

# THE 12<sup>TH</sup> FAIRY

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In the contest between Good and Evil, there are few moments of stalemate, lasting a precious short time. It is like a pendulum slowly swinging this way and that and resting only briefly at the equilibrium: one side nearly always has the upper hand. I was born Good. We don't make those decisions, as humans do, or so all of Faerie before me thought. Good I was born, and luckily enough in a time of Good's ascendance.

Though we knew of Evil in my youth, it was purely academic: a rumor, a vague threat to give our lives interest and purpose. Until, of course, my younger sister was born. She was born Evil, but then, she was the 13<sup>th</sup>, and all of us before her had been Good. No side ever has less than the thirteenth part of the whole. I think that's only fair.

Even so, she quickly came to shun our society. Wherever she went, whatever raw wounds her presence exposed, her elder sisters went before and behind, tracking beauty, cheer and order with the sweep of our long skirts. If she blighted the fields, one of us sprouted new seed. If she collapsed a riverbank and sent a flood, one of us came behind to shape still lagoons. If she felled groves and left stumps to rot, one of us blanketed them in moss and fresh blossoms so that you would never guess at the destruction that had gone before. She soon retired to her

own abode to brood and think of vengeance. After some time, most of us forgot about her. Humans assumed she was dead.

My eldest sister, the 1<sup>st</sup>, had a little girl-child I called Gaylin.

It came about in this way: my sister loved a mortal man, as sometimes happens to our kind, and while she with child, he went to war and never come back. When her infant was born, my sister called her Sorrow and placed her in my arms. Then my sister went to her bower to mourn her lost love. I little knew how deeply a loss could wound one of us. I was not mourning, and the child was not Sorrow for me. She was dear, like a drop of nectar falling from the first crocus of summer, and when she laughed, I laughed, and when she smiled, I smiled. My sister left us to while away our golden hours, and Gaylin called me her little mother.

But in the winter of her thirteenth year, my little maid left me. She fell to a fever of her father's kind, and the devils below who steal mortals' souls when they die came for hers. I protested, but her mortal half won out, and the earth took her body and soul. Then I understood my eldest sister's pain, and what death meant, and for three days I neither ate nor slept nor moved.

We were then at the Thistledown cottage, and the Lord Tenoak, the master of that place, took it ill that anyone with Faerie blood should be stolen away or come to grief in his domain. He came to me and knelt, swearing as he took my hand that he would go down to the depths and retrieve my darling girl for me. He was true to his word, for he girded himself and set out, and my elder sister, the 7<sup>th</sup>, soon brought me word that he had set out across the sea. For a time I had hope, but when he did not return, I became despondent again and shunned companionship as my younger sister the 13<sup>th</sup> did.

It was about that time that the mortal sovereigns had a long-hoped-for child, whom they called Rosebud. Out of gratitude to my elder sister, the 10<sup>th</sup>, who had given the queen the remedy for her barren womb, the court of Faerie was invited to the christening. The whole court, that is, except for my younger sister the 13<sup>th</sup>, who, as I said, was thought deceased. Too perhaps the king and queen had considered it ill-advised to welcome an Evil fairy into their home, and slighted her purposefully. It was, of course, the exactly wrong decision. But they were humans, after all; they didn't know.

I went with my elder sisters, who had each prepared a gift to bestow on the child, but I had no gift and could think of none, for I was still beside myself with grief and had no great inclination to mingle. Thus I spent the celebration standing aloof, too distraught with my own private concerns to take part in others' happiness. My eldest sister, the 1<sup>st</sup>, told me that my pain would ease with time, as it had for her, but I was beyond all counsel and barely heard her. When it came time to present the royal child with their gifts, she began it, promising the child patience, a gift in which I could discern little point, since surely a princess is rarely kept waiting. My next sister, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, presented the infant Rosebud with innocence, which I assumed she had, being too young to have committed any grievous wrong. My next sister gave her beauty – an impertinent gift, I reflected, for it suggested some deficiency in the appearance her parents had passed on to her.

And so on down the line, until Rosebud had every quality humans could wish for in their princesses: diplomacy, courage, a sense of humor, perfect pitch, generosity, humility, health, and tenderness. It was then my turn, but I had withdrawn to a far corner, half-concealed behind a tapestry, and the king, seeing no other fairy, stood to give the command for dinner.

Before he could, the air in the room turned cold and the torches blew out. A shutter clattered against a window frame, and a dog bayed in the yard. When one of my sisters managed to rekindle the lights, the entire assembly was shocked to see my youngest sister standing before the cradle. There was a menacing glower upon her face.

She looked poorly; her skin was gray and her limbs were thin. Her unkempt hair grew every which way, tangled up with burrs and twigs and dead leaves. She was dressed in a thick pile of rags to hold off the chill.

"So," she said, addressing my sisters; her voice was like the rasp of a handsaw grating across a young tree's corpse, "you have exhausted your benevolence again on this tiny mortal. How...charitable," she wheezed. Her breath smelled like a bog. "But you know it really isn't fair."

"Your Excellency," began the queen, and what she thought she could say to prevent disaster, I haven't the slightest idea.

"Now, now," said my younger sister, sharply. "You didn't send me an invitation, Your Majesties, the least you could do is let me speak my piece. All of my sisters have given their gifts to the princess. It wouldn't be fair if I didn't add mine."

"Oh, no, you don't!" shouted the king, laying his palm upon his sword hilt. It was a ceremonial blade he wore for show, not even sharp. Perhaps he could have thrown it at her. "We want none of your curses here!"

"Your Majesty, that's hardly sporting of you. It isn't my fault I was born Evil, after all, or that Evil fairies can only give curses, not blessings. But what I can give, I intend to: hear me," she began, in her voice that could not be undone, "Princess Rosebud shall indeed grow in patience and innocence and beauty – in all my sisters have given her, for I have no power to

change what they have decreed. Until her sixteenth birthday, when she will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall into eternal slumber."

With those words, there was a clap of thunder, and my younger sister disappeared.

I'm sure you can imagine the shock and sorrow that fell over the entire assembly then. The king simply collapsed into his throne and began to weep. The queen cried out to my sisters: "But surely you can stop this! You must stop this!"

My elder sister the 9<sup>th</sup> explained to her that it was impossible for one of us to undo what our sister had wrought. Magic does not work that way.

I found myself weeping as well, although my sisters showed no such similar signs of weakness. For I was imagining the princess, not as she was then, a tiny gurgling thing, but as she would be, tall, and patient and graceful and beautiful, eyes shining with her sense of humor, full of health and promise – suddenly cut down. I did not see how her poor people should withstand such a blow. It was with this thought that I stepped out from the corner and approached the royal family, and with this conviction that I spoke, not knowing what the words would be until they were out of my mouth.

"Your Majesties," I said, "my elder sisters cannot undo the curse. But I have not yet given the princess my gift."

"Then *you* can undo it?" the queen asked, and I could read the hope in her eyes, the same hope I felt when the Lord Tenoak had rashly promised to restore my Gaylin.

"No, Your Majesty," said I, gently as I could. The hope disappeared like dew at summer's sunrise. "But I can soften it. For I tell you now, on the day Rosebud falls into eternal slumber, at the very moment her finger meets the spindle, you and all your court shall into the

self-same slumber, and so long as she sleeps, you shall sleep with her and join her in the happiest of dreams, where no grief may touch you or her."

When I ceased to speak, there was not a sound in the room, but every eye was fixed on me, and every face had turned ashen. The king rose.

"Out," he said.

