

1 day

She lets her legs guide her, running as fast as she can in a nightgown and a flower crown decorating her long light brown hair. The breeze pushes against her face, and she can feel a slight chill begin to creep into the air. It initiates a tingling in her skin, causing her to feel slightly uncomfortable at the unfamiliar stimulant. Ryland sure is acting strange today, she thinks to herself as she continues to sprint. Eventually, her run slows to a jog as she feels yet another strange sensation. She looks down at her purple gown and presses a hand against her chest, feeling a constant thumping. It seems to line up with her breathing. She pauses, trying to understand what's happening. Even her feet are beginning to feel sore, or at least, she assumes that's what the term 'sore' refers to.

Eventually, her breathing quiets and her heart beats steady, so she continues running, only stumbling as her foot hits snow. She looks down at it, wondering why it feels so sharp and cold, and why it seems to be covering her foot. She pulls it up and tries again, but the same thing happens. Then her head snaps up as she hears a sound close to her. She looks around before realizing that the sound matches the tone of her own breathing. She does it again, discovering that it's coming from her. She does it a few more times before remembering where she's going. If Ryland can just cooperate!

She takes a detour, settling for a lower area of terrain, continuing to run. She isn't going to stop until she finds who she's looking for. Just a little more running, she promises herself, for some reason feeling her normally eternal energy beginning to weaken. What if it still doesn't work? She asks herself, but then reminds herself that the extra stimuli today must be a good sign. And her timing is right, too: the group she's looking for haven't exited the enchanted forest yet. Thank gosh. Maybe they can tell Flora before it's too late. Aurora has only been back for a day, I still must have some time.

The thought pushes her to run faster, until she finds herself around an area she's been before. But still, no sign of the group. I didn't run in the right direction? She feels that strange sound escape her again and switches to the correct direction this time, continuing her journey northward. Eventually, she hears the faint sound of voices. She pauses, listening to what they're saying from a safe distance away; she doesn't know if the guardian animals are with them or not.

"A funeral?" A girl asks. Ilena. "They think I'm dead?"

"It's alright. As soon as we get to the castle in Briar, we can explain

everything,” a different girl assures her. Elicia.

The other two princesses in Ryland. Well, two of five, but the other two barely cross the girl’s mind. What awful creatures. Elicia doesn’t deserve a horrible family that neglects and teases her all the time. And Ilena needs to know she’s being targeted by the evil queen of Aella. Going home won’t be safe for her, not until she knows the truth. I have to tell Sneider about both Ilena and Aurora. They’re both in danger. I just hope he can see me this time.

She goes a bit closer, hoping to get one of the animal’s attention. Normally, she would need the attention of the fairies. But the fairies in Ryland are never able to see her for some reason, not like the ones on the mainland or in Asteria.

“But they’re busy dealing with Aurora,” Ilena deters, making her stop her in tracks. Dealing with Aurora? “It’s the biggest news everywhere, not only is one princess presumed dead, but the other never woke up and never returned.”

“Briar will find Aurora,” Elicia promises.

She hasn’t woken up yet? Or returned?

I can’t let her go to Briar.

With more determination in her steps, she ventures closer to the pair of princesses, before the wolf pup, Halston, starts barking, and she can hear him running toward her. Is he barking at me?

He approaches her, growling.

“Halston, what is it?” Elicia asks, following after him, gasping at the sight of another girl in the forest. The girl’s eyes widen as Elicia addresses her. “Are you alright, ma’am?” The girl hesitantly moves her hand in a small waving gesture, testing if she’s really being addressed. Elicia waves back at her. That’s impossible! Elicia isn’t a fairy!

Ilena stands next to Elicia and also locks eyes with the girl.

“Do you think she’s going to try to hurt us?” She whispers to Elicia, giving the girl a wary look. The girl quickly gets over her shock and starts gesturing frantically, repeating the gestures multiple times, trying to communicate. “What is she doing?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never seen someone try to communicate like that?” Elicia says. The girl points to Ilena and tries to explain through gestures the retelling of everything that’s happened to her. She points to Sneider and Ilena’s cut up legs and then makes a cup with her hands, pointing to Elicia, mimicking the girl’s efforts to save her. “That’s strange... how does she know everything that’s happened to us?!” Elicia exclaims.

“Perhaps she could come with us to Briar and we could ask one of the fairies

there?” Elicia nods but the girl frantically shakes her head no, trying to beg them to stay away from Briar without words. “You don’t want us to go to Briar?” Elicia asks. “Why not?” The girl puts her hands on her head, trying to mimic a crown, and then does the best impression of Briar’s queen she can muster. Elicia and Ilena stare at her in shock. So, she got the point of that across, but she still needs to explain about the fairies and Aurora.

