched in the head.
And she knew that Flora was going to smarter-than-thou herself right into one of Maleficent’s traps if she kept carrying on the way she was. She wasn’t even going to go after Maleficent’s pet bird! That mangy crow would have been the death of them if Merryweather hadn’t turned him into stone, and Merryweather knew that she would never, ever in her life receive full credit for saving her sisters’ lives and keeping the Plan from being a failure in the worst way.

The three good fairies had fortunately had the foresight to put everyone to sleep before undertaking this treacherous journey to set everything aright. How would it be with only a Mistress of Evil and no Good Forces to balance her out? Hmm? Ponder that, O All-knowing Flora.

Merryweather may have been more quick-tempered than Flora, and she was not as motherly as Fauna, but she loved Ro…Aurora fiercely. She knew she was out for Aurora’s best interests, and she would, as she had from the beginning, fight with everything she had to protect her surrogate daughter.

It was only that…”true love’s kiss” had sounded so good and so simple at the time, and Merryweather had really figured that Flora would come up with another plan so they didn’t have to deal with the curse at all. And as it turned out, it was simple, so Flora could quit her passive-aggressive bellyaching about Merryweather’s curse-breaker being stupid. All they needed was Philip.

Philip was not a magical being, but he was a well-trained young royal. He was strong, clever, and battle-savvy…well, as battle-savvy as one could be, having only battled one mere mortal at a time in his life. Battling Maleficent wouldn’t be easy by any stretch, but if anyone was prepared, Merryweather thought with a little surge of pride as she gazed upon the face of the boy in chains, it was he.

Philip looked up and blinked a couple of times, then smiled tiredly. “It cannot be! The three Good Fairies! I…I thought you must have been captured or put to sleep!”

“We were, Your Highness,” Flora said, taking the lead as always. “Alas, we have lost much time. Of course, had we not been captured, we would have come for you sooner.”

“Then…the girl? Forgive me, I am so confused as to how to think of her.”

“The Princess Aurora, the girl of whom you speak, slumbers still.”

“We hope that her slumber, and the slumber of the entire kingdom, has granted us some much-needed time,” Fauna added.

“However,” Merryweather chimed in, “that is no reason to dally.” Her sisters nodded in agreement and aimed their wands at the prince’s chains. Once free, Philip sprang to his feet, as though the long days of sitting and mulling had only fuelled his youthful passion. Once more, Merryweather’s heart surged with pride.

“I have confidence in you, Prince Philip,” she said with a smile, “We must hurry to the tower where the Princess sleeps, and we will help you as much as we can along the way. But the road to true love may be barred by still many more dangers, that you alone will have to face.”

Philip nodded his understanding, and Flora and Fauna moved to stand beside Merryweather, that they might use their magic as one.

“So,” Merryweather spoke again as the fairies waved their wands in a rare moment of perfect unison, “arm thyself with this enchanted Shield of Virtue, and this mighty Sword of Truth. These weapons
of righteousness will triumph over Evil.”

Philip tried them out with grace and skill. The three sisters exchanged looks of pride.

“If anyone can save our Rose,” said Fauna quietly, “it is you, dear Prince.”

Making it out of the castle was not terribly difficult. They saw another band of the gruesome creatures who no doubt acted as Maleficent’s minions, but with no crafty little blackbird to alert them, the prince and the fairies were able to sneak past them without another battle.

Making it down the mountain was something of a different matter. Though the wicked fairy had once kept her home in perfect condition, her obsession with ruining the lives of Kings over the past couple of decades meant that said home, especially the footpaths leading to it, had fallen into disrepair, rendering the mountain far more treacherous than, for example, Maleficent’s hoglike minions.

Fortunately, though, Philip had a trusty steed, a fact of which the three fairies had been unaware until they reached the bottom, where the horse was waiting patiently. He, too, sprung to attention at the sight of him, in the same way Philip had when he had been released.

Yes, this Plan was working out better than the three fairies could ever have hoped. On horseback, Philip did not slow the fairies down at all, and together they charged in the direction of the sleeping Kingdom of Stefan and Leah. Their collective mindset was surprising and delightful. They did not want to waste a second in awakening Aurora, and with her, the dawn of a new era, a new, united kingdom, a new life for everyone.
You'll Love Me At Once

Chapter Notes

It might be worth noting again in this chapter that I'm posting this as it was when I first posted it...there are some especially strange tense and grammatical problems in this chapter. Sorry!

From deep in her heavenly unawareness, Rose hears a familiar voice.

“Aurora…”

“A stranger? But don’t you remember? We’ve met before!”

“Oh, sweet Princess. I feared I should never see you again after that first day. It seemed as though every possible difficulty stood in our way.”

“What is your name?”

“And then, after all seemed lost, I find out that it could have been so simple!”

“…you’re already betrothed…since the day you were born…”

“But I am here now. I have fought for you, oh, you cannot know what I have suffered…but the wicked fairy is dead and we are free!”

“…unless you fall in love with me…”

“It is over now, my Princess. I have you!”

The wicked fairy is dead.

“I have fought for you…and now I have you! I can…simply…”

And then Rose opens her eyes. The face of her love is blurry at first, but her eyes soon adjust to the dim lighting in the room, and his face-oh, so handsome!-comes gradually into focus.

“It can be simple again, my Aurora,” he smiles.

She smiles, too. In her head, thoughts swirl and tangle and she finds it almost impossible to sort them out. Aurora. Rose. The wicked fairy is dead. She wishes he would call her Rose and not Aurora, but she supposes no one can hear her thoughts anymore.

The wicked fairy is dead.

“Oh, it is so joyous to know your name, my love,” he is almost babbling, she thinks, as he offers her his hand. It is difficult to sit up. Her whole body aches. “Aurora! And oh, you are the very embodiment of the fabled princess…daughter of the dawn. You are in every way Aurora. Aurora…” he whispers, then shouts, the sound echoing, “Aurora!”

Rose struggles to find words, but she is not certain that she could speak even if she had anything to
say. She thinks there might be tears running down her cheeks, but the boy-Philip, her mind offers her numbly—does not seem to notice.

*The wicked fairy is dead.*

*Aurora!

A stranger? We’ve met before!

“The wicked fairy is dead?”

Rose did not think it possible, but his smile widens at these, her first and only words. “Yes. Oh, yes, my Aurora, that creature is dead! I have slain it, and it is dead, and we are free!” He takes her in his arms, as she has dreamed countless times he would, and spins her around.

“…true love’s kiss, of all the bothersome things…”

“I know you,

I walked with you once upon a dream…”

She realizes that he is waltzing and humming that tune she sang when they first met.

*The wicked fairy is dead.*

“…unless you fall in love with me…”

*Aurora!

“Aurora! Oh, Aurora, we shall be so happy! Aurora, Aurora, Aurora!”

*Aurora! Aurora! Rose. AURORA!*

*The wicked fairy is…

…true love’s kiss…

“I know you,

The gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam…”

*AURORA! Rose…

A stranger? But don’t you remember?

“And I know it’s true

That visions are seldom all they seem…”

*I have slain it and we are free…

Rose!

“But if I know you,”

*AURORA!*
“I know what you’ll do!”

*The wicked fairy is dead.*

*I have slain her.*

“You’ll love me at once,

The way you did once…”

*Rose! Aurora! Aurora, Aurora, Rose…Rose…Rose…*

“Rose.”

Rose, Aurora, Rose, Rose…what new hell is this?

Everything was colour and sound and chaos, and so at first, she did not realize that she could not actually see anything.

“You were having a nightmare.”

The word was difficult for her mind to process. It was simply added into the jumble of nonsensical thoughts swirling around, occasionally making itself more prominent than the others, so that eventually the idea began to sink in. A nightmare.

*A nightmare. And then, You’re alive?*  

“Alive?” the word seemed to confuse her. “Assuming that’s directed at me, of course I’m alive.”

*You’re alive. A nightmare. You’re alive. The wicked fairy is…*

A nightmare.

She’s still alive.

Rose was not certain how long only these and similar thoughts echoed quietly in her addled mind before she noticed that Maleficent was not responding at all.

*Has something happened? she manages. Anything? Or was it only a nightmare?*

A long silence answered her, and Rose noticed that she felt terrible. Aside from the ever-present ache of muscles which fought against the curse to contract, she was hot, sweaty, she thought she even felt tears stinging in the corners of her eyes. Somewhere in the swirling mass of unintelligible sounds, Rose heard footsteps, and at once, painfully, the shattered pieces of her consciousness crashed together to form one unified idea. *Don’t go.*

The footsteps stopped. She heard a faint whooshing sound, then approaching footsteps, then a rustling of skirts and a cloak. Shortly thereafter, she felt the best thing she had ever felt in her life: a cool, damp cloth to her forehead.

“I’m not accustomed to playing nurse, you know,” said Maleficent softly. She patted at Rose’s forehead, and then at her cheeks. “I was going to get a damp cloth the old-fashioned way, but it appears my magic is amenable to new skills such as conjuring linens.”

Rose wanted to laugh, but for some inexplicable reason, this comment, which was more light-hearted than anything the wicked fairy had ever said, caused Rose to dissolve into wracking non-sobs.
“Well, that’s too bad. I knew I wouldn’t be any good at making a non-cruel joke.”

Rose’s body only tried even harder to cry. Her throat made a faint, pitiful sound, like a sob thousands of miles in the distance.

Rose’s body continued to twist and push and pull against the stillness. She could not stop, nor could she even grasp onto a coherent reason for her distress.

_The wicked fairy is…_

She mourned the loss of the soothing cloth against her skin, and felt the familiar ache of an unfulfilled shudder when Maleficent touched her fingers to Rose’s temple, lightly stroking the tender skin and wisps of hair there. Abruptly, so abruptly that Rose’s deep, even breath hitched, her non-crying subsided.

Rose was surprised she had the sense to wish anything amid her silent hysterics, but she found herself wishing she could lean into the hand that caressed her face. Maleficent, who had obviously heard this strange wish, cupped Rose’s face in her slender hand, which caused even more painful shivers to build up against Rose’s skin.

Maleficent was silent for some time, now idly stroking Rose’s cheek with her thumb, and then finally responded to her previous question, “Nothing has changed…well, nothing has happened since last we spoke, Rose.” Another silence, and now it seemed like a tense one. With a tone of hesitancy that Briar Rose had never heard in her voice, she asked, “Would you like to tell me what you dreamed?”

Yes, came her immediate reply, but Rose was not altogether certain that she could. Her entire life had become such a blur of dreams and memories and gruesome nightmares that the only thing of which she was certain was that she was confusing them all. She did not know what was real and what was not.

“I…” and Rose could have sworn that the fairy’s voice had cracked. Silence. Then, in her usual tone, “I understand that it is confusing, Rose. Tell me every… Anything you like. Anything you recall.”

_I woke up_, comes the first thought. That had been the nightmare in its simplest form. _I woke up and… I was happy to see…he came and woke me…and it felt so real, as though I had really awoken…_

Maleficent did not respond at first, which made Rose nervous, but her thoughts had descended into turmoil again, and she could not make enough sense of them to continue.

“I don’t understand,” she said at last. “When did that turn into a nightmare?”

_The wicked fairy is dead._

_Aurora! Rose, Aurora, Aurora!_

_Once upon a…I am sorry, it’s all so muddled._

“Correct me if I am mistaken. You were upset because your prince called you Aurora.”

_And the wicked fairy is…he slew her. No, you’re alive. A nightmare._

“It was a nightmare because your prince slew me?”

_I have slain her and we are free…he thinks I am peacefully asleep. The wicked fairy is dead. Aurora! I wished he would call me Rose, but he couldn’t hear me. No one can, when the wicked fairy is…_
yes. I would miss you terribly. You are alive, right?

“Yes, I am alive."

A nightmare. She’s alive. Maleficent?

A pause, and what sounds like a shuddery sigh, “Yes, child?”

I don’t blame you. I know I should, true love’s kiss of all the bothersome things, what use would you have for a sleeping sixteen-year-old girl, I know I should, but I don’t.

“Yes, well,” she lets out a strangled sound, perhaps a distorted version of a low, derisive chuckle, “you certainly should.”

Aurora! Rose, Aurora! I know you, I walked with you…don’t you remember?

What will become of me now, Maleficent? Am I to stay here forever?

“No, but if you did, I would pardon that, as well.

Aurora!

If he came to wake me, truly, he would call me Aurora.

“Yes.”

I am not Aurora. I am Briar Rose.

“I know.”

Even my non-aunts started calling me Aurora that night. If they called me Rose, they cringed and corrected themselves. …this one last gift, dear child, a symbol of thy royalty…let her have a few moments alone…it’s that boy…they thought it was only Philip. It could have been so simple, could have been, can be, could be, still be simple…I am not Aurora. I am Briar Rose.

“I know that, too.”

You are the only one who knows. I am not Aurora. If he slew you, nobody would know. I would be Aurora because nobody would ever know.

“That isn’t true, Rose. You would know.”

Once upon a…I don’t know anything anymore.

“That isn’t true, either.” Rose felt a cold hand take one of her own. She hadn’t noticed when Maleficent removed that hand from her cheek. She felt that odd, twisting feeling, the need to shiver, at first, but the unpleasantness was soon replaced by warmth, and even a bit of comfort. Rose’s swirling thoughts slowed down slightly, and her mind felt clearer. At least she knew this, Maleficent’s hand holding hers, was real in some way.

“Everything will be all right, Rose,” she says warmly, though there is a hint of sadness in her voice. “You will feel so much better once you have awoken.”
An idea flashed through her mind so quickly that it made her dizzy, and she tried with all her might to forget it as soon as she had dreamed it up. She realized that she had been granted a moment of respite, for Maleficent was still speaking calmly and distantly. She was so distracted that she had not shared Rose’s momentary, terrifying and shameful thought.

“My original plan was very simple, but killing you has not been a viable option since I met you. My second plan was rather poetic if I do say so. I planned to keep Philip imprisoned for one hundred years, then, assuming he lived that long, release him and allow him to find you and wake you, an old man in love with a beautiful teenage girl preserved in ageless sleep.”

…it could have been so simple…Aurora, Rose, Philip…unless you fall in love with…Rose tried so hard to pay attention, but Maleficent’s voice was so soft and so hollow, it sounded like one of the many voices she heard echoing and repeating, singing and spinning all the time.

“That, however, would be cruel to you on two levels: first, I would be forcing you to stay in this restless sleep for one hundred years, and second, not only would an old man be in love with a teenage girl, a teenage girl would be in love with a man who was old and not at all how she remembered him.

“I have come to care for you a great deal, Rose, and so I am offering you your freedom and his.”

Freedom. I have slain her and we are free. The wicked fairy is… My freedom? How? The prince will not slay you, will he? Is he here now? What will happen? How will I awaken? When? Where will you go?

“The prince is my prisoner; therefore, I can free him and lead him here. He will kiss you and break the curse, and you will awaken. I will retrieve him presently, only…” and again Rose thinks her voice has cracked. She swallows once, twice, then continues. “I have come to say goodbye first.”

Goodbye? A nightmare. The wicked fairy is…once upon a true love’s kiss of all the bothersome…unless you fall in love with…goodbye?

“I did not expect you to share my need for a farewell.”

Goodbye. Offering me my freedom…slain her and we are free…goodbye. Where will you go? You are the only one who knows. Goodbye? But I will miss you terribly.

“I will go…far away. There are many kingdoms in this world, and they all require both Good and Evil Forces. I will find somewhere else to be.”

But if all kingdoms require Good and Evil Forces, what will become of us without you? Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, bye, bye, bye…

“You and Philip will marry, uniting the kingdoms of Stefan and Hubert, the kingdom of Gavin will continue as it is, and the two kingdoms will go through a Golden Age of Prosperity, where no evil befalls them until another evil fairy like myself happens upon you.”

Goodbye? But I can’t marry Philip, I can’t wake up, I can’t keep anything straight…who is Philip? My dream boy? The prince. Right, I forget. Aurora! He will call me Aurora and no one will know. I can’t, Maleficent, please don’t leave me!

“Rose, you don’t understand…”

I don’t understand? Of course I don’t understand. I don’t understand anything anymore…
“...the only way I can help you is by waking you. The only way to wake you is to give you your boy. And then what do you expect will happen? He’ll simply kiss you and go about his merry way? You’ll want to be together, and you’ll want a life together, which requires awakening the entire kingdom. And where does that leave me? I know you don’t blame me, Rose, but I can assure you that everyone else in the kingdom does.”

But, but, but, goodbye, don’t, the wicked fairy is I have slain her, I would miss you terribly foolish girl...

“Foolish indeed! The only reason you shall miss me at all is because I am the only person who speaks to you, and the only reason that is the case is because all suitable company is either asleep or imprisoned!”

Rose had no more coherent thoughts. They had ceased even trying to form sentences and now returned to their former senseless swirling. She doubted Maleficent could make any sense of them at all. Fortunately, because the troublesome idea from earlier kept appearing, ill-formed and blurry, with no real ideas on which to base it, tantalizing, terrifying, forbidden, foolish... was it even real? Was any of this real, or was it all a swirling mass of nothingness? Had the nightmare really ended at all?

“Oh, Rose…” Maleficent pressed her cold hand against Rose’s feverish cheek.

I don’t even know what you look like.

The wicked fairy made a soft sound that resembled a chuckle, and ran her fingers slowly and gently through Rose’s hair. “Perhaps it is best that way.”

And then Rose heard another sound, one unlike her own voice, unlike the dream voices that span and sang, and very unlike the low, powerful one that was her keeper’s, the one which resonated in her very soul. It was distant, but loud. Animal, but human. It was a cry, but not of anguish or sadness. It was a cry of aggression. A cry of war.

Maleficent’s hand left Rose’s hair, and an eerie silence remained after the cry was done.

“It appears,” she said at last, “that I needn’t fetch your noble prince after all.”

Again, words began to spin and slur. Rose fought to hold onto reality as she felt it once more crashing down around her.

“Farewell, Briar Rose.” These words chilled her to the bone and her heart ached, but nothing could prepare her for what followed them.

She heard the faint tap-tap-tap of Maleficent’s footsteps, the rustling of what she supposed must be robes or a dress, and then she felt warmth near her face.

She heard a breath, and then realized that she felt it against her cheek. Another and her heart was pounding in her ears. The breath hitched, ceased. Maleficent pressed her lips to Rose’s left temple.

“Up here, Philip! This way!” And these footsteps were loud and raucous.

“Aurora...”
A Rose No More

The boy didn’t speak nearly as much as he had in her dream. In fact, he had no words to offer aside from her birth name, after which she felt his lips on hers, and somehow found the wherewithal to open her eyes.

The boy—Philip, her mind offered for the thousandth time—was smiling at her, a loving glow in his eyes. So she smiled, too.

He picked her up in his arms and swung her around joyfully. She thought he might be singing, too, but it was all so difficult for her to understand. She was currently concentrating on what her eyes could suddenly see.

The room was fairly large and nicely-furnished, with two windows on either side and a door leading out to a balcony. The room was open, with a staircase leading out of it instead of a door. It was also spinning, and at first this caused Rose great concern, until she remembered that Philip was spinning her in his arms.

Finally, he stopped, and set Rose onto her feet. This turned out to be disastrous. Almost immediately, her knees buckled, her stomach twisted, the room began spinning in directions she hadn’t thought possible. Endless repressed shivers and muscle spasms suddenly overtook her. Her entire body ached and shuddered, and she wasn’t certain if she was crying from the pain or simply because she could.

When Rose came to her senses, she had stopped shivering and crying. Her muscles were sore, and tears were drying on her cheeks, but she could hear and see normally again. A laboured assessment of her surroundings revealed that she was lying on the floor with her arms wrapped around her knees, Philip and the good fairies standing uncomfortably above her.

She rose to a sitting position, testing her steadiness, then looked up at Philip pleadingly. He looked very uneasy, but knelt down to help her to her feet without question.

It hurt to walk. Every step sent a jolt of pain through her leg and up her entire spine. Philip made a gesture with his arm, offering to carry her, but still not daring to utter a word, but she was so glad to be able to move that she refused.

The fairies were not so respectfully silent, and, as soon as they had been assured that Rose could walk, burst into an unintelligible flurry of rants against the wicked fairy. Fortunately, Rose could not make out most of what they said, because every time they said that wicked fairy’s name, she felt another stab of pain in her chest.

About halfway down the first of what Rose vaguely remembered to be many, many staircases, Philip lost patience with her and all but insisted upon carrying her. Rose was not particularly happy about this. She wished she could have relished every awful, wonderful step down those stairs, for she had never truly appreciated the ability to walk before. However, as the fairies attempted to explain to her, the kingdom would also be awakening from their slumber, and it would not do to keep them waiting. She and Philip were to be wed this very day.

Rose turned her head to rest it upon Philip’s shoulder, looking away from the fairies and from the road ahead, but ahead they went, nonetheless, far more quickly than she would have liked.

At the bottom of the first series of stairs, which led to what Rose now understood to be a tower, lay the room where Rose had been left alone to mourn the life she had lost, a life which now seemed
impossibly distant, as if it had never been hers at all. Here, the fairies conjured up a pot filled with warm water for Rose to wash her face. It was odd to see herself in the mirror. She looked exactly as she had the last time she was here, except that it was clear she had been crying. She thought she would look the way she felt: awful. So much older. Exhausted. Devastated.

The fairies sent Philip on ahead to alert his father and Rose’s, and then proceeded to fuss over her, fixing her hair and dress, readjusting her crown, and babbling about how *wherever it is Maleficent has gone, she will come back to a nasty surprise.*

Again, Rose’s stomach twisted and she felt a stab of pain in her chest, but her eyes offered up no more tears. She had cried herself out. Nor did her thoughts begin to swirl and tangle, for she had few thoughts to speak of. Rose felt empty.

And perhaps this was okay.

Her mind was slow to come to conclusions, and sometimes she became trapped on a word that had stopped making sense to her, but a low, resonant voice from her memory urged her on, reminding her that it was okay to be confused, to simply sort through it all piece by piece. Reminding her that there were a few things that Briar Rose knew.

She knew that her name, the one to which she had responded for as long as she could remember, was Briar Rose, and not Aurora.

She knew that, though she may have been born a princess, she was raised a peasant, and more than that, as a forest-dweller.

And yet, she knew that this life, the only one she had ever known until very recently, was gone to her forever. From the world of her childhood, she could only hope to salvage the three fairies and the boy she had met on her birthday, and even these, the only faces she could call familiar, were strange to her.

What of this life she had known lately? A life of silence and solitude, of swirling thoughts and whispering echoes of voices past, of skin that longed to crawl and eyes that longed to cry, of wicked fairies who were kind and good fairies who were unknowingly so cruel. Was this any life at all? She was not even certain that any of it had been real.

It had to be, her mind protested after a moment’s consideration. She recalled a moment of comfort, of clarity, where a cold hand with long, thin fingers grasped hers. And yet, so many of her dreams during this time had also seemed so real. It was not unlikely that Rose had never even met the wicked fairy Maleficent, who was responsible for all her misfortune, but simply fashioned herself a companion out of the ominous figure weighing most heavily on her addled mind.

Rose did not know whether this nightmarish world was real, but she knew that it no longer existed. She was really and truly awake now. Philip broke the spell. And she did feel much more level-headed now, though her mind was a bit sluggish. She could clearly remember everything that had happened since she awoke—including however long she had spent writhing in agony on the floor of the tower room—which was far more than she could say for the time she had been sleeping, where everything seemed jumbled even as it was happening.

The business with Maleficent was difficult to sort out, though. It was foolish to miss her, to hang onto her memory. The Maleficent Rose knew and cherished might be a figment of her imagination, a way to turn something nightmarish into something comforting. That made sense, that Rose would want to feel safe and protected when she was neither.
And now, for the first time, Rose sorted through the words the fairies had said against Maleficent. Something about the whole thing still felt wrong, but Rose coaxed herself into accepting that this was foolishness. Even Fauna, who had something nice to say about everyone, had added that Maleficent wasn’t to be blamed for…something…because she knew nothing of love or kindness.

Very probably, the real Maleficent was just as cruel and heartless as the good fairies made her out to be. The Maleficent who had held her hand, who had assured her everything would be all right, who had kissed her goodbye, had been a series of very bizarre dreams. Perhaps the lips, which had felt so real, even more real than the hand on hers, had actually been Philip’s. The two events, Maleficent kissing her goodbye and Philip kissing her awake, were closely related in her mind, and she could not seem to sort them out, to tell which had happened first, or to tell if they had been separate events at all.

She realized that Fauna had taken her hands, and she made an effort to pay attention to what the little fairy was saying.

“Oh, Rose, everyone is going to be so happy to see you alive and well!”

Everyone? This was another word she found confusing for a moment. Everyone…Her parents, whom she had never met. She assumed Philip had parents, too. And there was a whole kingdom of people who knew her as the Princess Aurora, the way she had known of the legend all her life. She was not looking forward to meeting hundreds of people who thought she was someone she was not, but that was hardly their fault.

Fauna smiled hopefully, and Rose’s heart surged as she glanced around to Flora and Merryweather, both wearing equally uneasy and hopeful smiles. How could she blame these women, who had only tried to protect her and to make her happy for sixteen years, for her unhappiness now?

At last, she returned Fauna’s smile. “I suppose I’m not Rose anymore, am I?”

Fauna looked startled, realizing her slip in the use of name, but then she smiled again and helped Rose to her feet. “You’ll always be our little Rose, you know.”

Rose squeezed Fauna’s hand, and held out her free left hand, which Flora quickly took. Merryweather led the way down the next flight of stairs, and if she perhaps sniffled once or twice, neither her sisters nor Rose would dare tease her for it.

As they approached the final staircase, this one wide and grand, as it led down to the ballroom where she was expected, Rose decided that she must try to make peace with all that had happened.

She must let go of her grievances against the fairies who had masqueraded as her aunts, for they had no idea the damage they had caused her, and would be broken-hearted if she told them. In any case, she knew that she would be happy to have three familiar faces with her in the days and weeks to come.

She must let go of what was quite possibly a very dangerous delusion regarding the Mistress of Evil, Maleficent. Maleficent was a wicked fairy who had wanted her dead since she was a baby. This did not ring right with the Maleficent she remembered from her dreams, and it was far more likely, she admitted, that Maleficent was indeed cruel, considering that everyone excluding her seemed to think so. Perhaps later, when her mind was not so sluggish, she could find out more about the real wicked fairy, to help to dissolve the image of the one of her own creation.

She must let go of her anger and despair that Philip, her parents, and an entire kingdom of people, would never know anything about the past sixteen years of her life. That was not their fault, and she
would have been just the same, had Maleficent allowed her to sleep for a hundred years, expecting things that were no more.

And then she had to stop and remind herself that perhaps Maleficent meant to let her sleep, but Philip had escaped and rescued her.

Yes, she must let go, one by one, of her delusions about Maleficent.

And finally, she must let go of being Briar Rose. Once in awhile, to her aunts, she could be little Rose again, but this was as close as she would ever come to her past life.

From now on…

…the ballroom came into view, full of people who looked sleepy, and yet anxious and excited. She locked her gaze upon Philip, who was standing next to the King and Queen—her parents, she reminded herself—and another royal she didn’t recognize, perhaps his own father, whose name she did not remember.

As she descended the stairs, tightly clutching the hands of Flora and Fauna for support, hundreds of eyes turned one by one to gaze upon her, and an eerie silence fell over the room. Philip, too, turned and smiled, and she was urged on by the warmth in his eyes. She could do this, she could do this, she could do this…

From now on…

“Hail to the King!” shouted a man, joyfully.

From now on, she was not Briar Rose.

“Hail to the Queen!” the rest of the crowd joined in the chant.

She was…she must at least try to be…

“Hail to the Princess Aurora!”
Maleficent had always had a particular fondness for ravens. Villagers who dwelt near the forest knew them as the black-plumed scavengers who picked at the remains of some unfortunate animal. Many soldiers and some of the aristocracy had seen the gruesome image of a flock of ravens pecking at men who had fallen on a battlefield. To them, Maleficent’s choice of a raven as her companion had seemed an obvious one.

Of course, that had nothing to do with it.

Years ago, in a faraway land where Maleficent had a mother and sisters as companions, she chose instead the elegant blackbirds who inhabited the surrounding forest. They made odd noises that fascinated and even amused the young fairy, so that she followed them, spent hours watching them and crowing back to them. As she grew older, she found that the birds were drawn to her, that wherever she roamed, one or two ravens would follow.

This was a phenomenon that Maleficent had never experienced with other people or animals. Most living creatures regarded her with, at the very best, unease and suspicion. Her mother loved her and her sisters in her way, but it was a distant, intangible sort of thing. Mistress of Evil Adara had been beautiful, guarded, and extremely volatile. At her best, she was calm, quiet, and an exacting teacher of magic to her three children. At her worst, she waved her scepter, a gnarled, twisted thing with a reddish orb at one end, or flailed her arms about, and caused household objects, furniture, animals, and (not as occasionally as one would like) people to burst into flames. All three of Adara’s children could have set anything on fire with a snap of their fingers before they even mastered the art of walking.

Maleficent’s oldest sister, Seraphina, shared this affinity for fire. Maleficent had always speculated that their middle sister, Acacia, might not actually have shared the love of fire, but, as she did in all things, simply followed Seraphina’s lead.

It wasn’t necessarily that Maleficent minded fire (she was more of a lightning fairy, herself), but it was a little hot and smoky for her taste, especially when all of them were giving it a go at once. Maleficent felt there must be a way to refine the flames, so that they were less smoky and perhaps a less disturbing colour. When-around the time she hit puberty and was going through a very awkward stage physically—she had finally perfected her cool green flames that were more for show than they were actually destructive, she had not shared them with her family, for she somehow felt that they would not be appreciated.

