Adornment

by whitedatura

Summary

After Aurora's coronation, Maleficent gives Diaval a gift for his years of service and tells him to go find happiness. He leaves. She might've phrased it differently if she'd known he'd take her so literally. Autumn and winter pass, as seasons do, and Maleficent finds herself in possession of a growing number of raven feathers. Meanwhile, Diaval discovers that roaming the countryside as a dragon is not without consequences.

Notes

Hey there, I like to show up nine months late to fandoms after everyone else has moved on and write a 20k+ word fic with no sex and do way too much research for what ends up being a sentence or two. (See the end notes for references.)

As always, thank you to my wonderful beta Rachel.

The coronation in the Moors was over. The party that had followed was over, too, despite the best efforts of a few punch-drunk, giggling pixies at the water's edge. The rest of the Moorland fair folk had collectively collapsed in exhausted, happy heaps around the pools. Aurora herself was cradled in
a bed of sweet grasses nestled amongst the roots of the great tree on the cliff, a smile on her slumbering face, coronet askew.

"She'll start drooling soon," Diaval said at Maleficent's side. The moonlight was kind to him, the gleam of his eyes striking in the shadows. "Adorable, but not very regal."

"It will be our secret," she replied, a matching smile on her lips. She hadn't been able to stop smiling, which was—strange. Not unwelcome, but strange. She glanced at Diaval again, reveling in the feel of her wings as she flexed them. It would be a long time before she'd begin to forget their absence, but the joy she'd found flying with him had helped happier memories resurface.

Attentive as always, he met her gaze, eyebrows raised. "Yes, mistress?"

She had a gift for him, hidden away in a knothole of their tree beyond Aurora's head. It would be simple to retrieve it, to offer it to him, to say the words. His eyebrows climbed higher as the silence stretched. He opened his mouth, surely to say something he thought clever, but she raised her hand as if to transform him and the words died unspoken as he caught her wrist.

Instead of shifting him, she pushed against his yielding grip and pressed her fingers to his lips. His eyes widened and his palm slipped down to the crook of her elbow. "Hush, Diaval. In the morning."

And then she shifted him anyway, because it amused her to do so. He cawed and flew up to his usual branch in their tree, feathers fluffed in a show of indignation that didn’t extend so far as finding a different roost for the night.

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"Did you give it to him? Did he like it? Of course he did, I knew he would," Aurora said, circling Maleficent as she took in the aftermath of yesterday's celebration. Diaval was off seeing to breakfast, thankfully, but Aurora's bright voice carried like seeds on a summer breeze.

"Not yet, beastie. Soon."

"Godmother," Aurora started, but her eyes darted somewhere past Maleficent and she didn’t continue. The sound of familiar wings came from overhead and Maleficent looked up to see Diaval flying in a tight circle above them, looking for somewhere to land.

Her staff, his usual perch, had been discarded somewhere amongst the roots of their tree, no longer necessary. "Do not," she called up, "even think about landing on my horns." Aurora giggled.

Diaval croaked back and landed on the ground with as much grace as he could manage. Taking pity on him, Maleficent tipped her head to the side and dropped her shoulder a fraction of an inch; he needed no more encouragement. Upon gaining his new perch, he plucked a bit of dandelion fluff from her hair with his beak. Then he croaked again and took off toward a loosely organized group of fairies with platters, presumably bringing their breakfast.

Maleficent rolled her eyes and turned to Aurora, whose normally open face held an unreadable expression. "I'll wake Phillip and my aunts," Aurora declared and bounded off.

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It was midday and Maleficent and Diaval were alone, sitting at the foot of their tree on the clifftop. Aurora had departed a few hours ago with Prince Phillip and a contingent of knights and court ladies sent to escort her to what was now her castle. Diaval had looked at Maleficent expectantly, waiting to be shifted to his raven form to accompany them, but that would have been—unfair.
That hadn't stopped her from shifting him for purely selfish reasons, but he'd followed her gladly when she'd beckoned for him to join her as she spiraled into the clouds. His good-natured acrobatics had made her laugh despite of what she knew was to come.