And in that instant, my sisters and I left the celebration, each one disappearing with a pop. But we did not go our separate ways thereafter, for we all re-appeared in the wood together, still in our finest gowns. My elder sister the 5<sup>th</sup> railed at me.

"Do you realize what you've done?!" she cried. "The king and the queen and the entire court in eternal slumber?! What will become of the kingdom?!"

"I-I meant to spare them," I said.

"Spare them?!" should my elder sister the 9<sup>th</sup>. "You've given them a death sentence, to be carried out in sixteen years."

"Now instead of losing a princess, the humans will lose a whole court," agreed my elder sister the 10<sup>th</sup>.

"But," I protested, "their subjects will make do, I'm sure, without them."

"They could make do without a princess much more easily," said my elder sister, the 8<sup>th</sup>.

"You are too young," said my elder sister the 2<sup>nd</sup>. "You don't remember the last Evil times – the wars, the factions, before there was one king in the realm."

"The human realm is like a vast snake," said my sister the 4<sup>th</sup>. "The king and his court are the head – if you cut off the head..."

"If only you had left well enough alone! If only you hadn't come at all!" my sister the 11<sup>th</sup> wished.

"Yes, if only!" said I, weeping again. "I hadn't wished to go. And I only did as I did to spare her poor parents. And their parents. And friends. And retainers. And servants. Think of the grief they would endure if they went on awake while their princess fell into eternal slumber, if they could never hear her sing or speak or laugh again." I wept copiously, hardly knowing the reason then. I wept for Rosebud and her court, I wept for Gaylin and myself.

"Let her alone," my eldest sister scolded the others—tardily, I felt. "She meant well. And she is learning." She embraced me and I wept into her shoulder.

"I will go to the king and queen," said my elder sister the 3<sup>rd</sup>, "and I will advise them to have every spinning wheel in the kingdom burned. Our magic may not be able to prevent the curse's fulfillment; that does not mean it must come true."

Time passed too quickly, I think, for the king and queen and all the court, but slowly for me. I had no Gaylin then to fill up my days, and, although I found moments of delight here and there – in a rabbit's twitching whisker, in a robin's first song, in a well-formed rose – I found nothing that delighted me so long and so deeply to make me forget.

On a clear day in autumn, I went to see my eldest sister. She was not at home, and I was told I could find her at the sea's edge, where a certain bluff, rocky and barren, yielded a clear view to the horizon in the west. As I approached, she turned to me and explained, "It was on this day twenty-eight autumns past that I watched my love's ship disappear." She put her hand to her belly. "Then I was carrying your little darling."

And I told her what I have just told you, that I could find no joy great enough to hold back my loneliness. "It feels as though there is a hole in my heart that nothing, save her, can fill."

My eldest sister nodded. "It feels that way, sometimes."

I marveled at her. "But you, you are just the same as you always were. You smile, you laugh, you scold us. Surely you do not still grieve?"

"No one who has truly loved will ever stop grieving, little one."

"Then is love an Evil?" I asked her.

"I have not decided," said she.

I stood beside her in silence, staring out at the sea that seemed so endless. My eyes came to rest upon a gull, wheeling in the air over the surf. And as my gaze followed the bird, he came to turn toward shore – indeed, toward the very beach below the lookout where we stood, the harsh rocky beach some twenty fathoms below the bluff. When the gull flew below us, over that beach, my gaze lit on a new figure, barely discernible, a creature crawling in from the sea.

I do not know how, but the moment I saw that wet, ragged shape, I knew. I raced to find a path off the bluff and down to the rocks below. I felt nothing as bramble clawed at my face and limbs, noticed nothing as my eager feet slipped on spray-soaked lichen, heard nothing as my sister called after me. When I reached bottom, I turned around and about frantically, seeing no one at once, frightened I had missed her or, worse, that she had been a trick of the surf and the sun. But suddenly, there she was, dripping wet, tattered dress and hair clinging to her. My girl. My Gaylin.

"Oh, Mama," she cried, and ran to me, and I held her with all of my strength. "How I've missed you!" she said. "How frightened and lonely I was!"

"There, there," said I, bewildered. "Hush. All is right now. You're safe."

My eldest sister followed on soon after and greeted her daughter with wide eyes, and when we had stood transfixed with amazement long enough, we had presence of mind enough to take thought for our girl's health. We brought her to her mother's house and dried her hair and dressed her in fresh, warm clothes. We fed her and sat her by the fire, and even then my eyes could never have their fill of the wondrous sight of her. I was struck dumb at turns, staring.

In appearance she was unchanged. Though she had been gone from us fifteen years, she was still a maid of thirteen, and her eyes had lost none of their light. And yet there was something, added to the familiar gaiety, just behind her dark pupils. She could not tell us where she had been, nor in what way she had come back, and she seemed not to have marked the passage of time at all, but she asked after mortal creatures she had befriended all those long years ago, and shed small, silent tears when my eldest sister told her of their fates. In her mourning, as she came to understand the seasons she had lost, Gaylin made no move to conceal her face or hide her tears, but sat quietly with her back straight. When I compared my grief to hers, I was ashamed. But now we were together, I resolved to be unhappy no longer.

Thus it was my life began anew.

When she was small, she was a mystery to me. Each day, I made a new discovery – what delighted her, what troubled her, what she would and would not eat, how to coax a smile or a game or a nap, how best to calm her woken from a nightmare. Now I was relearning her. One day shortly after her return, I saw her eat the elderberries my sister the 6<sup>th</sup> offered to her. Before, she had thought them too bitter and spat them out. Often I found her on the bluff looking out to the sea like her mother, although in times past she had been frightened of the water and the height. Now she was fearless – not reckless or bold, but little could worry her. And though she

had always been passionate and quick to laugh or cry, she was quicker to laugh at trifles now and quicker to cry at grave things.

She told new stories: no longer larks and jokes, but stories full of heroes' anguish and straining and grasping and finally despairing; stories of times when Evil stood ascendant and the tiny minority of Good scrambled and struggled for the merest foothold; stories of victories won by only the smallest of margins and at great cost; even stories with no victory at all, sometimes. I knew not where she could have learned such tales, and I asked her.

"I do not know, Mama," she said, creasing her brow, "for I scarcely know what I am about to say when I open my mouth. The story almost tells itself. Isn't that odd?" She laughed.

It was about then that my younger sister the 13<sup>th</sup> came to pay a visit to her niece, who, after all, was family, and she was the only one of us not yet to see Gaylin since her return. Perhaps it was Gaylin's mortal half, but there had always existed a strange affinity between the two of them, though Gaylin never saw much of her aunt before she was taken from us. When Gaylin asked her politely how she fared, she complained that she could not make a spinning wheel. For, being born Evil, she could create nothing.

"That is an odd complaint, Aunt. Why do you want one?" said Gaylin.

My younger sister then told her of the Rosebud affair and the unfulfilled curse.

"I am running out of time, Niece. Ooh—it makes my blood boil to see them, the nasty mortal king and his nasty mortal queen, surrounded by their scraping subjects, so smug, so sure they have outwitted me." My younger sister writhed in paroxysms of revulsion. "But have they? Have they outwitted me?" she went on, fearful. "Come spring, the girl will be sixteen and it will be too late. Who knows what will happen if the curse is averted? It could tear at the very fabric of Faerie; certainly it will be an outrageous victory for Good."

"Aunt," Gaylin said calmly, "could you not persuade someone else to make the spinning wheel for you?"