Her ravens, though, had very much appreciated the flames. They were wary at first, for they were intelligent birds and knew to stay away from flames. But they were also very curious, and soon came flocking back to the lanky, green-skinned teenager who often kept them company, and whose magical green flames did not produce much heat or any smoke at all.

Maleficent had the most fun—if she were to be honest, the only fun she ever had—teaching the birds to speak and sing songs. Where around her sisters and any other people she might encounter, Maleficent was shy and reserved, to her birds, she sang, recited rhymes, and made silly noises in hopes that they would try to copy her, and copy her they always did.

When Maleficent fled to escape the certain death of her family, it was the ravens in the nearby forest she felt saddest to leave behind.

Diablo had been particularly fond of this quirk in her personality, though at first he had pretended to
want nothing to do with it.

Many ravens populated the south of the country where Maleficent had settled, perhaps left over from a time when there was much for which to scavenge. Maleficent had been delighted to discover them hopping about, not only just outside her castle, but all down the mountain and around the countryside, as well. They were not accustomed to people, and were very wary of her first generation of minions, who had been large, brutish, and fiendishly clever, fashioned out of enchanted hogs, but Maleficent had fed the birds and talked to them for hours each day, and it didn’t take long for the birds to warm to her.

There was one bird, though, whom she recognized because he was a bit smaller than the others, and because he had a slight purplish tint around his eyes. If she ever held out her hand to him, or made some silly noise to get his attention, he would turn to her, make some sort of scoffing noise, and then pointedly hop away. If there were other birds present who took part in her call and response games, he would stand at a distance with his back to her and occasionally shoot her disdainful glances over his shoulder.

“Whilst alone to myself I repeat all her charms,
She I love may be locked in another man’s arms.”

On one such occasion, she had worked on this particular song for over a month, teaching her birds one or two lines a day and then trying to connect them into their rightful stanzas. Some of the birds had caught on by now, and sang after her with varying degrees of fluidity. When they became particularly cacophonous, the bird with the purplish tint around his eyes would whip his head around to glare at them.

“She may laugh at my cares and so false she may be,
To say the kind things she before said to me.”

Maleficent decided to try something. She took up her scepter from where it lay at her side, waved her fingers over the greenish orb that adorned it, and produced, at a safe distance from the many birds who were gathered around her, a small green flame.

The birds stopped singing almost instantly. Surprised by the silence, the purple-feathered raven turned his head once more, and then craned his neck to that his head was facing the opposite direction from that of his body. Comically, his feet padded around so that his body aligned with his head, and he even took a few steps forward.

Some of the other birds had already plodded forward to investigate, and were making various noises of approval, excitement, and disjointed song lyrics. Maleficent smiled smugly at the bird who turned his beak up at her songs and poems as he slowly made his way toward the flame, stopped, and hazarded a glance at its creator. He noted her smile and narrowed his eyes. Then he turned and hopped forward quickly, surpassing the others. He hopped around the flame, cocking his head and squinting occasionally, and then he looked back to Maleficent and gave a little jerk of his head, like a nod. Then he hopped toward her and stood expectantly less than a foot away.

She held out her arm and he hopped onto it, then, in a perfect imitation of her voice, sang,

“O then ’tis, O then that I think there’s no Hell
Like loving too well.”

He cocked his head and there was a twinkle in his eye as he made his way up her arm to perch on her shoulder.
And there he stayed. Maleficent quickly grew very attached to him, and enchanted him so that he
would not live the relatively short life of an average bird. He slept close to her bedside and spent his
days either on her shoulder or perched somewhere nearby. He would make a disgruntled croaking
sound if one of her minions was not throwing his spear or stirring some potion correctly. He once
picked up a quill, looked alarmed, and compared it with his own feathers. Maleficent laughed when
she noted the twinkle in his eye that meant he was joking, and he made an odd wheezing sound in
response. A few weeks later, when he lost a feather, he took it up in his beak and offered it to her,
jerking his head in the direction of her jar of quills. How could she not accept his offer and fashion
the lovely black feather into her favourite new quill?

She stroked the feather quill idly, then stood and made her way once more outside to the balcony
where she had found him upon her return.

She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting tears, and then reached out her hand to stroke what was once
soft, black plumage. She tried behind her closed eyelids to imagine that the hard, cold stone was still
silky, sleek feather, but the stone against her hand only made the tears spill down her cheeks. She
opened her eyes in defeat and gazed upon her only friend in the world, now a stone statue of a bird
still flapping his wings, crying out for help.

Diablo had proven a very chatty bird once she had won him over. He had clearly been very
intelligent to begin with, but with limitless magical years added to his lifespan, he learned to
understand every word she said, to grasp a quill and write with it (though his penmanship was
questionable), and she supposed he could probably have a full conversation with her if he wanted to,
but he preferred to communicate with written word if his bird calls and pointed looks didn’t get his
meaning across.

He was also very fond of delivering messages, and it was for this reason alone that Maleficent was
sorry she didn’t have more correspondence with the outside world. He became very excited when
she began scrawling a letter, and almost impossible when she began to roll it up. He would dart
around the room, then swoop down unexpectedly and take the letter from her hand before she even
had time to ask him if he would deliver a message, and he was halfway out the window when she
called out its intended recipient.

Maleficent began to gather the large black feathers strewn about her bedroom and balcony. She
didn’t know why she would possibly need them. She could make two dozen quills, she supposed, or
a silly feather hat that she would never wear. It was illogical to keep the feathers, yet something
inside of her could not leave them behind.

It must have been Merryweather, she thought as she gathered the feathers. Flora turned things into
flowers, bubbles, and other such nonsense, and Fauna would never harm an animal. In a way, she
was glad it was stone, for how would she ever have found him if he had become a series of daisies,
or bubbles that floated away and popped?

She hadn’t meant to stay for very long. She figured she could pack her things with a wave of her
scepter, leaving the castle as bare and desolate as she had found it, hold out her arm for her faithful
companion, and be on her way. In fact, she had almost done just that. She had transported herself
directly into her bedroom and begun waving things into a bag, watching the sun set out of the corner
of her eye and trying desperately not to linger on the idea of the wedding taking place in the
Kingdom of the East. She had called for Diablo once, then again, louder, and she had instantly
become frantic. She raced down the stairs into her main hall, where she found what remained of her
minions and wondered how it had not occurred to her before that the fairies would have had to do
some damage to get Philip out of her castle.
She searched among the injured and unconscious creatures (whom she had intended to leave for dead, anyway) for a small blackbird, but found none. She searched the dungeons, where she supposed her magical bonds on the fairies had weakened over time (a skill she would have to improve), every room and every corridor, and finally made her way back to her bedroom, harried and quite upset, and had then wandered onto her balcony.

At first, she felt as though someone had knocked all the air out of her body, but shock was soon replaced by fury. Those nasty little fairies would pay for this. She would destroy the entire kingdoms of Stefan and Hubert. She would carry out her revenge on Leah before destroying her. She would tear each one of those fairies limb from limb, and save the one who had done the deed for last, for how else could they ever understand what they had done to her?

She threw back her head and wailed at the sunset, then shot an enormous bolt of lightning high into the sky with a wave of her scepter, followed by another, and another, and another in every direction except that where there stood a stone statue of a raven frozen in flight.

When she was sweaty and panting from the exertion, she sank to her knees and cradled the stone statue in her hands, heaving ragged breaths as she cried for what seemed the thousandth time.

In retrospect, Maleficent was a bit disgusted with her behavior of late. Crying never solved anything. Perhaps it was time to move on from this place after all. It wouldn’t do for the Mistress of All Evil to be reduced to a sniveling mess every time her plans didn’t quite work out.

But how desperately she wanted to stay! First, she wanted to find out if there was any way to revive Diablo. Perhaps he, like Rose, was merely trapped in stone, conscious of every minute, waiting for her to figure out the solution. Perhaps it had something to do with Merryweather’s magic.

She wanted to look after the Princess; to make sure that this life she had so recently been given would make her happy. And, she admitted, simply to remain nearby.

But Maleficent knew she had to leave, and worst of all, she knew she would not be destroying anyone on her way out. She briefly entertained the notion of destroying everything and whisking Rose away with her, but that was of course the desperate nonsense of a woman coming unhinged. She would destroy herself before she harmed a hair on Briar Rose’s head, and destroying everything she held dear certainly fell under that heading.

The sun had long since set. Philip and Rose would no doubt be consummating their union. The thought made her uneasy and vaguely nauseated, and she found it was somewhat easier to think of Rose with Philip as “Aurora” or “the Princess”.

Perhaps Rose would truly grow to be happy as Aurora. She had her dream prince. She had her three good fairies, who were no doubt busy refilling her head with all the nonsense they’d spewed for the past sixteen years. She had parents and a kingdom who adored her in the only way they knew how.

Come morning, Stefan and Hubert would begin plotting Maleficent’s downfall for her crimes against the royal families. The fairies would caution them to be especially careful, considering how odd it would be to them that Maleficent had left Rose unattended for their retrieval. Too easy, they would think, and so they would strive to be as merciless as possible in return.

Maleficent must be gone before they reached her castle.

She finished packing with a lackluster wave of her scepter, stepped out onto her balcony to bid Diablo one last, silent farewell, and then exited through the front door of her castle, making her way down the crumbly path to what had once been a thriving village. Countless ravens flocked around
her, offering up their various calls, chatting amongst themselves. It occurred to her that none of these birds knew of Maleficent’s fondness for them, for she had been somewhat distracted over the past seventeen years.

Her first thought as she passed them was that she hoped there would be ravens, wherever she was going.

Her second thought was that she wasn’t certain she could bear to look upon the birds anymore.

When her feet touched green grass, she turned to survey the old castle where she had spent the past century or so. She wondered where she would go from here, for she no longer had any responsibility to this place. Perhaps she could travel around awhile before choosing a suitable place to rest, revisit some of her old haunts from the last time she had nowhere to be.

An idea occurred to her which made her stomach twist in dread and desire. She wanted desperately to take one last look at the Princess before she departed forever. But she was certain she could not bear to do this and then still leave.

And so she concentrated not on the first, but the second place that popped into her mind, and with a wave of her scepter, she left the Forbidden Mountains, the kingdoms of Stefan and Hubert, and the Daughter of the Dawn behind forever.

END OF PART I
So I began the process of posting this like...eons ago. But now I am finally continuing it! For anyone just joining me, this is a first draft of a story I'm now revising. So it's completed, but there are a lot of things I don't love about it. Fortunately, the writing gets a bit better/more consistent towards the end.

She had tried so hard.

And it would all come to nothing. If she got caught—and she knew she would get caught eventually, for how could she succeed in this foolish plan?—she would be locked up forever, never allowed to go outside, never to see the kingdom or her books or the sun again, trapped in some gilded cage, to live out the rest of her days as a madwoman. The beautiful, mad Princess Aurora who had either lost her mind or never had it to begin with, left to her own private little world until she was needed to bear an heir to the throne she would never see, herself, an act which would probably kill her.

And yet, this was more or less her fate if she stayed.

Beyond that, she did not know what she expected to find at the end of her journey, should she by some miracle succeed. Still further, what would she do after she made this foolhardy visit to no one and nothing? She could not very well waltz back into her father’s kingdom and act as though she hadn’t gone missing at all. But where else could she go? At the very best, she would make it to the end of her stupid trip and then die in the wilderness for lack of anything better to do.

And yet, was that any worse than dying of grief for the life she could never have?

At least now, from this moment on, Aurora could say that she had done something. She had not been taken away, been lost, been found, been put to sleep, been awoken. It did not sound very grand, but she had done something. She had run away.

As long as she was quiet, she would at least make it out of the village surrounding the castle. Everyone would have fallen into a drunken sleep not long after the celebration. It occurred to her that perhaps Philip had had a bit too much wine, himself, but she quickly pushed the thought of him out of her mind because it made her nauseated and upset.

She wasn’t entirely certain of her way, for she had never been beyond the cottage in the forest where she had spent her childhood, but she had been told that there were clear, paved roads between the four castles in the area. She wished that she could wait until the sun rose, so that she could be absolutely certain of the direction in which she was traveling, but not long after sunrise, people would begin looking for her. She needed this head start.

Her first thought was to take the main road through the village, but she did not want to put too much stock in the idea of every single person being sound asleep. It wasn’t so much that someone might recognize her as it was that anyone out this late at night meant trouble. And so she kept to side streets, carefully avoided walking directly in front of windows, and generally tried to weave her way towards her old cottage, from whence she knew she could navigate through the forest at a generally south-west direction.
It was odd to see the little house, now abandoned and quickly becoming overgrown with vines. She had not been here since the morning of her sixteenth birthday. She almost wished that someone did live here now, for seeing it empty was haunting, as if it were missing something, or someone. This was a feeling which resonated with Aurora in a way she could not entirely explain. She touched her fingers lightly to the wood of the front door, but resisted the urge to go inside, fearing she might spend the rest of her time here instead of getting a head start.

The forest was no trouble at all. She felt more at home here than she had in over two years. Along the way, she stopped at spots where she knew that edible berries and other plants grew, and tucked some into a pocket she had sewn into her old dress. She was not hungry now, but she knew she would be traveling for some time, and she would feel much better if she could take the road at least some of the way so that she didn’t get lost in unfamiliar woods.

By the time she reached the edge of the woods, the sky was growing lighter. Aurora could see that the grassland amid the forest was vast and lush, and she could clearly see the path that led into the distance in either direction. Reassured by the hints of a sunrise, she headed down the road towards the South, where she would find…probably nothing.

Again, the thoughts of doubt and anguish filled her head. She was very sleepy, and it was very cold. She had never stayed up a whole night before, and, in fact, was not accustomed to foregoing any sleep at all. She felt vague and confused, the way she did when her thoughts began to get away from her. Occasionally, she forgot why exactly she had to keep going, and could not just lie down to sleep in the grass, which looked very soft and inviting.

The first reason which came to her as an argument was that she would probably freeze to death, or at least catch an awful cold, to which her mind helpfully responded that she was going to catch her death out here, anyway. The second reason, of course, was that shortly after the sun rose, people would start looking for her. The village surrounding the castle was small, and someone would soon realize that Aurora had left it entirely.

At which point someone would find her, take her back to the castle, and deem her mad. Why was she doing this? Was her life really so bad? This morning had been so pleasant.

This morning had begun the celebration of Aurora’s eighteenth birthday, and what a glorious celebration it was! Everyone in the two kingdoms, which would one day be ruled by the son and daughter of Hubert and Stefan, respectively, had been invited, and they danced and sang and feasted the whole day and night. Aurora had allowed each and every one of the guests to kiss her hand, and had even consented to dance with a few of them.

The feeling of joy in the air was almost hysterical. How could she not join in? It was not only a celebration of Aurora’s birthday. It was also the second anniversary of her wedding, and of the day that the wicked fairy Maleficent, who brought all manner of Evil upon the kingdom, and who had spent sixteen years trying to find and kill the Princess, had shot her infamous bolts of lightning in all directions, crying out her miserable defeat for all to hear, and then had miraculously disappeared, never to be seen again.

Some people, most of whom had a wild look in their eyes and an alarming number of whom were missing most of their teeth, believed that Maleficent had not disappeared at all, but was merely in hiding, plotting her next move. When these people, wide-eyed and trembling, took hold of Aurora’s hands and murmured warnings to her, she was quickly ushered away by her guards and allowed to sit for a few moments. These threats left her ill-at-ease, but not for the right reasons.

Far worse than these madmen were the gossipy upper class women who varied in their degrees of politeness from whispering when they thought she couldn’t hear to outright asking her why she and
Philip were not yet expecting a child.

Philip. The name, or perhaps the name together with… Aurora fell to the ground and retched. She could not. She could not stay and continue to live this half-life. It was too much to bear. She remembered her thoughts at the time, how the whole issue had seemed a minor problem, something that was not of immediate concern. Uncomfortable. None of their business. And none of Aurora’s, either.

What had been her breaking point?

Flora had been the one to take her aside after her wedding ceremony, to explain in vague terms what was to come, what was expected of her. And she wished it could have been absolutely anyone else, perhaps Fauna or Merryweather, or even her mother whom she had just met, for Flora made the whole thing incredibly embarrassing, and though she was clearly trying to be vague and encouraging, also managed to make the whole business sound painful and disgusting while still emphasizing that it was necessary.

Aurora had left the conversation absolutely petrified, and really, at first, it hadn’t been nearly as bad as all that. The real problem was not the physical act, but that it was emotionally taxing, and Aurora had not had a firm grasp on her emotions at the time. Worse still, when her emotions became overwhelming, so, too, did her thoughts, and when they all began to swirl, her body, now perfectly capable of reacting to the hell inside her head, began to twist and contort as it had longed to do as she slept. And before she knew it, she was a mess and Philip was sitting a safe distance away from her, covering himself and looking distinctly ill-at-ease.

So, for the first few weeks, she had been deemed unwell and allowed considerable time to herself, which was the opposite of what she needed. She wanted company, someone in whom she could confide, more than anything. But on the few occasions that people were allowed to talk to her, no one ever bothered to ask her if she knew why she wasn’t feeling well, in which case she could have told them that she was not truly, restfully asleep all that time as they had been, or at the very least, that she had had some very disturbing dreams.

And so, she spent much of her time in a hazy state between sleep and wakefulness, catching up on the hours of rest she had been denied in her cursed state, and hoping that this would cure at least the anguish and fatigue that plagued her body, if not that in her mind.

After spending all this time alone and well-rested, her bizarre dreams about the missing Mistress of Evil had begun to seem even more unreal than they had before, and so, when she was again allowed to spend her days with other people, she ultimately decided not to confide in anyone about what she experienced. Furthermore, she tried to put the whole thing out of her mind. She wanted to be a good and loving wife to Philip, a good and loving daughter to her newfound parents, and a good and loving princess to the people of the kingdom. And she could not do these things if she was trapped in her own private hell, which was probably solely of her own devising.

This had worked to some extent, but when Philip had attempted to initiate the act of lovemaking again, the same dreadful thing occurred, just as it did every time after that. The court referred to this as “one of the Princess’s spells.” She felt as though she were trapped in that restless sleep again, except that her body was free to contort and shiver as it pleased. After the initial “spell,” she was exhausted for days, and her family left her alone to sleep. Sometime after her seventeenth birthday, when she had shown no signs of improvement in this regard, she had simply begun avoiding Philip if he ever suggested engaging in the act.

Without these awful spells to worry about, Aurora had truly begun to feel better, and the court had begun to treat her as if she seemed better. She felt a little twinge of guilt every time she saw Philip,
which was becoming less and less often, but in the end it was a small price to pay for how well she felt. She could stay awake and active all day without needing a nap, and she could concentrate on the simple tasks she was given, which would once have sent her head spinning.

She knew that she must someday bear a child, or else watch as Philip turned to another source for an heir to the throne, but for now, it was not of great concern. The King and Queen were not very old, and probably had a great many years left to rule. Yet, it was somehow expected that a newlywed couple would soon be expecting a child, and so, without being entirely clear on why, she felt not only guilty, but ashamed when these women questioned her.

Guilt, shame… these were emotions she was accustomed to feeling. Shame that she was uneducated, guilt that she resented her closest friends and family… Guilt and shame did not make her run. She tentatively turned her thoughts to Philip once more as she stood on shaky legs and continued down the road. The sun was rising now, and she could actually see the faintest outline of a mountain in the distance.

Aurora’s relationship with Philip was a complicated matter. She had been so happy at first, had been devastated that she was unable to fulfill his desires because she was so ill, had longed for his company. Sometimes Philip would come knocking at her door, and he would spend some of his valuable time talking to her, without pressing the issue of marital relations. She supposed in retrospect that these conversations were not particularly pleasant, but she had adored them blindly at the time. She would ask questions: about Philip, his family, his childhood, his kingdom, or about her own family and kingdom, and he would not answer them. His favourite reason was that Aurora should not trouble herself with the information. After awhile, Aurora began making a game of how simple and basic she must make her questions to get an answer. One day, she finally received a different answer, but it was not the one for which she was hoping.

“All right, how about this: what is your favourite colour?”

Philip chuckled and tapped his finger under her chin. “You never do run out of whimsical questions, do you? I’ve never thought about it, Aurora. I don’t really have time for such things. What is yours?”

“Purple,” she replied, trying to keep the sting of his insult from showing on her face. “Or green.”

More than anything, her conversations with Philip reminded her of another person with whom she had spent her days longing to converse, and who had never let her down when she did make an appearance. Someone who had always listened to what Aurora had to say and who had given it credence, someone who had always answered Aurora’s countless questions.

The sunrise out here in the open was breathtakingly beautiful, and Aurora stopped and turned back to admire it. She took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air she had been denied for so long. It was the opinion of the aristocracy that outside air was bad for someone who was as sick as the Princess, when really it did wonders for her. In fact, she hadn’t realized just how much she missed being out of doors until this very moment.

She smiled, and tired as she was, there was a skip in her step as she continued along the road.

But, she quickly reminded herself, those conversations had been nothing more than disturbing fantasies dreamed up by a lonely mad girl trapped in a cursed slumber, a fact of which she had to remind herself at least once per day. The fact that she clung to this voice in her head lent even more credence to its probable fictitiousness. A voice which listened to the Mad Princess’s ramblings? Which spoke kind words as though she were an equal and not someone to be pitied? It was something only the madwoman herself could dream up.
Philip and the fairies and...everyone...perhaps they were right to treat her the way they did. Perhaps she truly was mad and delusional. The way people treated her would have made her run long ago, had that been the matter at the heart of this.

The sun was high above her now, beating down on her, and she was not quite so chipper as when it first made its appearance. Exhaustion was getting the better of her. Where the night out in the open had been bitter cold, the sun was twice as hot when there were no trees to filter it out. In addition, she had not considered her need for water. She looked to her left, surveying the unfamiliar woods. It was likely that somewhere in them lay some source of water, and beyond that, she could find a place to rest for just a little while. But she did not want to get lost, and as tired as she was, she did not want to lose sight of her journey.

She made a bargain with herself: she would walk a short distance into the woods and see if she could spot some telltale signs of water. If not, she would walk right back out and continue down the road a little longer before trying again.

This plan did not go exactly as she had hoped, for firm as her resolve might have been, Aurora was very tired, and as soon as she felt the cool shade of trees across her shoulders, it became almost impossible to take another step. She quickly slumped against a tree and fell fast asleep.

Her sleep was plagued by nightmares. Some she had had for as long as she could remember, of spinning wheels and dark, distant voices. Some she had had whilst under a curse, dreams of a prince coming to save her, never coming to save her, and her inability to do anything one way or the other. The others were more recent...of finding Maleficent, of never finding her, of discovering that all her odd delusions regarding Maleficent were indeed deluded...of discovering that they were not...

She awoke, heart pounding, to the sound of hooves, and immediately jumped to her feet, after which she became dizzy and fell down again. Fortunately, the offending noise was only a deer, who was quite as frightened by the sound of her feet as she was by its hooves, and who scampered away back into the forest.

Aurora tried once more to stand, but it seemed that every bone in her body ached as much as the most sensitive area between her legs, and her feet felt too swollen for her shoes. She leaned heavily against the tree and wiped one hand, then the other against her forehead. Her hair was a sweaty mess, sticking up in odd directions if it was not plastered to her forehead. Finally, defeated, she slumped against the trunk of the tree once more.

She wondered how long she had been asleep, for she felt slightly less exhausted. She could not tell the position of the sun, but she knew it was darker than it had been earlier, and so it must be close to sunset. She supposed no one had thought to look outside the kingdom for her yet.

Or perhaps no one had noticed her missing at all.

She felt a stab of guilt or regret or hurt or something...and then decided it was all the better for her. If they were so contented with their slumbering princess that they did not bother to check that she was still happily following orders, then she was all the happier to defy them.

When, sometime after her seventeenth birthday, it had become clear that the Princess could not spend her nights with Philip, she had been granted her own room. This had been a topic of much heated debate and even more fervent gossip. She had asked a few times to be allowed to sleep in the tower room where she had been found two years ago, but her request had always been swiftly and without debate denied. She supposed it would not make sense for her to stay there, given her propensity for "spells", but she did have a certain inexplicable fondness for the room...or perhaps that was not quite right, because it was not an uplifting feeling. She was drawn back to it in some way, and sometimes
when the court was particularly negligent of her, she snuck back up there to read, or simply to sit.

The room she had at last been granted was actually meant as a sort of guest room. The Queen had arranged for new bedclothes and other decorations to be made, to make the room more suited for a princess, and Aurora had had her say in the choice of the rich purple which was the prominent colour in the room.

The walls had been lined with books, because Aurora’s reading skills were not what they should be. It was not that the good fairies were uneducated, and it was not that they had not tried, but little Rose had much preferred playing out in the forest to sitting indoors staring at scribbles on a page, and her aunts had a hard time denying her anything she wanted. So, after her few weeks of constant bed rest, she had been assigned several tutors, who were quite strict and exacting. After only a year, Aurora could read and write as well as anyone else in the court, and she actually began to enjoy it.

She was glad for the extra tutelage. First, she had felt horribly inferior compared to the other ladies in the court. Second, it gave her something to do with her time, since she was mostly forbidden from going outside for long periods of time or engaging in physical activity because of her health. Third and most recently, she had become very interested in a subject which was not written about in books she could easily comprehend.

Wicked fairies were a species who performed very powerful magic, and it was not limited in the way that the magic of good fairies was. Depending on their inclinations and lineage, they had varying specialties, and if they so chose to settle down in a particular area, they held dominion over all things Evil. Where many good fairies could inhabit an area at one time, there could be only one Mistress of Evil. It was always female fairies who held dominion over things. Male fairies were almost invariably mischievous and nomadic.

No one whose books Aurora had read so far knew where the wicked fairy Maleficent had come from, or what her lineage was. She had simply moved into the castle of the South one day and begun wreaking havoc, though the conditions of this claim were a little vague, as well. The King had a particular dislike for her, and the Queen a particular fear. Most historians attributed this to their exceedingly Good nature. Some suspected that something had happened to them which had something to do with a wicked fairy, be it Maleficent or another of her kind.

She would never forget the time she had been reading something along these lines…that no one knew where Maleficent had come from, that she was fond of affecting the weather, that her specialties were lightning and shapeshifting…and then she had flipped the page and gasped, faced with a very crisp and detailed painting, apparently done by the author of the book. The caption read “Maleficent and her pet raven, Diablo.”

Maleficent was tall, thin, and angular, and she had pale green skin. Her hands had long, thin fingers, her eyebrows were dramatically arched. She had a prominent chin which was emphasized by the angle of her head, and her ruby-red lips were curled in a derisive expression. Aurora could not tell whether she had two enormous horns on the top of her head, or if that was a headdress. It would certainly fit with her ensemble: long, flowing black and purple robes and a scepter. Of all the things that stood out to her in this excellently-crafted painting, they did not distract from, or perhaps they contributed to the fact that Maleficent was beautiful.

Aurora had traced a finger along the sharp cheekbone, then across the thin, elegant hands.

*I don’t even know what you look like.*

“Perhaps that’s for the best.”
In that moment, her understandable interest in the wicked fairy who had wanted her dead for sixteen years had turned into an obsession, a need to know what she was truly like, a need to know if she had any capacity to be the woman Aurora had made up in her restless sleep, or simply to know anything about her at all.

The people in the court whom she had pestered for more books and artwork depicting Maleficent had acted very uneasy, and she later learned that they had asked advice from the King and Queen, who had in turn asked advice from the fairies. Flora had been the most uneasy of all of them. Fauna and Merryweather had convinced her that it was good for Aurora to know, now that the danger had passed.

And so, Aurora was given anything that came to the court’s attention which had to do with Maleficent. And so, her fixation grew stronger.

She had been studying a picture of Maleficent’s abandoned former domain, the Forbidden Mountains, on the previous evening, right before she had decided to run away, when she heard a faint tap-tap-tap on the door.

She jumped a little, feeling as though she had been caught doing something she wasn’t supposed to, then pushed herself off of her bed, wrapped herself in a dressing robe, and went to the door. She remembered wondering how long it had been since anyone came to visit her at all, let alone at such an odd hour.

“Hello,” said Philip softly, with his usual warm smile, but without his usual gusto.

“Hello,” she responded, feeling awkward. Her fingers found the ends of the tie to her robe.

“May I come in?”

She felt a lump forming in her throat, for she knew what he would find if he came inside. Candles lit everywhere, books strewn across her bed…he would think she was waiting up for him. She struggled to think of any excuse that didn’t sound incredibly flimsy, then felt that familiar stab of guilt for trying to avoid her husband.

“Of course,” she smiled and opened the door for him.

She walked over to the settee by one of her many bookshelves and sat, smiling up at him. He followed her lead, sitting so that their knees were touching.

“It was a lovely celebration,” he said.

“It was.”

“Did you enjoy yourself? You seemed to.”

She smiled, “I did.”

“I do enjoy seeing you smiling and dancing.” He took one of her hands between his. “It has been awhile since I’ve seen you that way.”

She looked down almost shyly, “I am so often tired.”

“Are you tired tonight, my Sleeping Beauty?” he asked, leaning forward. She stood and tried to withdraw her hand, and they replayed a scene from years past, she pulling away, he refusing to let go. He seemed to find it amusing, and was clearly trying to steer her in the direction of her bed. She
found it unnerving. He ended up backing her into a corner, placing his hands on the wall on either side of her.