The beauty of the sun-drenched Moors was spread out before her, but the small weight of the cord around her wrist seemed heavy as a stone. Diaval was lounging nearby, tossing an apple into the air and shooting surreptitious glances at her when he thought she wasn't looking.

"You've missed morning by a few hours," he finally said, shining the apple on his shirt and offering it to her.

She took the apple and stared at it for a few moments before putting it in her lap. She unwound the gift and offered it to him in return. "Here." Her voice did not waver because she did not wish it to.

"What's this, then?" he asked, a knowing lilt to his tone as he held the necklace up to the light. Two feathers, one glossy black and one autumn brown, were bound to a length of braided cord with a few strands of Aurora's hair. She couldn't bring herself to say anything as he put it on and held the feathers in his cupped palm, a few golden motes of magic curling lazily around his hand before he looked up and grinned at her.

The grin melted into the beak of his raven self, then he was a bear with a hooked snout, a stag with clawed feet, a dragon ridged with feathers, serpentine neck rising high above their current perch until he ducked his head down, scaly wings tucked close to his sides. His hot breath blew her hair back and set the leaves rustling wildly around them. She put her hand on his snout and he was a man once more, leaning his scarred, familiar face into her palm as he knelt on the ground beside her.

He grinned again, his dark eyes alight with good cheer. "I promise not to go terrorizing the countryside. Probably. Maybe a few farmers, here and there, for the good of ravens everywhere."

For all the smiling she had done lately, Maleficent could not mirror his happiness. "The little beastie told you, did she?" She patted his cheek once and withdrew, her fingers curling into a loose fist. She did not wonder if it was the last time they would be so close, because she could not think such things.

"The girl can't keep a secret for anything." He sobered. "At least not from us."

"She didn't know everything." Maleficent's knuckles were white around the apple in her lap. "I release you. You've more than repaid your life debt to me. Go and find happiness."

"Happiness?" he repeated. When she did not respond, he said it again. "Happiness. You want me to go and find... happiness."

"That's what I said," she snapped, wings tense at her back. "I'm certain you heard me. If misery makes you happy, find that instead." The apple was very red; sticky juice leaked onto her dress where her nails had pierced the skin.

She could feel his gaze on her, but she did not look up.

"All right." The magic of his shift lapped at her senses and then he was gone without a goodbye, a tiny black silhouette against the clouds until he wasn't even that.

The sun was still shining, but its warmth did not reach her.

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Flying was magnificent, freeing, and solitary. None of the others would fly with her, though Maleficent did not ask. Such things must be earned, and while she was once more the Protector of the Moors, the other fair folk maintained a distance borne of wariness and respect.

No creature in the Moors had seen Diaval since the day after the coronation. Her desire to ask vanished when the curious looks she received began to border on pity. After having Diaval nearby for so many years being alone was jarring, but the feeling would pass. Her memories of him didn't deserve to be tainted and soured by the thwarted hope that he would someday return.

If she still half-expected a raven to be tumbling in the skies around her, amusing himself by flying in loops, no one else need know.

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The castle's towers rose before her as she approached, alighting on one of the high balconies, recently freed from its iron barriers on the order of Queen Aurora. Aurora, who fretted in the privacy of her rooms or the Moors that she hadn't the slightest idea of how to run a kingdom, had issued that particular order with steel in her voice. The foreman of the ironworks had bowed low, and that had been that. It had been wonderful to behold.

Queen Aurora was much beloved by her subjects in the Moors; her playful spirit had endeared her to them before she'd ever been crowned. She'd been a surprise to her human subjects, who could scarcely believe King Stefan and Queen Leila's daughter was still alive, let alone fit to rule. The prompt unification of the human and fairy kingdoms—a feat generations of kings had failed to accomplish—had summarily silenced most of her would-be detractors. Her sunny personality and innate kindness had charmed the rest.

