



“O nce upon a time, there was a wicked faerie called Maleficent, named for both her malice and her magnificence. Her lips were the red of freshly spilled blood, her cheekbones as sharp as the pain of lost love. And her heart was as cold as the deepest part of the ocean.”

The storyteller stood on a cobbled street near the castle, watching with satisfaction as a crowd formed. Children peered up at him openmouthed, henwives stopped in the middle of their shopping, and tradespeople drew close.

Among them was a woman shrouded in a hooded cloak.

HEART OF THE MOORS

She stood slightly apart, and even though he couldn't see her face, something about her drew his eye.

The storyteller had crossed into the kingdom of Perceforest just two days before, and his tale had gotten a good reception in the previous town. Not only had he made a pocketful of copper, but he had been stood a supper at the second-best inn and offered a place by the fire that night. Surely, so near the castle, where there was bound to be more coin, his tale would earn him even greater rewards.

“There was a princess, Aurora, named for the dawn. Her hair was as golden as the crown that would one day rest upon her head. Her eyes were as wide and soft as those of a doe. From the time of her birth, no one could look upon her and not love her. But the wicked faerie hated goodness and put her under a curse.”

All around him, the listeners sucked in their breath. The storyteller was pleased until he realized that they looked alarmed in a way that didn't seem entirely pleasurable. Something was wrong, but he wasn't sure what it could be. He had heard a variation of this story all the way out in Weaverton and had taken it upon himself to embroider it a bit. He was sure it was a solid tale, one crafted to flatter the prejudices of the old and inflame the passions of the young.

“Upon her sixteenth birthday, she was to prick her finger on a spindle and die!”

Several listeners cried out in dismay. One of the children clutched another’s hand.

Again, that reaction wasn’t quite right. It shouldn’t affect them so greatly.

It was clearly time to temper the villainy of his tale with a sprinkle of heroism. “But you see, there was a good faerie and—”

A snort came from the hooded figure. The storyteller paused, ruining the momentum of his tale. He was about to pick up the threads and start again when the cloaked woman spoke.

“Is that what happened?” Her voice was melodious, with traces of an accent he couldn’t place. “Truly? Are you *sure*, storyteller?”

He’d dealt with hecklers before. He gave her his brightest smile, looking around, inviting the crowd to smile with him. “Every word is as true as your standing before me.”

“What would you wager on that?” came the voice. He realized his audience was riveted by this exchange, far more than they had been by his story. “Would you give me your voice? Your firstborn? Your life?”

He laughed nervously.

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The woman threw off her cloak, and he took an involuntary step away from her. And then another.

The crowd shrank back in anticipatory horror.

“You—you—” He couldn’t get the words out.

Black horns as sinister as her smile curved back from her head. Her lips were the red of freshly spilled blood. Her cheekbones were as sharp as the pain of lost love. And he was afraid that her heart was indeed as cold as the deepest part of the ocean.

Suddenly, it struck the storyteller that tales all came from somewhere. And that Perceforest was rumored to have a very young queen, one whose name he hadn’t thought to ask but was beginning to guess. Which meant that standing in front of him was . . .

“You must have guessed my name, storyteller. Won’t you tell me yours?” Maleficent asked.

But it seemed he couldn’t make his mouth work.

She waited a moment, and then her lips curled up into a smile that promised nothing good. “No? No matter. Let this be your fate: *You shall be a cat*, yowling your stories under windows but never having the satisfaction of getting better than a thrown boot or water dumped on your head for your trouble. Let you remain so until my wicked heart relents.”

Maleficent’s hands sent a whirl of glittering golden

light at him, and everyone around the storyteller began to grow. Even the screaming children became enormous, their worn leather shoes the size of his head. He fell to his hands and knees. A curious warmth covered him, as though someone had thrown a fur blanket across his back. He opened his mouth to cry out, but the sound that came from him was a terrible, inhuman yowling.

“I believe you already know the end of the story,” Maleficent said to the crowd. Then she leaped into the sky, her large and powerful wings carrying her away from town in a rush of wind—leaving the storyteller, who had made his living from words, no longer able to speak a one.