Then her eyes find Ilena’s locket. Ilena follows her gaze.

“You have an obsession with my locket too?” Ilena asks.

Take it off and put it in the snow, the girl tries to sign, but the girls stare at her blankly, so she switches back to pointing and gesturing. She mimics taking a locket off and patting it into the snow, clasping her hands together, closing her eyes.

Suddenly, images flash beneath her eyelids of Freya, the blue-haired fairy of Ilena, who’s done all she can to help the girl indirectly. If it wasn’t for the royal fairy alliance, she would’ve been able to save the young girl without setting up Sneider to find her.

She opens her eyes and acts out the last parts of the summoning, gesturing for Ilena to do the same.

“Did... did she just explain how to summon a fairy?” Ilena breathes, and all the guardian animals nod, along with the girl herself. Elicia quickly encourages Ilena to give it a try. As Ilena finishes, Fauna appears behind Elicia and the girl turns to see Freya standing a bit away from the group. “Are you my fairy?” Ilena asks and Freya nods.

“Hello Ilena,” she breathes. “My name is Freya.”

“Hello, Freya, it’s an honor to meet you. How come you didn’t become my fairy when I was born?”

“I’m so sorry Ilena. I’ve wanted to help you. I’ve wanted to cure the poison and stop Gretchen---”

“Gretchen is after me?” Ilena asks and Freya nods solemnly.

“I’m so sorry. Her selfishness and jealousy has caused her to try some awful things with you. She’s manipulating your dad through lies. I’ve wanted to stop it all these years but your mother never finished the process of assigning you a fairy. The most she was able to do was the locket,” Freya confesses.

“Excuse me,” Fauna pipes up. “I think it’s extremely important Ilena and Freya are able to connect, but what exactly is your name?” The girl looks around to see who Fauna’s addressing, but furrows her brow when everyone looks at her.

I don’t have a name, the girl tries to sign. Fauna, even as the fairy of animals,

isn't able to translate her actions. The girl feels herself sigh, settling for shaking her head. Then she remembers the one other thing she's forgotten. She may have managed to communicate Ilena's danger, but she hasn't finished with Aurora's yet. She starts gesturing again, making a crown and then mimics being asleep, before repeating her imitation of Queen Maria of Briar. Everyone looks at her confused, but Fauna speaks up again.

"She'll have to stay with us tonight until we can understand what she's saying. In the meantime, Flora has been trying to reach us," Fauna says to Freya. "She's leading the search for Aurora and may need our assistance." At the sound of that, the girl tries to again explain that Aurora can't go back to Briar.

"Can she come here?" Elicia asks. "Perhaps we could help too?"

"That's very sweet, Elicia, but this is a matter for fairies only. Though, I believe it is important that we tell Flora to meet us here." Freya nods in agreement and a few minutes later, a fiery haired fairy appears, immediately telling Freya and Fauna:

"She could be anywhere, the fairy's curse had a special rule about her awakening. The thing is, I don't know how it would apply to Aurora, since we have no idea what her condition is. Who knows where her spirit would take her if she's never learned how to formulate thoughts or communicate her wants?" Fauna and Freya immediately look behind Flora at the girl. As Flora follows their gazes, the girl takes the opportunity to try to sign out her warning about Aurora, as well as her knowledge of the fairies. To her delight, Flora begins translating her gestures verbally.

"Aurora is in danger. Queen Maria wants to have her back in order to start war with the fairies. The fairy's curse wasn't meant to harm Aurora, but help her see the side of the fairies. The fairy wanted her to convince her mother to revoke the awful rule placed on fairies that strips them of their free will. I'm scared that if Aurora goes back to Briar, and agrees with the fairy, she'll become a target of her mother too. I've seen it happen with Ilena and Elicia. I've seen how horrible the Queens of Ryland are. Please protect Aurora. Please don't let her go back to Briar."

Elicia and Ilena gape at the girl's words.

Flora flies down over to the girl and asks her:

"Do you agree with the fairy?"

The girl signs her answer and Flora translates.

"The curse is truly on the fairies, and I've been trying everything I can to help rid them of their alliance that strips them of their own free will, but no one in Ryland has been able to interact with me until today for some strange reason. No

fairy should ever have to live like how the current Queens have made them. Freya should've been able to help Ilena, and Flora should be able to listen to what Aurora wants, not her mother, and she should only obey Aurora if that's what she thinks is morally right."