"You're here!" Aurora called, nearly tripping over herself as she rushed out to the balcony. The hug was brief, but Aurora's unwavering delight, no matter how frequently they saw each other, never failed to warm Maleficent's heart.

Maleficent tucked the snowdrop she'd brought—magically encouraged to bloom—into Aurora's hair and followed her inside to a huge oak table strewn with maps and quills and other parchment. Aurora was saying something about water sprites and irrigation, but Maleficent's attention was arrested by a single black feather blown across the tabletop when Aurora threw herself into a chair.

The question escaped before she could think better of it. "Diaval was here?" Of course visiting Aurora would make him happy, why hadn't she asked before?

"Hm? Oh, yes," Aurora said as she shuffled through a pile of maps. "He seemed pleased with himself the last I saw him. He's putting your gift to good use." She plucked the feather up and motioned for Maleficent to duck down and deftly wove it into the hair near her right horn.

Maleficent twined her fingers together to stop herself from touching it. "He's well?"

Aurora's brow furrowed as she realized something was amiss. "Ye-es," she drawled. "I've not seen him in a few days, but he was fine. Did you quarrel?"

"No."

"Did you turn him into a dog again?"

"It was a wolf, and no. I haven't turned him into anything since I gave him the charm." Aurora didn't need to know she had lacked the opportunity to do so, especially if Diaval hadn't mentioned it.
Aurora hummed and finished braiding, tying it off with a bit of thread she plucked from the hem of her sleeve, which was sure to give her wardrobe mistress fits. "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about." Her eyes were wide and guileless. "I've only gotten a few reports of dragon sightings; they might not be him."

The laugh that bubbled up in Maleficent's throat was so startling it almost ended as abruptly as it had begun, but the delighted grin Aurora gave her made it easier to enjoy news of Diaval's antics.

"Let's hope there's not another raven-shifter," Maleficent said, mirth and company easing her solitude, "I don't think the kingdoms could handle a second Diaval."

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They walked in the castle garden, between the neatly boxed beds of herbs and vegetables clinging to the last of their leaves. It wasn't the Moors by any stretch of the imagination, but seeing sky instead of stone overhead was calming.

There was an elder tree near the garden wall, heavy with berries not yet harvested. Maleficent healed a crack forming on one of the laden branches; Aurora ran curious fingers over the spot when she was finished and sighed. "I miss the Moors," Aurora confessed, "but there are always so many decisions to make here, and all of the neighboring kingdoms have been sending envoys and coronation gifts and suitors—it's overwhelming."

Maleficent remained silent as Aurora began to pace between the elder tree and the rock-lined garden path. Though she knew he wasn't there, her eyes searched for the familiar shape of a raven amidst the berries.

Aurora came to a stop under the elder, wringing her hands as she blurted out, "Phillip asked to court me and I don't know what to say." Before Maleficent could think of an appropriate response, Aurora continued, "If I am to accept his proposal, he must love the Moors as I do, but he's only been there once."

Maleficent closed her eyes and took a deep breath, hoping she wasn't about to make a tremendous mistake. "Bring him. You wanted to speak to the water sprites, did you not? Bring the prince with you."

"Really?"

"It is your kingdom; you may bring who you like. How can he grow to love the Moors without knowing them? And, beastie, it is your decision. If he is sincere, he will give you time to make it."

Aurora nodded with all the gravity her sixteen years could grant her, then her face lit up with a grin. "Do you think he'll like the wallerbogs?"

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While Aurora was deep in conversation with the water sprites, Phillip approached Maleficent. It wasn't an easy feat, given that she was seated on a high branch in an oak some distance away. She allowed herself some amusement as the twigs and browning leaves caught at his cloak and made a tangled nest of his hair.

"My lady of the Moors," he greeted her, more composed than she'd expected for a princeling dangling from his elbows with his feet in midair. She didn't completely dislike him, but he'd have to do more than climb a tree to merit her consideration. She wasn't Diaval, after all.
She propped her chin on her hand and remained quiet.