"Who?" demanded my younger sister the 13<sup>th</sup>. "No Good fairy will aid me with her magic, and no human craftsman will either—if the human does not care about the princess' fate, he cares for himself or friend or his cousin whose fate's all wrapped up with the princess, now that my elder sister the 12<sup>th</sup> has worked her magic." All this she said with unmistakable scorn for me and my efforts. The scorn I returned whole-heartedly, for what kind of ill-conceived curse is it that can languish for want of spinning wheel?

"Oh," said Gaylin. "I am sorry to hear that."

"Hmph," said my younger sister, and she went away without trying the tarts that Gaylin had baked for her. I should say that the affinity between them was much warmer on Gaylin's side than my sister's.

Gaylin took it upon herself then to intercede on her aunt's behalf, and naturally she came to me, knowing I was most pliable to her wishes. On this, however, my answer was unrelenting. I would not help my younger sister by creating a spinning wheel, as the king had shown the good sense to follow my sister the 3<sup>rd</sup>'s advice and ban them.

"It goes against my nature, Gaylin," I told her. "You know this."

"Surely it is not Evil to *make* something, Mama, even something so simple as a spinning wheel. Or to aid a relative."

"Not ordinarily," said I, "but in this case it would be a Good thing that brings about Evil outcome. And," I added, with a blush, "my meddling in this matter has already done enough harm."

"Oh, I see," said Gaylin, in her frank way. "Because the fulfillment of Aunt's part of the curse would mean the fulfillment of your part, too—not only will the princess fall, but all the court with her."

"It is not a curse," said I, bristling, "to fall asleep and fail to miss one whom you love. Even so," I admitted, "I did not consider, and acted hastily, and I wish I hadn't done it."

"So do I, Mama," Gaylin replied, embracing me fondly. "Yet, do you not believe that an Evil thing may sometimes come around to a Good outcome, also?"

"That," I cautioned her, "is a dangerous notion, my darling lamb."

"Yes," she agreed. "And only suitable when all is said and done. But what's done *is* done, Mama, and I think Aunt's curse must come about somehow, and then yours will follow. Perhaps—perhaps it will not be so terrible for the kingdom as everyone expects. And afterwards perhaps there will be some other remedy to save Rosebud."

"Perhaps," I replied, to comfort her. "But I know of no such power." Gaylin said nothing.

It was a few short weeks later that we were all (except my younger sister of course) feasting at the home of my elder sister the 8<sup>th</sup>. After the meal, my elder sister the 7<sup>th</sup>, who had taken to Gaylin's new manner of tale, called for a story, and Gaylin stood to oblige her. She paused, closing her eyes for a moment as she sought for a beginning.

"There was once a handsome knight, a lord of Faerie who loved an equally beautiful lady of Faerie."

My elder sister the 7<sup>th</sup> exchanged a smile with me, for this was a good beginning. We all listened eagerly as Gaylin continued.

"But she knew nothing of his love for her, and, try as he might, he could find no way to make it known to her. At last, he mustered his courage and resolve, for he could see that there was nothing else for it but to declare himself to her boldly.

"The feast of the Floralia was well nigh, and the merrymaking gave him an excuse to beg her company, and that of her family with her, for he made preparations and offered himself as their host for the length of the festival. All went according to plan, for the lady arrived with her sisters to the lord's abode, and there enjoyed his hospitality for a fortnight, but, at the very height of the feast when he had purposed to draw his beloved apart and unfold his heart to her, a disaster without precedent befell all of Faerie.

"There was a child, a young maid dear to the lady, who shared kinship with Faerie on her mother's side, but with fragile mortals on her father's. This child was struck with a wasting fever and fell before any understood the gravity of her illness. Before anyone could make inquiry or protest, the devils of the Under-realm came for her mortal half, and without distinction or care for her Faerie blood, stole her away like any departed human.

"When word reached the poor lady of this disaster, she fell to the ground, just as if she herself had been shot through the heart. She spoke not a word, but remained limp and dumb, so sick with grief was she, and her sisters could do nothing to rouse her from her stupor, try as they might.

"Thus it was that the noble lord girded himself and stole upon her, kneeling before the lady like a suppliant. He said nothing of his love, not then, but took her hand and pledged on his honor that he would restore the child, whatever would come of it. And the lady, still mute and half-blind and deaf in her sorrow, made no motion that she understood or thanked him. So the lord went away from her sadly.

"But he was true to his word, for that very night he made sail for the edge of the world, far to the west where the living may cross into the Under-realm if they dare. He sailed for one hundred days past sight of land, through storms and fogs and deadening calms, ever westward. On the morning of the one-hundred-and-first day, though he had not yet glimpsed anything upon the horizon, he spotted a bird in the skies above. Though not near enough to identify, the lord kept his eyes upon this creature, in case it should give him some sign. The bird came no closer, but neither did it fly off beyond his vision. For ten days he sailed in this manner, with the bird always just in sight, until at last on the eleventh day, it flew down to perch on his masthead, where now it could be seen clearly to be a raven.

"I have watched you for many days. Who are you to sail so far?" asked the raven. "And why have you come?"

"The knight told him.

"A bold promise you made to this lady-love," cawed the raven. "Bold and rash. What if you fail?"

"I will not fail," said the knight, "for I am prepared to spend whatever time it takes, whatever effort, in service of this quest. There is nothing else for me, except to serve my lady, for I realized the moment I heard of her grief that I was hers, body and breath, because it was then I felt the grief as if it were mine, and I knew my heart would never be my own again."

"What if," cackled the raven, "you were not only hers, but she were yours, without fulfillment of this mad pledge?"

"The knight shook his head sadly. "Even if I had her love, I would still wish only to serve her. Why demand recompense for what one would offer up gladly? I need no reward from her, and I left without asking for any."

"At this, the raven clicked his beak. 'If that is the case, I shall soon see you again.' With that, he flew off into the horizon. But, true to his word, the raven returned the next day with a forked branch in his beak, which he dropped at the Faerie lord's feet. It hit the ship's deck with a hard *thunk*. The Faerie lord stooped to retrieve it, and wondered to see that, though in every other way it was the clipping of a young branch with budding leaves, it had the color and weight of gold.

"'In two days' time,' said the raven, 'you will reach the shore, where you shall find cliffs of unimaginable height, and the mouth of a cavern. Tie up your vessel, come ashore, and enter the cavern at dusk. The road you seek is there. The way is steep and winding, but the path is sure, and there is but one. If any question you along the way, show them this branch, which shall be your talisman, and all will know I have heard your tale and you are granted you safe passage. You will come to a fork in the road, but that will not trouble you, fairy, for your nature shall decide which way to choose without thought. Come to the palace and tell the gatekeeper your name.'

"Once more, the raven flew off, and the lord of Faerie sailed on. In two days, he came to the shore. There was a white sandy beach, and then sheer cliffs that rose farther into the sky than he could see – as if now he were staring upward into the horizon that had lain before him for so many days. The cavern mouth gaped, and he could make out nothing in the blackness within. He waited until dusk as the raven instructed, and then he took the golden branch the raven had brought and continued on his way.

"It was just as the raven had said. He followed the steep and winding road that led down into the Under-gloom, and if any challenged him, he had but to produce the sprig and he was permitted to pass. At the crossroads, he took the path to the right without a thought, and he soon

saw a darkly glittering palace below him. He told the gray-cloaked gatekeeper his name. In the blink of an eye, the knight found himself standing inside the palace, before two thrones. One was amethyst and emerald, and one was ruby; two thrones for the Dread King and his consort, the richest of all monarchs. The Queen sat on the throne of ruby, but the throne of amethyst and emerald was empty save for the raven, who perched upon one arm.

