

MALEFICENT

I am Malaya. You probably don't know me by that name. Perhaps you've heard of my half-sister Aurora and that whole "Sleeping Beauty" disaster. Or my stepsister Snow and her poisoned-apple mishap. Possibly you've even heard of my stepsister Ella and those confounded glass slippers. What can I say? Is it *my* fault my father married three women after my mother died, all of them before my teens? My father may be a king, but that sure as heck hasn't stopped him from having the most undignified love life in all of the Five Kingdoms. A few 'I do's and I was abruptly plucked from my standing as the Beloved Only Daughter.

If you're wondering what other names I have, the names you would know me by, prepare to be horrified. Evil Queen. Ugly Stepsister. *Maleficent*.

This isn't my fault. It was all one big misunderstanding. Rory, Snow and Ella stole all the glory while I became totally infamous.

When my first stepmother had Rory, I was five. My father took one look and declared her heir in my stead. Just like that, Rory became Crown Princess Aurora all because of her beauty. And I, plain as mud, was discarded.

Of course, some joker showed up at the court and prophesied Aurora's death-by-way-of-spindle. Someone else changed the death sentence to a nice long nap, but my father hustled Rory away to a hidden house in the country anyway. Wouldn't want to damage the merchandise. He sent three nannies, and me.

The nannies spoiled that child beyond belief. I, meanwhile, took on the position of junior maid to my baby half-sister.

"Malaya? Lazy girl, fetch your sister's bottle!"

"Malaya, useless girl, get your sister's doll!"

"Malaya! Selfish girl, attend to your sister!" Commands such as these were all that the nurses bothered to give *me* during those three years I stayed in the country.

When I was eight I had had enough. I point-blank *ordered* the nurses to send me back to my father. They couldn't refuse royalty outright.

By that time, my father had married his third wife, who already had a twelve-year-old daughter. Ella was feisty, blonde, utterly charming and violent. So much larger than I, Ella pummeled me every chance she got. I soon had black eyes around the clock. My nose was broken twice, mending badly. Hence the "Ugly" Stepsister.

Ella found a way of dodging blame. She spread the rumor that I was using beauty potions that backfired drastically, "Because," she said primly, "Malaya is ugly inside."

When I was twelve and Ella sixteen, she went out in society, attending balls while I sat alone in my room. She conned the glass slippers out of a fairy and ensnared a fool prince into marrying her. Ella would someday become queen of the neighboring realm, but at least she was gone.

Fate, it seems, still had it in for me. My father married his fourth wife just before my thirteenth birthday, and I gained another stepsister: a tiny black-haired waif, also thirteen. Snow White, they called her. It suited her, and not only because of her pale skin. Heart of ice, and all that.

Snow was almost worse than Ella. In the eyes of the court, she was all that a princess should be: a sweet, charming, pretty girl. Only when we were alone did she reveal the viper within. Snow wasn't violent, but used words the way Ella had used fists.

"You're a pathetic excuse for a princess, Malaya."

"I wonder how long your father will keep you around. One year? Two? He's so much fonder of me."

She was right.

A year after Snow's arrival, I bribed a guard to take her deep into the woods and ditch her. I wasn't homicidal or anything, I just wanted to give her a good scare.

To ensue that the guard could lose Snow easily, I sent an apple for my stepsister, spiked with a light sleeping potion.

In retrospect, I probably should have told the guard about that part.

He returned to my father's castle in a panic, yelling "Murder!" and "Poison apple!" I was immediately thrown into the dungeon.

Not long after, Snow returned. She had awoken in the forest surrounded by seven dwarves, who had pointed her on her way to the castle. At least, that's what Snow *said*. I suspect she blundered around in the woods like an idiot for a day or so, found the castle by sheer luck, and invented the story to save her pride. Of course she supported the guard's belief that I was a murderess wannabe.

"Malaya wants to be queen," Snow said, wide-eyed. "She'll go after Aurora next, mark my words."

That was when people began to call me the Evil Queen.

Predictably, my father banished me. Cast me out like a stray dog. I fled to the woods, while he ordered that Rory be brought back to court. He tripled the castle guard. There was no way I could have gotten to Rory even if I had wanted to.

So *why* was I blamed when one of Rory's nurses carelessly brought a spindle into the playroom?

However it happened, Rory became legend as Sleeping Beauty while I was remade as Maleficent. The name hit me like a slap. It was so like my own name, but twisted. I felt haunted, replaced by some ghastly alternate version of myself. I disappeared farther into the forest.

Suffice to say, as endings go, mine is not happy. Eventually my name was cleared, but the shadow of Maleficent will hang over me all my life.

Snow and Rory married their own Prince Charmings and went on to rule their own kingdoms. I was offered a second-rate position back at my father's court.

But I've just had word that he's married another woman with a daughter, some girl named Rapunzel.

You couldn't pay me.