"I, er, apologize for intruding, but I was hoping to ask for a boon."

Her reply to his audacity was a tremor in the tree limb from which he was so precariously suspended. His eyes widened and the color from his exertion drained from his face. "I am not in the habit of granting boons to men."

His voice shook when he spoke, but he did speak. "My lady, I was—of course not, my humblest apologies for my impertinence, truly, I merely wished to know more about the history of the Moors from the perspective of the fair folk. My kingdom has vague accounts, but they are hardly more than warnings. Lord Diaval has told me a little, and the queen loves the Moors so much, I—" He gulped audibly as his arm slipped and his attention turned to not falling instead of talking.

Lord Diaval? She couldn't have said with any certainty whether the princeling had added the honorific or if Diaval's self-importance had spiraled wildly out of control without her to temper his vain nature.

Having found purchase with one booted foot, Phillip continued, "I asked the queen's aunts, but they don't seem to like me very much. And they're, er..."

"Pixies," Maleficent filled in. "What makes you think I like you?"

"Ah—"

"Be silent, son of man." No magic was necessary to enforce her command. He hung there, looking contrite and terrified. She tried not to smile. "Man has always sought to usurp the treasures of the Moors for their own," she began, making herself comfortable. "They have never succeeded; nor will they." She coaxed a few branches under Phillip so his attention wouldn't be divided between peril and knowledge, though she looked forward to watching him try to climb down.

When her words ran dry, he thanked her. She thanked him for listening by not leaving him stranded in the oak.

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"Godmother," Aurora grinned as she watched Maleficent's leisurely glide to the shore of the pool. "Did Phillip tell you—oh my!" She gasped as she caught sight of Phillip trudging along. "Did I miss all the fun? I haven't thrown a good mudball in ages!"

Maleficent kept a straight face when Phillip tripped over a root. "Tell me what?"

"He's been teaching Diaval to play Nine Men's Morris," Aurora replied, obviously distracted by Phillip's disheveled appearance. "Goodness. Was Balthazar throwing mud, too?"

Phillip shook his head and made a futile attempt to set his clothing to rights. "He's quite good at it," he offered, ruffling his hair vigorously enough to knock a cascade of bark and leaves loose. "Lord Diaval, I mean, not Balthazar." Aurora beamed at him and Maleficent looked away from his answering smile.

"I imagine he is," Maleficent said, "since he's known how to play longer than Aurora has known how to walk."

Aurora's lips parted in an O of surprise and Phillip, after a moment of consideration, said, "I suppose that explains why he always wins."
Maleficent laughed despite the ache under her breastbone.

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Winter had often left Maleficent at loose ends. The trees and plants of the Moors were mostly dormant; few had need of her help. The fair folk and animals alike slowed down, living off stored food and waiting for spring. Past winters had seen her and Diaval, in the form of a great bear, curled up together, watching the snow fall as the world passed around them. Being sedentary by herself was much colder than she remembered and held little appeal, so she took to roaming the land when she wasn't with Aurora, magic cloaking her in warmth as she cut through the crisp air.

She didn't go looking for more of his feathers, but they seemed to find her all the same.

The second feather turned up in the little attic room of the cottage where Aurora had grown up. Maleficent had gone to make sure the pixies had closed it up properly when they'd left—they hadn't, and what if Aurora wanted to see it again?—and it had been caught in the crack of the windowsill, jarred loose when she'd closed the glass panes. It reminded her of Diaval wrangling a three-year-old Aurora away from the pixies' latest kitchen disaster with nothing but fancy flying and a bright flower in his beak and then tolerating Aurora's pudgy, sticky fingers stroking his feathers with a plaintive look out the window to where Maleficent had been watching.

The third feather drifted down from the high branches of the tree on the clifftop to land on her stomach as she settled down for the night. Its gentle descent made her think of the dolls she'd played with as a girl, dancing winged figures held aloft by her magic.