She thought sadly of the discomfort that would quickly turn into twitching, spasming chaos, the unhappy thoughts which would quickly turn into unintelligible ones, of the days she would spend trying to remember what was real and what was not.

“Please, Philip,” she whispered between his kisses, but he misinterpreted her plea, gave a little laugh, and threw her over his shoulder, knocking the wind out of her. He almost skipped to her bed, where he pushed her books forcefully to the floor and lay her down, then climbed on top of her and continued to kiss her face and neck.

“Philip, I—no, please, stop,” she tried to stammer out, becoming more and more frightened as he continued laughing, thinking this was a game, thinking that this awful state he would put her in was a game.

She tried to push at his chest, but she was not very strong and he did not think she was being serious and he was already lifting up the delicate fabric of her night dress.

It hurt so much more than usual tonight, perhaps even more than it had the very first time, and almost immediately, she forgot why she was in pain, then, remembering, could not fathom who this man was and why he was doing this to her. She was crying out no, no, no, stop, and beating her fists against his chest, but his face, dimly lit by candles, was sad and resigned, because this was always the way it happened. She would be happy and playful at first, and then as soon as they began, she lost all sense.

There had been a time—a time which was not so long ago, but seemed as if it had been a dream she had once, more than an actual memory—when the boy from her dreams, after he was finished hurting her, would lay down beside her, stroking her hair and whispering kind things to her until she began to remember who she was, who he was, and why she felt so horrible all the time. But that time was no more, and when the boy—Philip, she reminded herself—was done with her, he left without a word.

Lost and disoriented, slumped helplessly against a tree in unfamiliar woods, Aurora retched again. There was nothing in her stomach to expel except for blood.

*Philip, Rose, Aurora, Rose, Rose, the wicked fairy is dead…*  

*The wicked fairy has disappeared forever.*  

*Only a nightmare. She’s still alive. You’re alive.*

Aurora remembered sitting up slowly, waiting for her dizziness to subside before she gently retrieved each of her books and returned them one by one to their trunk.

The last book she retrieved was still lying open on the picture of the Forbidden Mountain. When she saw it, she fell to her knees, suddenly feeling especially dizzy. She sighed unhappily, tracing her finger in the swirling pattern of the clouds above the castle. This was how her next few days would be: stand, fall, sit, stand, fall…

And then a thought occurred to her, a mad, terrible, wonderful thought which made her feel suddenly better instead of dizzier. She stood shakily and returned the book to its trunk, then went to her wardrobe and retrieved from the bottom drawer a dress she had worn when she was still a peasant girl who lived in the forest. It was simple and practical, and she could put it on without assistance.
She put on shoes and a cloak which would cover her head, and then, without a second thought as to the insanity of her plan, opened her door as quietly as she could and tiptoed down the corridor.

Aurora wiped the bile and blood from her mouth and attempted to stand once more. She felt even weaker than before, but her head had cleared somewhat. She knew why she had run. She had run because she could not stand it anymore. Any of it. She had run simply to go anywhere but there, to accept any fate but that one.

She wandered around, trying to remember from whence she had come, and again the feeling of hopelessness began to overtake her. She was lost. She would die in this forest. Any fate but that one, indeed. If indeed she did make it out of the forest, she would be caught. If she made it to the mountains, she would find nothing there.

But then she considered her life. She was taken away from her parents when she was a baby to live in the woods with three fairies masquerading as peasant women. She met a man she wanted to get to know, and then found out she was betrothed, again, since she was a baby. She found out she was born a princess. She found out that when she was a baby, she was put under a curse. She found out that absolutely nothing in her life had any options.

While she was busy coping with that information, the events of her fate began to play out, and then it seemed she was doomed to sleep until someone woke her up. She could not do anything to help herself, she could only lie on a bed in a tower and try to hold onto her sanity, at which, it seemed, she had failed miserably.

She had not known whether she wanted the prince who was the boy she wanted to get to know to wake her up or not. On the one hand, she was happy she could keep him. On the other, what if she got to know him and found out she did not like him? Beyond that, she didn’t have a choice in the matter, anyway, because they had been promised to one another at birth. Still more, what if there were other responsibilities and obligations and things that were just going to happen to her regardless of what she did once she awoke? Was she doomed to live a life waiting for other people to tell her what to do?

As it turned out, Aurora had never awoken at all. She had been trapped in the same restless sleep for two years. Every day, people told her what she must do and who she must be, and if she failed, they deemed her unwell and sent her off to sleep again. This, her fascination with the dark force that could have destroyed her but did not, was her only tie to anything that was not in the carefully-laid plan of her life.

Whether or not any of those dreamy conversations, any of those kind words which were becoming so hazy and difficult to remember, were real, Aurora had the sense that if Maleficent had wanted her dead, she would be dead. She wanted to know why the wicked fairy had let her live, had let everyone in the kingdom who had so obviously done something to upset her get away with it, and go on about their lives. Wicked fairies were not renowned for their forgiveness.

Aurora lit up and practically skipped when she heard the faint rushing of a little stream, and she knelt down to drink handfuls of fresh, cool water.

Her answer might be a simple one. Perhaps Maleficent had felt that the people who had wronged her would do a good enough job of making themselves miserable if she just left them to it.

Aurora took off her shoes and soaked her aching feet in the stream. She wondered idly what her life might have been like without the wicked fairy’s interference. Would she have been happy with Philip? Contented to live the life of a princess, since she had never known another? Would she have been just as feeble-minded and unable to discern reality from fantasy, or would she even have
enough fodder for fantasies to begin with? Would she ever wonder if there was something more to life than to do what was expected of her?

Regardless, she thought, putting her shoes back on, splashing her face, and taking one last sip of the refreshing water, this Aurora in this life wondered just that.

With some difficulty, she located the edge of the forest where she had entered and continued along the path. The sun had almost set, and Aurora sadly accepted that no one had come looking for her. It was all right, for then she need not feel bad for running away, for forsaking all of them. Aurora was no longer content to play Sleeping Beauty. She was very much awake.

When the night turned cold, and when her feet and back and neck and shoulders and head protested madly against her continued journey, Aurora fought mightily against them. And when the sky began to grow light with the faintest hints of the sunrise, Aurora found that she had almost reached the edge of the forest which stood between her and the Forbidden Mountain.

She felt oddly nervous as she made her way through the forest, and attributed the jittery feeling to that of the unfamiliar woods, which were somehow more sinister and foreboding than the rest of the surrounding forest. It was something about the animal sounds, the shape of the trees which cast grisly shadows in the morning light. She began to murmur to herself, to talk herself down, that she could not expect to find anything here, that she was simply taking a trip here to assuage whatever bizarre instinct had told her to run two nights ago.

What would she do after she had explored the Forbidden Mountain? It surprised her that this question had not occurred to her before. Would she just stay there? Go back home? Go somewhere else?

She could probably provide for herself. She had lived in the forest for sixteen years, and could learn to live off of these woods, as well. But she imagined that that would become quite lonely, and if there was one thing she did not want, it was to go back to living a life of solitude.

As the trees became fewer and farther between, and the terrain became rougher, she contemplated going to the kingdom of the West. It was very far away, she knew, and she would have to prepare much better if she were to make it there in one piece. There was no guarantee that the King and Queen would not recognize her and demand that she be sent back. But perhaps she could pass unrecognized for a few days, and then continue on to whatever lay West of the West?

Aurora suddenly had the awful and not unfamiliar sensation of many eyes watching her. She stopped and looked around to find that the culprits were ravens, large blackbirds with craning necks, cocking their heads at her. It was a little comical, but also very unnerving. Ravens were known for being birds of prey, often found picking at the remains of men on a battlefield, and so many of them could make short work of her.

Instead of giving into her initial fear, she decided to treat them like her animal friends back home.

“Hello,” she said with a smile. They cocked their heads even more. Some toddled toward her.

“Hello,” she said again to one in particular. It responded with a tuneful whistle.

“Oh, you can sing?” she asked and knelt slowly. The bird whistled again.

“Oh, my love is like a red, red rose,
That’s newly sprung in June.”

She sang this a couple of times. She did not know whether ravens could repeat melodies like some
birds, but she thought she would give them a chance. The bird closest to her sang the melody back to her. Another bird not far away sang, to her surprise, a few of the words.

“O, my love is like a melody
That’s sweetly played in tune.“

She tentatively held out her hand to the bird, but it did not seem to be particularly wary of her. It toddled forward, then stepped up onto her wrist, happily whistling and singing broken verses of her melody.

“As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I…”

Another voice, chilling, shocking, unsettling, and yet so, so painfully familiar that it made Aurora’s heart ache, finished her verse in a deep, resonant alto,

“And I shall love thee still, my dear,
’Till all the seas go dry.”

Aurora whipped her head around, startling the ravens so that they fluttered away noisily. Standing at a distance, towering above her, was an imposing figure with green skin, sharp features, and horns atop its head.

“My Love Is Like A Red, Red Rose,” the figure said softly. “How appropriate.” There was no malice in her voice or her expression, but she was so tall and held herself in such a way that anything she said would seem to have the edge of a threat to it. “Although I’m given to understand that you now answer to your birth name, Princess Aurora.”
Aurora said nothing and did nothing. If she said anything her voice would shake, but she had nothing to say. If she tried to stand, her legs would not support her, but she was too terrified to move. It was all she could do to keep her eyes trained on the woman before her.

“Ravens are very intelligent birds, you know,” she continued when the tense silence had become almost unbearable, and yet her voice was still calm and even. “If you sang that song to them every day for a fortnight, some of them would learn to imitate you perfectly.”

Aurora swallowed the lump in her throat multiple times, trying to gather enough nerve to speak. Finally, she managed, “You are fond of ravens. Don’t you have a pet raven?”

Her brow furrowed ever so slightly, “A pet? I suppose one could have called Diablo my pet.”

Aurora had to swallow again, “Diablo. Is he…?”

“That, Your Highness, is what I am here to find out.” The woman approached slowly, and Aurora felt herself begin to tremble as she drew closer. She decided it was best to try to stand, so that the height difference between them was not quite so stark. Before she could attempt—and probably fail—to stand on her own, the woman offered her hand, which had long, thin fingers with blood-red nails. Aurora was hesitant to take it, but the hand held her steady, and she rose on shaky legs. She kept her eyes trained on the hand, fearing that her knees would buckle under her if she were to attempt to meet the woman’s piercing eyes at such a close distance.

“I hope you’ll forgive my poor manners. It’s not often that I entertain royalty.”

Aurora’s eyes slowly made their way up the long, thin arm, concealed in black fabric, the long neck, the prominent chin, the angular cheekbones, and finally met the eyes, which were gazing at her with an intensity that made it impossible for her to breathe. She wondered if they were actually black, or a very dark brown.

“Would you like to come inside, Your Highness?” Her grip loosened, but Aurora held tight for fear that she would fall, and so the woman did not withdraw her hand.

Aurora nodded, but could not hold the other woman’s gaze. She followed the train of the woman’s robes up the hill and across the bridge to her castle.

When they were almost to the main doors, the woman spoke again, in the same soft, smooth tone. Aurora realized that she found the voice and its steady, quiet rhythm rather soothing. “It occurs to me that my home may be a bit of a mess. I am just arriving here, as well.” She looked back at Aurora, which startled her and she stumbled backward a bit. “I assure you,” she said, politely ignoring Aurora’s skittishness, “I shall render it hospitable in no time at all.”

She swallowed and nodded, and the woman opened one of the doors.

It wasn’t so much that the main room was “a mess.” It was covered in dust and cobwebs, and Aurora thought she saw a few rats scatter when they entered, but for the most part it was very, very empty.

The woman tapped one long finger against her chin, glancing around the room. She then raised her scepter, which caused Aurora to shrink away, wondering if perhaps she had misjudged her safety in this situation.
But when the woman waved the scepter, the room was suddenly filled with a burst of warm light. The dust disappeared, and lush carpets appeared and began to roll themselves out across the floor. Another wave of the scepter, and furniture began popping up all over the room: an enormous throne, a long dining table with beautifully-crafted chairs, and various other lighting fixtures and seating arrangements.

“That will do for now, I suppose,” she said with a little nod. She then pointed her scepter at one of the miscellaneous seating arrangements, two cozy-looking chairs and a small table, and with a little flash of light, a full tea set appeared on the table, complete with rising steam. Aurora felt the corners of her lips curl up into a smile, but her smile quickly fell and she began to bite her lip nervously when she noticed that the woman was giving her a sideways glance, one eyebrow raised, head inclined in a question.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

She tried very hard to meet the woman’s gaze as she managed to respond, “Yes, please.”

The chairs were indeed very cozy, Aurora noted as she sat down and picked up her cup, savouring its warmth against her hands and breathing in the delightful smell of the tea.

“It strikes me as quite odd,” said the woman, and Aurora almost dropped her cup, “that you are aware that I have a fondness for ravens.”

Aurora had no response. She stared wide-eyed and motionless at the green-skinned woman and waited for more.

“It suggests that you know who I am,” she finished, eyebrows raised.

Aurora attempted to speak, but the only sounds which emerged were “I…I…I mean, I…”

“If indeed you know who I am,” she continued, “then I wonder why you would follow me into my castle and accept tea from me without any ostensible fear of poison.”

Aurora tried to swallow, but her throat had run dry. She truly had not thought this through.

“What brings you here, Princess Aurora?” asked Maleficent, furrowing her brow slightly.

Aurora had to work again to speak, and she averted her eyes while she searched for some answer that didn’t sound completely stupid and foolish. Since she had none, she opted for the truth. “I…I don’t know.”

Maleficent raised her eyebrows and thought for a moment. “Well, it must be something. I doubt you’re stupid enough to seek out your own death for no reason.”

Aurora quickly set her cup down to avoid dropping it. She clasped her hands in her lap and looked firmly down at them as she fought against tears.

“Trouble in paradise, perhaps?” Aurora began wringing her hands. “Looking for answers? Or perhaps you need a favour, and went on a dangerous journey in hopes of coming across any wicked fairy at all?” Aurora’s eyes snapped up in surprise.

“No favour? That is a relief. Wicked fairies can perform powerful feats of magic, but it never comes without a price.”

“I had to get away.” Aurora was not certain why she said this. This woman had tried to kill her.
Might still want to kill her. Had cried out with rage and lashed out with lightning when faced with her failure. And now she was back, she was back because she had disappeared, probably with some new plan for revenge, for wicked fairies were not renowned for their forgiveness. She should be terrified for her life. She should not be offering this woman an explanation for her presence. She should not be present at all.

And yet, Maleficent waited patiently for her to continue, and so continue she did. “I…it is difficult to explain, only…I could not stay and simply…be. What everyone wanted me to be. I…” she looked down at her clasped hands, suddenly losing her nerve under the steady gaze of the wicked fairy, “…I admit I did not think it through very much at the time.”

Maleficent remained silent, so Aurora chanced a quick glance up only to find that she was still waiting patiently for Aurora to continue. This, a patient listener, was something to which Aurora was quite unaccustomed. And so the words kept coming. She continued to say all the things she felt boiling and burning in her heart. “I might as well be dead if I stayed, I…I might as well still be asleep. That’s what they…Sleeping Beauty. That’s what they call me. Even Philip. And he…I can’t. I might as well…I would…” she glanced up, and then quickly back down, “I would rather die than go back there.”

Maleficent was silent for quite some time, and Aurora did not dare to look up from her clasped hands. Finally, she said softly, “You must be very tired. It’s a long journey from your kingdom to this place on foot.”

This comment was just casual enough to surprise Aurora into looking up. Maleficent was still gazing steadily at her, no detectable malice in her expression. To emphasize the bizarrely informal turn this conversation had taken, Maleficent took a sip of her tea. Again, Aurora nodded stupidly.

“If I did not want to know, I would not have asked.” A small smile crossed her lips, and Aurora’s stomach twisted. The books had not done her justice. Maleficent was even more terrifying and still more beautiful in person. The subtlest of smiles had rendered her helpless. She knew she would not be able to keep her anguish a secret.

“Whenever Philip and I are…intimate,” she began, and decided to look down at her tea again, “I become sort of…ill. Not so much an illness of the body as an illness of the mind. I feel dizzy and I cannot keep anything straight. It lasts for days. So I avoid him and then I feel awful, but I don’t want to feel like that for days, and he doesn’t understand, he never understands, when I try to tell him no, he never…he never…”

She looked up suddenly, “I bet you’re so patient with me because of the ravens. You can wait and wait for them, you said yourself you can teach them entire songs, and that must be very frustrating. No one has ever listened to me before. Not since…I can’t seem to sort my thoughts out anymore, and
I know it is very tiresome to talk to me, only… No one ever talks to me anymore, and the less people talk to me, the more tiresome it becomes, because I can’t…” she shook her head unhappily.

“Teaching ravens to sing is not frustrating at all. It’s not as if anything will happen if they forget the words to an old folk song, or sing them out of order. Speaking to you is not tiresome, but it seems as though it is tiresome for you to speak.”

Aurora considered this. “No one ever wants to listen. So I never know what to say.”

Maleficent smiled again, and Aurora wanted to cry from the onslaught of conflicting emotions the simple expression caused in her. “I assure you, Your Highness, you have my full attention.” Aurora was not certain whether her expression hardened or if that was the product of her naturally sharp features. “So, you are unhappy with Prince Philip?”

“Unhappy?” the word confused her for a moment. No one had ever asked her whether she was happy. They had expected her to be happy and had been surprised when she wasn’t. Furthermore, if anyone had ever asked her that question, she would have felt obligated to deny her unhappiness. It struck her as incredibly foolish to want to tell the wicked fairy Maleficent, of all people, the truth. Somehow Aurora knew she had asked an actual question, to which she expected an actual answer, as opposed to a courtesy question with only one acceptable answer; however, how she could tell the difference was anyone’s guess.

“Yes,” she said at last. “I am unhappy.”

“So your plan was what, exactly? Run away? Nothing else at all?”

Aurora’s lower lip trembled, and despite her best efforts, tears began to pour from her eyes. She covered her face in shame and embarrassment as she tried desperately to get a hold of herself. But her efforts only made her sobbing worse. She dropped her hands and began taking ragged breaths. “I am stupid!” she cried. “I am just as—” she hiccupped “—stupid as everyone thinks I am. Why? Why, why, why are you even bothering to talk to me? You’ve wanted me dead for eighteen years—here’s your chance! Kill me! You win and I win. Everybody wins!” She was almost laughing now. It seemed sort of joyful, the prospect of dying. Her misery would be over! Her vision refocused on Maleficent, still sitting serenely across from her, expression unreadable, and she felt like crying once more as reality came back to her.

“You know,” Maleficent said softly, a hint of something indescribable in her voice, “another answer to my question would have been ‘No.’”

Aurora blinked a few times. The corners of Maleficent’s mouth quirked up into a little smile. She had been…joking?

“Now you see why people find me so tiresome,” Aurora said at last, slumping back into her seat.

“I see nothing of the sort,” Maleficent replied crisply. “Tell me, Princess Aurora, since you do not know what you intended to find in coming here, what would you have done, had you found nothing?”

“I…I don’t…”

“Would you have stayed, or continued to travel?”

“I…I would have stayed, I suppose. I would not survive many more nights in the woods. And I…I have nowhere else…”
“Excellent,” she said, standing. “Then your will to live has not been completely extinguished. Since you have made it clear that you have no immediate plans, Your Highness, would you like to stay here until you acquire some?”

“Yes, thank you,” Aurora said quickly before the sensible part of her could get a word in edgewise. “If it isn’t…I don’t wish to be a burden.”

Maleficent smiled, and this one definitely had an edge to it, “If it would be any trouble, I would not have offered.” She waved her hand in the direction of the tea tray, and it rose into the air. It flew across the room, then hovered for a moment. Another flick of her wrist and a cabinet appeared, into which the tea set quickly arranged itself. “You may feel free to look around, though I suspect there’s nothing to find. I shall go and prepare you a room.”

She turned and made her way toward the grand staircase. “While you’re here,” she said as she walked upstairs, “I will be happy to let you know if you are indeed tiresome. Provided I don’t kill you in your sleep, of course.” She chuckled darkly and disappeared around a corner, and Aurora felt chills run down her spine. She was now almost certain that Maleficent was making a joke, and entirely certain that she would never grow accustomed to such a twisted sense of humour.

Aurora stood and began to meander about the room, idly tracing a finger along the newly-appeared furniture, admiring the detail. She wondered if Maleficent had conjured them out of nothing, or perhaps out of dust, or if she had taken them from somewhere else.

She dared to feel just the tiniest bit excited about staying here for the foreseeable future. She had so many questions, she realized, which had little to do with her personal run-in with the wicked fairy, a topic she hoped to avoid for the moment. Anxious as she was to determine how much of their interactions while she was in a cursed sleep had been real, she also wanted to put it off for as long as possible, for she knew she would be devastated if she had indeed made it all up as she suspected.

Having satisfied her curiosity with the newly-formed objects in the room, Aurora settled herself back into the cozy little tea chair to contemplate some more.

Maleficent, it occurred to her, did not seem particularly evil. Her appearance was formidable and intimidating, as was her voice, but her taste in furniture seemed to be of the lush, exquisitely detailed variety, and she got the sense that the castle only looked so terrible because Maleficent had not been around to keep it in proper order.

She wasn’t certain what she had been expecting. In her dreams, Maleficent had been kind, almost protective, and somehow informal. She had called her Rose, and had perhaps not been quite as talkative as the real Maleficent. She had not minced words, so to speak. Her responses to the questions Aurora had posed her had been precise and simple. And no matter how muddled Aurora’s thoughts had become, she had always been able to seek out the parts that pertained to their conversation, to continue it as though it were sane. That in itself lent credence to the notion of that version of Maleficent existing purely inside of Aurora’s head.

Then there was the Maleficent the fairies had described: cold, calculating, merciless. Had no respect for anyone or anything. Cursed a baby because she was not invited to a party. Could transform into all kinds of loathsome things. Just when one thought she had some tiny wisp of goodness in her, she turned around and proved herself to be just as evil as her title implied.

The real Maleficent was yet a mystery, and a frightening one at that, for if Aurora misjudged her, the results would be disastrous. She was exceedingly formal, reserved, and polite, though not in a way which seemed saccharine. She never seemed to feel ill-at-ease while she waited for Aurora to continue rambling on. On that note, though Aurora’s comment on the matter seemed to strike her as a
non-issue, she was very patient, for no one had ever waded through more than one of her senseless rambles per conversation, and no one ever continued said conversation as though it were normal.

She supposed that Maleficent’s conversational prowess might lend itself to the fairies’ description, for one who can so easily navigate a conversation can also manipulate it. She had mentioned more than once that there was always the possibility that she might kill Aurora. The idea obviously amused her greatly, which could mean that it was so preposterous to her as to be funny (in which case Aurora could feel quite at ease) or it could mean that she was deranged and thought killing people was funny (in which case Aurora ought to remain on the alert). She decided she had better pursue that matter.

“I’ve prepared your room. Would you like to sleep now?”

Against her better judgement, Aurora had begun to curl up in the chair, and while the wicked fairy’s approach had surprised her, she took a little longer to turn her head than she had the first time. Apparently she stared in silence for longer than she thought, for Maleficent continued, approaching the tea table, “Or would you like to continue our chat?”

Aurora thought for a moment. “May I ask you a question?” she managed so quietly that she was not certain Maleficent would understand.

“You may,” she replied and sat in the opposite chair.

Suddenly thousands of questions flooded her mind, and she began to feel dizzy even though she was sitting. One question, though, stood out among the rest, and so she began before she lost all reason. “You could have killed me and you didn’t.”

After a pause, Maleficent said with a hint of amusement, “I suspect your good fairies have forgotten that.”

“But why?” she asked, suppressing a yawn. She blinked several times. She needed to know the answer to this before she slept. “Why did you decide to let us all go?”

“Why do you think I did?” But Maleficent’s voice was perhaps even softer and smoother than before. It reminded her of a dream-nightmare she used to have in which a similar voice suggested she prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel. Much like in the dream, she fought against its hypnotic power as hard as she could.

“Well…” Aurora tried to gather her thoughts, prepared herself to fight the daily battle of what had happened and what had only been a very vivid fantasy. “I’d like to think that you had a change of heart. That you decided you didn’t want to hurt anyone anymore. But…” she could barely keep her eyes open “…it seems more likely that you simply thought we could destroy our own lives without your help.”

“Would I have been correct in that supposition?”

Aurora yawned fully and leaned her head against her arm, “Absolutely.”

Maleficent was silent for a moment, and Aurora might have drifted off for just a second when she heard, “Your Highness, will you grant me permission to carry you to your room?”

She remembered how much she had hated Philip carrying her everywhere after she had first awoken. She knew what he meant by it, but she truly hated not being able to go where she wanted on her own two feet, and he never took her seriously in such matters. Or any matters. She thought of Maleficent, who had offered her steady, long-fingered hand, who in her dreams had only ever touched her hair and face, and only with the tips of those elegant fingers. She thought of tracing her
own fingertips along the sharp cheekbones in the painting which were not at all an exaggeration.

The idea of being carried to bed by Maleficent was monumentally different than the idea of being carried by her husband, as well it should be. However, Aurora was not so certain that the scale should tip in favour of the wicked fairy.

“Mm-hmm,” she said at last. She heard a faint rustling, and then felt those elegant fingertips ever so gently running through her hair and across her knees. She felt a tingling sensation which would have alarmed her, given her propensity for spells, had it not been so pleasant. Maleficent took her time in wrapping very thin arms around Aurora’s shoulders and under her knees. She then waited patiently until it dawned on Aurora why she was waiting, and she sleepily wrapped her arms around Maleficent’s neck.

Everything about her—fingers, arms, neck—was long and thin, Aurora thought groggily. Her fingertips ran idly over the material which covered the back of Maleficent’s neck. It was soft, silky, and cool. It suddenly occurred to her that Maleficent, herself, was generally colder than Aurora. Aurora actually felt a little feverish, and she wondered if she was truly becoming irretrievably ill.

“Do you really have horns, or is that a headdress?” she asked into Maleficent’s shoulder as they reached the top of the stairs. She was answered by a low chuckle which she felt vibrating against her cheek, and the sound was so warm and unexpected that she found herself smiling, too.

“It’s a headdress,” she responded. There was a moment’s silence, in which Aurora was wondering what colour her hair might be, or if she even had any, which was a disturbing image, and then Maleficent was placing her gently into a most luxurious bed. Aurora let out a contented sigh as she snuggled into the pillows. “In response to your earlier query,” Maleficent said in her usual even tone as she took off Aurora’s shoes and then pulled blankets over her, tucking them around her shoulders, “I assure you my intentions were good.”

Aurora smiled and snuggled even further down into her blankets. It took her a moment to register Maleficent’s comment, and then to identify what her “earlier query” had been. Her intentions had been good meant…that she had intended to let Aurora and all who were associated with her live their lives…and she had expected that they would be happy. That revelation was enough to surprise Aurora’s eyes open to gaze upon the wicked fairy.

“I would call it a pity that my plans of late have not been going the way I thought they would,” she paused, and a small smile crossed her lips, “but I am beginning to think that it is quite the opposite. Sweet dreams, Princess.”

For the first time in years, Aurora’s dreams were nothing but sweet.
An Unwelcome Epiphany

The little princess with hair of sunshine gold and lips red as the rose was very, very lucky.

Or perhaps she was very unlucky.

To cite the most recent example, if she hadn’t made her way to Maleficent’s former place of residence on that very day, at that very time, she would have found nothing at the end of her arduous journey except a flock of unusually chatty blackbirds.

On this particular morning, Maleficent believed she had discovered the trick to reviving her avicular companion, provided there was any reviving for him. Her choice of literature over the past two years had been regrettable; namely, all the pedantic drivel she could imagine those three old biddies who advised King Stefan might have read in their youth. She now knew such delightful tricks as how to turn things into flowers, a skill which she had surprisingly never bothered to pursue, and from a book in this series had also learned how to turn things—only, the book stressed, the most loathsome and Evil things—into stone.

It turned out that the whole thing tied together with suspended animation, lending credence to Maleficent’s suspicion that these two spells cast by Merryweather—putting the Princess to sleep and turning her raven to stone—were related. She had felt so mind-numbingly bored as she read, for this was perhaps the thousandth book of this nature she had perused (and thousands were not an exaggeration), that the information had taken a moment to sink in. She had been almost halfway through the spell reversal when it dawned on her that Diablo might be alive.

Her first impulse had been to transport herself back to her castle in the Forbidden Mountains immediately, but she had taken pause to send a surveillance spell ahead of herself. Herein lay Aurora’s perfect timing. Maleficent’s magic was not especially amenable to tracking people, or else the whole debacle with the Missing Princess would have been a non-issue. She could, however, make a quick sweep of an area she knew well before transporting herself there. The point of doing so was to ascertain that the King’s men did not lie in wait for her return.

At first, greeted by nothing but slightly charred forest and chatting blackbirds, Maleficent chuckled almost giddily. Of course Stefan would not take long to feel safe in her absence. Of course he would not be clever enough to leave his soldiers at the ready.

Suddenly she stopped mid-chortle, for there was someone approaching the castle, but it was most certainly no soldier.

The approaching figure was a woman in peasant’s clothes with a cloak drawn over her head. Maleficent could not see her face, but a few wisps of golden hair escaped from the garment’s protection. The wicked fairy watched as the woman caught the attention of the ravens and the hood of her cloak fell to reveal the loveliest of faces, all the lovelier because Maleficent had resigned herself to never seeing it again.