"So we meet again, fairy,' said the raven. 'None of your kind has come here before.'

"I expected to find your master,' said the Faerie lord. 'Please, you know my business with him.'

"The Queen moved. 'You will find no masters here,' said she. 'They are not known in the Under-realm.'

"Before the knight could beg of her what she meant, the raven's aspect changed. He grew into the shape of a tall and handsome man. Then the Keeper of all mortals took his throne beside his consort. Their very eyes shone like jewels.

"The Faerie lord dropped to his knees before them, terrified. 'I beg your forgiveness, Majesty,' he said. 'I did not know you before. I thought the raven was your servant.'

"So you would,' said the Raven, his voice soft and quiet, like a creeping fog. 'It is in your nature, is it not? But all mortal creatures belong to me, and I to all mortal creatures. As such, I may assume any of their forms, and they may assume mine.'

"The Faerie lord said nothing, doubting his tongue to find the proper words. He held his peace and his gaze to the floor until the Raven spoke again.

"On your ship, you spoke of a child.'

"Yes, Majesty. She has come into your realm, though she shares Faerie blood with her mother.'

"She shares mortal blood with her father,' said the Dread King. 'You also spoke of a woman, dear to you, to whom this child was dear.'

"That is true,' said the knight. 'There is a lady of Faerie, who languishes in grief for this child, and she is dearer to me than my own soul.'

"That is little compliment to her,' said the Raven, 'for you do not have a soul, fairy. At least I have never seen one.'

"The Faerie lord did not argue, for he could offer nothing to prove otherwise.

"What if I told you,' the Dread King proceeded, 'that, should you return this very moment to your lady, she would confess her love to you, and grant you her hand, with all her dowry besides?'

"This the knight answered, though slowly. 'I would still seek, Majesty, to be worthy of her love, and to prove mine for her.'

"I see,' said the King. 'That is your right. But I know my right as well. All mortals souls are mine, that is my due. I will not be cheated one penny; I will not be cheated of my full measure.'

"But nor will we, the folk of Faerie,' said the knight. 'Could we not divide the child, you and I? Let her mortal half remain here in your realm, Majesty, but let her Faerie half return to the Upper-air with me.'

"Blackgard!' shouted the Raven. 'What unnatural act is this?! Carve her up, as though she were two separate pieces, fixed together by some clumsy smith or carpenter, as if you could tell where mortal began and Faerie ended?! As though I should be content with a disfigured stump, and your precious lady would thank you for a bundle of limbs – or does her Faerie half

reside in her trunk and the mortal in her limbs? You cruel, savage, soulless thing! No, never should I accept such a bargain. Nothing but a whole, integral creature will do.'

"In that case,' said the knight, daunted but determined to accomplish his task, 'consider this proposal: you have kept her many months and days. Allow her to return with me now for an equal span, and then we will send her back, and so on the two realms may claim her in turns.'

"No,' said the Raven. 'I have made such a bargain before, and then with far greater cause and assurance than you are able to give.' At this, the Dark King glanced once at his Queen, and she averted her eyes. 'Do you think your lady will thank you, when she learns that she must send the child away again, when her allotted time is through? Or when she hears that you have earned her far more than the sorrow of the child's single departure, but an infinite number of such partings?'

"Now the poor knight was near despair. 'Majesty,' he cried out, 'if you will divide the child no-wise, then will you not grant her to the Upper-air, wholly and completely?! Call it a gift, call it a boon, and no bargain at all, but allow me to take her!'

"Impossible,' said the Dread King. 'That sprig you carry is the talisman. One was permitted to descend by it, one shall be permitted to ascend.'

"With this, the King made as if to rise and extend his hand to his Queen, the audience over, but again the knight cried out. 'Sire!' The Dread King paused.

"Sire. Majesty,' said the brave lord of Faerie. 'I shall give the talisman to the child then, that she may return to the Upper-air alone. I will remain. Will you not accept me in her stead?'

"Done!' said the Dread King at once, and with a snap of the monarch's fingers, the knight found himself no longer inside the palace, but standing upon a dark and seemingly endless plain.

"A throng of people pressed about him on all sides, of all ages and times and passions, just as they were at the point of their deaths. Thus some were quite lovely to behold, whole and still in their prime, while others were wasted and blasted, and others showed the full marks of their death wounds, bloody and fresh, or festered and gangrenous. The knight fingered the branch in his hand and held it aloft, relieved to find he still had it as he shuddered and shrank from the crowd of dead. At that moment the raven appeared again and landed upon his shoulder.

"'Why do you stand quivering?' asked the bird. 'Find your little maid and give her the talisman. I will lead her to the crossroads. That is,' the raven added, 'if you have not changed your mind.'

"I have not," said the single-minded knight, though his heart quailed. How was he to find the child on that vast plain? Once he had found her, did he have the strength to hand over the talisman to her and with it, his own life? To remain forever in the Under-gloom among the thronging multitude of corpses? Did he have the courage?

"He did. He searched the crowd one face at a time, from one end of the plain to the other, fixed on his task with diligence and sorrow. At first, he could not allow his thoughts to stray to what would happen once he had found her, for then his resolve would nearly fail him. He would stand on the point of turning to the raven and declaring he had changed his mind, that he wished the bird to lead him back to the crossroads. But in time, the task came to seem so fruitless that he more than once suspected the Dread King to be making sport of him, setting him an impossible test; then his blood would boil in futile anger, and finally he looked forward to the search's completion and whatever could befall him next, his sole desire fixed on this task's end.

"If someone ordered you to find a grain of sand upon the beach, you would agree readily and set out at once to accomplish this simple feat. But if someone ordered you to find a certain

grain of sand, and then described it to you in such loving detail that no other grain could counterfeit it, you might despair. You might spend years in the search, and perhaps spend your very lifetime, before the task was complete. Such was the task the lord of Faerie had taken on. But he did not despair, he only searched.

"He had never considered mortal faces with such care before, so similar they were to his eyes. But now, seeking one face so particularly, he began to notice their infinite variety, even in the faces they showed to death: fearful, defiant, callous, indifferent, laughing, weeping, bewildered, smiling, bitter, enraged, serene, desperate, accepting, relieved. Joyful faces with old sorrows etched into their brows and the corners of their eyes. Mournful faces without a wrinkle or worry line. Resentful young faces, cheated their full measure of life. Beleaguered old faces, still awaiting the wisdom and peace of age. The knight began to think what a thing it must be to be mortal. With so many possibilities, and no two mortals alike, how did they ever know their true selves and their place in the world? He supposed many of them never did.

"I cannot tell you for how long the knight searched, only know that in the end, he found the child among the crowd on the plain. She looked just the same as the day she had departed, as if no time had passed for her. At intervals, she shivered in her thin shift, and wrapped her frail arms about her body, or sweated and longed for cool water in her throat, as if the fever still raged inside her. When she saw the lord of Faerie, she knew him and cried out his name.

"In haste and delight, he knelt before her and showed her the branch and the raven, and explained to her that she must leave that place. He told her to follow the raven to the crossroads, to take the steep and winding path back the way he had come to the shore, where she would find his ship. 'Do not fear the management of the craft,' he said, 'for she is a ship of Faerie and will

bear any of Faerie blood whithersoever they purpose to go. Follow the rising sun for one hundred and fifteen days, and you will find yourself safely upon the shores of your homeland.'