A touch of magic bound it in her hair, opposite the first two.

The fourth feather found her at the edge of the Moors during the first thaw of spring, the last remnants of winter coalescing into a pervasive gray slush. She'd been investigating what a young mushroom fairy had insisted was a monstrous wolf roaming the land when she'd felt the brush of her own magic at the edge of her senses and froze, one hand against the smooth trunk of a beech. After several quiet minutes of the steady drip of melting snow, she cautiously picked her way toward the direction the magic had come from, heart in her throat. The stark black of the feather was bold against the washed-out gray of the ground.

It joined the other three. Sometimes, when she moved in just the right way, she could see them flutter from the corner of her eye.

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Maleficent's wings were spread wide under the rising sun when Diaval returned, four of his feathers in her hair.

"Thanks for outing me to Prince Phillip. I had a plan, you know. I was testing his patience."

"You needed a plan for that?" Maleficent kept her face turned toward the sun, her eyes closed. She couldn't look at him, didn't want to see how he had changed without her. She did not question the veracity of his presence, because of course the first words he'd say after two seasons apart without any sign he'd ever return would be a scolding about something absurdly unimportant.

"I can't believe I missed you." The fondness in his voice clawed something ugly loose in her chest. The urge to fly as far as possible as fast as possible took hold of her very bones, but she kept her feet on the ground.

"What brings you here?" She kept her tone as neutral as she could.
"I live here?" She heard him take a few steps closer. "Have you forgotten my beautiful self so soon? You've yet to look at me, so perhaps you have."

"You live here?" she shot back, realizing she'd fallen for his ploy after she'd whirled around to face him. He looked—the same. The feathered charm was around his neck and there was a new hole near the hem of his coat, but he was still Diaval, and her breath came a little easier. She saw the instant he noticed the raven feathers in her hair and her chin rose, daring him to remark upon them. He didn't.

"You told me to find misery if it made me happy, so I came back." The half-grin fell from his lips as soon as it appeared and he hurriedly added, "That was—I wasn't serious. I didn't mean that you—that was in poor taste and I shouldn't have said it." When her thunderous expression failed to lighten, he backed away, one hand raised in supplication, the other clutching something so hard his knuckles were white. "Perhaps I'll visit Aurora."

She turned and waved her hand, ashen words rolling off her tongue. "Fine. Go. I don't care."

Diaval's muttered, "Of course you don't," stung like cold iron. "I'll give Aurora your love, shall I?"

Without waiting for a response, he shifted and flew past her shoulder, angling himself around the apex of her wing.

Again she watched until he was less than a speck in the sky, every muscle in her body growing tenser as the distance increased. The space he occupied in her scarred heart, hardly mended, began to splinter and ache anew.

Her wings snapped open and she'd thrown herself off the cliff before she could think herself out of it. She'd missed him and he'd come back—he'd come back—and she'd driven him off over one of his stupid retorts that she would've had no trouble ignoring in the past. She thought of calling for him with her magic, but it was no longer his duty to come to her when she wished it. This time she would go to him.

Maleficent poured all of her energy into the powerful beat of her wings, confident that she'd overtake him long before he reached the castle.

At the edge of the Moors, where the land was still scarred by the years her wall of thorns had stood, she found him in an elm tree that was barely clinging to life, its half-dead branches knotted and bent in strange twists. She should have been looking for a raven, but the flash of pale skin amongst the sparse brown leaves had her wheeling in the air. If he noticed her he gave no sign.

She approached the tree on foot, avoiding the patchy dry grass until she stood beneath the gnarled boughs. He was sitting on the narrowest branch that would support him as a man, his back against the trunk as his legs dangled in the air.

"Diaval." She didn't know how else to begin.

He jumped and overbalanced; it was instinct to reach out with her magic to steady him. He shook his arms as if the magic would fall away, deliberately leaning over to brace himself and look down at her. She could not say if the surprise on his face was from her presence or from nearly being startled out of a tree.