Maleficent wondered if the Princess was perhaps mentally unsound. Her judgement had been clouded with emotion when Rose had been trapped in her cursed sleep, and so she had not thought much of ignoring how muddled and disjointed the girl’s thought process was. There were rational reasons for it, she had thought. The Princess had been fed a great deal of troublesome information. She was caught in a restless slumber which was driving her mad.

But these were subjective considerations with which Maleficent did not usually concern herself, and
no reason for her to disregard Rose’s apparent inability to form coherent thoughts.

Two years later, it appeared that Rose was still a bit prone to confusion. Maleficent did not find her difficult to follow, and in fact had not noticed that it was unusual until the Princess herself had said that no one could stand talking to her, which only served to worsen her condition and further her isolation.

The idea needled at her quite a bit, mostly because she was not certain whether the girl had always been prone to madness (and how could Maleficent blame her? She, too, would have gone mad if she had been raised by the Righteous Three) or if it had been the result of her encounter with Maleficent. The wicked fairy had driven enough people mad in her time, after all.

Actually, the time away from this whole mess had been immensely helpful in clearing Maleficent’s head, and she had actually only planned to come back in order to retrieve Diablo. All the aimless wandering had been nice, aside from the mind-numbing reading she had required herself to do.

Her first stop had been her childhood home, a much larger and more ornate castle whose only near neighbor, and ergo the only domain over which Mistress of Evil Adara had held power, was the kingdom of Gianfrancesco.

The climate was much warmer there, and Maleficent had found her many layers of black robes to be stifling. She had ditched the cape and wing-like robes—fond as she was of their effect, she was not at all fond of sweating—and switched her usual black dress, which was covered in travel grime, anyway, for an intricately-designed purple one she hadn’t worn in years, with a high collar to support her beloved horned headdress, which she was not at all willing to give up in the name of comfort.

To Maleficent’s relief, no one resided in the abandoned castle of her ancestors. She had still been a bit emotionally strung-out at the time, and killing someone just for being somewhere would not have sat well with her, which in turn would not have sat well with her. She broke the heavy locks on the front doors with a flick of her wrist and made her way inside.

Everything was much as she remembered it. Ghastly colour scheme, uncomfortable furniture, unfortunate paintings still hung on the wall…but what her mother had lacked in refinement, she made up for in sheer brute force and cruelty. She would never, out of carelessness, have allowed her minions to inbreed and turn themselves into a laughingstock, for example. Adara had also been very fond of tradition, a thing in which the Forces of Evil were steeped, and Maleficent supposed that accounted for her terrible taste in decorations. All the paintings were gruesome and gory, all the furniture, while ugly and uncomfortable, would be intimidating to anyone who wasn’t accustomed to that sort of thing. Everything was very purposeful in its way.

Maleficent supposed she, too, was so purposeful, but in action and word rather than simply in presentation.

Seraphina’s bedroom reflected the same style, though Seraphina had not been particularly purposeful. She had truly embodied their mother’s beloved fire. Wild, untamed, uncontrollable. She was also messy. Clothes and books were strewn all about her room, just the way she had left it, though everything was now covered in a layer of dust and overrun with rodents.

Acacia’s bedroom was a little less messy, and therefore a little less rat-infested. The vermin at least had the decency to scurry into hiding when Maleficent opened the door. A book lay open on the light blue covers of her bed, and a cup sat on her bedside table. If not for the dust, one would think she had simply gotten up from her book and glass of water for a moment, soon to return. Maleficent wanted to pick up the book, but she also wanted to leave it there, just as it was.
Maleficent’s own childhood bedroom stood in stark contrast to those of her older sisters. She had been quite stubbornly set on the darker, more muted colour scheme—chiefly because all the red and orange gave her a headache. It was also as extremely tidy as she had left it, and mostly devoid of dust and vermin. She smiled ruefully. Dust dared not settle on her things even in her absence. She was the Mistress of All Cleanliness. How very intimidating. She really was losing her touch.

She had left her sisters’ rooms untouched, but from her own room, she had collected a few books and knickknacks she had collected in her youth. It was a pity she had outgrown her clothes, for she had had very nice dresses, and they were still in perfect condition. Maleficent had already been tall for a woman at the age of thirteen, but shortly thereafter, she had grown to be tall for anyone, and her figure had fortunately eventually filled out a little so she was not quite so gangly and awkward. Still, she could have used a nightdress that was not quite so warm as the one she had brought, and her magic was not particularly fond of making dress alterations.

It occurred to Maleficent that perhaps she had come here for a reason, hoping to find something of meaning in what remained of her childhood. She had come here because it had been the first idea that came to mind besides take one last look at the princess, after which anything would have seemed like a better idea.

Maleficent had not had a particularly unhappy childhood, as she remembered, and she had believed it to be fairly typical. She had often felt very lonely, but this was of her own doing, as she would rather have no companions at all than make idle chitchat with people about whose opinions and activities she did not care.

She had spent much of her time feeling terrified of her mother’s frightful mood swings. If Adara had destroyed one or all of her children, it would not have been the first time for such an occurrence in a family of wicked fairies, or even particularly unusual. Only one wicked fairy could rule in any domain at a time, not because there were any laws against it, but because wicked fairies simply could not stand to inhabit such close quarters. Most young fairies who were killed by their mothers were either killed as infants because their mothers immediately found they could not handle the care that young children required, or as teenagers because their mothers could not handle the growing threat to their power, or sometimes simply for a minor infraction such as a missed curfew.

Seraphina had believed—more out of spite than actual evidence to the contrary—that these stories were nonsense made up to scare young fairies into behaving, but Acacia and Maleficent believed them wholeheartedly. Acacia had responded by always and without question following Adara’s every command, while Maleficent had responded by becoming very intelligent, shrewd, and crafty. She might have stepped out of line every morning, afternoon, and night, but no one could ever prove it.

Seraphina had been the target of most of their mother’s aggression because she egged it on, and almost every time Seraphina had been punished in some dramatic fashion, it had been for something she had actually done. Acacia and Maleficent had lost their fair share of toys and books in the wake of fireballs and explosions, but the things they did which warranted punishment were almost invariably innocuous. For example, Adara had found Maleficent’s tidiness irritating from time to time, and had on a couple of occasions sent a series of explosions or a swirling storm through her youngest daughter’s room which threw to the floor what it did not destroy. She had on multiple occasions believed that Acacia was crying on purpose to gain sympathy, and had cursed her so that she could not stop crying until her entire room was flooded.

But Maleficent had always believed that the fear had been good for her. She hadn’t felt any real kinship with her sisters. Their misfortunes had served as warnings to her. These events had driven her to work harder, learn more, so that when she was seventeen or eighteen and Adara decided to kill
her for one reason or another, Maleficent would be a force to be reckoned with.

Admittedly, the way it had played out had been unexpected. Mortals were not usually a match for wicked fairies, and these, the king’s men who had come after Adara, must have been aided by good fairies. In addition, Adara had not been in her right mind. She had just finished haphazardly shooting fireballs around their home, and had crumpled into a heap on the floor, panting and muttering to herself, when the doors flew open. Seraphina, Acacia, and Maleficent had been crouched in a corner, hiding behind a bookshelf. Seraphina ran to her mother’s aid, and Acacia ran to Seraphina’s aid.

Maleficent thought only of herself. She thought only of escaping.

Which was probably why it had worked. She had been barely thirteen at the time, and had never transported herself anywhere before. She didn’t even know of anywhere to go. If even one shard of her had been tied to anyone or anything in that room, she would not have made it out.

Maleficent pushed open the door to her mother’s bedroom. The same awful colour scheme. Messy. Messier than Seraphina’s. The embodiment of its inhabitant, a woman out of control. Overrun with filth and rodents. Perhaps they had even been there a hundred years ago when Adara still slept among them. It was not improbable—in the last few years, Adara did not care about anything.

Maleficent supposed this had been what drew her back: the fact that she felt nothing for her family. She had some vague desire to feel something for them, to feel heartbroken when she looked at their belongings, left in a hurry as they had been when they heard their mother going off on one of her tears. She remembered it all clearly, but the only feeling of fear she remembered was a fear for herself, for her own life.

There was nothing wrong with that, really. It must have been the recent events with the Princess and her family-related crisis that led her to wonder if there was something wrong with her. Her sisters had been stupid and foolhardy, looking out for one another and their crazed mother out of some sense of duty. Any wicked fairy in her right mind would agree on that point. And now that she understood her purpose in coming, she could move on.

At present, Maleficent heard a tiny “ahem” and turned to see the Princess standing awkwardly in the doorway of Maleficent’s study.

“Good morning, Your Highness. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, very well. Thank you.”

Maleficent had noted almost immediately upon her arrival that the Princess was terrified of her, as well she should be, and that Maleficent would have to take the lead in the realm of conversation if they were to get anywhere. She had also gotten used to being addressed as royalty and as Aurora, or was at least too frightened to say anything against the form of address. Maleficent was usually most comfortable in formal situations, even better if everyone involved was petrified of her, but she privately admitted that in this one instance, she missed the even ground they had once shared.

With no one else to talk to and with no visual reminders that Maleficent was the wicked fairy responsible for her plight, Briar Rose had easily forgotten that Maleficent was the force keeping her trapped in sleep. With no filter for her thoughts, Maleficent had heard everything that crossed the girl’s mind, a circumstance to which Rose had also become accustomed. She had had no secrets with Maleficent. That ostensibly gave Maleficent an enormous advantage, but quite the contrary, it had almost completely undone her. Such honesty, innocence, and true kindness of heart were not things to which Maleficent was accustomed. Rose could most likely have simply asked for her freedom and saved Maleficent a lot of time contemplating whether to give it to her.
But aside from their first meeting when she had asked to be able to react, Rose had never asked for anything from Maleficent. This was another thing to which the wicked fairy was unaccustomed. The only reason anyone ever dealt with a wicked fairy was because they wanted something. Granted, Rose had not had a choice in the matter of dealing with her, but that did not make her pure lack of personal requests any less astonishing.

“I’m glad. Are you hungry?”

She looked down, “Yes, a little.”

Maleficent rose from her desk and gestured Aurora out the door. As they rounded the corner and descended the stairs, Maleficent waved her scepter in the direction of the dining table she had conjured up last night. She conjured up some various types of bread, fruits and vegetables, along with two table settings.

“I should warn you that this is the best it gets. I generally overcook meat—something about the lightning, I suppose.”

“I imagine you never spent much time learning to cook,” Aurora swallowed and continued to walk forward, “or else you’d be quite good.”

Maleficent smiled as she offered the Princess a seat. “Perhaps. I doubt I shall ever find out whether you are correct. There are far more worthwhile pursuits.”

“May I ask you a question?”

“You may.”

“Is it true that you are a shapeshifter?”

“Of course it’s true,” Maleficent’s eyes widened. “Why would anyone make that up?”

Aurora looked down sheepishly under Maleficent’s gaze, “I’ve sort of been going on the assumption that anything I’ve read or heard about you could be a complete lie. I mean…it seems unlikely that you would tell someone what to do in the form of a beetle.”

This, too, was surprising, but then Aurora’s doubts made more sense. “Oh, I see. It hadn’t occurred to me that anyone would think to use my influence as an excuse for their wrongdoings. Aside from having little interest in the everyday deeds of mortals, I have absolutely no interest in taking the form of something that can be crushed.”

“But you could if you wanted to,” Aurora stated more than asked.

Maleficent raised an eyebrow at her, “I could do all kinds of things if I wanted to.”

Fauna did not know what to do.

This was not an unusual circumstance. In fact, she found more often than not that she did not know what to do, given any situation, and she wondered if this had to do with the fact that she always deferred to her older sister on everything. Perhaps she had simply lost the ability ever to know what to do on her own.

But this…did Flora even know what to do?

She had to. She always did. She would know exactly where Rose had gone, and it would have
nothing to do with what Fauna was thinking, or she would think of some new brilliant place to look, or she would think of something. Anything.

Not long after dawn had broken, Fauna had gone on her own to visit Rose. She wasn’t exactly lying or being secretive, she told herself again and again—she was simply going on her own without the company of her sisters to visit her adoptive niece. And not telling them about it.

Rose had looked so unhappy lately. And no one ever spoke to her, not even Fauna and her sisters. Admittedly, it was difficult to speak with her for a long time, but more so because it was worrisome. Sometimes she started out her normal self, all lively and happy and talkative, but then by the end, she would descend into this lost mad girl that no one could recognize. She talked in circles, she forgot who people were, and overall she seemed so, so sad.

Fauna would never think ill of either of her sisters, it was only that Flora and Merryweather could sometimes be very…overbearing. And if one was not a particularly forceful conversationalist, one tended to get run over by the two of them. Fauna understood this feeling well, and she knew that if something was wrong with their little Rose and Flora and Merryweather didn’t want to hear it, Rose would never get a word in edgewise.

And so Fauna had decided to pay a private visit to the Princess, simply to ask if she’d like to talk about anything, and to listen, be it to idle chitchat or to something that was really bothering her.

She had found it very odd when Rose was not in her bedchamber, or any of the surrounding rooms. Nor was she in the library, any of the studies, any of the sitting rooms, or the dining room. She had even gone so far as to search in the highest tower in the castle, where she knew Rose sometimes liked to hide when she thought no one was paying attention. When this also turned up no Princess, Fauna grew frantic. She immediately sought out Flora, who had clearly just awoken.

“Flora, have you seen the Princess this morning?”

“Of course I haven’t, Fauna. How long have you been up?”

Fauna glanced away nervously. “Oh, awhile. But Flora…I haven’t seen Rose anywhere.”

Flora humphed and sipped from her cup of tea. “Have you checked her bedroom?”

Fauna sighed unhappily, “Of course I did, Flora! She wasn’t in her bedroom, and so then I thought I ought to find out where she was…and she isn’t anywhere!”

It had taken her at least another cup of tea to convince Flora to even help her search the castle, and even that did not concern her older sister. “You know Aurora,” she said dismissively. “She wanders about. I’m sure she’s somewhere.”

Aurora briefly tried to maintain eye contact, but then thought better of it and focused on her strawberries. Maleficent smiled to herself and then continued, “I masquerade as the odd peasant woman, but large cats and birds of prey are more my style. And dragons, of course.”

This caught Aurora’s attention, “Dragons?”

(Of course. I feel quite slighted that my fictitious stint as a beetle was mentioned in your books, while none of my actual stints as a dragon made the cut.”

“However did you learn to transform yourself into a dragon? Is it difficult? Is it something that runs in your family? Do you—”
Maleficent smiled in amusement, which caused Aurora to stop speaking immediately, and then considered her questions. “My mother was fond of dragons. Many of the creatures inhabited the mountains not far away from the kingdom where she held dominion. But she was not a shapeshifter. I doubt she even had the capacity,” she paused, unsure of how familiar Aurora was with wicked fairies.

“Who was your mother?” Aurora asked, then covered her mouth, “I am sorry for interrupting.”

“My pause in speech was intentional,” Maleficent assured her. “My mother was Adara.” Aurora’s eyes widened, which told Maleficent what she wanted to know: Aurora had definitely done her research.

“I admit I only read one book about her, but that author said her two daughters were put to death with her.”

“So, too, would have been the fate of her third daughter, but she was clever enough to escape.” Aurora was leaning forward on the edge of her chair, and she cocked her head and frowned slightly as Maleficent continued. “Continuing with your previous slew of questions—” Aurora blushed “—where my mother and sisters enjoyed the dragons for what they were, I searched for more. In doing so, I felt a kinship to them, and in doing that, I was able to learn to become one of them. I wouldn’t necessarily call it difficult, but it is physically taxing.”

Aurora again allowed her eyes to travel up to meet Maleficent’s. “So no one else in your family was a shapeshifter?”

“Who can say? We were very young when our mother was put to death.”

“Adara was said to be…the word he used most often was volatile.”

“That she was.”

“She was put to death because she tried to destroy the entire kingdom?”

“And very nearly succeeded,” Maleficent nodded.

“Why did she want to destroy the kingdom?”

“One of her favourite dragons was being a nuisance, eating forest-dwellers and setting food supplies ablaze. The King sent an army to slay the dragon. Adara began shooting fireballs.”

“Because they slew her favourite dragon?”

“It is not so unusual for a wicked fairy to have such an incredible overreaction. Though I admit I did not understand it at the time, I had a similar urge when I found what Mistress Merryweather did to my favourite raven.”

“Merryweather? What did she do?”

“I’ll be happy to show you,” Maleficent replied, standing.

It was not until Rose had not shown up for lunch, tea, or dinner that anyone else besides Fauna seemed even remotely concerned. Fauna reflected on the matter with some confusion. She supposed the Princess was awfully dreamy, especially lately. And she supposed Rose sometimes did not show up for meals and other things she was supposed to do. And she supposed maybe Rose did hide away
some days, and no one really bothered her. But as these things occurred to her, she wondered whether they really ought to let her be so much as they did. She was not truly so tiresome to talk to. It was only that she made everyone sad. Because she was sad. Right? Yes, right.

Another search of the castle wielded no results, and finally Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather informed the King and Queen. The King decided that, if she did not show up by morning, he would assign men to search for her.

She had not, so he had, and after two more days, the King decided to send a search party outside the bounds of the kingdom.

Fauna could not fathom it at all. Rose had seemed sad, forlorn, listless, lethargic. Not at all restless. If anything, the fairy sisters were worried that the girl was sleeping her life away. That she could have left not only the castle and the village, but the entire kingdom behind was not only surprising, it was frightening. How would little Rose survive outside the bounds of the forest she knew so well? What if—heaven forbid—Maleficent was truly out there somewhere plotting away, just waiting for the right moment to carry out her awful plan to kill the Princess?

“Oh my,” murmured Aurora as she entered Maleficent’s bedchamber. The floor was littered with broken stone statues, some of which resembled rats. Maleficent, however, paid them no mind, and continued walking out onto the balcony where Diablo was still perched. Aurora followed her, and then uttered, “Oh. Oh no.”

Maleficent clenched her hands into fists as she turned to watch the girl tentatively approaching the stone statue of Diablo. This would undo her. Aurora reached out a delicate little hand and stroked the stone head of what was once Diablo. “How could Merryweather do such a thing?” she asked softly. “What would Fauna think? I thought—they said their magic could only bring happiness.”

Maleficent took a moment to gather her thoughts. She wanted, of course, to wholeheartedly agree with the Princess, but that would be neither accurate nor informative. “The good fairies are meant to oppose Evil. Diablo was my ally, therefore their magic felt perfectly justified in subduing him.”

Aurora had not taken her hand away from the stone raven. She was petting it as though it could feel. Suddenly she turned shining blue eyes on a very unprepared Maleficent. “Is he really—? Can you not bring him back?”

Maleficent gestured to the rat statues. She aimed her scepter at one, muttered the incantation she had memorized, and the statue turned back into a rat, which scurried away.

“All that anyone could hope for was that the King’s men would find Aurora in the forest outside of Stefan’s kingdom, or in Hubert’s kingdom where they were headed. If she was nowhere to be found in these places, it was more likely that she had (Fauna had to wipe tears from her eyes at the thought) perished than it was that she had made her way anywhere else.

And anyway, where else would she go? Rose did little with her time except practicing her reading and writing. Recently she had been reading a great deal about Maleficent, which was a bit worrisome given how ill she always seemed, but the fairies had agreed that it would probably be good for her in the end, since there was no longer any danger of her actually running into the wicked fairy.
Perhaps they had been misguided in that assumption.

Anyway, she was certain Flora had already thought of it. So why should she suggest it? There was no reason to make everyone worry over nothing. Maleficent had disappeared.

“Where do you suppose she’s gone?”

“More importantly, when do you suppose she’ll be back?”

“It doesn’t matter! Her plan has failed!”

“All the more reason she’ll try to blow us all to smithereens.”

“Don’t be silly. How could she destroy the entire kingdom?”

“You don’t be silly! Her kind have done far worse because of far less and you know it!”

“She wouldn’t destroy us all. She needs people to torture, after all.”

No one in the kingdom would ever forget the mighty cry and the crack-crack-CRACK! of lightning which echoed from the Forbidden Mountains as Philip and Aurora said their vows. Stefan had prepared his men for an all-out war against the wicked fairy. He had considered sending the newlyweds away to Gavin’s kingdom, or perhaps farther, to shield them from what could very possibly be a disastrous attempt to overthrow the Mistress of Evil.

When the first wave of soldiers had reached Maleficent’s castle, however, they had found it deserted. After they had stayed there keeping watch for months on end, Stefan, Hubert, and their kingdoms finally began to believe the unbelievable: Maleficent had really and truly disappeared.

Fauna had, in the privacy of her own heart, been overjoyed by the revelation for reasons entirely unrelated to the safety of the Princess and the two kingdoms. Because she knew she had been right all along, something no one else would ever acknowledge. Maleficent was not all bad. She had had a change of heart, in this one matter, the matter of the happiness of little Rose. Fauna wasn’t certain how or why, but sometime while the three Good Fairies were locked away in Maleficent’s dungeon, the Mistress of All Evil had decided it was just plain wrong to condemn a little girl to death for something she didn’t know anything about.

But as time went by, she wondered if maybe that was not exactly the case. Rose seemed so very unhappy. Fauna wondered, as, she was certain, did her sisters, whether Maleficent had indeed left the girl completely unharmed. Some days, Rose seemed perfectly fine—almost like her old self. But other days, it truly seemed as though she might be under some frightful spell. She sat motionless, staring with unseeing eyes at nothing in particular. She wandered away and did not make an appearance for days. She spoke in circles, said many things in one breath that were not related, or simply forgot that she was having a conversation and ceased trying to talk at all.

Much as Fauna wanted to believe that Maleficent had nothing to do with Rose’s unhappiness, it seemed that the wicked fairy could not be completely separated from their lives. And since that was the case, it was worthwhile to consider that nothing in which Maleficent was involved had ever been coincidental.

For perhaps the hundredth time, Fauna alternately flew and paced to and fro across Rose’s bedchamber. Once or thrice, she stopped beside the bed and glanced nervously down at the book which lay open upon it. It wasn’t as thought Fauna had not known that Rose had such books as this. The princess had become rather fixated on Maleficent. She had pestered everyone in the court for books and paintings of wicked fairies, or anything related to the one who had hunted her for sixteen
years. It was only that this fixation, though understandable, was frightening.

Fauna did not want to frighten her sisters, and she also did not want them to think she was mad, like one of those crazed peasants who believed the wicked fairy was still out plotting her revenge. But the king’s men had only searched this kingdom and Hubert’s. What if Aurora had left the kingdom heading the opposite direction?

“It isn’t a very exact science to turn something into stone,” Maleficent said. She demonstrated by firing the spell at a vine growing on the wall of her castle. “However, it is quite an intricate matter to bring something back to life. I believe, as I demonstrated, that I have finally figured out the process, but it took all night, and I had to read more drivel about good fairies.”

Aurora glanced at the raven statue, then back to Maleficent. “So you’re going to try to revive him?”

“Of course I am,” Maleficent replied incredulously, searching for the hidden question in her obvious one. She narrowed her eyes and studied the girl, then tried, “Would you like to stay?”

Aurora gave a nervous smile and nodded.

“It’s rather dangerous,” she said, folding her arms. “Didn’t I just tell you that I wanted to destroy everything in this land when I found him here?”

Aurora’s smile fell, and she averted her gaze. “But you didn’t.”

“Fair point,” Maleficent responded with a small smile which Aurora did not see. She would have freely admitted that she was deliberately toying with the girl, but Aurora probably did not know what to think, and so did not ask.

“Flora, Merryweather, I have to ask you something.”

The two fairies were seated at a small table in the library, and had been chatting idly before Fauna interrupted. Flora apparently heard the unease in her sister’s voice, for she turned to face Fauna with considerable urgency. “What is it, Fauna?”

“I have an idea of where…where Rose might have gone.”

“What?”

“Fauna, why didn’t you say something before?”

Fauna began fiddling with the pages of the book in her hands, “It’s only an idea…and I…I didn’t want to worry anyone. It might be nothing, after all, and I—”

“Out with it, Fauna!” they cried at once.

Fauna looked at them and she wondered if perhaps they already knew. Their frightened eyes, their faces contorted in anguish, as though they knew exactly what Fauna was going to say, as though they did not want to say it, themselves, did not dare to, could not even think it.

Fauna opened the book and turned it to show them. She could not meet her sisters’ eyes, but nothing could drown out the sound of their ragged gasps.

This was the page the Princess had left open. It was a picture of the Forbidden Mountains.
Maleficent took a deep breath and turned to face Diablo. She held her scepter steady, at just the right angle, and slowly and clearly recited the incantation.

She held her breath as the stone began to crumble away.
A Complicated Matter

Prince Philip was not a man of many thoughts.

To be more precise, he liked to think of himself as a man of action, like his father. They did not sit around contemplating various possible courses of action for months on end. Where would that get them?

For many weeks, for example, Philip had been imprisoned in the dungeons of the most vile, wicked sorcerer in all the land. If, when the good fairies had come to his rescue, he had sat around mulling over his options, that wretched creature would surely have been the end of his beloved Princess.

For another example, if he spent valuable time and energy considering the state of his marriage to Princess Aurora, he would most likely find himself unhappy and all the more confused for his trouble.

Aurora was…well, she was beautiful. More beautiful than any other girl he had ever seen. She was nothing like any of the girls in his father’s kingdom, for he had found all of them coarse and unrefined. The girls in Stefan’s kingdom were nice enough. He had met his fair share of them over the years, and they were certainly very…friendly…toward him. Philip smiled briefly at the recollection, but then he sighed and shook his head. None ever maintained his interest for very long. There was no mystery to them at all. And in any case, he was promised to a woman he had never met. Could never meet, not until the day they wed. And really, there was a certain intrigue to that that none of these other girls could ever live up to.

The girls in Gavin’s kingdom had been his favourite, not least because there had been such a rich variety. Most of the royal family was fair-skinned and fair-haired, with bright blue eyes and lovely faces, while most of the other assorted nobility were more exotic, with darker complexions and hair of many varied shades. They were quiet and well-mannered—they knew that a lady’s place was not to bother everyone with incessant chatter—and they were all excellent musicians and dancers. If Philip had had the freedom to choose his own bride, he would have chosen a girl from Gavin’s kingdom.

The idea of an arranged marriage had never bothered him. It was a political move, as his father had informed him, and Philip had seen Queen Leah—incidentally, a princess from Gavin’s kingdom. If her daughter looked anything like her, that would be quite all right with him. And so, he had never thought much about the whole thing.

Until he met her.

The most beautiful girl he had ever seen. If he had thought about it he would have realized that she could not be a peasant. The facial features screamed of nobility, along with the fair, soft skin and, of course, the colour of her hair. No peasant in Stefan’s kingdom had golden hair. The closest he had ever seen was a ghastly bright orange.

But Philip did not think. He saw what he wanted and he acted.

The rest had happened so quickly. He had of course won the girl over immediately, and he had been so caught up in the idea of making her, the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, his. He knew his father would understand in time, and this whole arranged marriage thing could be worked out somehow. It would be a crime to marry some unknown, unseen girl his wife and queen and relegate the fairest girl in all the land to the role of his mistress, and surely his father must be made to see that.
And then…well, then all hell had broken loose.

If Aurora was the fairest creature in all the land, then that wicked sorcerer was the ugliest. Philip refused to believe that it was a fairy like the three good fairies or a woman like Aurora. It towered over him and had no discernible womanly shape. Its skin was green and the devil’s horns grew atop its head.

Furthermore, no mere woman could so easily overpower Philip. He had been trained from the time he could hold a sword or wield a bow. He could fight bare handed or using any weapon and he would triumph. He had bested every combatant sent his way. He had hunted and killed all kinds of fearsome beasts, including a dragon. That this skeletal, snarling, green thing had, with a wave of its hand, imprisoned him and proceeded to mock him at its whim, was testament to its incredible, dark power.

The way it had all played out was unsettling to him at first, and honestly, more than a little disappointing. It seemed as though that, rescuing his beloved, would be the moment he had been training for all his life. That all of the combat, the hunting, the training had been so that, when the moment came, he would be prepared to fight the most fearsome foe of them all.

And then he had all but waltzed across the wilderness and up a dozen flights of stairs and it had been over.

And then a new nightmare had begun.

Aurora was as delicate as she was beautiful. Prince Philip had not realized how very true that was. When she had awoken from her cursed sleep, she had almost immediately collapsed. When she had regained control of her senses, Philip had attributed it to the curse and put it out of his mind.

So, too, did he attribute the events of their wedding night to said curse.

But after awhile—a very long while, if he did say so—Philip was certain that the curse was no more. What he was seeing—what happened every time he tried to initiate intimacy with his love—was the affliction of a very fragile, delicate girl. And he would simply have to accept that.

Many people in the court called Aurora mad. People in his father’s court suggested Philip end the marriage, find a sane, stable girl, and send Sleeping Beauty somewhere far away to live out the rest of her tortured existence.

But Philip would not do that. He would not give up on her. And so, every few weeks, or when the occasion struck, he came to Aurora’s door and tried again.

It could have been very frustrating, he realized. Could have torn him up inside. Fortunately, he had the support of good friends. In the meantime between his carefully-planned visits to his wife, he whiled away his nights with Lisa, a lovely scullery maid with a sort of lower-class charm, Elvira, the daughter of a Duke in his father’s kingdom, Bertha, the daughter of a Lord in his father’s kingdom, and Abigail, who worked in the kitchen of Stefan’s castle.

Philip had, in fact, begun to feel almost comfortable with his life again. He could live the rest of his life this way, he decided. Sure, the nights he spent with Aurora were very stressful, tiresome, and sometimes downright unsettling. But he had slain a dragon once! He could do anything! And after all, the rest of his life was so pleasant!