"All this the child heard in wonder, but yet she reached out to the knight with clinging hands, told him she was frightened and begged him to go with her, for she could never make such a journey alone.

"Little one,' said the knight, 'I cannot return with you, for that is the bargain I made with the Raven.' And then he described to her the sorrow in which he had left her Faerie kin, and put courage into her with the tale of his own love, which had borne him over the sea and beyond. At last the child nodded and took the branch from his hands, the golden branch which he offered to her without regret. As soon as it passed from his grasp to hers, the child felt well and strong, but the knight, a lord of Faerie no more, felt frail and shivery and he nearly cried out in surprise and horror, for he had never known illness before. But he bit his tongue and he watched as the child disappeared into the crowd. He could mark her progress for a time by the raven's flight which she followed, but soon, even this was lost to him. And from that day to this, he remains as he was, in the Under-gloom and in love."

No one moved as Gaylin finished her tale. She picked up her goblet, her mouth grown dry in the telling, and drank deeply. When she put the goblet down, her eyes met no one else's. Finally, my eldest sister the 1<sup>st</sup> rose from her place and looked away, as if she recalled some task left undone elsewhere, and left our company. One by one, the others did likewise, departing without a word, until there were none at the table save Gaylin and I.

"Is that a true tale?" I asked her.

"I do not know, Mama. It came to me as I spoke, but I do not know where it came from. Do you know it? Have you heard it before?"

"Something very like," said I.

Days slipped by very quickly after that, for all I sat about with two minds. For on the one hand, I was consumed with guilt that love of me had brought any of our folk into the Dread King's power, especially love unknown and unlooked for, unrequited and without even gratitude. On the other hand, I did not know how much of Gaylin's tale to believe, nor whence it came into her mind. For she might have easily heard, since her return, about the foolish pledge Lord Tenoak had made to me after the fever took her, and that small kernel may have suggested the tale to her imagination, the tale which then arose with little more than a passing resemblance to reality. Three considerations comforted me in this regard: no one had seen Lord Tenoak's ship on our shore since the day he disembarked; Gaylin had not arrived in it, that was certain, and she carried no twig with her; and she herself appeared to make no connection between the story and what she herself had experienced, but regarded the characters as simply that. These thoughts were my consolation, despite the fact my sisters took the account as undressed history and soon made a game of calling me cold and breaker-of-hearts, and showing all nicety to Tenoak's memory, although he had had no particular friend among them when he had been present in the flesh.

Meanwhile, Gaylin was utterly insensible of the trouble she had caused, but still on about my younger sister's spinning wheel.

"It is most unfair," she said, "that my Aunt the 13<sup>th</sup> be always thwarted, simply because she was born different. And who knows what might happen if her curse has no effect?"

"No such thing has ever happened," my eldest sister told her impatiently. Gaylin had given up on me for the moment and come around to her mother instead. "Every curse or blessing uttered by a fairy comes true, whether we help it along or not. It is the way of things. It is our nature. Besides, child, I could never create for an Evil purpose."

"And yet an Evil plan may result in a Good outcome. Just as a Good intention may result in Evil."

"And what Good outcome can we expect when the human court falls into unwaking sleep?"

For the moment Gaylin was speechless, and I took the opportunity to interject. "She expects some other power shall present itself to remedy that, when all is said and done," said I. "I have already told her I know of no such power."

"Don't you, sister?" replied my eldest sister, to my surprise. "True love in its purest form can surely work wonders, past all reasonable expectation. And it is that rare blossom that flowers best and strongest in Evil circumstances."

"A beautiful notion," said I, as I sniffed, "but somewhat lacking empirical support."

"I should think the testimony of your dear niece here would be all the evidence necessary."

At this I realized my eldest sister had turned the dispute to another opportunity to twit me about Lord Tenoak, and I took my leave of her and dear Gaylin in protest. I was all but certain that there was no truth to the story then and sincerely hoped that it would be forgotten.

My elder sister the 7<sup>th</sup> had developed a fondness for walking along the sea coast since she had heard Gaylin's latest tale – I suppose she now found it romantic – and consequently she

knew more of that territory than any of us. It so happened that she was taking a stroll of this sort when she came upon two human children at play and their innocent sport charmed her. So she followed them as they raced each other along the rocky beach, and they led her into a part of the coast to which she had not been in recent memory.

A small craft lay beached upon the sand, abandoned to all appearances, with its sail cut to tatters and twisted about the splintered mast. The children laughed and climbed upon it. They chased one another about the deck. They stood at the tiller, imagining the strange lands to which they would only ever voyage in their dreams. And my elder sister the 7<sup>th</sup> observed them from afar, waiting until their shadows stretched across the pebbled shore and they ran back to the safe warm light of their cottage. Then she stepped forward and lay her palm on the prow of the craft. The craft shuddered, as if wakened from a long sleep and it wondered where it would journey now.

But my sister had no desire to journey when she stepped aboard. Her soft feet walked the length and breadth of the deck. She fingered the tiller and touched the mast. At last she paused and sat on the nearest of the benches, and when she did, her fingers brushed the surface and discovered a forked branch. She lifted it, finding its weight more than she expected, and though it was withered and briny with sea spray, she saw it was not green and brown, but gold.

She brought this branch to me, and told how she had found it. I took the thing in my hands. It looked like a fresh cutting, slender shoots joined at their common source in a narrow fork, and each shoot putting out the first buds of delicate new leaves. It could have well been grafted to a new trunk and grown and budded and bloomed for a hundred years. But it had been turned to gold – truly *turned* gold, not crafted, no craftsman has lived who could counterfeit nature so well – and frozen. I shuddered at the abomination, the Dread King's talisman.

"It was on Lord Tenoak's ship," my sister the 7<sup>th</sup> told me, and I went to see it with my own eyes. Gaylin and my eldest sister went with me.

For a time, we stood in silence on the beach. Even then, I do not believe Gaylin understood the enormity of her story. But my sister the 1<sup>st</sup> did. She spoke to me in reproach.

"There has never been one of our kind claimed by the Dread King."

"How was I to prevent it?" I asked.

My sister did not reply. "It bodes Evil," she said gravely. "The pendulum will swing back. Dark days are ahead of us."

"How was I to prevent it?" I said again.

"What would you do to remedy it?" my sister asked me sharply, as Gaylin stood between us innocently and made no sign. I knew what my sister meant, and I embraced Gaylin.

"Nothing," I answered.

My sister nodded slowly. "I see. You would allow Evil the victory."

I said nothing, and I did nothing.

I did nothing for quite some time. Nothing, I should say, except think about Lord Tenoak, about Gaylin, about the tale Gaylin told, about the Princess Rosebud. On the morning of the mortal princess' birthday, I went to see my younger sister the 13<sup>th</sup>. That evening, while the human court prepared to feast and celebrate their favored daughter, all of my older sisters were dining together. My younger sister and I joined them, she proudly and I silently.

"What are you doing here, wet blanket?" my elder sister the 6<sup>th</sup> asked my younger sister the 13<sup>th</sup>.

"I have learned a new spell," said the 13<sup>th</sup>, "and I wanted to demonstrate for my beloved family." She twirled her wand, and upon the table, directly over my eldest sister the 1<sup>st</sup>'s place setting, a spinning wheel appeared.

My other sisters gasped. Some were stricken speechless, but my elder sister the 2<sup>nd</sup> spoke. "You cannot create! You are Evil!"

"Can't I? Am I?" asked my younger sister, smiling.