"Why—" Why did you come back? she wanted to ask, but her fear of his answer changed the question to, "Why were you testing the prince? I thought you believed in true love."

His eyes closed and she saw him sigh before he sat back, hiding his face from view. "I've revised my
opinions on love," he informed her. "I got caught up in the moment with the curse."

"Oh?"

"I'm willing to concede that love at first sight probably doesn't happen, but you weren't right either. True love exists, though it's not my place to say if that is what's between Aurora and Phillip now. But it almost seems... too easy," he concluded after a moment of deliberation. "Prince meets princess, curse is broken, they fall in love, everyone's happy. Love hurts more than that, doesn't it?"

"I have found it so, but I made my own hurt with Aurora," she answered carefully. She did not mention Stefan because he was cold in the ground and did not bear mentioning, and she did not ask who Diaval had loved that had caused him pain. Instead, she knelt in the dirt and laid her hands on the protruding roots of the elm and let her magic rush out.

She worked without interruption, which was strange, since Diaval had always delighted in having the last word in their conversations whenever it was physically possible.

"I thought you were going to the castle." She kept her attention on her task, though she could hear the scrape of cloth on bark as Diaval moved.

"I was. I am," he protested. "I just—I like to stop here."

The barren land around the tree held no appeal to Maleficent; the Moors were near, but no fairy would come here without reason. Balthazar's guard came the closest, but even they stayed to the greener side of the bleak boundary. "Why?"

"What does it matter?" There was an edge to his voice she hadn't often heard. "You're asking a lot of questions for someone who doesn't care."

"I didn't mean that," she snapped and stood, glaring up at Diaval's back. "How was I to know you were going to come back?"

His sudden shift startled her, but he was aloft as a raven for mere seconds before he was a man pacing the bare earth and scrubbing his hands through his hair, leaving it in disarray. "When have I ever not come back? When? I always come back to you!"

"I did not tell you to leave."

"Oh, really?" he shot back, stomping a few steps closer. "'Go find happiness, Diaval,' certainly didn't sound like 'stick around the only home you've ever had and be happy here,' from where I was standing! What was I supposed to do, go be a raven again? I'd perish of boredom; that's not me anymore. And I love Aurora, I do, but spending the rest of my life playing court spy—that's not—is it wrong to want more than that?" he trailed off, the uncharacteristic anger that had buoyed his words dwindling to a disparate melancholy.

Any desire she'd had to argue with Diaval had withered and died with the knowledge that he'd thought she'd wanted to be rid of him.
He crossed his arms and kept his gaze on the ground. "I am still a raven, but some days I feel—I guess I don't know what I am most days, except me. And being a dragon is all well and good until you get hungry and want to eat a flock of sheep with a side of shepherd." His attempt at levity fell flat.

"I'm sorry." They were petty words compared to how she'd changed him. She'd left her mark on him as she'd left her mark on the land.

His eyes went wide. "For what?"

She settled on, "For altering your very nature."

He shrugged, a glimmer of his usual self shining through in the lopsided curl of his lips. "I'm not complaining, really."

Her incredulous laugh was too loud in the still air. "You complain all the time."

"I don't mean it, obviously. What would I have done as a raven? Spent all my time feeding hatchlings?" He paused. "Well, I suppose I did that anyway. But I'd certainly be dead by now if I were only a raven, so there's that."

"Yes," she said, throat tight in a way it hadn't been when she'd first witnessed the farmer's cruelty. "there's that."

"I want to come home. Can I?" Each quiet word felt like iron striking her heart. Even when she'd been without her wings she'd always had her home, but she'd taken that from him, however unintentional.

She closed the distance between them and hooked a finger around the charm he wore. "You don't need my permission." The charm dropped back to his chest. She reached up to smooth his disheveled hair into place and pretended not to notice the way he first jolted at her touch and then stood still as stone, as if he were afraid she'd spook like a skittish horse if he moved. She stepped away once he'd been set to rights, her hands clasped in front of her, at a loss for what to say.