Aurora really was the worst of his troubles.

It was baffling to him why she would run away. She must know how weak and fragile she was, and
she had everything she could possibly need here. She had a loving husband, a family she had missed for sixteen years, three good fairies, dozens of servants, delicious food, a lovely bedchamber of her own designing (not that Philip ever stayed there anymore—she screamed in her sleep almost every night, and thrashed something awful), and all the comforts Philip assumed she would have wanted terribly while living in that little cottage in the woods.

Furthermore, she had not shown any signs of wanting to leave. She wandered about in a kind of daze. Sometimes she disappeared for days on end, but someone always found her hidden away in a little nook somewhere, more often than not up in that accursed tower room, simply staring at nothing in particular.

She had seemed exactly the same as always the last night he had seen her. They had chatted pleasantly, he had wooed her in an effort to get her to the bed, and then, as usual, she had gone off on one of her spells. It had been quite miserable at the time, he admitted, but he left when they were done and went straight to bed, and he spent the next night with Lisa, after which he felt much better about the whole situation.

A few weeks had passed since then, and Philip was beginning to feel the faintest twinge of guilt for leaving his wife alone for so long, whether or not the experience was always painful for him. He had resolved to go and visit her this evening when the three good fairies had come to deliver the news: Aurora had run away.

What was more, it was possible that she had run away to the castle of that green-skinned beast. The fairies were distraught. They were crying, which would have made Philip incredibly uncomfortable if he were not so ecstatic.

This was his chance! He could put an end to that horned devil and finally break what he now knew to be the curse still controlling his sweet Aurora!

“Oh, Philip,” sniffled Flora, “we were worried, considering how little you and the princess are together anymore. But this, oh this gives me such hope!”

“I shall stop at nothing to defend my true love!” Philip responded, proudly drawing himself up to his full height. “When does the search party depart? I shall lead the charge!”

“We depart at sunrise tomorrow, Your Highness,” said Merryweather.

“Oh!” Aurora exclaimed, retracting her hand and shaking it. She wrinkled her nose at Diablo, who was looking very pleased with himself, indeed. “You’re a real tease, you know,” she said with a humph. “Making me think you might accept my offer of friendship only to snap at me!”

Diablo responded with a wheeze akin to a chuckle.

“No matter,” she said, shaking her head. She extended her hand to another raven, who happily hopped upon it and whistled tunefully to her. “There are plenty of birds who would love my company.”

Diablo cocked his head and crowed disdainfully.

“Of course I’m bent on winning you over. You’re Maleficent’s favourite, after all.” Diablo imitated her earlier humph and she giggled in spite of herself.

Aurora did not know how long she had stayed in Maleficent’s castle, and she was loath to try to
come up with a number. Because if she realized she had stayed a very long time, she would feel like she was imposing and she would have to leave, and she did not want to leave. And so she did not give the matter much thought, and she did not ask Maleficent. She hoped and rather suspected that, if she were imposing, Maleficent would inform her in no uncertain terms.

As it stood, the two had easily fallen into a delightful rhythm. They ate all of their meals and had afternoon tea together. They often spent the mornings talking, or sat side by side in Maleficent’s enormous library and read, and Aurora would occasionally stop to ask Maleficent a question or three. Most of Maleficent’s books were on magic, or else referenced magic as though it were a commonplace thing. Magic was difficult for Aurora to conceptualize since she was not a magical being, herself, and all the more fascinating to her for its mystery. The only time they sometimes spent apart was in the early afternoon, after lunch. Maleficent did not much care for bright midday sunlight, and so, although she sometimes accompanied Aurora outside to sing to ravens or walk around the vast land surrounding her castle, she more often stayed inside and continued to read while Aurora was left to her own devices.

Aurora had countless questions to ask Maleficent, and the time away from her only caused her to think of more. She felt that, if Maleficent allowed it, she could ask questions continually for days without stopping. Perhaps longer—weeks, months…she might never run out of questions. When Maleficent had made it clear that she did not mind answering Aurora’s questions, she had all but opened a floodgate in Aurora’s mind.

It was enough to send her spiraling back into her private world of nonsense, and yet, she had remained quite sane during her time here. She had come to the conclusion that the freedom to ask was to thank for her mental stability. Maleficent had not yet laughed at her, nor had she failed to answer a single question, nor, most importantly, had she complained. She had on a couple of occasions made jokes about Aurora’s incessant curiosity, but when Aurora invariably became embarrassed and upset, Maleficent had quickly assured her that she meant nothing by it, which only embarrassed Aurora further.

Maleficent’s sense of humour was something Aurora still had trouble understanding, and she had come to the conclusion that this was because she had never really been exposed to any sense of humour at all. The fairies were quite serious and literal, as were her parents, the King and Queen, as was Philip. Aurora, herself, wasn’t certain that she had a sense of humour, for every time the wicked fairy had apparently been good-naturedly teasing her, she had reacted poorly. She hoped to remedy this in time, and Maleficent seemed to be quite patient with her in this, as in all things.

Generally speaking, Aurora still did not know quite what to make of Maleficent. She now knew much about her background and family, and about her likes and dislikes, but the pieces were not fitting together between what Aurora perceived to be her everyday demeanour and what the rest of the world perceived of her.

For example, there had been that day when Maleficent set Diablo free from his stony curse.

Bits of stone crumbled away from the form of a raven, who then fell from his frozen stance, poised in flight, into a heap, which in turn almost fell off the side of the balcony.

Maleficent stood motionless, holding her scepter just so until the spell had completely finished. The raven collapsed and she dropped her scepter, rushed forward in one lightning-fast, fluid motion and gathered its body in her arms before it could even think twice about falling.

She cradled the bird like a child while, for a few minutes, both were motionless. Then, finally, the bird moved its head, and Maleficent let out a laboured sigh, as though she had been holding her breath. How, Aurora had wondered, could anyone think that she did not feel love for this creature?
The bird slowly wriggled around in her arms, tried to get its footing and failed, then tried again.
Aurora recalled those first few moments after she had been awoken. If she could hear anything, she
could not comprehend it. Everything had seemed so bright. Philip had spun her in his arms, so she
didn’t have to get her footing at first. But when he had placed her on her feet, she had collapsed and
had been a veritable mess for weeks and months and years to come.

She watched the bird just as carefully and painstakingly as Maleficent did. How long had she been
out? A month or two? And the fairies had escaped from Maleficent’s castle…

“Did he know?” Aurora asked before fully considering the consequences.

Maleficent looked up suddenly, as if she had forgotten that Aurora was there. She took a moment to
register this and then her question. “Who can say?” she said at last, and there was a weight and
sadness to her voice that broke Aurora’s heart. Fortunately, the bird took this moment to grasp
Maleficent’s wrist with one of his talons, so that he could pull himself over to grasp her arm with the
other. His legs were shaky, and he appeared disoriented—he kept moving one wing at a time and
turning his head slowly from side to side—but he was up, which was progress.

“May I ask you a question?” Maleficent said softly.

Aurora was stunned, “Me? I…of course you may.” What could the Mistress of All Evil want to
know from her?

“What happened after you awoke?”

Aurora had to consider this for a moment. For one thing, the events of that day were extremely hazy.
Any attempt to recall them overwhelmed her, and she did not want to descend into madness now.
She doubted Maleficent’s kindness extended so far as to deal with that. For another, Maleficent had
just asked her a question, and Aurora understood why she wanted to know. The spell on her bird
must be similar to the one that was cast on Aurora, since both were Merryweather’s doing, and she
wanted to know if her bird would be all right.

“Philip spun me around. When he put me down, I fell to the floor. I lost all reason, I think for quite
some time. All of the things my body wanted to do—to shiver, contract, convulse—it did all at once.
It was difficult to walk, so Philip carried me.”

Maleficent was silent for a moment. She allowed her bird to balance himself on one arm while she
reached up to stroke his head with her unoccupied hand. “And then what happened?”

“Aurora was stunned, “Are you asking me to be helpful and not to be a nuisance, and she did not know what to do to
achieve these things.

After another pause, Maleficent suddenly turned her gaze upon Aurora, who almost winced in
surprise. The look in her eyes was even more intense than usual, and Aurora tried to discern the
meaning behind this. Was there some specific information she was waiting for? Was she going to ask
a question? Accuse her of something?

“And then?” she asked finally. Aurora could not find any words to answer her.

The bird took this moment to lift one foot, then the other, which distracted Maleficent. He padded
around on Maleficent’s arm for a moment, then his gaze focused on Aurora. She could have sworn
that his eyes widened, as though in surprise. He then turned his head completely around and craned it
up to look at Maleficent.
Maleficent gave him a wry smile. “Quite a turn of events, isn’t it?”

The raven tried flapping his wings, but fell back down into Maleficent’s waiting arms. “Yes, welcome back to the world of the living, my pet,” she said. Aurora noted that, beneath the air of derision, the tone of her voice was oddly warm. “You’ll want to take it easy,” she finished in her usual clipped manner.

The bird squawked at her, then made his way talon by talon up her arm to perch atop her shoulder. Maleficent turned and smiled at him. “Welcome back,” she said again, quietly.

Aurora had grown quite fond of Diablo, even though he didn’t seem to return the sentiment. He, too, had a quirky sense of humour, albeit one which mostly only manifested itself in the presence of Maleficent.

Aurora had a secret hope that Diablo took after his Mistress in his manner of dealing with people: that is to say, that he was secretly fond of her, but just didn’t show it in a way that was intelligible to her. She wanted to ask Maleficent about this theory, but she was afraid; first, that she was wrong and he hated her, and second, of the implied question as to Maleficent’s feelings toward her. And between Maleficent admitting she hated Aurora and the bird sneering at her, she was quite certain which one she would rather deal with.

Aurora knew she was being paranoid. Maleficent showed no signs of being bothered by her presence, and showed many signs, albeit cryptic ones, of enjoying her company. The one Aurora was beginning to pick up on most often was the way she sometimes pointed out that she never did anything she didn’t want to do. Another favourite activity of Aurora’s was deciphering the subtle shifts in the tone of Maleficent’s voice, for although it could never exactly be described as warm, there was a distinct difference between the usual, brisk manner in which she spoke, and the gentler, more nuanced tone she sometimes employed, which hinted at layers upon layers of meaning laced into her words.

Her secret favourite, though, and something she would never, ever admit to, was when, on a couple of occasions, she had been idly chatting about something or other, or singing to a raven, and she had glanced over at Maleficent to find her staring back, brow ever so slightly furrowed, a half smile gracing her ruby red lips. It was a contemplative gaze, as though she were studying Aurora, and yet, there was something distinctly warm and fond in her expression that made Aurora’s heart flutter as she quickly averted her gaze.

Aurora described the feeling as a fluttering of the heart because she had never felt anything like it before. She remembered the first time her heart had made itself known in Maleficent’s presence, and it had been quite surprising and frightening to her. The two had been sharing one of the first of many afternoon walks to come, shortly after Aurora’s arrival.

“May I ask you a question?”

“You may.”

“Where have you been for the past two years?”

“Here and there,” she replied. “I visited my childhood home briefly, traveled with a band of wicked fairies I’ve known for many years, did a lot of reading…” Maleficent paused, and after some time, it became clear that she had nothing more to say.

“That sounds…rather sad. And lonely.”
Maleficent glanced in her direction, but continued walking. “How so?”

“Visiting your childhood home, where your mother and sisters were…well, they were put to death, weren’t they? What was it like?”

“It’s not as though I loved them, Aurora,” she said simply, and for some reason Aurora could not entirely explain, the statement made her heart ache tremendously, and she felt her eyes fill with tears. Aurora had stopped walking, and Maleficent turned to her, surprised. “It isn’t so unusual,” she continued more gently. “I am a wicked fairy, after all, and you seem to have done your reading on the subject.”

“But…is…” Aurora felt her thoughts getting away from her as she tried desperately to keep tears from spilling down her cheeks. “Isn’t there anyone…I mean… Did you feel nothing for them?”

“What do you feel for your parents, the King and Queen?”

This question further stunned Aurora, and she struggled to gather her thoughts. “I feel…they are kind people, and I…they have been so warm and kind to me, and they waited sixteen years for…I mean…” she shook her head sadly.

“Is there anyone, at this very moment, without a doubt in your mind, that you could tell me you love?”

She did not love her parents. What an awful thing to think. Philip. She…oh, she felt ill at the thought of him. She did not…this was so terrible. She did not love her husband. She supposed she loved the Good Fairies. Supposed. For they had raised her and cared for her, and they had always been kind and loving to her. Loving. “Well, I…of course I love Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather. Even…I know you’ll say, even after…no, but you wouldn’t because…nevermind that. I know they weren’t the best of caretakers, but they did take care of me in the only way they knew how. And I know they love me in their way.”

Maleficent nodded, but said nothing.

“And you?” Aurora asked, barely audibly, and immediately averted her eyes.

“As you’ve just realized,” she said as she began walking again, “love is a complicated matter. I wonder why exactly you’d like to know.”

“I—I am sorry, it’s such a rude question, I only meant…it’s just that the Good Fairies always say…” she paused and took a deep breath.

“They always say Maleficent knows—I mean—they say that you know nothing of love or kindness, and I just…I don’t believe it’s true, for you have been very kind to me, and you let everyone go…and you said your intentions were good. I’m sorry.”

“It must be exhausting, trying to believe the best of me.” Aurora dared to look up and found that Maleficent was smiling almost warmly as she looked ahead. “But what good is my answer to such a subjective question? If I were to say to you that of course I am capable of love and kindness, would that make it true?” Aurora felt heat rising in her cheeks. “To respond to your previous question, I certainly felt something for my mother and sisters, but it was more akin to duty than any other emotion. It seems to trouble you that I say I did not love them, but if I tried to, I would have died with them. Would it have been better in your mind to die for some deluded sense of allegiance to them, thereby never living long enough to have the chance to love anyone at all?”

Aurora considered this for a moment before answering, “I suppose not.”
There was a moment’s silence as Aurora studied the grass beneath her feet. Then she suddenly looked up again. “Diablo?” Aurora asked softly.

Maleficent stopped walking. “Diablo is my only friend in the world. Of course I love him.”

Aurora was not certain how or why the next question escaped her lips, but she was suddenly aware of how close she was to the wicked fairy, for she had to crane her neck to meet her eyes. “What about me?”

Maleficent raised her eyebrows and tried quite unsuccessfully to suppress a smile. “What about you? Are you my friend, or could I love you?”

Aurora blushed fiercely and backed away, “Nevermind that. I embarrass myself.”

Maleficent tilted her head slightly. “There is something delightful about saying whatever you are thinking, isn’t there?”

“Wh-what?” Aurora, who had continued to back away, stumbled over something. Before she even fully realized she was falling, Maleficent was firmly gripping her arms, holding her steady. Aurora could not help but look up into her eyes again. They were definitely black. There was not even a hint of warm brown or cool grey in them.

“You have a habit, Princess Aurora,” Maleficent said so softly that Aurora could barely hear her, “of saying or asking very intriguing things, and then shying away from them.”

Aurora tried to swallow. “Intriguing?”

Maleficent raised her eyebrows.

“I…I am very worried,” Aurora continued unsteadily, “that you’ll grow tired of all of my questions. It’s only that no one…no one has ever answered them before.”

Maleficent shook her head, “But however would anyone learn anything if not by asking questions?”

A warm, bubbly feeling, so different and so much more pleasant than the feeling of embarrassment, began to spread through Aurora’s chest, and she felt herself half-smiling, “Exactly! And there is so…” she bit her lip, “so much I want to know.”

But the whole thing had become too much for her, and she had backed away, panting, trying desperately to catch her breath and figure out why her heart was not only pounding, but fluttering.

It struck Aurora as odd that someone who was ostensibly so different from her was the only one who had ever seemed to understand her at all. But then, perhaps they weren’t so different as they seemed. They both valued knowledge, for example. And they liked music. And animals.

Aurora smiled to herself as she stroked the feathers of the raven who was perched upon her arm, singing bits and pieces of an old folk song to her. The biggest difference between them, really, was their level of familiarity with themselves and the world. Maleficent had seen and done and been so many things, and she seemed to know who she was and to relish it. Aurora, on the other hand, had just recently been granted…or granted herself, depending on one’s perspective…the freedom to be whoever it was she wanted to be, and she was just beginning to explore that freedom.

“I should remind you that I don’t need to keep you alive at all.”

Please don’t kill me. I haven’t even lived yet.
Aurora would say that she wondered whether that conversation had even really happened, but to wonder was too easy a word. She ached for the knowledge. Sometimes, when she lay in her bed at night, she worked herself up into a frenzy with the need to know whether Maleficent had truly spoken to her when she was under the curse. On one occasion, she had even gotten up out of bed and made her way all the way to the door of Maleficent’s bedchamber, raised her hand to knock, and then she had been seized by a terrible fear and had raced back to her bed and hidden under the covers, trembling in fear that Maleficent had sensed her presence and would come to investigate.

As much as she needed to know the answer, the answer was almost certainly that she had made the greater part of it up, if not the whole thing. The earliest conversations seemed as though they could have involved the Maleficent she now knew. She was formal, almost congenial, were she not so threatening, and had a sort of twisted sense of humour. These things made sense to Aurora, and even sort-of made sense in light of what the Good Fairies thought of Maleficent.

It was the later conversations which did not fit. The hesitancy, the gentleness, the broken voice wrought with emotion, cool lips pressed against her temple…

An idea flashed through her mind so quickly that it made her dizzy, and she tried with all her might to forget it as soon as she had dreamed it up.

Aurora knew on some level that she had made these things up. She had truly been mad then, and the real Maleficent showed no signs of being capable of hesitancy or hysterics. The most vulnerable Aurora had seen her had been with Diablo, and even that had been understated and controlled. Yes, Aurora knew, but she could not bear to be told. This, her illusion of a sympathetic friend who cared for her and set her free, was the only thing that had kept Aurora from losing what remained of her senses. Reading those books, seeing those pictures, obsessing, dreaming, wishing…these were the only reason she was able to break free from the miserable life she was meant to lead. Even if it was only a dream, Aurora was not certain what would become of her if she lost it.

Aurora sighed and shook her head as she began to sing idly.

“Black, black, black is the colour of my true love’s hair…
Her lips are like a rose so fair.”

The raven perked up at this new melody, but Aurora was not in the mood to teach a song, particularly this one.

“The purest eyes and the bravest hands
I love the ground whereon she stands.”

She had learned it a long time ago from Fauna, who was very fond of it and often hummed the tune to herself. It was not a song Aurora had sung before in her time here, for reasons she could not entirely explain. Now, alone and feeling quite emotional, she felt it pouring forth from her very soul, as though she desperately needed to sing it.

“Oh, I do love my love, and well she knows
I love the ground whereon she goes.”

Aurora’s eyes were closed, squeezed shut against the world as she sang. She faintly realized that tears were streaming down her cheeks. How had she not seen it before?

“And if my love no more I see,
My life would quickly fade away…”
But she would have to leave someday. She could not simply stay here forever, desperately in love with... oh, it was too painful even to think it! How, how did she not realize it? She truly was mad, sick in the head, and this was proof if there was any to be had.

“Black, black, black is the colour of my true…”

She felt a small nudge against her hand, which was clutching her skirt tightly, and she opened her eyes, blinking away tears. Diablo nudged her once more and then met her gaze solemnly.

Aurora let go of her skirt and offered her hand to him. He climbed upon it and cocked his head.

“What?” she asked with a snuffle.

He whistled the tune back to her.

“You like that song?”

That a bird was capable of rolling its eyes cheered Aurora up somewhat. “Oh, then you know.”

Aurora sighed, and she dared to lift a hand to stroke Diablo’s feathers. He let her. “But there’s nothing I can do. Even if it weren’t so, so very wrong... But it is. I am mad. I am sick. The people in the court didn’t even know how right they were about that.”

Diablo shook his head vehemently, and Aurora felt a tiny flutter of hope in her heart. “Really? You don’t think I’m sick?” He shook his head again.

Aurora sighed, “Well, that’s very sweet of you to say, but there’s still nothing I can do.”

Diablo gave an indignant squawk.

“What?” Aurora’s eyes widened as she deciphered the meaning behind his call. “You think I should tell her?” Diablo nodded. “I can’t tell her!” The thought terrified her. She could not even imagine it! What would she say?

Diablo huffed in irritation and padded around on her arm to gain better footing. Then he sang, in an excellent imitation of Maleficent’s voice,

“Oh, my love is like a red, red rose
That’s newly sprung in June.”

“Diablo, I don’t know what you’re-“

“My love is like a melody
That’s sweetly played in tune.”

But there was no sense in it. Aurora would have to make a painful confession and then what? Maleficent, disturbed and disgusted, would send her away forever. The very best she could hope for was pity.

“My Love is like a Red, Red Rose. How appropriate.”

The memory put a stop to Aurora’s depressive spiral of thoughts. What was it Diablo meant by singing her this song?

“As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I,”
“Diablo,” Aurora gasped, “you don’t mean to say…”

“And I shall love thee still, my dear
Till all the seas go dry.”

Again, she found that she was crying, but this time her tears were of joy. “You’re sure?”

Diablo nodded and Aurora’s heart soared.

“Then I must go to her at once!” Aurora cried, all but jumping to her feet. “Will you come with me?” she asked Diablo.

In response, Diablo paddled his way up her arm and perched himself on her shoulder. She turned and smiled to him, and she saw that there was a twinkle in his eye. She privately decided that this was his version of a smile, but perhaps this was overly optimistic.

Aurora turned to walk up the hill to the castle, but she quickly stopped in her tracks. She heard the sound of horses approaching, many of them by the sound of it, and they were quite close. She did not know how she had not heard them before. The ravens slowly began to scatter, chattering nervously as they flew back into the trees. Diablo remained on her shoulder, but he was on the alert, craning his neck in every direction.

As soon as they broke through the trees, Diablo took flight and let out a mighty call, circling every tower of the castle. Aurora was too scared to run. She knew those colours, she knew the horses, and she knew the man leading the charge.

It was Philip.
Maleficent could not believe her good fortune.

It seemed that Aurora would never run out of questions to ask Maleficent: about her life, about Aurora’s own life, about everything. The Princess sought her out when she awoke in the morning. They dined together and had afternoon tea. They took walks through the forest, and sometimes whiled away their afternoons simply singing old folk songs to the multitude of exceptionally clever ravens who inhabited her domain. Aurora knew countless songs and she had a lovely voice, gifted to her by Fauna, though she revealed she had not sung much in the past two years.

“May I ask you something?” she had said one day, idly stroking the feathers of a raven who was perched on her arm making odd clicking sounds.

“You may,” Maleficent responded, as usual.

“Well, possibly a series of questions,” she amended, and a faint tinge of pink coloured her cheeks.

Maleficent raised an eyebrow, “Go on.”

“What did the other fairies give me?”

Maleficent hesitated. The subject she had dreaded was fast approaching. “Flora gifted you with beauty, Fauna with song, and Merryweather would no doubt have gifted you with a sweet disposition, had I not intervened.”

Aurora looked up, “Intervened? How?”

“I chose that time to make my most unwelcome appearance at your christening.”

Aurora seemed to consider this for a moment. Maleficent was not certain how much of this story Aurora knew.

Without looking up, she said softly, “Everyone says that you meant for me to die simply because you weren’t invited.”

Maleficent chuckled darkly, “Well, I suppose no one has any reason to believe otherwise.”

Aurora looked up and her eyes were shining. “It wasn’t, was it? It wasn’t all because of a party?”

“Of course not,” Maleficent replied. “Though I warn you, the real reason, should you wish to know it, is not particularly noble.”

“I…I wish to know it,” she said, trying to find a place to focus her gaze.

Maleficent nodded. “Your mother was unable to conceive. She became so desperate that she turned to a wicked fairy for assistance. As I may have mentioned to you, wicked fairies can perform great feats of magic, but it does not come without a price.” Aurora finally turned her gaze back to Maleficent. “As it happens, I took pity on the Queen, and my price was small.”

“What was your price?”

“I wanted to be invited to your christening in order to bestow a magical gift upon you as was permitted of the good fairies, I wanted to be consulted when it was time for you to marry, and I asked
that Stefan and Leah cease regarding me and my line of work with fear and contempt.”

Aurora frowned, “Well, they certainly didn’t do that.”

It struck Maleficent as particularly tragic that Aurora was so blissfully naïve as to believe her immediately. It wasn’t as though she had ever told the Princess a lie, but she was quite certain that this conversation would go a lot differently if Maleficent were telling her story to King Stefan.

“Precisely,” she replied, putting aside her thoughts on the matter of revenge. “If it had only been the christening, I would not have lashed out so harshly.”

“So after you…after you cursed me…?”

“Merryweather used her gift to save you from death.”

“What…” Aurora paused and swallowed, “What would your gift have been, had all of your conditions been met?”

“Oh, I was thinking intelligence.”

Aurora raised her eyebrows, “So you really didn’t intend to cause any trouble?”

Maleficent tapped her nose with one finger and a small smile crossed her lips. “Which is why it was particularly irritating that the Queen did not keep up her end of the deal.”

Aurora shook her head, “But…but what would I have been like if I had not received any of these gifts? Did you give my mother an ugly, talentless child?”

“My dear,” Maleficent laughed, unable to conjure up any image of an unremarkable Aurora, “you are far better at this than I, for the thought never crossed my mind.” She sobered before continuing, “I imagine you would have been much the same, for do you not have a sweet disposition without Merryweather’s intended gift? Are you not intelligent without mine? Perhaps you would not have had such a lovely singing voice…which would, as I understand it, have earned you some trouble in ensnaring Prince Philip.”

Aurora frowned. “That would have been quite a bit of trouble.”

“Not really, assuming the rest of the sequence of events remained the same.”

“But how else would I have awoken?”

“It’s quite possible you would never have been put to sleep. The only reason I was able to lure you away from your fairies was because they left you unattended to mourn the boy you met in the woods.” Well, perhaps that was a lie. Maleficent always found a way to get what she wanted. However, she could no longer remember what it was like to wish Aurora any harm.

Aurora, who looked more and more troubled as the conversation progressed, considered this for a moment, “It is…I find it very distressing that they would not have understood at all why I was upset if the boy…I mean, Philip…had not been a part of it.”

Maleficent did not know how to respond to this, so she waited to see if Aurora would say more.

“They still do not understand,” she said after a moment. “People are always asking them if I have always been mad, and no one believes them when they say no, because how could I be driven mad? I have a husband who loves me, I am a princess, I have a family, I have…everything and I am
unhappy. I must be mad. I must have always been mad.”

Aurora looked up suddenly, biting her lip. She opened her mouth as if to speak, closed it, then opened and closed it again. Then she covered her face with her hands and began to weep.

If Maleficent did not know what to do before, she was truly at a loss now. She was wholly unaccustomed, not to constant, unprovoked outbursts of emotion, but to caring about how to react to them. Uncertainly she reached out and placed a hand on the girl’s shoulder. Aurora sniffed a few times, then dropped her hands from her face. Maleficent brushed a blonde lock of hair away from Aurora’s face, and, to her immense surprise, Aurora reached up, took her hand, and held it against her cheek, her eyes squeezed shut.

Aurora’s hand was small, soft, and warm. Maleficent did not have much experience touching people, but she knew her hands must feel frightfully cold. She had always been tall and spindly, and her circulation was not quite up to the task. She wasn’t certain why this contrast had not occurred to her already. She had touched Aurora’s face a few times, had offered her hand when the Princess showed up outside her castle a few weeks ago, and had even carried her to her room. She supposed it had something to do with Aurora’s initiative to touch her which had not only surprised her, but heightened her senses, put her on alert.

After a few moments, Aurora let go of Maleficent’s hand, wiped her cheeks with the back of her own hand, and apologized quietly. A few more moments passed, and a raven, probably feeling the awkward silence, had waddled up to Aurora and sung, “O, my love is like a red, red rose that’s sweetly played in tune, June, tune, June…”

Aurora gave a little giggle and held out her arm to the bird, who gladly stepped onto it and continued rhyming tune and June interspersed with whistles. “It is nice to sing every day.”

“I doubt anyone would mind if you sang in the castle.”

Aurora sighed, “I haven’t much felt like singing.”

“Are you feeling better now?” What she meant to say instead of now, what she hoped Aurora knew, was here, with me.

Aurora considered this for a moment. “Yes,” she said at last, and then looked up with the first truly genuine smile she had given in her time here. “Yes, I feel much better.”

It was truly too good to be true, and Maleficent did not know how to proceed. She made no immediate plans, and she was contented, for once in her life, not to make any. She did not have anywhere to be, so why plan to continue traveling when she could stay here? Yet, she feared if she planned to stay here, Aurora would decide to leave or someone would decide to come and find her, and then it would all be for naught. Option three, of course, was to leave and take the girl along. Once or twice, when the two were sitting side by side chatting or sipping their tea in amiable silence, Maleficent had considered asking. In fact, the words had almost crossed her lips without her permission.

But she knew that if Aurora said yes, it would only be because she was frightened. Frightened of being killed or otherwise maimed, fearful of being sent back to the life she loathed, perhaps even fearful of hurting Maleficent’s feelings.

Either way, Maleficent would not be able to bear it. And so she did not ask. She did not ask, and she did not make plans to go, and she did not make plans to stay. She grew complacent as weeks passed and no one came and she thought that perhaps she could get away with this…this crime against the
laws of nature, if she simply kept her mouth shut and let the days roll by.

“I admit,” Maleficent had said yesterday evening, “I am surprised no one has come looking for you.”