"Sister," said my eldest sister the 1<sup>st</sup>, but she was addressing me and not the 13<sup>th</sup>. "What have you done? You are changed."

"No," said I. "I am as I have been for sixteen years, when I sent a Good man of our kind to his doom. It is only now that I admit it to myself, and to you, openly."

"You are *not* Evil," said my sister the 1<sup>st</sup>.

"But she is," said my younger sister the 13<sup>th</sup>.

"But I am," said I.

"And I am Good," said my younger sister.

"They exchanged natures?" asked my elder sister the 11<sup>th</sup>.

"Can they do such a thing?" asked my elder sister the 9<sup>th</sup>.

"Quite so," said my younger sister the 13<sup>th</sup>. "There is an ancient rite, one little used and little known now, but I learnt it in my infancy. Naturally, I thought of it as soon as I realized there is not a spinning wheel to be had in the whole kingdom. It would be so easy if I could simply call one up, I thought. But the rite requires the consent of both parties and so it was useless until this very morning, when our sister the 12<sup>th</sup> paid me a visit."

"You *agreed* to this...this treachery?" my elder sister the 4<sup>th</sup> asked me.

"So I did," I replied softly, and did not meet their eyes. It was the last time I would be in their company altogether.

"So she did," said the 13<sup>th</sup>, grinning.

My eldest sister rose. She said nothing, but she stared down her youngest sister, who quailed nevertheless even in her hour of triumph. Our eldest sister held all the authority of the sun and the stars and the thunderstorm in her stern gaze.

"I...I have matters to attend to," said the 13<sup>th</sup>.

"Take your spinning wheel, then," said my elder sister the 5<sup>th</sup>, glowering.

"Oh, you may keep that one," said the 13<sup>th</sup>, before she disappeared. "I can make another."

I am sure you can guess that my younger sister's curse was fulfilled that night. Her curse, and my blessing.

While she was waiting for her handmaids to dress her for the celebration, a golden orb attracted Princess Rosebud with its light, and she followed it to a part of the castle in which she had never been. In fact, no one had ever been there, for my younger sister the 13<sup>th</sup> had built it that very moment, for just this purpose, and the glowing ball that delighted and mystified the curious mortal child was her handiwork as well. When Rosebud had climbed to the pinnacle of the castle's newest tower, she discovered my younger sister there, drawing golden thread from a swiftly-spinning wheel. At once the ball was forgotten, as the glint of light on the thread caught Rosebud's attention.

My younger sister must have terrified the girl in her appearance, but my elder sister the 5<sup>th</sup> had unluckily gifted the Princess with courage, and the Princess overcame her fear to inspect

and observe what the stranger was doing, for she had never seen the skill plied before. And when my younger sister invited her to try her hand at it, Rosebud eagerly agreed, little knowing the danger she was in, for neither I nor any of my elder sisters had thought to gift her with cunning. Nor, I am sad to say, did we give her dexterity, for she no sooner took up my younger sister's place at the wheel and reached for the shining thread than she pricked her finger on the spindle's point. My younger sister felt no sting of pity for the child as she cried out in surprise at the sudden pain, and no pang of remorse as the first ruby-red bead of blood formed on the child's fingertip. Rosebud had time to bring her injured finger to her rosebud mouth before she collapsed. And slept.

In the same moment my younger sister cackled in triumph, the king, the queen, the lords and ladies, the dukes and duchesses, the pages and knights and squires, the handmaidens and ladies-in-waiting and chamberlains, all the court slept where they stood, cooks, grooms, footmen, hounds, horses and hawks. The musicians on their dais ceased to play, butlers ceased to butle, flies ceased to buzz. Silence blanketed the entire palace, until only my younger sister's cruel laugh broke it.

Yet the silence so profound and pregnant that my sister was cowed, and she cut short her laughter. Then having accomplished her goal, she pulled the edge of her cloak from beneath the fallen girl and disappeared from the tower she had constructed. She thought no more of poor Rosebud.

Uncertain times began then for the mortal kingdom. As word spread through the fiefdoms that the king and all the court had fallen asleep, the humans were unsure what to believe, and if they believed, what to do next. In Faerie, we waited and watched.

My elder sister the 4<sup>th</sup> had compared the mortal realm to a snake, with the king's court at its head. Cut off the head, and an ordinary snake dies. But this snake, we found out, was a hydra, and would not be killed. Instead new and many heads sprang up, however many were lopped off.

In some places, peasants rioted without fear of masters' reprisals, and cruel reeves and overseers were murdered in their beds, or simply turned out of doors. In the outlying lands, where the lords were not at court, the remaining gentry wondered how to turn events to their favor and girded themselves for the battlefield or the law council. Others wondered simply how to remain alive, barricading themselves inside their castles in fear of their neighbors or their own serfs. As my elder sister the 3<sup>rd</sup> had predicted, wars broke out here and there among new factions. Where too many were called away to battle, crops went untended and children starved.

In other places, there was no war: as if by some unspoken agreement, the people carried on with their lives and their work, content to let others grapple for power and draw new borderlines. In these places, it mattered not whether the king slept; the commonfolk had never seen him while he was awake, and they needed no court to tell them how to conduct their affairs. They knew their own business best. If one of the faction lords came to them, declaring his sovereignty in that land, then the people took up weapons or submitted, as seemed best to them; by turns they beat back the invaders or went down in glorious slaughter, were subjugated to their new master's will or left to live their lives in peace until the next catastrophe. I cannot tell you how it usually came out, for in every place it went differently. Every village and hamlet had its own story, as many as grains of sand on a beach. One hydra, infinite heads.

At first, some intrepid mortals went to the palace and tried to wake the king and queen, but they could not. The slumber held fast. My sister the 13<sup>th</sup> would take no chances, though.

She planted seeds about the castle and nourished them with all her care and heed until they grew into an impassable thicket of thorns.

My younger sister experimented much in those times. It was she who discovered the skeleton of the last dragon and sowed its teeth in the fallow soil of a fresh battleground, and so spawned the choking weeds that now plague the eastern watches. It was she who boiled deadly nightshade and the tears of new widows, woven with the hair of stillborn infants, and so brewed the fever that hangs over the marshes of the south. It was she who first reduced sea foam and the blood of a dead ship's captain to make the gales of the northern sea and the maelstrom that lies across the strait.

Although there was little love lost between my sister the 13<sup>th</sup> and my sister the 1<sup>st</sup>, my other elder sisters felt compelled to extend every invitation to the 13<sup>th</sup> now, and she, in perverse delight, spent every available occasion with them, glorying in her newest creations and their distaste.

Conversely, I had fallen low in the family's estimation, and it was no longer proper that I should disgrace their table. Seasons came and went without my seeing them. One-by-one, rumor came to me that my elder sisters faded and shrank, that each had at last disappeared and were not seen again. I knew not the cause; it could not have been the 13<sup>th</sup>'s doing, I consoled myself – not now, for she was Good. What *was* happening to them, though, I could not say. There was nothing like it in living memory, and without my elder sister the 4<sup>th</sup> to tell me, I knew of nothing like it in recorded history.

Of all Faerie, Gaylin alone did not desert me. She grew and aged while I did not, though she was but half-mortal and would seem nearly ageless to any of her human kin. To me it was like the blink of an eye before the time when she could have been my daughter had passed, and

but two blinks more before she would have seemed the little mother to human eyes and I the child. And still Rosebud slept.