"Well, I can assure you that I don't think I should take you back to Briar either," Flora tells the girl. "And you are Aurora, dear." The girl points to herself and Flora nods. "You can also use your voice if you feel comfortable, we'll be able to hear you." The girl tilts her head and tests out Flora's idea.

"I'm Aurora?" She asks.

"Flora, how did you know how to communicate with her?" Fauna asks.

"Before she left, our old fairy friend told me a bit more about the spell she had put on Aurora. She said when Aurora awoke she would go wherever her spirit decided she was meant to be. And that she would learn her own rules and ways that the world works, as well as her own form of communication through spirit like dreams, which served as her reality until now. That's why I insisted to Queen Maria that I should be there with Aurora when she woke up, so I could use the ability I was given to understand her and help her readjust to the world like our fairy friend wanted."

"Lilith cursed Aurora," Aurora speaks. "Lilith 'cursed' me." She's getting tired of the lack of the fairies using her name. "All of you should be calling your friend Lilith. And if that's another rule of that stupid curse, then Ilena and Elicia should order you to obey your own rules again," Aurora snaps, signing as she speaks. She isn't used to using her voice, and her words come out differently than the rest of the people's she's heard. Still, even with fluctuations in tone and diction, her point is still able to get across.

"Is it true that you have no free will, Fauna?" Elicia asks, turning to her fairy, to which Fauna nods. "That's awful! Of course I revoke that!"

"Me too," Ilena quickly agrees. "No one should be treated that way." Freya and Fauna exchange relieved looks and Flora expresses,

"Thank you girls. Now we can explain what really happened when Lilith cursed Aurora. Aurora, come this way with us?" Flora asks, holding out a hand. Aurora looks down at her own and jumps a little at the feeling when she clasps Flora's. "It's alright dear, you should adjust to those feelings fairly soon."

"What language is she communicating in when she gestures?" Elicia asks. "I'd love to learn it so she feels more comfortable communicating," she offers. Aurora gives her a grateful look, spelling out 's-i-g-n'. Flora translates for her and Elicia quickly figures out they are letters and Aurora starts teaching her the alphabet.

“This is so amazing,” Elicia marvels. “I can’t believe I’ve never seen this before.”

“It’s amazing what the mind can do,” Flora agrees as Aurora signs ‘thank you’. She’s ecstatic that Elicia’s taking the time to understand her, and a bit proud that she was right with her prediction that Elicia is the coolest and sweetest Ryland princess, Ilena a close second. I guess I’m technically a princess too, she thinks to herself as Flora, Fauna, and Freya begin explaining. “I believe Aurora has somehow figured some of this out on her own, but the details aren’t quite there and I can imagine the two of you are extremely confused.” Elicia and Ilena nod. “Aurora’s mother, Queen Maria, helped enforce a law that forbid the fairies from doing anything that wasn’t ordered by her. She blackmailed all of us into agreeing, threatening the safety of our families and even our unborn children.”

“Lilith was the bravest of us,” Fauna continues. “Her methods were very rash, but Queen Maria had put all of us completely over the edge. I don’t know if I can support what she did to Aurora, but I understand why she did it, and I know it was only to teach Queen Maria a lesson.”

“Unfortunately, it didn’t work. But it seems Aurora has learned this lesson instead,” Flora adds.

“Lilith put a very specific curse on Aurora. Fauna and I don’t know all the details, but we do know that Lilith never intended to hurt her. She just needed for Maria to understand the gravity of what she was doing. She offered to return Aurora in exchange for the freedom of all the fairies, but Maria refused, so she extended the curse,” Freya adds.

“She allowed Aurora to live in a world as a spirit while she slept away the years of the curse, so she could learn and grow up and learn to communicate in her own way. The curse would end after sixteen years, and I would return her to her family,” Flora continues. “Lilith trusted me, and since Maria already had me obeying her, I didn’t have another choice. But I whole-heartedly accepted, ready to make sure Aurora was safe and healthy.”

“Freya and I stayed back here with Flora while Lilith took all the other fairies in Ryland to another, top secret place, to keep them safe,” Fauna explains. “There were a few other fairies here, as Princesses Ashlynn and Dixie also have fairies. But besides them and us, we’re all that’s left.”

“Ilena’s mother didn’t even know if Ilena would be able to have a fairy, which is why she waited so long to start the process and find me,” Freya continues.

“So all of the fairies are in another place?” Elicia asks. “I thought they all lived in an enchanted forest in Briar.”