Aurora, who was curled up in her chair, half-asleep, sighed contentedly, “Yes, it surprised me, too, at first. Everyone at the court knows I’m practically obsessed with you, so it’s really quite odd that they didn’t think to search here. But they do think I’m mad and weak,” she mused through a yawn. “Perhaps they don’t think I made it.”

Maleficent had turned and raised an eyebrow at her, waiting for any sort of negative reaction to this conclusion, but none came. Perhaps, she thought. Perhaps she truly could get away with this.

Maleficent smiled to herself, and closed the book she was pretending to read. She sat back in her chair and sighed. She could not remember a time when she had felt more blissfully content. What did it matter, really, the feeling that sometimes seized her when she looked at the girl? And oh, it held her heart in a death grip. Maleficent had not even been certain she had a heart at all until this feeling latched onto it.

She couldn’t even be truly certain when it had begun. As she sat, she remembered a night almost two and a half years ago, a night she had anticipated with everything she had, a night she had waited for single-mindedly. A night which now seemed as though it had occurred in another lifetime.

There were two items on Maleficent’s agenda for that evening: make sure her spell, however muddled it was, was carried out, and make sure that no mere peasant boy would somehow acquire the wherewithal to interfere. The only thing that could break the sleeping curse was True Love’s Kiss—Maleficent scoffed in disgust—and a peasant boy would be ill-equipped to deal with the likes of her, but it never hurt to be cautious.

Maleficent transported herself to Stefan’s castle—her second visit to the castle, she thought with a chuckle—just before sunset. She knew the fairies would think they were being quite cautious by waiting until the last moment to bring Aurora back, although why they didn’t do something halfway sensible, such as waiting until tomorrow, was beyond Maleficent’s comprehension. Not that it mattered, for the three fools had already blown their cover, and Maleficent could not wait to inform them of their failure.

The courtyard and ballroom were already crowded with guests to the upcoming wedding. Maleficent barely stifled a chuckle. She did hope it would be embarrassing for the King and Queen when their daughter did not make her scheduled appearance. And what would the fairies have to say for themselves? Oh, Maleficent wished she could stay to witness that!

But there were other matters to attend to. At some point, she would have to decide what exactly she wanted to do with the Princess once she was under Maleficent’s power. It was too early, though, to contemplate that. First, she must concentrate on, and most importantly, enjoy the next few moments. She had waited for this for sixteen years.

She melted into a Will-o’-the-wisp and made her way up a few flights of stairs, wandering aimlessly about, looking for a sign as to where the Princess would be taken to be readied for her wedding. It was not difficult to find, for the fairies were using their magic again, which was quite easy for Maleficent to sense. It was almost comical to watch them carefully look behind them and try to cover their tracks as they went, all while Maleficent lurked in the shadows, waiting for her moment. She settled into the corridor behind the fireplace wall as the fairies entered the adjacent room.

“Bolt the door, Merryweather! Fauna—pull the drapes!”
Maleficent fought to suppress her laughter.

“And now, dear, if you’ll just sit here,
This one last gift, dear child, for thee,
A symbol of thy royalty:
A crown to wear in grace and beauty,
As is thy right and royal duty.”

Maleficent did not have a clear view of the girl from her vantage point. She could only see her shoulder and a few locks of golden hair, which, when Flora finished speaking, fell from sight. Maleficent realized then that the girl was crying.

“Now, dear,” said Fauna.

“Come,” Flora chided, “let her have a few moments alone.”

Maleficent almost laughed aloud, for she could not believe her good fortune! She had considered that she might have to do battle with the good fairies, but this was too perfect! She could hear them still, outside the door.

“It’s that boy she met,” said Merryweather.

“Whatever are we going to do?” Fauna asked tearfully.

Maleficent smiled as she floated through the wall of the fireplace and began to mutter a hypnotic spell. The same thing you always do, Fauna, she thought gleefully, the thing you do best. Nothing at all.

The girl lifted her head, all thoughts and feelings momentarily out of her mind. Perhaps Maleficent was doing the girl a favour, she thought as the Princess stood and her cape fell away.

She was truly the most beautiful girl Maleficent had ever seen. It was not merely her hair or her features, lovely though they were, but some indescribable quality which transcended mere looks. Maleficent smirked to herself. It was a pity the kingdom would never be afforded the opportunity to look upon such beauty. Perhaps Maleficent would simply keep the sleeping girl by her side, to look upon forever.

Maleficent waved away the wall between the room and the stairwell as she continued to weave her hypnotic spell. It was quite a sight to see, and it thrilled her in ways indescribable: a beautiful princess completely at her mercy. Maleficent did love power, and this was a kind of power she was certain she would never experience, at least not if anyone’s free will was involved. She felt a chill run down her spine and through her fingertips as the girl followed her up flight after flight of stairs.

She considered taking her usual form, just for a moment, but something stopped her—something which she would later identify as fear rooted in self-consciousness. Instead, she backed away into the shadows of the tower room before transforming, and she quickly distracted the girl by causing a spinning wheel to materialize in the opposite direction.

“Touch the spindle,” she murmured. This was the closest she would ever come to the wicked fantasies playing themselves out in her mind. She had better relish it, the ability to command the most beautiful girl in the world to do her bidding, and to feel no remorse for it. “Touch it, I say!”

But when the girl fell lifeless to the floor, she did feel remorse, though she did not know it at the time. As she emerged from the shadows and stood over the body of the princess, she felt an odd twinge in her heart which was very unpleasant, and she decided to chalk it up to the sound of
approaching Good Fairies. She made up for her momentary lapse by taunting them ruthlessly.

“You poor, simple fools…”

The girl had so easily won her over. Two times, in fact, for when Maleficent had returned for Diablo, her guard had been put firmly back into place. But Aurora had disarmed her with so little as a smile and a kind word.

Maleficent imagined that, given the opportunity, her unrequited affection might begin to drive her mad. She wondered, with a sort of deranged glee, how long that would take. Months? Years? Decades? For if she began to go mad in her tragic passion, it would mean that she had truly grown accustomed to Aurora’s presence here. It would mean that Aurora would stay with her, beautiful and kind and clever and untouchable. It would also mean that every look they exchanged would become painful. Every innocent touch of her hand would be excruciating. Maleficent closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and she hoped that she might one day face such an exquisite challenge. She knew she would never dare fail where Aurora was concerned.

Vaguely, she realized that a raven was crowing quite loudly. She was rather accustomed to the sound, but this one seemed to be circling the castle very quickly as it crowed, which was a bit disorienting, and which finally shook her from her twisted daydream. Maleficent rose and went to her window, but all she saw was a blur of blackbird as it flew past, still crowing. Her mind felt oddly foggy. She couldn’t imagine what could be wrong. Perhaps some kind of predatory animal had made its way into her forest.

Suddenly, two things occurred in the same instant: Maleficent realized what could be wrong, and she realized that someone was screaming.

Maleficent raced out of her study and into the room across the hall, which overlooked the spot where Aurora usually sat. She was nowhere to be seen, but in her spot stood a small army of King Stefan’s men.

Maleficent had never felt the need to scream before.

When the horses came to a halt in front of her and Philip dismounted, Aurora began to regain the ability to move. She backed up in the general direction of the castle, forming a vague plan to run or scream or do anything at all, but her body would not cooperate. She stumbled as she walked backward and fell into something solid. She jumped and turned around to find another group of soldiers behind her. She was surrounded.

“Aurora!” cried Philip, and she whirled around to face him. “We’ve come to take you home!”

Aurora swallowed, “Then why have you brought so many soldiers?”

“Why, don’t you know? You are at the castle of the evil sorcerer! You are in grave danger!”

“We were so worried, Aurora!” cried Fauna, rushing out from the crowd. “You just disappeared—we were afraid…”

“We were afraid you had perished,” finished Flora more sternly.

“Come home, Rose,” said Merryweather gently.
Aurora glanced between them and then began slowly turning in a circle, trying to find a gap. If she could just run, if she could make it to the castle...aha!

Aurora broke into a dead sprint through the first gap she saw, and it seemed she had caught the men by surprise, for she broke through and headed in the direction of the castle as Philip cried, “Seize her! Seize her at once!”

Was this really what it had come to? The boy in the woods, the handsome stranger, whom she believed was a dream come true...the man who was her husband, who would have risked life and limb to save her, had it been necessary...now ordered his men to seize her, like a criminal. And she was running away from him, as though she were a criminal.

And they did seize her. Two of the soldiers grasped her arms roughly and they tied her hands together before they tried to put her on a horse. She got in one good, long scream before a soldier covered her mouth. The three fairies cried out at once.

“Now, now, there’s no need for that!” Flora chided.

“You watch what you’re doing!” added Merryweather.

“It’s as I told you, gentlemen. She’s prone to spells of madness, but there’s no need for drastic measures. She can’t really hurt you. She’s such a little girl, after all.”

Aurora felt something she had never felt before. It was hot and cold at once, and it raced through her veins and made her dizzy, but it also made her stronger instead of weaker. She was seized with the irrepressible need to prove Philip wrong. She bit the soldier’s hand.

The soldier cried out and let go, and he almost dropped her completely, which would have resulted in her falling and probably getting trampled by the horses. She had not thought that one through.

“Be careful, I say!” the fairies and Philip cried out at once.

""The little bi—"" the man swallowed his foul words. “Eh, with all due respect, she bit me, Your Highness!”

“We cannot afford to stop,” Philip replied, obviously unconcerned. “The sorcerer could be chasing us already, and we wish to fight it on our own turf.”

“Is this what you always do?” the soldier whispered ferociously in her ear. “No wonder the Prince has found greener pastures, you wretched thing.”

Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather came to fly next to her.

“Calm down, dear.”

“Everything is going to be all right.”

“You’re safe now. We’re taking you home.”

On the contrary, Aurora thought miserably, she had never felt less safe and less at home. And moreover, she wasn’t certain what to wish for: that Maleficent should come after her and save her, or that Maleficent should keep her distance and keep out of danger.

As they rode on, Aurora began to doubt Diablo’s theory about Maleficent’s feelings towards her. She recalled a conversation they had had recently regarding Maleficent’s family, whom she had not
loved, whom she had left to die to save herself. Aurora did not think any less of Maleficent for this, but she understood it to be part of the wicked fairy’s character. She found it admirable, actually, for if Aurora were faced with such a situation, she would not be able to make the decision to save herself, whether she wanted to or not.

Maleficent wanted to stay alive. Even when she believed she had lost Diablo, she did not make reckless decisions. She appreciated the value of her life independent of the other people in it. She would not lay down her life for Aurora, and there was nothing reprehensible in that.

Really, maybe it was not as heartbreaking as Aurora had thought that Maleficent had never loved anyone. Perhaps Aurora had not felt pity for Maleficent for never having loved, but for herself, for loving someone she barely knew, someone who had the good sense never to love her back.

But oh, it had been marvelous while it lasted.

Aurora could not decide whether she wanted to live anymore. When she had been under the sleeping curse and miserable, so miserable that death would have been an act of mercy, she remembered that her only reason for living was that she hadn’t really lived at all. She had experienced so little of life, and she did not want to die having only experienced the ignorance of childhood, vague discontent, and misery. What an awful existence, and what a pointless one.

As she thought about it, she realized that this had remained her reason for living even after the curse was broken. She had clung to the image she had formed in her mind of Maleficent because it was something so foreign and unknown to her that it held some hope for something that was not miserable, or was at the very least an exciting way to die. If Maleficent had still wanted to kill her and had done so, then at least her existence would have had a purpose for someone. If Maleficent had been long gone and she had died in the wilderness, at least she had done something. She had tried.

Recently she had felt so very happy. It had been a pensive happiness, surely, and plagued with the leftover misery of the life she was slowly trying to forget, but it was the first true happiness Aurora had ever experienced. The question of living had not come up in her mind, but if it had, Aurora would not have simply wanted to live as an alternative to giving up. She would have wanted to live because her life was so full of good things, things that were worth living for.

Aurora would have happily spent the rest of her life at arm’s length from Maleficent, relishing every shared glance between them, every innocent touch of the wicked fairy’s elegant hand which made Aurora’s skin burn. She was glad she had not told Maleficent of her feelings. It was possible that Diablo was right on some level, that Maleficent did feel some affection for Aurora, perhaps even the deep and protective affection she felt for Diablo. That kind of love was a thing to treasure, and Aurora would never forget the wicked fairy’s kindness. Perhaps her warm memories would keep her from completely losing her mind in the days to come.

She was now certain that this was what Diablo meant, and she was all the more glad she had not been allowed to confess and ruin everything. Maleficent’s affection for her was not the same as what Aurora felt. It was not the kind of love that could save her from what was now her fate. Aurora knew she did not need to worry about the wicked fairy. Maleficent would not fall for this trap to try to come after her. She was smarter than that.

By the time they reached the castle, Aurora felt numb. She vaguely felt the ache of her muscles as she was lowered from her horse by Philip and carried inside and up to her room. She did not hear anything Philip or the three fairies said to her. She did not even try to offer a response. She stared stoically at her wall until everyone left, and then she curled up on her bed and began to shiver.
Aurora wondered what would become of her. She wondered if she would be locked away somewhere. Or if she would simply be forced to continue her existence as before, as if nothing had happened. After awhile, Aurora stood on shaky legs and, out of curiosity, went over and turned the handle of her door.

As she suspected, it was locked.

Aurora returned to her bed and lay flat on her back, and for the first time in her life, her mind was completely blank.

Out of the corner of her left eye, she saw a book, and, at a loss for anything better to do, she picked it up and flipped it open to a random page.

Suddenly, all of her emotions came flooding back to her in one painful wave. It did not matter if Maleficent loved her or didn’t. It did not matter where she was sent or what she was made to do. No matter what became of her or Maleficent or Philip or the fairies or anyone, Aurora was certain of one thing: she would never see Maleficent again. She traced her finger along the sharp cheekbones and suddenly regretted never having done so in real life. She doubted Maleficent would have stopped her, or even demanded an explanation. And even if she had, it would have been worth it to know how her cheek felt.

She traced her finger over the ruby red lips, curled into a sneer, and she thought of all of the other subtle expressions those lips had formed. She regretted, too, not touching those lips when she had the chance. It would have been odd and embarrassing, but so very worth it when the time came that she would never even see them again.

She examined the eyes, which were nondescript in the painting, and she wondered idly how an artist might capture the intensity of those eyes, and how they suddenly turned to you and demanded information while you were still recovering from the shock of seeing someone with eyes black as night.

Aurora could not decide whether she regretted not asking Maleficent about the time she spent under the sleeping curse. She had been so close on so many occasions, had almost blurted out the words in one breath and waited for her world to come crashing down around her as it had so many times before. What did it really matter, she wondered? Maleficent had grown fond of her no matter what happened or did not happen before, and she had spent the happiest weeks of her life in the wicked fairy’s company. What did it matter if she had, in her crazed dream state, fabricated some or all of their interactions?

Aurora knew why it mattered. She wondered how it had taken her so long to realize how madly, terribly obsessed she was with a woman who had wanted her dead. Perhaps she truly was out of her mind.

It mattered because Aurora remembered Maleficent saying goodbye to her before Philip woke her. She remembered that, when Maleficent had explained that she was offering Aurora her freedom, Aurora had had a brief, mad, shameful idea. She had wondered if Maleficent was going to kiss her to wake her up. But of course that was ridiculous. Maleficent had said on multiple occasions that waking her would require Philip, because it had to be True Love’s Kiss, and she was in love with Philip.

Not that she was, but that was what Maleficent said, and Maleficent was right about everything.

She remembered Maleficent kissing her goodbye and Philip kissing her awake, but not necessarily in that order. The two events were completely inseparable in her mind. Try as she might, she could not
tell which had come first, or if they had been separate at all. She placed them in that order because it was the one that made sense to her, not because she had any evidence to back that sequence of events.

And if Maleficent had indeed kissed her, perhaps, there was a chance…

But she most likely hadn’t. And if she had it had only been on the forehead. Aurora sighed and closed the book, clutching it to her chest as if her very life depended on it.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” said Maleficent, and at once every soldier and horse jumped all the way around to face her. They were all trembling. Who were these would-be soldiers Stefan had sent to face her, whose knees buckled at the sight of her? “What business have you here?”

She waited, then glanced around to each one in turn. All were too scared to speak.

“Well, in that event, I suggest you tell me what is to become of the Princess,” she said with a smile.

The man at the front of the formation, who was now farthest from her, finally gathered up the gumption to speak. “The Princess is none of your concern, Sorceress.” he approached her on horseback. “The poor girl is half-mad and she wandered off. If you were any sort of a decent person —”

“Hmm, but I’m not, am I?” Maleficent had already lost her sense of humour with this conversation. “I strongly recommend that you tell me what I want to know, or I shall pay a visit to your sorry little kingdom and find it out, myself.”

“Now, now—” He stammered, “n-n-now, we do not w-want a war.” He began grappling with, and then unsuccessfully searching through his bag.

Maleficent chuckled, “Then what are you doing on my land?”

After several more obnoxious seconds, the man finally produced an official document of some sort.

“King Stefan of the Kingdom of the East…”

*King Gianfrancesco of the Kingdom of the Two Rivers…*

“…doth hereby decree that the Sorceress Maleficent of…of the Forbidden Mountains…”

*…doth hereby decree that the Sorceress Adara of the Dragon Country, along with all of her kin…*

“…leave this land forever, or be condemned to death.”

Maleficent smiled, “Condemned to death, you say?” She approached him, and with a flick of her wrist, he fell from his horse into a heap on the ground in front of her. “And who’s going to kill me?” she asked him as he scrambled to his feet. “You?”

“Listen, we…we don’t want any trouble!”

“It’s a bit late for that.” Maleficent waved her hand again, and all of the men fell from their horses. She waved her arms in the direction of the forest, and all of the horses ran away, disappearing into the trees.

“Now,” she said as the men stood, “Is anyone going to tell me what I need to know?”
“See here—” the man began, but another cut him off.

“The Princess has been taken back to the castle.”

Maleficent rolled her eyes, “That would be most helpful if I were an imbecile. I asked you what is to become of the Princess. I am quite aware that she was taken back to the castle.”

“She’ll be locked in her room until she can produce an heir, and then sent away to a—”

“Hold your tongue, soldier!”

“She’ll murder us all if she doesn’t get what she wants.”

“Oh, really?” Maleficent interrupted. “I was under the impression that you were going to murder me if I didn’t leave.”

“Damn right, we are,” said the first man, puffing out his chest. “All I’m hearing from you, Mistress Maleficent, is a lot of smug smiles and empty threats.”

Maleficent raised her eyebrows.

The man glanced around nervously. “That’s…that’s right. If you wanted to kill the Princess, you would have done it already, s-so what has she been doing here? Playing house? Are you some kind of…sick deviant? Seducing young girls who don’t know any—”

His final words dissolved into unintelligible screams. Maleficent supposed it must be painful to burn alive.

“Now,” Maleficent looked up from the charred remains of the soldier in front of her. “About my death sentence: are you planning to carry it out now?”

The soldiers stood motionless, eyes wide.

Maleficent sighed. She really needed to stop trying to be nice. “That, gentlemen, was your chance to run away.” Maleficent raised both of her hands and called a massive bolt of lightning down from the sky. The soldiers finally got it into their thick heads to run, but the ones who weren’t hit by the lightning storm were chased down by the fireballs she began throwing shortly thereafter. There was little Maleficent hated more than stupid soldiers.

Aurora sat up abruptly. Her book almost fell from her arms and she clutched it protectively to her chest. She felt oddly pensive and at first could not fathom why, nor could she explain what had awoken her.

She glanced around the room, feeling very disoriented as the events of the day slowly came back to her. It all seemed like some awful nightmare, and she felt as though she should have awoken in her room in Maleficent’s castle. This led her to wonder whether all of that was the dream, and this was her rude awakening. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t dreamt up such things before.

Aurora stood on shaky legs and went to her door. She wondered what time it was, and whether anyone else was awake yet. Perhaps she could talk to the Good Fairies or take a walk outside before the rest of the court awoke, and reorient herself in the world of the waking after what she was now convinced was simply a long and lovely dream.

She turned the handle and pulled. The door did not budge. She was locked in.
Her heart skipped a beat. Then it had all been real. She smiled, though she felt tears prickling in her eyes. It had been real. Maleficent was not the evil beast everyone believed her to be. And Aurora was not mad.

Suddenly Aurora became aware of a faint commotion outside her door. Or perhaps not outside her door, but rather outside in general. Aurora went outside to her balcony, which was mercifully not sealed off, and the sight that greeted her almost caused her to faint dead away.

In front of the castle stood scores of armed soldiers, some wearing Stefan’s colours and some Hubert’s. Still more men appeared from the sides every minute. Aurora squinted in the faint morning light, trying to get a look at where they were marching, what they were going to battle, when she realized that the light shining on their armour was a sickly green.

Maleficent.

Aurora covered her mouth and breathed deeply, trying not to scream as she frantically searched the masses of soldiers. She could not decide what to feel. She knew only that she needed to see. She needed to lay her eyes upon the woman she had believed to be lost to her forever.

A great bolt of lightning flashed down from the sky, followed by another, then another, accompanied by the pained cries of wounded men. The men at the farthest reaches of Aurora’s vision began to scatter in opposite directions, but they were chased by balls of fire which seemed to come from nowhere. Aurora dared to hope for the survival of the wicked fairy, but the ranks of soldiers approaching the unseen threat continued to grow at an alarming rate. Another lightning storm sent them scattering, followed by the fireballs to finish them off.

And yet more soldiers continued to appear. Maleficent was outnumbered by hundreds. Perhaps thousands.

A good third of the men were suddenly lifted from the ground and flung into the sky as though by a great wind. They fell back to the ground and a great cry of pain rang out as, at long last, a tall woman with green skin and devil’s horns appeared. She stood still, surveying the fallen men, until one man rose and approached her.

“Ah, Prince Philip. We meet at last.”

“I do not intend to exchange pleasantries with you, Sorcerer,” Philip responded. “I intend to finish what should have been finished three years ago. I intend to free my wife from the clutches of your evil curse at long last.”

Maleficent laughed, “I see! You blame me for the discontent of your Princess? How very rich!” She raised her scepter to gesture to him. “Your precious Princess has been free of my influence since you retrieved her from the tower where she slept.”

“You speak nothing but wicked lies, Monster!”

“And you speak the righteous truth, O High and Mighty One?”

“Enough of this, Maleficent!” cried Flora from somewhere within the ranks.

“Of course you would enlist their help,” Maleficent sighed. “Perhaps because they share your convictions. But listen well, Your Highness,” the words dripped with mockery, “before you go brandishing your sword at me, perhaps you’d do better to concentrate on banishing the wickedness from your own heart.”
And brandish his sword at her he did. Philip was not a man of thoughts, nor of words. He was a man of action. He was not about to sit idly by while the most vile, hideous creature in all the land suggested to him that Aurora’s madness was somehow his fault.

“Philip, wait!” cried the three Good Fairies in unison.

Maleficent raised an eyebrow and a small smile crossed her lips. “So eager to fight. Thou dost protest too much, methinks.”

This time the three fairies had to grab hold of Philip to keep him from lunging at Maleficent, who stood impassive in the wake of his would-be attack.

Aurora’s knees buckled under her, and she clutched the railing of her balcony as she fell. She could not afford to succumb to the weakness of which everyone accused her. Not now. From her knees, Aurora quickly surveyed the walls around her. The stone walls were old and uneven. It was very likely that some of the stones were loose, and would crumble under her weight.

Aurora crawled over to the side that looked the sturdiest and reached out her hand, testing one of the stones. She pulled herself to her feet and looked down. If she fell from here, she would surely break her neck. But if she could get at least halfway down, she had a chance of surviving a fall. Aurora glanced back over her shoulder and saw that Philip and Maleficent were still standing some distance apart, staring each other down, each poised to spring.

Aurora could not sit idly by in her tower. She reached out and got a firm grasp of two stones in the wall, then swung one leg over the railing of the balcony and found another. She did not dare glance down again. She thought only of the two people who were about to do battle, of the one who was so sorely outnumbered, of the one she thought she would never see again, the one she wished so desperately to reach out and touch just to know for an instant how it felt.

Aurora lifted her other foot off of the balcony floor and slowly began climbing down the wall of the castle.

“You must proceed carefully, Philip,” whispered Flora.

“We have to help you,” added Merryweather. “Mere mortals are no match for a wicked fairy.”

“But the creature is outnumbered by thousands!” Philip whispered back incredulously.

“Didn’t you see how easily she can take them down?” asked Merryweather. “And you haven’t even seen—”

“You know,” Maleficent interjected, sounding little more than mildly irritated, “if I weren’t so well-versed in etiquette, I could have finished you off in the time it has taken you to strategize.”

Philip drew himself up to his full height. “Enough talk, then.” He held up his sword, and the Good Fairies began chanting something together. “Prepare to die, Evil One.”

Maleficent chuckled darkly.
The First and Final Battle

Perhaps half a second before the Good Fairies completed the incantation which would enchant Philip’s sword, Maleficent, in one fluid motion, raised her scepter and fired a great, swirling storm of darkness directly at the four of them. The storm threw them and several nearby soldiers, who had been instructed not to move, high into the air, pushing and pulling them to and fro until they finally crashed back down to the ground.

“All your talk of playing fair!” bellowed Merryweather as she rose and dusted herself off.

Maleficent’s grin was positively wicked. “Forgive me,” she said, and the amusement in her voice caused a chill to run down the spine of everyone within earshot.

She waited until Philip and the fairies had regained their footing, but when the fairies turned to one another to begin their enchantment anew, Maleficent raised her hand and, with a flick of her wrist, turned Philip and the fairies to face her. She held her hand in front of her as if to say “stop,” and they found that they could not move their bodies below the neck.

“Now, now, ladies,” she said icily. “If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it right. I shan’t have any more cries of foul play. Your skills and…” she gestured to the scores of soldiers surrounding her, “resources…against mine.” She folded her arms and waited.

After a moment’s uncomfortable silence, Philip leaned over to the nearest fairy, who happened to be Fauna, and asked, “What does it mean? What is it waiting for?”

Fauna, who would have wrung her hands uncomfortably if she were able, replied, “She expects you to bow, dear.”

Philip sneered, “Never!”

Maleficent raised an eyebrow. “Very well.” She turned the palm of her hand upward and gracefully lowered her arm, and Philip and the fairies were pulled into a long, slow bow. She released her hold on them and they snapped back up, momentarily unbalanced. The fairies rushed together to begin their incantation anew, and Maleficent, never taking her eyes off of Philip, returned the bow regally.

The fairies finished the enchantment at last and cast it upon Philip’s sword and shield, which began to glow with the only sort of magic that was a match for Maleficent. Maleficent waited patiently while Philip brandished his newly-fortified weapons, and then she raised her scepter.

With his magical shield, Philip was able to block all of her usual attacks: fireballs, lightning bolts, swirling storms all bounced off of the shield and evaporated. A few caught him, but only on the shoulder or the side of the leg. Additionally, now that the fairies had protected the Prince, they, too, were firing spells at her.

In a way, it was exhilarating to finally have a fair fight. Maleficent had not fought many battles in her lifetime, but the few she had seen had been easy wins. Most of her knowledge of battle magic had come from her youth, when a young fairy had been terrified that she would one day have to face off against her own mother.

Unlike Adara, who had spent hundreds of years defending her land and livelihood, Maleficent had barely lived a century, and much of it had been in relative peace. Her greatest disadvantage in this war, besides allowing the Good Fairies to enchant Philip into a worthy opponent, was that it was her first. She knew from books that her kind were capable of taking out thousands of armed men at once,
but she had never personally tried. It was quite possible that her magic lacked stamina.

This theory gained some credence when, preoccupied with keeping up a shield, the storm she sent Philip’s way petered out into a harmless little raincloud before it reached him.

Fortunately, Philip, who was, himself, preoccupied deflecting her various spells with sword and shield, did not notice this momentary lapse. Maleficent concentrated on her magical shield while she considered how to proceed. Neither Philip nor the fairies seemed to notice that she had ceased firing yet.

Obviously she must wait a moment to regain power, but she would rather not make that obvious. She knew she must assume her dragon form to inflict any sort of physical damage on the Prince, since his sword and shield would hold up against anything else she could throw his way. Assuming dragon form did not require a great deal of magic, but it was physically exhausting. She must only assume it when she was certain she could win, for she doubted she could transform herself back and continue to do battle in one go.

It would be ideal to drop her shield for just an instant, for she was certain the defensive magic, which was not her strong point, was sapping her power immensely. She glanced around, taking in the trees and rooftops, and then began surveying the walls of the castle. She thought for an instant that she saw something moving on one of the walls, but she was distracted by the nearby balcony.

Aurora took quite some time making her way down the castle wall, and by the time she had taken only three or four steps, she heard the sounds of battle erupt behind her. Her hands began to shake, and she took a moment to calm down before she continued, but the next stone her foot rested upon crumbled almost immediately. She jumped slightly, which caused her to lose her footing completely, and she spent the next several seconds clinging for dear life to the stones above her head before she found two stones on which to rest her feet.

Now she could not calm her shaking hands at all, and had to talk herself into continuing the climb regardless. She made it a few more steps down before another stone crumbled, and, once she regained her footing, Aurora dared to look down.

The height was still dizzying, and she felt as though she might be sick. Beneath her was a little bit of stone which she could probably avoid if she thought fast, a long stretch of grass, and the moat she would have to cross to reach the battle. Aurora wished she could hold her stomach, but she was too afraid to let go of her tenuous grasp on the castle wall.