She had become legend by then among mortals – the princess that is, not Gaylin, although perhaps this was true of her as well. For she took to walking among them frequently and their plight touched her tender heart. I did what I could, bending sword blades back on themselves, snapping bowstrings. I even once managed to destroy a crop blight without destroying the crop. I ill-understood my second nature, and my powers had diminished, as I felt my very body did.

As I said, Rosebud was legend among mortals by then, as I learned when Gaylin accepted hospitality in a small village that lived on its own, beyond the borders of any land claimed by this master or that chieftain. Indeed it was Gaylin's home village, but her father had died long ago and none were left old enough to remember that his child had ever existed. She prevailed upon me to come with her there. On a cold night in early spring, the family gathered to tell tales beside the hearth.

"The princess still slumbers, with all her court, deep in the heart of the Knotwood."

"What, our Knotwood? Where?"

"In the very castle she was born in."

"I've been into the Knotwood, and never saw no castle."

"Well, it's there. But ya'd have to get to it first, wouldn' ya? It's not on the outskirts where you young things go to snare thrushes. In the very heart of the forest I'm talking."

"Whoever heard of building a castle in an impassable thicket?"

"Tell us what happens if the princess wakes, Uncle."

"Oh that'll be the day, may I live to see it. When the Sleeping Beauty opens her eyes, I tell ya, so too will all of her court – the old king and queen will reign again, and we'll have a proper kingdom. There's not a soul in the realm who wouldn' declare for the princess if it came to blows. Then things would look up for us commonfolk." Such was the effect of long years on mortal memory: no fear, no pain, no grief, no flaw of elder days was handed down, only beauty and peace and abundance for all.

"But isn't the slumber magic?" asked a small child.

"So?" asked the storyteller.

"What can wake her up if it's a magic sleep on her?"

The storyteller shrugged. "There must be some power strong enough to do it. But I don't know it."

"Do you, Nan?" the child asked Gaylin.

"You'd have to ask that lady." Gaylin gestured to me.

"That shivery little thing by the fireplace?" The child's mother also gestured to me. I was indeed by the fireplace, huddled beneath a thick fleece, but not shivering anymore. "I didn't realize it spoke."

"She is older and far wiser than you imagine, mistress," Gaylin replied.

"My mistake. I had taken it for your own child, Nanny."

"Mine? Oh, she's not mine," said Gaylin, and even without looking at her, I knew her eyes were dancing with amusement.

"Then who are its parents? Where does it come from?"

"She has no parents I can name."

"And she knows how to wake the Sleeping Beauty?" pressed the child, impatient that the adults had strayed from the critical point.

"She may," Gaylin encouraged kindly. "Ask her."

But the child was shy of me and hid his face in Gaylin's shoulder. So I said nothing.

"Fairies. Curses. Sleeping princesses. Bloody nonsense if you ask me," muttered the young man who had doubted before.

Later, when Gaylin was laying the child to sleep, she said to him, "What did you think of your grandfather's story?"

"I liked it. But it made me angry at the fairies, especially the 12<sup>th</sup>. The 13<sup>th</sup> only made Rosebud sleep, but the 12<sup>th</sup> made all those other people sleep too. Is that wrong, Nan? Oughtn't I feel sorry for people, sleeping all that time?"

"Sleep is a funny thing, my chick," said Gaylin. "Often it's a relief and an escape, and even a well-deserved reward for toils and hardship. But after a while, everyone needs to wake up. No one is sad or in pain when they sleep, but no one is happy either."

"I feel sorry for Rosebud. It wasn't her fault. And nobody asked her what she wanted."

"I feel sorry for her, too."

"Will she ever wake up, Nan?"

"Yes," said Gaylin. "When the world is ready."

"But what *can* wake her?"

"That is the wrong question," said Gaylin. "It is better that you ask *who*, not *what*."

"A fairy?" the child guessed. Gaylin only shrugged in reply.

It was not a fairy that woke Rosebud in the end, but one of her own kind, a mortal with a mortal heart. In fact it was that very child who did it. He was called Charles.

Gaylin had her hand in it from the beginning. I had been puzzled why she chose to befriend that family so particularly, but she must have recognized some spirit in the boy early on and marked him as the right material for the hero of her tale. For I realize now that we were all in one of her tales of desperate times and uncertain outcomes.

Whether she put it into his heart directly that he should be the one or if his youthful mind came to that decision on its own, I cannot say. I only know that the boy became convinced that this was the sole purpose and indubitable purpose of his life: to wake the Sleeping Beauty. Gaylin did nothing to dissuade him, but instead fed the fire.

"You will have to be strong," she used to say to him, "to pass through to the heart of the Knotwood." And then he would eagerly set to his chores, chopping wood and drawing water for his mother.

"You will have to be brave," she would tell him at bedtime, "to find your way in the ancient, silent palace." Then he would consent to blow out the lights after a nightmare.

"You will have to be kind," she would add, "to convince Rosebud to trust you and follow your lead." Then he would cut free the birds his cousin had snared.

I remembered the blessings my sisters had given Rosebud when she was an infant. Gaylin had no such power to grant virtues, and yet she had found a way even so to shape this child. It troubled me, how readily she pressed her will onto his, and I began to understand for the first time the injustice my sisters and I had done Rosebud when we decided her fate for her – indeed the injustice we had done mortals time and again in the old days.

As Charles grew, Gaylin began to ask him questions.

"What will you carry into the Knotwood?"

"I must travel lightly, Nan, to crawl through the tangle. All the same I will bring my axe and a whetstone so that I may cut the briars."

"What will you say to Rosebud when she wakes?"

"I shall step away, lest she feel startled. When she sits up, I will say, 'Good morning. Happy Birthday.'"

Gaylin laughed. "A fine idea. But how will you wake her?"

At this, Charles' face became solemn. "That is easy, Nan. I will give her a kiss."

Gaylin's lips curled into a smile.

"I think he is ready," she said to me that evening. The mortals had retired and the glow of the last dying ember on the hearth was the only light.

"That is well," I replied, because she wanted to hear as much from me. I had taken to sitting in her hood, where I could speak softly into her ear and curl close to her warm neck. So diminished I had become in size, and so susceptible to the night air. "Well for you," I added. To me, Gaylin's plan seemed all out of season. Mortals had lived so long now without a king or queen or princess, they had found their own ways. Some of those ways were cruel and brought misery, but others brought contentment and even happiness. I could not see how the world should be helped if the ancient sleepers woke in a world so different from the one they had known, and walked out of the forest.

"How will your protégé find his way?" I asked.

"I had hopes," said she, "that you would go with him, Mama, and be his guide."

"I suppose you told him as much?"

"I would not presume. But I shared with him my hope."

"What if I do not remember the way?"

"Then he will not be lost alone."

"Say that he comes upon the castle, by some miracle. How will he pass through the thorns your aunt created?"

"Luckily he will have an Evil fairy at his side who can destroy them."

"What if I do not have any magic left in me?"

"Then he will use his strong young arms to cut his way through, or die in the attempt."

"Then Rosebud will sleep forever," I said.

"No," said Gaylin. "No one sleeps forever."

"If you are so confident," I said, "why am I necessary?"

"You are not, Mama," said Gaylin, with a smile and a tear, "nor am I. We have outlived our time. But I thought you might like the chance to take part, to see it through."

I did not answer this. For I realized at once that what she said was true – the mortals could have done it on their own, all on their own. We were guests in their life.

"Do you think it will work?" I asked her. She knew I meant the kiss.

"Yes."

"What makes you so certain?"

She shrugged. "Love can overcome death, why shouldn't it overcome sleep?"

"Charles does not know the princess. How can he love her?"