“That’s where we used to live, yes,” Fauna confirms. “We still do, but our kind

lives elsewhere. Lilith left a way to reach her and the other fairies, but she didn't tell any of us how to get there, saying that if it was safe, we'd learn more when the time was right," Fauna sighs.

"Lilith and the fairies live in Asteria," Aurora speaks up, still signing along with her words. "It's a place above the mainland, a place I believe the people there call 'earth'. No one in Ryland has ever talked about it, and now it all makes sense..."

"You've visited Asteria?" Flora asks and Aurora nods.

"I live---I stayed there while I was asleep, I think. The fairies there could see and talk to me, but Lilith never told me I was Aurora."

"You've spoken with Lilith?" Freya asks. Aurora nods. "And... the other fairies?" This one requires a bit of a longer explanation, so Flora resumes translating for Aurora.

"All of your friends are alright. Queen Maria's order is not able to affect them in Asteria. They all seem happy, and Lilith is a partial leader there. They won't let her lead completely because of her actions to Aurora... me, but seeing as the situation was dire, and they know Lilith's learned her lesson and perhaps should've escaped without targeting me, and has served a due sentence, they still value her opinion. And, perhaps... perhaps I'm the key to this. I'd always wondered why know one here went to Asteria or the mainland, and vice versa, and now it makes sense. Lilith must've allowed me to be part of both worlds."

"That's incredible," Ilena breathes. "Two worlds?"

"Indeed," Fauna marvels. "Thank you Aurora, thank you for this information, but we must get all of you somewhere safe now. Aurora cannot go back to Briar, and Ilena cannot go back Aella until we can come up with a plan to stop Gretchen. As for Elicia... I really should get her back to Cybele, but I believe she'll want to stay?" Elicia nods, and Aurora feels a bit of excitement bubbling inside her. Elicia is a quick learner, and a much better teacher than her, so it will be incredible to have both Ilena and Elicia to communicate with.

"I believe it's settled then, we're off to the fairy grove." Flora reaches for Aurora's hand, as Fauna gets out her wand to magic them away somewhere. Freya holds her hand out to Ilena, but she quickly goes back to the guardian animals, thanking them for their help.

"I'm sorry I couldn't understand you before, and that I wasn't smart enough to listen to you, but I'll forever be grateful for all you've done to save my life. Bye Sneider, Selene, Baxley, Griffin, Dottie, Dove, and Halston. Thank you so much." The animals all look at her, urging her to continue with the fairies, but looking grateful for her appreciation all the same. Ilena grips Freya's hand, and then the

winter landscape around them fades into an overgrown forest.

“Follow us right this way,” Flora instructs, leading the girls deeper and deeper into the forest, before they stumble upon a large treehouse. Flora leads them into the entrance at the bottom, fumbling through the fridge to give them all something to eat. While Freya catches up with Ilena, and Fauna talks with Elicia, Aurora decides to look around the cozy wooden structure, eventually finding a strange black chest with a gray wand displayed above it. Images play inside her mind, and she recognizes it as Lilith’s. In fact, she can even start to imagine Lilith’s voice...

“Aurora, if you want to save the fairies and Ryland both, you must continue to become what the curse allowed for you: to be part of both worlds. You must accept your destiny as the princess of Briar, as well as an ally for the fairies. This is the only way... in order to make things right, you must choose... you must follow through with your destiny....”

The words echoing in her mind are slightly familiar, for she had sometimes heard Lilith mention an important choice Aurora would have to make as the curse ended. Aurora thought that meant that she can’t go back to Briar, but as she stares at the fairy’s old wand, she realizes the most important part of Lilith’s message. She has to find a way to make Ryland safe for the Asteria fairies again, and she can’t do that until the rules are broken. And Lilith has discovered that loophole. She didn’t tell me I was Aurora, because she wanted me to make this choice on my own. Lilith does not get to control me, and neither does Queen Maria.

Aurora knows how to fix things. All she has to do is find a way to get that wand without anybody noticing. She turns back to the fairies and the princesses, taking a seat at the table. Elicia immediately starts talking to her, thanking her for informing them about the fairies.

“I’m just glad you and Ilena are ok,” Elicia translates, happily surprising Aurora with how fast she learns.

“Thank you,” Ilena adds, doing the motion along with it. Aurora smiles, excited to be communicating with other people her own way. For some reason, the other fairies in Asteria could understand her motions, but they only communicated with her verbally, never by signing. I like this change, Aurora decides. I like these fairies and these princesses... I just wish waking up hadn’t meant leaving the Asteria fairies too.