What was she even planning to do once she got down there? Bite someone’s hand? There were a number of ways she could die for absolutely no reason in the next few minutes. It was also possible that her presence would simply cause an unnecessary complication—a distraction for Maleficent, whom she was foolishly hoping to protect by means of this mad venture. Perhaps Maleficent did not love her, and perhaps she would not intentionally die for her, but she would try to keep Aurora safe—Aurora had never felt more safe than when she was in Maleficent’s company—and when she was so vastly outnumbered, that could very well cost Maleficent her own safety.

Then again, what was the sense in staying in her room, locked up forevermore, as a war raged outside her window? Even if she perished by falling, it would be better than whatever fate awaited her if Philip won. If she perished in battle—if she could even do one small thing to help Maleficent—that would be worth absolutely everything. If she could perhaps see Maleficent one more time before she died…

Aurora continued her climb down the wall.
She made it one, two, three steps farther when a sudden flash of something erupted above her head. Aurora screamed and completely lost her grip.

The sensation of falling was odd and not unfamiliar. It was in many ways similar to the way she had felt under the sleeping curse—terrified, anticipating pain, but unable to do anything about it.

Philip was the first to notice that Maleficent had stopped sending spells, perhaps because he had been doing little but blocking them, trying in vain to think of some way to catch the creature by surprise, that he might actually make use of his enchanted sword. Now the monster stood relatively still, both hands held out almost nonchalantly, as the spells of the three Good Fairies appeared to rebound off of thin air.

Philip turned subtly to the fairy on his left, namely Fauna, and gestured to the sorcerer. But no sooner had he done so than the creature exploded into a mass of green flames and disappeared. The fairies cried out and immediately scattered in different directions.

“Where are you going?” Philip cried, alarmed.

“Maleficent didn’t just disappear—she must have gone somewhere!”

Maleficent lay unceremoniously upon the floor of someone’s balcony. It was not out of view, but it was very high—the topmost floor aside from the infamous tower room. For a moment, Maleficent allowed herself to lie in an unbecoming heap and take several deep breaths. She felt her magic trickling back into her, beginning with her fingertips and spreading slowly with a tingling sensation through her hands and arms. Now that she thought of it, she had experienced the feeling once before —after she had transported herself away from her family. It had taken every bit of magic she had in her body, and for a moment she had lain in the grass unmoving and felt what it was to be truly powerless.

She was a bit older now, though, and she recovered far more quickly. She adjusted her robes and grasped for her scepter as she stood and surveyed the battlefield below her. Philip and the fairies were bustling about frantically, searching for her. She waited patiently for an opportunity to strike all of them at once, while they still did not see her. The height and distance would give her all the advantage she needed. Playing fair, indeed.

At a loss for where Maleficent might have magicked herself off to, the three Good Fairies and Philip reconvened.

“She must be somewhere,” said Flora.

“Perhaps the coward has run away,” Philip suggested.

“Maleficent would never run away from a fight,” Merryweather replied.

“But what about the time she just left Rose—” Fauna interjected, but Flora shushed her.

“Obviously,” she said derisively, gesturing to the battlefield around them, “that was all a ruse.”

Fauna might possibly have wanted to say something else, but she was erupted by a crash of thunder, which was followed by a massive lightning storm. That, in turn, was followed by several fireballs which did not end when they hit their targets, but rather set the ground ablaze and spread rapidly.

Philip, who was armed with magical items, and the Good Fairies, who were naturally equipped to have some immunity to Maleficent’s powers, were not killed by the lightning or the fire. Many of the
soldiers were, however, and the ones who were not were quite finished serving their civic duty.

The King and Queen had been sent off in a carriage this morning to some place safe from this horrid sorceress, and more than a few of the soldiers were more than a little angry with the Royal Family, not only for abandoning the kingdom in its hour of need, but for the treatment of their beloved Princess, word of which, as it always does, had gotten out.

The Princess in question lay immobilized by pain not far from the wall of the castle. The fall had been perhaps even farther than she imagined, and she had not been quick enough to redirect herself from hitting the stone foundation around the castle. The only defense which came to her was to roll when she fell, which mostly served to scrape her up, and she hoped she would never know whether it had done anything to help the force of the impact.

At the very least, Aurora was alive, and after quite some time, she felt as though she might be able to move again. Actually, she thought, as she began dragging herself towards the moat, the cool water might be good for her cuts. Provided she didn’t drown, of course.

In a matter of minutes, the battlefield, once the beautiful entrance to a castle, now the charred remains of war, had emptied. Most of Maleficent’s fire had burnt itself out, but some raged on, and some merely flickered ominously. Philip tried desperately to beat against the bonds of his magical entrapment, bonds he could physically feel, and yet he did not move at all. He tried to cry out in frustration, and yet the sound died in his throat, as though for lack of air, and he choked, but could not swallow.

Maleficent materialized in front of him.

“Do you like my latest invention? I made it especially for you,” she said softly. “All of you, actually. You see, when I cast my spell on Princess Aurora almost nineteen years ago, I meant for her to die.” She approached slowly, deadly calm. “Merryweather,” she turned to the fairy in blue, whose face was for once not set in a scowl, but widened in surprise, “in her infinite wisdom attempted to save the girl, but instead, cursed her in a way I would never have dreamed up. Aurora spent months just as you are now—unable to move, barely even able to breathe, yet painfully aware,” she leaned in close to Merryweather, “of every…” then to Flora, “…passing…” and finally to Philip, “…second.”

Maleficent had no way of knowing the effect her little trick must be having. She hadn’t had the time to figure out how to see to it that she could read the thoughts of the afflicted.

Philip, who felt as though he were beating wildly against chains, and yet stood impassive but for his expression of shock, was rather glad the sorcerer did not get the satisfaction of seeing him struggle.

Merryweather and Flora were outraged, but something about what Maleficent said made their stomachs just a little bit queasy. Had Rose really been aware of the passing time while she was asleep? Fauna, who was not much prone to anger, felt completely devastated, for this, if it was true, explained so much. She felt tears stinging her eyes, which had grown dry and sensitive for the several minutes they had been frozen open.

Maleficent wasn’t certain how long she had before the magical bonds of her spell wore off, and to her surprise, it was Philip who began to break free first.

“Alone at last, O Prince,” Maleficent said with a smile as the eyes blinked and first one arm, then the other began to twitch.

While Philip was busy regaining control of his limbs, Maleficent closed her eyes and breathed
deeply. She remembered the earliest days of her youth, which seemed so bright, so intensely
colourful, burned into her subconscious. She remembered the hatchling dragons, still such incredibly
dangerous creatures, yet so affectionate, so fiercely loyal, under the right circumstances. She
remembered how their eyes, black as night, gazed into her own, and how she saw her reflection in
them in so many ways.

It had been so long since she had felt her skin begin to harden into a powerful shell of scales, her
blood run refreshingly cold, the world shrink around her as she became something at least fifty times
her usual size—years, decades, and yet she felt at home in this body.

Philip’s eyesight was quite blurred, and he had to blink ten or twenty times before his eyes would
even begin to cooperate. He had an awful feeling that the sorcerer was up to something, for it was
being remarkably quiet while he freed himself from its latest curse. When he could finally move and
grasp and see, he turned to the Good Fairies, but they were all still frozen in the creature’s magical
entrapment.

“You monster! Free them at once!” he bellowed and whirled around to face the sorcerer, sword
drawn.

He heard the sorcerer’s wicked laughter, but did not see the sorcerer. In the place where it once
stood, he saw…a giant, dark mass of…something. When it occurred to him that the dark mass might
be a foot, he almost cried out in shock. Slowly, Philip’s eyes moved up what he soon discovered to
be a dragon.

But this was no ordinary dragon. Oh, Philip had seen a dragon before—had even fought one! This
dragon was perhaps twice the size of that one, and he knew of no dragons which were black and
purple.

The monster continued to laugh, as if enjoying his fearful reaction, and so Philip steeled himself for
an attack. He charged forward, sword held out in front of him, hoping for a clear shot at anything at
all while the dragon continued to enjoy itself. Rather nonchalantly, however, and without ceasing its
laughter, the dragon spat fire at the Prince, which he barely managed to block with his shield.

It occurred to Maleficent that perhaps the shield was also enchanted to position itself in order to block
her attacks, for Philip had been remarkably lucky otherwise. This made her strategy rather simple.

The dragon, which had towered above him and the castle behind it, got down on all fours, and Philip
took the opportunity to give it a good slash on the nose with his sword. This did not deter the dragon,
and for what seemed like an eternity, the dragon began consistently breathing fire upon him, with
only small breaks to inhale.

Philip got in a couple of blows, which were mostly just scrapes to the nose, but the ceaseless attack,
along with the fire which began to surround him, forced him to slowly retreat. After several minutes
of this slow progression, Philip stumbled on something and lost his footing. He fell onto his back and
quickly scrambled to get up, but the dragon blew another mighty stream of fire, and Philip lost hold
of his shield.

The shield blew only a small distance away, but the dragon quickly separated it from its wielder by a
wall of green flame. As if that were not sufficient, it placed one of its mighty claws almost gently
upon Philip’s chest, holding him to the ground.

Until this moment, as she stared down at an unarmed and trapped Prince Philip, Maleficent had not
even considered what winning this war would mean. A kneejerk reaction had caused her to come
here—Aurora had obviously been forcibly removed from her company, and Maleficent wanted to
free her...whatever that meant. If she had to take down the entire kingdom in the process, well then, so be it. If anyone in this world deserved the freedom to do whatever she pleased, it was Aurora.

Now, though, Maleficent wondered where Aurora might be. Whether she knew there was a war raging outside her window. Whether she was perhaps watching through her window, hoping and praying that the horrible monster, whom the kind-hearted Princess had inexplicably put upon a pedestal, did not let her down.

You claim I am wicked, and yet there is more cruelty in your heart than there has ever been in me. You look at a beautiful woman and see an annoyance, a thing to be used and thrown away at your discretion. You call her weak and mad, and yet you do nothing to help her, and so you do not see the strength and the clarity her mind has to offer. I wonder if you perhaps did see it, before she hid it away, and you simply did not care. Apologize to the Princess Aurora for your wrongs against her, and I will let you keep your sorry life, but the Princess shall come with me.

These were the words Maleficent intended to say, but as she opened her mouth to speak, a number of things happened in rapid succession.

The three Good Fairies slowly regained the ability to move. Flora was first, and she was also first to reacquaint herself with the situation at hand. It was unorthodox, surely, and would delay her sisters’ recovery, but time was of the essence—Flora borrowed her sisters’ magic and began to chant an incantation quickly under her breath.

Fauna, who could only move some of the muscles in her face, saw a flash of golden hair and tried to scream, but only succeeded in a dreadful groan which communicated nothing.

“Sword of Truth, fly swift and sure,
Let Evil die and Good endure!”

The force of the borrowed magic sent cracks running through Flora’s wand, but the spell was cast, and it flew steadfastly towards its target.

Philip flinched, certain when he saw the dragon open its mouth once more that he would burn to death in eerie green flame.

The sword, upon hearing its command, freed itself from Philip’s tenuous grasp and reared back to get the perfect angle into the Evil One’s heart.

Aurora, who was quite bruised and bloody and who would have been considerably more fire-damaged if she were not still dripping wet from her swim in the moat, saw Flora’s spell and the sword’s intended destination, and she was faced with a remarkable situation: the opportunity to make a decision.

“Aurora!” cried Philip

“Rose!” the Fairies echoed.

Maleficent whipped her head around in time to see the bloody Princess, who met her eyes steadily before taking one long, graceful leap.

The sword flew.

“NO!”
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Not actually an epilogue...more like a very long final chapter. This draft was finished in June 2012. Again, if you'd like to follow the second draft, it is currently available here:

https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6577499/1/Early-to-Bed

Aurora’s body fell atop Maleficent’s dragon foot, which in turn all but impaled Philip. Her body was encased in a strange purplish light and she convulsed violently like nothing Maleficent had ever seen. Maleficent squeezed her eyes shut and tried to pool her focus, to assume her usual form, to assume any form in which she could be of some assistance.

When she assumed her usual form, she collapsed to her knees, somewhere in the middle of the vast space her dragon body had occupied. Sapped of all of her magical power, she was supported only by the skeletal limbs of her humanoid body. She crawled shakily over to where Aurora’s body lay, almost atop Philip’s, and turned the girl over. Then she shrieked.

The enchanted Sword had run Aurora all the way through.

“Look what you’ve done!”

“You awful, wicked creature!”

“Oh, poor Rose, poor Philip…oh no, no, no…”

With what little magic she felt beginning to tingle in her fingertips, Maleficent slashed at the air, throwing the three bumbling old women flying back. She touched the Sword gingerly, testing it—for if it were still enchanted, it would burn her skin, and then what use would she be? But it was no longer enchanted. It had done its duty. Maleficent squeezed her eyes shut and pulled the sword from Aurora’s body. Aurora did not resist, or cry out, or do anything at all, and an awful, horrifying thought entered Maleficent’s head. She hoped with all of her heart that Aurora could not feel, that she was truly unconscious and not trapped in some merciless in-between.

Maleficent gathered the girl’s limp body protectively into her arms. “It’s all right, Rose,” she whispered. “It’s over now.”

“Go, Maleficent! You are not wanted here!”

“Get away from her!”

“Let the poor girl be! Haven’t you caused her enough pain?”

“What could you possibly want with her now?”

“Aren’t you satisfied now, Maleficent? You got what you wanted!”

“Now go!”
“Go, go, go!”

She heard the cries vaguely, as though they were coming from the recesses of her own mind, for never before had such sentiments cut her so deeply. As soon as she felt the magic tingling back into her arms, she transported herself and Aurora to the nearest safe place she could think of.

The tower room of Stefan’s castle had obviously not been used in years—all everything was covered in a layer of dust, including the bed. Maleficent lay Aurora down on the bed and began conjuring bandages and books on healing, but this was something about which she knew next to nothing. Maleficent was more or less immortal. As long as she could survive the initial damage, her body would eventually heal itself. Aurora, on the other hand, was vulnerable, fragile, human…and bleeding profusely.

_Aren’t you satisfied now, Maleficent? You got what you wanted!_ 

The words made her ill, and she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, willing her stomach not to retch.

Maleficent first bandaged Aurora’s middle the best she could. At a loss for any better idea, she essentially wrapped and wrapped until the bandages were secure. The Sword had also made an awful gash in Aurora’s arm, which ran all the way from her shoulder to a little past her elbow, and which was a disturbing purplish-blue colour beneath the blood. Maleficent bandaged this second. She imagined that the rest of Aurora’s cuts and bruises could wait while Maleficent looked for some magical assistance in her books, for it would indeed take magic for Aurora to survive the sword wounds.

Provided she was not dead already.

_Aren’t you satisfied?_

_What could you possibly want with her now?_

Maleficent imagined she would have a fair bit of trouble finding an exact cure, for she doubted that this sort of spell went wrong very often. What sane person launched in front of a Sword meant for an Evil Creature? However, she imagined that the Good Fairy books she had collected to save Diablo might lend her some information on generic sword wounds, and she turned out to be correct in this assumption. Who’d have ever thought she’d be getting her most useful information from this drivel? If her mother could see her now, she would be appalled.

None of the spells were for anything even nearly as serious, but they did stop the bleeding in Aurora’s arm, and perhaps a dozen of them finally succeeded in slowing the steady, sickening gushes of blood from the wound through her middle. Maleficent disposed of the bloodied bandages and conjured new ones and, momentarily satisfied that Aurora’s two worst wounds would not kill her, began tending the smaller ones. The Good Fairy charms worked wonders on minor cuts and bruises. From the look of Aurora’s left arm, once Maleficent had treated it and cleaned it with a warm washcloth, one would not know anything had happened to the girl. Aurora did have one jagged gash on her cheek, and a few on her legs that the charms did not completely cure, and they formed rather vicious-looking scars.

She imagined a dreadful scenario of what would follow, having to leave the girl there in the tower room, looking beautiful and serene just as she had years ago, and let the Fairies and Phillip (she did not know at the time that Philip was also dead by her hand) find her.

They would paint up her face so that no one could see the scars. Eventually she would run out of
blood, and they would put her in a clean dress with long, flowing sleeves, and fold her arms upon her chest so that she looked like she was sleeping peacefully. The way her people knew her best.

And then they would parade her through the village, put her on display so that her people might say goodbye. Minstrels would write songs about her, the beautiful, young, mad Princess, the Sleeping Beauty of the topmost tower, the lovely Princess in peasant clothes with the gift of song who had ensnared the heart of a Prince, and their tragic love story, doomed forever because of the curse of a wicked sorceress. No one would be able to see her wounds, so no one would ask that dreaded question: how exactly had she received them? Which lead to the still more troublesome question: why would she throw herself in front of a Sword meant for the Mistress of Evil Maleficent?

And then, after some time, after their tears had dried and their lives had continued, Philip would find a new wife, and Stefan and Leah would appoint someone in the court to become king, or they would accept Philip as their king and the merger of the two kingdoms would continue as planned.

And then they would bury the Princess Aurora, and she would be out of their minds forever.

And where would that leave Maleficent? Maleficent, who had always chosen survival over all else, who could not comprehend the concept of someone who would give her life to save another’s, would have to continue living her life without Aurora in it.

She gazed upon the girl’s face as she gently cleaned it with a washcloth, taking special care to trace the rather gruesome scar on her cheek.

“I never had a dream, you know,” she told the girl, who obviously could not hear her. “I’ve had many nightmares. Much of my life has been plagued by them. But never a dream, not truly.”

For a lack of anything better to do, Maleficent cast a few more healing charms on Aurora’s arm and middle, and then she changed the bandages. She kept talking, trying to distract herself from the growing heaviness she felt settling in upon her heart.

“I did have a wish, though, and I daydreamed of it quite a bit. I wished that you might stay with me...for a very long time, if not forever. For so long that I forgot what it was to live without you.”

Maleficent dropped the washcloth and knelt beside Aurora’s bed. She lay her chin upon her arms and regarded the girl, brow furrowed, eyes stinging. “It seems my wish came true, after a fashion. It did not take me very long at all to forget how to live without you.”

Please don’t kill me, whispered the cursed Briar Rose, but it was only a memory. I haven’t even lived yet.

Would you really rather she had died, Maleficent? pleaded the unassuming fairy Fauna.

And that voice was invariably followed by Flora’s unforgiving cry: Aren’t you satisfied now, Maleficent? You got what you wanted!

How quick they were to accept that their Rose was gone. Tried to shoo Maleficent away from the body like a carrion bird, that they might weep and look sadly upon the girl as the life bled out of her. Perhaps they had already been mourning her for months, when she had run away from the prison they had fashioned for her. Perhaps they had marked her as gone forever just as soon as she had truly begun to live.

Maleficent rose and re-bandaged Aurora’s many wounds, for the bandages were soaked through with blood once more. She thought of how much better Flora or Fauna would be at healing than she. The thought sickened her. There was no discipline, her mind protested, in which those three old
biddies were better than she.

And yet there was. Wicked fairies did not have any need for healing spells, and so they were not naturally inclined to be good at casting them. Wicked fairies were ill-equipped for anything that did not directly benefit themselves. The healing spells seemed weak to Maleficent, but cast by a healing fairy, they might save Aurora from her fate in the blink of an eye—how would she ever know?

Then the awful idea occurred to her, and she jumped back from Aurora as if burned. She clutched her stomach and her chest and struggled to breathe.

Aurora was already dead to them.

They left her for dead so easily because they viewed it as inevitable.

*Let the poor girl be! Haven’t you caused her enough pain?*

*What could you possibly want with her now?*

*Aren’t you satisfied now, Maleficent? You got what you wanted!*

Maleficent became frenzied, seized by a kind of wild panic she had never known. She clutched Aurora’s face in her hands and begged her to awaken. She splashed the Princess with cold water. She took the girl, injured though she was, by the shoulders and shook her violently, and all the while she screamed and whispered and sobbed, “Wake up, wake up, wake up!”

Once more, Maleficent fell to her knees, and she lay sprawled at the girl’s side. She reached out and stroked Aurora’s hair, which was wet and sticky in some places and dried and crusty in others, caked with a mixture of blood and whatever lay in the moat.

“You cannot die, do you understand me?” she said softly, evenly. “That is what everyone expects you to do. To lie down and die.” She sat up on her knees and wiped the tears from her cheeks. It occurred to her that there was a bit of blood on her face, as well, but it did not seem important at the moment. “You mustn’t do that.” She stroked Aurora’s cheek.

“You want to live, don’t you?” she implored. “Think. There’s so little you have seen, so little you have done. Don’t you want to see everything, do everything? You, who are so curious and so brave?”

But Aurora did not stir.

Maleficent sank to the floor once more.

At some point in the early hours of the morning, Maleficent had grasped Aurora’s hand on the uninjured side with both of her own. “Why?” she breathed desperately, her voice too hoarse to make any sound. “Why would you do this for me?”

She imagined that Aurora’s hand might have twitched, might have tried to squeeze hers, and her head snapped up, but the girl’s face was as impassive as it had been before, and perhaps even paler. Maleficent rose from her knees and sat on the edge of the bed, leaning over the Princess. She cupped Aurora’s face in her hands. She realized faintly that she was trembling.

“Come back to me,” she whispered. “Please, come back to me.” She continued to whisper these words, like a chant, and after several long minutes, just when she began to accept that she had imagined Aurora’s hand twitching, the girl’s eyes fluttered. Another moment passed, then they fluttered again, once, twice, three times.
And at long last, Aurora opened her eyes.

Maleficent had not realized she had been holding her breath. She exhaled, and she imagined her face must be nothing like the smile she felt within her heart, for the muscles of her face were too overwrought to convey any recognizable emotion.

Aurora’s own face twisted into a sleepy half-smile, and she lifted her uninjured hand and placed it over Maleficent’s own. She tried to speak, but all Maleficent could understand was “I thought…”

Maleficent swallowed back tears her eyes were too dry to produce, and she smoothed Aurora’s hair. “Thought what? That you would die?”

Aurora swallowed several times and licked her lips. “I thought,” she repeated slowly, “I thought I would never…never see you again.”

This statement took quite some time for Maleficent to process. She had spent the entire night at Aurora’s bedside. Who knew what Aurora’s last memories—and the time frame to which she was referring—were?

“Did you honestly think,” she made her best guess, “that I would allow your Prince and a motley band of would-be soldiers to carry you off against your will?”

Aurora smiled and closed her eyes for a moment, then she swallowed again, and again attempted to speak, slowly and carefully. “But you must know there will be a war since you’ve come after me.”

Maleficent’s heart sank. “My sweet, sweet girl,” she said, struggling to find words even though what she wanted to say was so simple. “There has already been a war.”

Aurora opened her eyes and stared blankly, then squeezed them shut, opened them again, and blinked a few more times, rapidly. She attempted to lift her head, failed, and instead placed her uninjured hand on the bandages around her middle, where blood had begun to seep through them again.

She looked up at Maleficent once more and smiled brilliantly. “And you won,” she said.

Maleficent chuckled, but it turned into a sort of choked sob. “Only because of you.”

If it was possible, Aurora’s smile widened. “Me? I helped?”

“Aurora,” Maleficent shook her head, “you saved my life.”

Aurora reached up with her good hand, now stained with blood, and ran her fingers over Maleficent’s cheekbone. She cupped Maleficent’s cheek for a moment, tilting her head slightly and allowing her eyes to close. After a moment, she opened her eyes and began to trace Maleficent’s jaw with her fingers, then ran them down her neck and back up, and then she traced a finger over Maleficent’s lips. Maleficent remained frozen, gazing at Aurora with wide eyes.

“Forgive me,” said Aurora with a sad smile. She ran her hand down Maleficent’s arm slowly until she found her hand and grasped it tightly. “I thought I would never…” she paused and shook her head. “I have almost lost you so many times. If I should lose you once more, I would like to remember what you feel like.”

Maleficent felt her features, previously frozen in surprise, soften. She knew the words she wanted to say. *You shall never lose me, Aurora. So long as you want me by your side, I shall be there.* But the words she spoke were a question Aurora most likely could not answer. “Why?”
Aurora dragged Maleficent’s hand up to her heart and held it there. “Why what?” she asked, and her eyes closed, and she yawned.

“Why did you risk your life to save mine?”

“Oh…no…” But Aurora said no more, and again, Maleficent felt panic seize her.

“No, no, that isn’t…what I…” It seemed Maleficent was doomed to be full of things left unsaid. What did it matter why Aurora had done what she had done? What was important was that she knew—if she did not live past this morning—that her life had not been entirely in vain, as she so feared.

Aurora did not have to answer for anything. Maleficent had to answer for much. And those brief moments may have been her only chance.

Maleficent gathered Aurora gently into her arms, careful not to disturb her bandages too much. “I am so sorry, sweet Rose. For everything.”

Maleficent?

Yes, child?

I don’t blame you. I know I should, but I don’t.

“Yes, well,” Maleficent responded softly to a conversation that had occurred years ago, cradling Aurora’s head in her hands, “you certainly should.”

Maleficent wanted to confess to the sleeping girl everything her heart held secret, everything she needed Aurora to know. Indeed, the words almost came spilling out from her lips without her permission. But that would be admitting defeat—admitting that Aurora would never wake up again. And so, instead, she began to tell Aurora of all the places she had seen—places Aurora could see, places they could see together—if she could only awaken.

She told the girl of the Kingdom of the Two Rivers, so beautiful and warm and lush. Of the people there, so well-fed and rosy-cheeked, and of the royal family with their dark hair and flawless, olive-coloured skin. Of the Dragon Country, where Maleficent’s mother, Adara, and Adara’s mother and grandmother and great-grandmother had lived in a grand and fearsome castle surrounded by rough, rocky terrain and the grand and fearsome creatures they knew as friends and protectors.

She told Aurora of the Land of Hill and Valley, where the Valley-dwellers thought ill of the Hill-dwellers and vice versa, and where there were often disagreements over the simplest things, and how Maleficent and a band of male wicked fairies had settled there for a time, long ago, and wrought such havoc that they almost wished never to depart from a place so rife with opportunities for mischief.

She told the girl of the Kingdom of the Skies, where thousands or perhaps millions of fairies dwelt if the Earth was not to their taste. They made their homes on clouds and lived in large groups, and there was always such a bustle of noise and movement that Maleficent could not imagine how anyone could stand to live there. Not that her kind would be welcome there, anyway. Nonetheless, it was a beautiful place to visit, and she knew Aurora would love to see it just at sunrise when it was all shadows and light falling upon wisps of clouds and colourful fairy wings.

And together they could find other places, Maleficent assured her, if she did not like any of the ones Maleficent knew. They could find a place to live, and it would be just as before. They would take their meals together, and of course their afternoon tea. They would sit outside in the sun and teach old folk songs to birds, or sit inside by a fire and read or chat or simply be. Maleficent would not mind that one bit—to sit across from Aurora and simply see her, alive and well.
Or they did not have to do any of that, Maleficent added, if Aurora did not wish it. “Only I beg of you, stay with me. Stay with me…and allow me to stay with you, and I swear I shall see to it that you have anything you desire.”

Maleficent was not certain how long she stayed there, cradling Aurora in her arms and whispering those words over and over. It struck her as surprising at first, and then sickening shortly thereafter, that, even as the sun shone brightly outside of the tower room, and even as it began to set, no one ever came to try to take Aurora away.

Sometime in the early hours of the next morning, Maleficent awoke, though she had not realized that she had been sleeping, and she gently lay the girl back down upon her fated deathbed. She stretched her aching muscles and sat next to the bed in the chair she had occupied a few times before, and wished with all of her heart that she might hear as she once had even the echo of Aurora’s voice in her mind, an indication that she was still alive.

But, as the sun rose once more over Aurora’s pale, gaunt features, Maleficent began to lose hope. She changed Aurora’s bandages again. The wound on her arm did not exactly look better, but it was no longer oozing anything. The wound through her middle still looked as ghastly as it had before, and Maleficent was not certain that the significant decrease in blood was a good sign anymore. Thought she felt foolish and wholly ineffective, she tried to feel Aurora’s wrist for a heartbeat and found none. She lay her head against Aurora’s chest and tried to listen for one and heard none.

And perhaps she was no healing witch, but she supposed that if there were a heartbeat to be found, she could find it.

She knew she could not go back to her castle in the Forbidden Mountains, for that would be where Philip or the Good Fairies or whoever would come to retrieve Aurora. She wondered whether she ought to try to take Aurora anywhere else—such as the Dragon Country, where she still had a home of sorts, to bury her. No, Aurora ought to remain here for the Good Fairies and Philip to find her, peacefully asleep, that they might mourn her the way a Princess deserved to be mourned, at least, if not the way Aurora deserved it.

Maleficent knelt at Aurora’s bedside and folded the girl’s hands upon her chest. She smoothed Aurora’s hair and traced a finger gently over the jagged scar on her cheek.

Maleficent did not know what she would do. She needed to retrieve Diablo—she had left him under a protective spell not far from Stefan’s castle, and she was certain he would be quite irritated at being left alone so long. But Diablo had been remarkably understanding of the whole thing, from beginning to end, and so perhaps he would understand this, too.

“My greatest wish was to make you happy, Aurora,” she said. “Immediately and always.” Maleficent heaved a long and difficult sigh. “How I have failed you.”

She shook her head as tears began to flow down her cheeks, “You owe me nothing, and I owe you my life, and so I hope you will forgive my selfishness.”

Maleficent leaned down and cupped Aurora’s face in her hands. She pressed her lips gently against Aurora’s, and she wept even harder at how cold they felt, and she lingered there much longer than she had intended, but when she drew away, she was absolutely certain that Aurora drew a breath.