"Not the princess, Mama. Rosebud." Indeed it had become Gaylin's particular quirk that the girl's name must be used, not her title.

"Very well, then. Charles does not know *Rosebud*."

"He knows enough," she said confidently.

I laughed. "What does he know? That she is asleep?"

"Yes. That she is a person, cheated of a full life. When he goes to that castle, he goes looking not for a princess to right the wrongs of his own life, or to return to her throne so that he and others like him may bow down. No. He goes to find a person – many people in fact – and to give them a choice."

"Is that what you call love?"

"The best kind," Gaylin nodded. "It leaves the beloved free and asks nothing in return."

"And you believe this...charity that you call love is enough to break the curse?"

"Mama, did you think Aunt placed her curse because she hated Rosebud and her parents so particularly much? No; she hated them for the same cause she hated you and all her sisters, the 1<sup>st</sup> most of all: you were favored without reason. Except your birth, and that is a reason that is no reason. It wasn't your doing that you were born older and Good, nor was it Rosebud's that she was born a princess. She hated you and them because you should have been equals; what else can undo such hate but love?"

Then I was still. I questioned her no more that day.

In the morning, I told Gaylin that I would go with the boy-child into the Knotwood, and give him what aid I could.

Charles bid good-bye to his mother and grandfather; his father was dead. He stroked his sister's hair. He even embraced Gaylin. Then he allowed her to lift me off her shoulder and place me upon his. With an axe resting on the other shoulder and a wallet of provisions and stout woolen jacket that his mother had woven herself, he set off on his quest to wake the Sleeping

Beauty. He was just as old as Rosebud had been on the day she fell under my younger sister's curse.

At the edge of the Knotwood, staring at its dark twisting passages, he asked me, "Please, fairy, how shall I know the way to the castle?"

I gazed at the sky and the ground, and listened to the wind as it slipped through the dry leaves. It had been some time, but I knew the place, and the sun was at its high point.

"It is quite simple," I said. "You make a straight line due west. Don't stray, and you'll come directly to it."

At my words, the lad steeled his will, and plunged across the treeline. I do not know how long we passed through those shady places, ever seeking after the falling sun, but by and by, with nary an uncertain step on the child's part, we came to the edge of my younger sister's briars.

"Please, fairy," said Charles, "how shall I get through?"

"What did you bring the axe for," I asked, rather crossly, "if not to use those strong arms of yours?" Before the quest, the boy had spoken to me rarely, but only passed his questions and greetings to me through Gaylin. Lacking her to hear his concerns and attend his worries, he spoke to me from time to time throughout the journey. To me, over the years become aloof and ill-accustomed to notice, it seemed incessant and unnecessary chatter.

But now, Charles had nothing to say. Resolutely he swung his axe, and it struck the outermost branch. I did what I could for him as he sweated and toiled his way through the ancient tangle. Limbs weakened before the axe's stroke, but it still needed him to put his strength into the blow. At last he came to the other side, red-cheeked and grasping, his jacket and not a little of his hide torn by the thorns.

But the toil was not over, for Rosebud had to be found, and I had no knowledge with which to aid him here, for the castle and its ways had never been well-known to me. Thus Gaylin's little hero was forced to search room-by-room, filled with humans and their creatures, all slumbering so deep as to seem dead. Dust and filth lay over everything – the princess' birthday feast had long ago rotted away, and the fine curtains and carpets and even the garments upon the slumberers were moth-eaten. The silence was so vast that not even the child's footfalls could disturb it. It was a waiting silence, the silence before a lung breathes again; the entire castle was a huge beast waiting to breathe again and perhaps swallow us all down its gullet. The air tasted moist and febrous.

Charles searched room-by-room and face-by-face, and though he grappled after his resolve, I could feel fatigue and frustration welling up into a sob through his shoulder. So I destroyed the wall.

It was the wall directly before us, a wall that had once helped to enclose the lady's chambers, and not one I had ever seen. I did it because it was there, and I wanted some sound, loud and clamorous, to distract the boy, and this was the last act of magic in me. The stones fell in on themselves and collapsed into a pile of rubble, which was to be expected. What was not expected was the staircase revealed behind the wall. When the dust cleared, the boy walked up the stairs and woke up Rosebud with a kiss.

Autumn came that year with a modest harvest and snows followed soon after. Families huddled inside their cottages passing around mugs of ale to stave off the cold, and sharing out the larder stores in careful portions among themselves and often with an ancient duke or lady, newly awoken. For the old mortal court did not resume their functions – how could they? They knew

nothing of the new boundaries or cities or leaders or languages that had sprung up during their slumber. What was left of their treasure was small and inaccessible, in the center of the Knotwood as it was. So too their arsenal. But the people of the court did come out, with young Charles as their guide, and settled in the countryside, some here and some there as their dispositions suited. They were welcomed in some villages as objects of curiosity, in others as objects of awe; still other villages drove them away lest they bring bad luck or dangerous ideas. Their speech and their manners were strange to the people they met, and their stories of fairies and curses were largely the subject of ridicule, for hardly anyone except the very old and the very young believed them now. But the newcomers, as they were called, shared their knowledge of the ancient lore – how to read the turning of the stars, to smelt iron, to build ships, and other crafts whose secrets had been forgotten.

The old king and the queen themselves came to settle in the very town in which Gaylin was born. Though deprived of their home and their station and the world they had known in what, to them, seemed only a night, still they had their daughter, whom they lived to see reach womanhood and make them grandparents. And many years after, when her first husband had passed on, Rosebud married Charles and they lived in comfort together in a small cottage at the edge of the village.

But Gaylin saw none of this. When Charles returned from the Knotwood with me upon his shoulder and quietly told her that the Sleeping Beauty was awake, she nodded and kissed his brow, told him that he had done well, and lifted me from his shoulder. She carried me to the sea with her, to the cliffs where once I had stood with my eldest sister, where Gaylin had returned to me from the dead.

"The pendulum is swinging back, Mama," she said.

"Yes," I agreed. "What will you do now that you have seen your project to completion?"

"Completion?" said she. "Yes. Almost." Then she showed me the golden branch in her hand; I recognized it, of course, though it no longer looked like fresh and young, but withered and dry. It was still golden. "I stayed as long as I could, for your sake, Mama. But I'm only half-Faerie. Nothing mortal may stay forever, and the fairies' time is all but over. So all of me is ready to go: Rosebud is awake now, I can sleep. You understand, don't you?"

I understood, but I could not say so.

Gaylin lifted me from her hood and set me on the cold and windswept ground. She pressed her fingertips to her lips, and then touched her fingers to me. Thus she gave me her last kiss, which was wet with tears.

She left me. I did not see where or how she went, but when I looked out the horizon, I saw a black shape on the waves disappearing into the sunset, like a small ship or craft. I waited until it was out of sight, then I went back to the mortal village to watch, unseen, what would happen next. Thus once more I began my life without Gaylin.

I was alone for the first time. Truly alone, the last of all my kin gone. My elder sisters had winked out long ago, like dreams whose dreamers had woken, forgetting the night in the trials and cares and joys of the daylight. My younger sister, so I guessed, had also faded in this way, as had the rest of Faerie. For Gaylin was the only one of the blood whom I had seen for years on end. I resigned myself and waited for my turn to fade and disappear.

But then one of them did return, the only one who could. He came back across the sea, he found me, and he did not begrudge Gaylin the time he had willingly lent her. So side-by-side we sit, the last Good fairy and the last Evil, and watch the seasons turn.