“We should get you all settled into the bedroom upstairs,” Flora instructs. “‘What about Queen Maria?’ Well, Aurora, I am no longer stuck following her orders, thanks to you. As far as your mother knows, I’m leading a search party,

which she's aware could take days. With that time, Fauna, Freya, and I will decide the next best course of action. We should be safe here, though, especially since I asked the guardians to cloak our location," she answers. "Now, come with me your highnesses." She leads the three girls up to another floor, before flying upwards to the third one.

"This is our bedroom," Fauna explains as the girls glance over the slightly miniature furniture. "The room upstairs will fit you three nicely. It's where we used to have humans visit us, back when we lived in harmony with them. It's plenty big enough to fit three young girls." Aurora signs a question, and again, Elicia answers instead of Flora.

"Yes, you're sixteen. Ilena is fourteen, and I'm fifteen," she explains. "Do you have a favorite color?" Elicia asks, looking between the three beds. Aurora pauses, thinking about it. She looks down at her gown and then Flora verbalizes her answer.

"I think it's purple. But I also like pink.' In that case, that pink bed over there is yours," Flora gestures. "Elicia will take the light blue one, and Ilena the red, as I'm fairly certain those are your favorite colors."

"Yes, thank you," Ilena says. "How long will we be staying with you? I want Gretchen to stop lying to my dad, and I want to tell him I'm ok."

"We will as soon as it's safe," Freya promises. "Right now, let us figure this out while you three talk up here. I think it'll be nice for you all to get to know each other, and Ilena, when we get the chance, you and I can talk more too."

"Fauna?" Elicia asks as she turns to leave. "If you don't have to work for us anymore, why are you continuing to help us?" Fauna furrows her brow and shakes her head.

"We must've misspoke. While we were subject to completely unfair rules regarding our work, the reason we were in the mess in the first place is because of our desire to help others. You, Elicia, have been nothing but kind and fair to me, as have Ilena and Aurora to Freya and Flora. We cannot abandon you when you are in danger."

"So you want to help us?" Elicia confirms.

"Of course!" Freya agrees. "You all are incredibly important to us." With that, she leaves to go speak with the other fairies in a different room. Elicia places her backpack next to her bed and Aurora resumes teaching the two princesses how to sign. By the time night falls, they can hold a few nonverbal conversations. Flora brings them up dinner, and the two girls watch curiously as Aurora tilts her head at the food.

“Aurora, do you know what’s in front of you?” Flora asks. She shakes her head in response, holding it in her hand strangely.

“Have you not eaten before today?” Ilena asks.

“Because of her sleeping state, I used a spell to provide her with nutrients,” Flora explains. “She’s never had to eat before today.”

Elicia picks up a piece of fruit and takes a bit as Aurora watches, mimicking her. She wrinkles her nose as she chews, not used to the feeling. Eventually, it gets slightly more normal, but still uncomfortable as she continues to consume the food and then brush her teeth later that night.

“It must feel exceptionally strange,” Ilena marvels. Aurora nods, walking over to the bed, touching it hesitantly.

“Do you know what that is?” Elicia asks. “I do, but I’ve never used one before.”

“What about all those years you were asleep?” Ilena asks.

“Flora is the fairy of plants, she made a makeshift bed out of them. I’ve never seen a bed like this before.”

“Well, it’s very soft, and comfortable,” Ilena assures her, showing her how normally you just climb onto it and lay down. Still, Aurora tries to stand on top of it, fumbling over the shifting surface. Beds are weird. Eventually, she stumbles, falling into the pillows leaning against the headboard. She shifts her weight, wrinkling her nose at the strange surface. Eventually, she just gets up and sits on the floor in front of it, watching Elicia and Ilena getting ready to go to sleep. “It feels so nice to have a bed after so many nights sleeping in the grass,” Ilena comments.

“It does feel nice,” Elicia agrees, leaning against her pillows. “Aurora, are you going to try to sleep?”

“Are you even tired?” Ilena asks, going to the foot of her bed to get a better look at Aurora. Aurora just shrugs in response, looking around the rest of the room.

“Well, Ilena and I are going to go to sleep now, but if you need either of us, just wake us up, alright?” Aurora nods and quietly walks around, exploring the room as she listens to the patterns of their breathing. Once they’re asleep, she tunes into the floor below, faintly hearing all the fairies whispering with each other. It takes quite a bit of waiting, but eventually Aurora sneaks down past them and to the first floor, picking up Lilith’s wand. I accept, she tells it. Make me a fairy.

Now, if Queen Maria tries to blackmail or threaten the lives of the fairies, she’ll be threatening her own daughter too.