She waited, frozen, leaning over the girl almost nose-to-nose, until Aurora drew another breath, and then another. And then she opened her eyes, not with a flutter of eyelashes, but suddenly and wide, and she inhaled deeply, as though stricken by panic. Her eyes flitted left and right, and then to Maleficent as she righted herself.
“The wicked fairy is...you’re alive,” she breathed as though she had been choking.

Maleficent said nothing. She could think of no words.

Aurora shook her head, “You’re alive, I mean, because the sword.” She sought out Maleficent’s eyes, begging silently for answers to nonsensical non-questions, the kind of answers Maleficent had always been able to provide. But Maleficent could not gather her thoughts, and so she could not fathom what Aurora was saying. And so she said nothing.

Aurora glanced around frantically, searching for answers. She tried to sit up, but quickly fell back. This called Maleficent out of her shock and into action. “Don’t move,” she ordered, though her hoarse voice did not quite convey its usual power. “You’re badly injured.”

Aurora sighed as though in relief. “The sword was going to kill you, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was,” Maleficent replied, smoothing Aurora’s hair. “Were it not for you, it would have pierced me straight through the heart.”

Aurora’s eyes widened, “So that wasn’t a nightmare at all. But you’re alive. I thought it…”

Maleficent shook her head. She felt tears welling in her eyes once more. “Aurora, you threw yourself in its path.”

“I threw myself...I did. I did...” Aurora closed her eyes for a moment, and Maleficent’s heart skipped several beats, but she reopened them and spoke far more clearly than she had before. “I had the same nightmare so many times—I saw the sword pierce you through the heart over and over and I tried to do something, but I couldn’t. But that isn’t what happened, right?”

Maleficent smiled as tears began to roll down her cheeks. “That isn’t what happened,” she confirmed. She resisted the urge that was beginning to well up inside of her, the urge to take Aurora in her arms and cling to her for dear life, and instead gently stroked the girl’s cheek, barely daring to touch her for fear that she would shatter into a million pieces, or simply disappear into nothing at all. “Brave, beautiful girl,” she whispered.

Aurora responded with a confused half-smile and caught Maleficent’s hand with her uninjured one.

“I am so glad to see you,” said Aurora. “When Philip and his men took me away, I thought I never would again.”

“I don’t much care for my houseguests to be dragged off screaming,” Maleficent replied, for lack of anything better to say.

Aurora gave a breathy chuckle, “Nevertheless, I didn’t expect you to fight a war against the entire kingdom for me.”

Maleficent took a breath. She must say it. There would be no better time. Perhaps Aurora was truly better, but more likely this was only a merciful trick of fate—a moment of stolen time. “I don’t believe there is anything I would not do for you, Aurora.”

Aurora gazed up at Maleficent with such warmth. It was overwhelming, and Maleficent wanted to turn away, but she feared so that she might never see Aurora look upon her that way again. And indeed, it did not last very long. Aurora’s smile faltered slightly, and there was a tinge of sadness in it.

“Am I going to die, Maleficent?”
“I certainly hope not,” Maleficent replied before she choked on her words. She swallowed before continuing. “You’re not in the most capable hands where healing is concerned.”

Aurora gave a little huff, “I can think of no more capable hands.” She squeezed Maleficent’s hand for emphasis, and then added, “May I ask you a favour?”

Maleficent bowed her head reverently, “Anything.”

The warm smile returned, and it so brightened her pale features that Maleficent dared to hope for the girl’s recovery once more. “Help me to sit up?”

Maleficent tried her best to give Aurora a stern expression. “I don’t know if you’re aware, but you were recently run all the way through by an enchanted Sword.”

Aurora pouted, “Please? Only for a moment.”

Maleficent sighed in mock-exasperation and helped Aurora to sit up.

“I feel very dizzy—please don’t let go,” she whispered shakily.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Maleficent replied. She wanted desperately to ask why, on so many levels, but restrained herself.

Slowly and with a pained expression, Aurora raised her injured arm and wrapped it around Maleficent’s shoulders, where her uninjured arm already rested. Maleficent bit back her cries of protest and said nothing, waiting patiently. Aurora’s face was very close to hers now, and it was so comforting to feel her warm breath when only moments ago she had been deadly cold.

“I’ve something to ask you,” she said, eyes half-closed, focused anywhere except on Maleficent, “but I don’t know how to begin.”

Maleficent ran her hand through Aurora’s hair, gently working through the tangles that were not crusty with dried blood. “Anything,” the word came unbidden, and then she added by way of explanation, “Anything you wish to know, I shall see to it that you get your answer.”

Aurora’s eyes rose and locked with hers, bright blue and shimmering as they did too often with unshed tears. “I have wanted to know for so long,” she said, as though this explained everything.

Maleficent frowned, “Wanted to know what?”

Aurora bit her lip, and then suddenly buried her face in Maleficent’s neck. Maleficent, caught by surprise, tensed and loosened her grip on the girl as a kneejerk reaction, but then she thought better of this and held Aurora as tightly as she dared. “Sweet, sweet girl…you’ve spent the past two days at death’s door. What words, what mere knowledge could hurt you more than you are already hurt?”

Aurora lifted her head and met Maleficent’s eyes again, and honestly, she looked so much healthier now that her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shining with her tears. It would have given Maleficent hope if Aurora did not seem so distraught. “Yours,” she sobbed.

“Mine?” Maleficent shook her head and thought for a moment, but she could make no sense of this. Instead, she removed one hand from its place supporting Aurora to stroke the girl’s cheek. “Please, tell me what you mean,” she breathed.

Aurora heaved several shuddery sighs, and she tried to wipe away her tears, but found only the shredded, filthy remains of the nightdress she had been wearing when she launched into battle. While
she busied herself, she began to speak very softly, “While I was under the Sleeping Curse, I dreamed that I spoke with you from time to time. Is that true?”

Maleficent frowned, “Yes, that is true.”

“But when I came to you, you acted as though we had never met. Or at least as though some of the conversations I thought we had did not happen. But they did, didn’t they? You came to me to say goodbye, because you were going to let me go.”

Maleficent bit her lip, “Yes.”

“But there is one thing I cannot sort out at all, and it has plagued me ever since, and I know it does not really matter, for I know you have come to care for me at least a little—at least enough to stay with me in my hour of need—and for that, I am so very thankful—” she looked up briefly to emphasize this point, but then slowly averted her gaze once more. “But I remember you saying goodbye and I remember hearing Philip approaching…and he kissed me and you kissed my forehead and I cannot tell which happened when or whether it happened at all. And I know it seems very trivial to you, but I hope you understand—I must know. I ache for the knowledge.”

Maleficent could not claim to understand even a little bit, and so she simply recounted what had happened. “I came to say goodbye to you because I intended to let Philip go, but the Good Fairies helped him to escape, and so he was already approaching the castle by that time. I kissed your forehead and then disappeared before Philip and the Fairies made it up the stairs, and then Philip kissed you and you awoke.”

Aurora was silent for quite some time, and then, even more softly than before, she continued. “That is what I thought, only…the curse could only be broken by True Love’s Kiss, correct?”

“As I understand it, yes.”

“But I do not love Philip.”

Though Maleficent supposed that on some level she knew this, hearing the words came as a surprise to her, and not an unpleasant one at that. “But you did at the time,” she replied, attempting to talk herself down.

Aurora shook her head, “I had only met him once.”

“But then…”

Aurora lifted her head to look at Maleficent, “I asked you one question that you never answered. I told you to forget it, but only because I so feared what you might say.”

Maleficent tilted her head and tried to remember. She had always tried meticulously to answer every single one of Aurora’s questions—it surprised her that one could have escaped her notice.

“What about me?”

What about me?

What about you? Are you my friend, or could I love you?

Nevermind that. I embarrass myself.

Maleficent’s eyes widened in recognition and she felt herself gasp. She gazed into Aurora’s eyes,
begging for an explanation she could readily comprehend, a question she could easily answer...that is to say, a question she could answer without offering up her heart to be crushed.

How she wished that this were then, the time Aurora had dared to ask such a question. She wished Aurora were standing, uninjured, bathed in sunlight, and looking healthy and happy.

But, she reminded herself, there would never be a better time, and there might never be another. And then or now, Maleficent would never be less afraid to speak the truth. Aurora did not have to answer for anything. Maleficent had to answer for much.

She swallowed, “Well, which is it?”

Aurora opened her mouth as if to speak, and Maleficent began to prepare something to say which would not make her sound quite as frighteningly intense as her true feelings were. What she wanted to confess to Aurora was her fondness, her devotion, things Aurora could perhaps return in some way.

But all of her careful words were erased from her mind when Aurora kissed her.

At first she froze, and her brain continued to grasp at the words as they flew out of reach, but then she thought better of this and held Aurora even tighter with one arm, cradling the back of her head with the other hand. Aurora’s left arm hung heavy on Maleficent’s shoulder, but her right hand ran over Maleficent’s cheek and jaw, down her neck and over her shoulder and arm, then back up again. The hand examined Maleficent’s horned headdress and the silky material that held it to her head. It clutched at the front and at the back of Maleficent’s robes and it pulled her ever closer and prevented escape. Not that its owner had any reason to worry.

Several minutes later, Aurora pulled back just a little, gasping for air, but her hand was pressed against the back of Maleficent’s neck, keeping her firmly in place. Aurora opened her eyes and sought out Maleficent’s, and she tilted her head and asked hesitantly, “Could you…?”

Maleficent almost laughed. “I cannot remember...what it was like not to love you.”

Aurora gazed at her for several minutes, mouthing the words she had just spoken, and then slowly, she began to smile. She cupped Maleficent’s cheek with her uninjured hand and ran her thumb over the cheekbone. “This isn’t a dream, is it?” she whispered.

Maleficent dared to close her eyes, to let the girl out of her sight for one second to savour the feeling of Aurora’s hand on her cheek. “I certainly hope it isn’t,” she replied, opening her eyes, almost surprised to find Aurora still gazing warmly up at her.

They did not speak much after that, for who knew how long Aurora’s reprieve from Death’s clutches would last? After spending so long at arm’s length from one another, and then spending far too long believing they might never see one another again, they found other pursuits far more worthwhile.

The Land of the Northern Mountains was truly a beautiful place to live, if one liked living on Earth. Honestly, Glenda would have preferred to live in the Kingdom of the Skies, but she’d had a rather nasty falling out with a rather prominent group of fairies there many centuries back, and she now found it quite intolerable. Anyway, she really was fond of mortals. She found them cute.

Like that girl, Ella. Pretty little thing, awful step-family, and Glenda had merely helped her to find happiness. A prince from a faraway kingdom had come to Snow White’s kingdom in search of a princess. The royal family had thrown a grand ball and everyone had been invited, but Ella’s step-mother would not allow her to go. So Glenda had intervened. She imagined the girl was well,
wherever she was. She had sort of lost touch.

Queen Snow’s little daughter, Emma, was a feisty little thing, too. Always got herself into all kinds of trouble. Glenda found her endlessly amusing, and she was always happy to babysit.

And then there had been the young girl who lived in the Castle of the Northern Mountains.

The Castle had belonged not so very long ago to a Royal Family, but they had run into some trouble involving a band of wicked fairies. There had been a very gruesome war, and the castle had been left abandoned for many years. A few years ago, a very tall, green-skinned, female wicked fairy had taken up residence there. Most wicked fairies were of average or below-average height. Though often more angular than their Good Fairy counterparts, extreme tallness invariably indicated extremely advanced power, and when it became clear that said wicked fairy planned to remain in the neighbourhood, Glenda had seen fit to tell the woman what was what. The kingdoms of this land had had their fair share of Evil lately. They did not need any trouble from the likes of her.

The wicked fairy had been exceedingly polite, almost charming, as they so often were, and had seemed almost amused at Glenda’s accusation, as if to say, Why, me? Cause trouble? Whatever do you mean? Glenda had left perhaps more suspicious than when she arrived.

As she had been leaving, she had first heard that lovely voice. It was almost too beautiful to belong to a mortal, and Glenda wondered if perhaps it had been gifted to her by a fairy. The voice sang,

“Black, black, black is the colour of my true love’s hair. 
Her face is something truly rare.”

The owner of the voice was a beautiful young maiden in a pretty blue dress fit for a royal, with long, blonde hair and fair skin. She sat in the grass outside the castle with a raven of all things perched upon her arm.

“Excuse me, young lady?” Glenda called to the girl.

The girl turned her head and Glenda could not suppress a gasp. Her face… She was the most beautiful girl Glenda had ever laid eyes on—she put the Evil Queen who had been Snow White’s step-mother to shame, as well as Queen Snow, herself. And yet, her face was marred by ugly, frightening scars—one on her left cheek and one right across her nose, as if someone had slashed at her with a knife.

“Good afternoon, Madame,” the girl said pleasantly, but she did not rise.

“Young lady, may I ask what brings you to this place?”

The girl tilted her head, “I live here, Madame. Why? Is there a problem?”

“You live here? But the wicked fairy inhabits this castle.”

The girl gave her a crooked smile, “Yes, she lives here, too.”

Since the girl did not seem intent upon getting up, Glenda approached her, instead. “Oh, you poor girl. I knew that witch was up to something. Is she keeping you here against your will?”

The girl’s smile fell, and she sighed, then decided to stand up. It was a slow process. Her movements were stiff, and once she made it to her feet, she was wobbly for an instant. But when she had collected herself, she seemed to tower over Glenda, though Glenda supposed she was not especially tall for a human, and there was something quite regal and commanding about the way she held
“No, Madame, she is not keeping me here against my will. Now, if I may ask, what business do you have here?”

Glenda took two tiny steps backward. “Oh, just having a quick word with the wicked fairy, that’s all, Milady. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll just be on my way.”

“I think that would be wise,” the girl replied, folding her arms. She made a clicking sound and the raven flew to her and perched upon her shoulder. Glenda had not realized it was possible for ravens to sneer.

Glenda made to leave, and the girl began to walk toward the castle. The way she walked was very stiff, as though she had been badly injured and still felt the pain keenly.

When Maleficent had arrived at the castle she now inhabited, there had still been human remains to dispose of. It had been a gruesome job, but she did not foresee coming across any other abandoned castles in the near future, and the surrounding country was quite beautiful.

There were two kingdoms in the area. Southwest of her was the realm of King James III and Queen Henrietta. To the Southeast, the realm of King Charles and Queen Snow White. Snow’s father had been Henry II. Charles was actually a younger brother to James. Henry II had had two wives: one, Snow’s mother, had died in childbirth. The name of his second wife was not spoken anymore. She was referred to as the Evil Queen, and the only thing that anyone would say about her was that she had tried to kill Snow White when she was but a little girl, not long after Henry II had died in the war which made vacant Maleficent’s new castle.

As she gazed out the window of her study, Maleficent wondered whether the Queen had regretted that attempt, or whether she had even been given the opportunity to regret.

Today was a special day, burned forever into Maleficent’s memory. Twenty-five years ago, Maleficent had placed a curse on a Princess who was no more than a baby. Nine years ago, she had attempted to make certain that her curse was carried out. Six years ago, she had fought vastly outnumbered in a war to save the life of the girl she once wanted dead simply out of spite for people who did not really matter.

And the girl, that beautiful, brave, kind, strong girl…

The scene played over and over in Maleficent’s mind, and it plagued her dreams. Sometimes, even now, she awoke in a cold sweat, hands outstretched, trying to reach out through time and space to knock the girl back out of the way.

But she had not expected it. She had not understood why Aurora would do such a thing. She had believed that Aurora wanted to live. She had come to that very spot, put her own life on the line, to ensure that Aurora lived a good life, with or without Maleficent, whatever she chose. And Aurora had thrown that life away to save Maleficent’s. When it had happened, when Aurora had leapt in front of the enchanted Sword and taken the blow meant for Maleficent, Maleficent had not reached out. She had done nothing.

“So deep in thought,” said a voice from the doorway to Maleficent’s study.

Glenda had worried for the girl, whose name was Aurora, for quite some time. She had sent various friends to visit the castle on unnecessary errands just to check on her, for she suspected the girl was
under some sort of spell, and that the wicked fairy was using her for her blood to make potions.

But multiple reluctant visitors to the Castle of the Northern Mountains, particularly those who were not fairies, reported that the two seemed most companionable indeed, and some said that the two behaved like lovers. Many said that, even though this was the case, the wicked fairy did not seem to exert any sort of control over the maiden as one would expect in such a circumstance. In addition, the maiden did not seem to be a prisoner, for she came into town from time to time, walking in that same stiff manner, proudly bearing her grotesque scars which looked as though they had been inflicted by some magical artifact, and the townsfolk shied away from her as though she were the witch.

After six years passed without incident, however, and when Aurora’s condition seemed to improve, Glenda had to—very reluctantly—set her suspicions aside. The girl was apparently not in any danger. What business was it of hers if she wanted to live out some sort of sick fantasy with a wicked fairy?

Aurora tsked, “I should have given you a real scare. Usually you hear me coming before I can even see you.”

Maleficent gave her a halfhearted smile, but she was a bit too caught up in the turmoil of the past to fully partake in Aurora’s levity. Aurora tilted her head playfully and raised one eyebrow, a mannerism she had adopted from Maleficent, and one which Maleficent was certain was much more becoming on her than it was on its originator, and she approached, taking Maleficent’s hands and swinging them. “What’s on your mind?”

Maleficent looked down at their hands and bit her lip. She withdrew her hands from Aurora’s and ran them up the girl’s arms. Aurora winced, ever so slightly, and Maleficent froze.

She still did not understand it.

“No, it’s all right,” Aurora said, holding Maleficent’s hand against her left arm, where, even through the sturdy material of her dress, Maleficent could clearly feel the heavy scarring.

Maleficent pulled her hand away. “I doubt that,” she replied. Her hand hovered over Aurora’s arm uncertainly, and she finally looked up to meet Aurora’s steady gaze.

“So that’s what you’re brooding about,” Aurora said softly.

In many ways, Aurora still looked like a young girl. Her body was small, her limbs were lithe. Her skin glowed and her eyes were bright and healthy. But these were not the things that caught one’s attention at first.

When people in the village saw Aurora approaching, they first perked up and then quickly shied away, and it broke Maleficent’s heart every time. For at first they saw a small, shapely blonde in a pretty dress, but as she drew nearer, they noticed the slight stiffness in her gait, the unevenness of her hair, and most strikingly, the vicious scars on her cheek and legs.

The way Aurora carried herself now was so different than it had been, too. When she had first come to Maleficent, she had been incredibly skittish, but even when she was at ease, there was a certain submissiveness to her stance. Her head was always a little bowed, her feet never quite set in where they were going, as if someone could say, no, Aurora, this way, not that way, and she would instantly change the direction of her entire essence to suit them.

Now, though, Aurora held her head high and walked slowly and deliberately. This was partially due to her lingering injuries and partially due to Maleficent’s influence, but another part of it was very
much from Aurora, herself. She radiated a deep sense of inner pride which made her every action deliberate, as if to dare anyone to tell her to do otherwise.

The overall effect, in Maleficent’s opinion, was that of a warrior. Maleficent took great pleasure in watching Aurora approach the castle when she had been away, for the girl’s natural grace had been augmented by certainty and a certain…almost haughtiness that delighted Maleficent to no end.

It pained Maleficent to see people turn away from Aurora and to hear them whisper in fear of the maiden who lived in the castle of the wicked fairy, when she knew Aurora had so longed for companionship in Stefan’s castle. Maleficent would have been devastated to learn that she was somehow responsible for Aurora’s loneliness in this new land.

“Come outside with me? It’s such a lovely day.”

Again Aurora’s voice and gentle touch surprised Maleficent out of her thoughts, and she looked up to meet Aurora’s eyes, bright blue and shining with her health. Maleficent nodded and stood to follow her. It was truly a miracle that Aurora had survived the sword wounds. A lesser mortal would have been dead in an instant, and yet she had survived and recovered, though it was clear she still felt the pain of her wounds now six years in the past.

The weather was truly nice, especially in the shade of the trees that surrounded the castle. When Aurora was alone, all of the various animals of the area flocked to her to listen to her song, and they allowed her to feed and pet them. When Maleficent walked with her, they made themselves scarce, except, of course, for the ravens.

Aurora chose a shady spot where the grass was particularly soft and motioned for Maleficent to join her. As Maleficent seated herself, Aurora caught the attention of a nearby raven with her song.

“Oh, my love is like a red, red rose,
That’s newly sprung in June,”

Maleficent’s greatest disappointment in coming to this castle had been the apparent lack of ravens. There were a plethora of other woodland creatures, many she had never seen before, but they were naturally inclined to be afraid of the likes of Maleficent. She mostly saw them from her window when Aurora was out walking alone.

Maleficent had even considered returning to the Forbidden Mountains to retrieve some ravens, for the utter lack of wildlife when she was out for a walk was becoming quite depressing to her. However, one day, as Maleficent had been taking a walk around the castle, Diablo had suddenly shot off of her shoulder and disappeared into the trees.

As it turned out, there were a fair number of ravens, though not quite the abundance that had inhabited the Forbidden Mountains. These ravens, though, were oddly quite wary of people, and so they were quite reluctant not to seek immediate cover if either Maleficent or Aurora showed up. With Diablo’s help and Maleficent’s natural affinity for the creatures, however, the birds eventually came flocking to her as they had always done, and Maleficent began to feel as though she had truly found a new home here.

Maleficent had almost grown accustomed to the hesitancy that gripped her every time Aurora made some gesture which might have said she wanted Maleficent near, for it was not something the wicked fairy could easily fathom. And so, even after six years, Maleficent sat leaving ample room between them, and Aurora looked at her with a quizzical tilt of her head. And just as she did every time, Aurora moved over so that their knees were touching, then continued to sing.
“Oh, my love is like a melody
That’s sweetly sung in tune!”

With the next lines, Aurora leaned in and lay her head on Maleficent’s shoulder playfully.

“As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I.”

Maleficent smiled and placed her arm around Aurora’s shoulders, holding her there as she let the raven fly away, still whistling the tune. She stroked Aurora’s golden hair, and ran her hands lightly over Aurora’s shoulder, hesitated a moment, and then gently ran her fingers down Aurora’s arm. Aurora winced, but she caught Maleficent’s hand before she could pull away.

“And I shall love thee still, my dear,” she sang softly, only for Maleficent this time, “Till all the seas go dry.” After a moment’s silence, she whispered, “It was so long ago, Maleficent.”

“And yet I think I shall never quite forgive myself,” Maleficent replied.

Aurora, for her part, was exquisitely happy. It was the kind of happiness that filled her, that completed her in a way she had never thought she would know. She awoke every morning well-rested and ready to begin her day, and her joy only intensified when she leaned over to kiss Maleficent on the cheek and give her shoulder a little squeeze.

She still felt a great deal of pain all throughout her body, and if she were being perfectly honest with herself, she doubted that the old wounds would ever quite heal themselves. They were inflicted by powerful magic, after all, and from what she had learned over the past few years, it was a miracle that she was alive at all. She had an inkling of what it was that had saved her, and though she desperately wanted Maleficent’s input on the subject, she knew better than to ask any more. Aurora’s brush with death all those years ago was still a touchy subject to Maleficent. Maleficent did not like to talk about it, and even though there was considerable evidence to support Aurora’s theory, she knew Maleficent would dismiss it as utter nonsense that her kiss had saved Aurora, and would then act very moody for days to come. Aurora didn’t think it was worth causing Maleficent any more pain. She knew she was right, and she hoped that someday Maleficent might see it, too.

Aurora sighed and took Maleficent’s hand, twirling it over her head as she sat up on her knees, “Forgive yourself for what, exactly?” she asked, and there was a twinkle in her eye which baffled Maleficent.

“For any of it,” Maleficent replied, trying to ignore Aurora’s obvious amusement at her expense. “For wanting you dead, for the Sleeping Curse, for…”

“But you see,” Aurora interrupted her, almost giddily, “nothing beyond those things was your fault at all. You left me with Philip for two years because you thought I loved him, and when you realized that was not the case, you did everything in your power to give me my freedom.”

“But—”

“And don’t you dare tell me that you were at fault for what I decided to do,” Aurora said, raising her eyebrows in mock-sternness. “If I hadn’t, neither of us would be sitting here having this pleasant little chat.”

Maleficent, in contrast, felt even more distressed as Aurora’s mirth grew. She shook her head unhappily and felt tears welling in her eyes. She tried to look away, but it was far too late. Aurora had seen them, and immediately she sobered and took Maleficent’s face in her hands.
“I am sorry,” she said, catching Maleficent’s black eyes with her blue ones. “It’s just that this day gives me great joy, and I don’t understand why it gives you such sorrow. We are both alive and well and free and together, and I would think that if you wanted those things even a fraction as much as I did, you would rejoice in the day we acquired them.”

“Why?” the question burst forth from her without preamble, and she felt the need to add, her voice broken from the years it had silently asked this question, not quite daring to voice it aloud, “Why did you do it?”

Aurora’s brow furrowed for a second in confusion, but then understanding dawned on her face, and she was silent for several minutes as the full weight of the question settled upon her. She understood in this moment that this was the question which was always upon Maleficent’s mind. This was the reason she often sat, gazing sadly at nothing. This was the reason Aurora sometimes awoke to find Maleficent, half-awake, arms outstretched, face contorted in panic, tears streaming down her cheeks, and this was the reason Maleficent always seemed so shocked and relieved to find that Aurora was lying right next to her. This was the reason Maleficent would then embrace her fiercely, would gather her up in her arms as though she were still a young girl and would not let go for the rest of the night.

Aurora never brought these things up, for she was certain that Maleficent would talk to her when she was ready to do so. Maleficent had never lied to Aurora, and she always answered her questions, even when—as Aurora had only recently realized—they were quite painful for her. Aurora had spent the better part of a year in Maleficent’s company asking her anything and everything she pleased, not well-versed in the wicked fairy’s subtle nuances of body language and so often blithely ignorant of what made her uncomfortable.

Far worse than that, Aurora privately worried that she had, while feeling particularly desperate because she thought she might die at any moment, coaxed a confession of love out of Maleficent before Maleficent was comfortable giving it. Maleficent’s expression of alarm, of panic, was so subtle that Aurora had not recognized it as such at the time, and yet now it haunted her dreams. And, in her haste to continue discovering what it was like to kiss the object of her most ardent affections, Aurora had failed to give a confession of love in return until quite some time later. Knowing the way Maleficent’s mind worked—that is to say, that she was as obsessive as Aurora was—she imagined that that must have been rather traumatic.

And now, faced with the question which had clearly been haunting Maleficent every single day since the war with Stefan’s kingdom, she learned that her hesitancy to admit her feelings had been traumatic in ways she had not even considered.

“Because I love you, of course,” Aurora said at last. Maleficent’s confusion caused her heart to ache, and she added as evidence, “Would you not have done the same for me?”

“Of course,” Maleficent replied, but wanted to say much more. That was a different matter. Maleficent owed Aurora everything. Aurora owed Maleficent nothing.

Aurora sighed, but it was good-natured, “Think of this, then: where would I have been if you had died?”

Maleficent supposed that was a fair point.

“I don’t know exactly, but what I gather is that I would have been kept prisoner until I could produce an heir, and then I would have been kept prisoner somewhere far away where I wouldn’t bother anybody anymore. Would you say that that is a fair assessment, O Mistress of Logic?”
In spite of herself, Maleficent began to succumb to Aurora’s irrepresible good mood, and she awarded the girl a look of half-hearted disapproval.

“So,” Aurora crooned, leaning in so that their noses were almost touching, “it was in my best interest to attempt to save you, my Great Protector.”

“You weren’t thinking of your best interest at the time,” Maleficent offered weakly.

Aurora kissed her soundly before whispering triumphantly, “Quite right. Which only goes to prove my first point, which is that I love you.”

As a woman who understood most things to a minute degree, Maleficent had always disliked things she did not understand, for she felt that if she did not understand something, it was probably because it was not worth understanding.

This, however, Aurora’s love for her, was proving quite resilient in changing her mind on the matter.

“Till all the seas go dry, my dear,” Maleficent sang,
“And the rocks melt with the sun,
And I will love thee still, my dear
While the sands of life shall run.”

Maleficent had not felt truly at ease in all the time she had been here. That dream she once had of a life where she grew accustomed to Aurora’s presence seemed a distant and absurd thing, for every day she was surprised by it: surprised to find her alive, surprised to find her with Maleficent, surprised to find her ostensibly happy.

The dream she had tried hardest to achieve, the dream she felt she had failed over and over again, to make Aurora happy immediately and always…this seemed to have come true. And it had been such an unreachable thing for so long that Maleficent could not even believe it and enjoy it.

Wicked fairies were not known for letting things go.

However, they were also not known for falling into the good graces of beautiful mortal women, nor for learning from their mistakes. They were not known for growing or changing at all, and they were almost invariably known for coming to most gruesome ends for their misdeeds.

Anyway, Maleficent had never cared to think of herself as a common mischievous sprite.

Maleficent continued to sing and Aurora joined her as they sat huddled together beneath the shade of a tree, and Maleficent found that they were suddenly surrounded, not only by ravens, but by all the bird and animals that inhabited the forest. They had all come out of hiding to listen to the love song of the Princess and the Wicked Fairy.

“So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I…”

Maleficent looked in confusion from the animals to Aurora in hopes of some explanation for this strange phenomenon, but Aurora smiled warmly, tilted her head to consider Maleficent for a moment, and then leaned into kiss her once more before finishing the song.

“And I shall love thee still, my dear,
Till all the seas go dry.”
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