"I—" Diaval cleared his throat. "I can come back to the tree, then?"

"As long as you don't hide any disgusting bits of carrion in the knotholes." She smiled when he bristled, his slumped shoulders straightening.

"That was once and it was winter," he protested. "Excuse me for not wanting to starve."

"Once?" she laughed. "Surely you mean once a week."

"I surely do not."

They stood there trying not to grin at each other like fools until Diaval bowed and gestured toward the Moors. "Shall we?"

She swept past him and put her hand to the elm for a final burst of healing magic. Then she set a path toward the next standing stone, flowers blooming in her wake. "Walk with me?" she asked over her shoulder. He watched the green leaves unfurl for a few moments more before making as if to follow behind her as he always had, and she stopped, shaking her head. "With me, Diaval."

His face brightened and he sprang forward to offer her his arm with an expression that spoke equally of hope and the expectation of being toppled into the dirt. She tucked her hand around the crook of
his elbow and continued on her way, not bothering to hide her smile when he half-tripped into motion.

The first standing stone loomed tall in front of them when she said, "Diaval," because having a reason to say his name again pleased her, "there's something I should tell you."

Without missing a beat, he guessed, "You threw out all of my things while I was gone? You set the pixies on fire? You put the prince on top of one of these giant rocks and left him there?"

"I missed you." Of all the things she had to say to him, that was most important. His stride faltered, but he recovered so smoothly she wouldn't have noticed had she not been so close to him.

"You did? I mean, obviously you did, what's not to miss?"

It would have been easy to temper her sentiment with teasing, but she did not. She continued around the stone and set out for the next, dotting the spreading meadow flowers with an occasional sapling.

"That's it? You missed me?"

"That's it." Out of the corner of her eye she saw him duck his head, the remnants of a pleased grin still on his face when he straightened.

The earth healed as they walked. The barren ground did not deserve to bear the burden of her memory; it felt right to mend it with Diaval at her side. Occasionally the work dictated that they separate to repair a high branch or shoo away a swarm of beetles, but after the first time Maleficent stood impatiently waiting for Diaval to offer his arm he did not make her wait again.

They broke midday at a snowmelt stream with a handful of fruits and nuts she'd encouraged to grow. Diaval sat near her on a flat rock, accepting whatever food she offered, his eyes half-closed. On a whim she pushed a cherry pit into the ground and helped it take root until it was large enough to drop blossoms in the burbling water.

"I want to finish another three stone's distance before nightfall," she told him, brushing a flower from the folds of her robe. "You don't have to come."

"I'll come."

Maleficent frowned. "You were eager to go home this morning."

He shrugged. "It'll still be there. Someone has to make sure you didn't actually leave the prince on one of the rocks."

She feigned offense. "I would never. It would be far too easy to yell for help from up there."

Diaval laughed and got to his feet, shaking petals from his long coat. He hesitated for a moment, then held out his hand.

"Have you come to any conclusions about the prince?" She graciously allowed him to help her up. "Since your tests were important enough to bring you back to the Moors to scold me for ruining them."

He snorted. "That's not why I came back."

"Oh?"

As if she hadn't spoken, he continued, "And you didn't ruin all my tests, just the one. It took him
three helpless woodland creatures to catch on to the compassion test, which was a little slow for my tastes, but he was unfailingly kind. Even when he was out hunting the majestic black stag of the forest—" Maleficent rolled her eyes when he gestured to himself, "when he saw its leg was caught in a trap—not really, obviously—he freed me. Not that I was going to let him kill me if he decided differently."

"I should hope not," she said, her tone sharper than she'd intended. When Diaval cocked his head she shook herself and half-marched toward the next standing stone, covering the bare ground in lavender. The bees and smaller fairies would like it, and Aurora liked honey. Diaval had a taste for it, too, though he'd never admit it.

Diaval cleared his throat and trailed after her. "He seems like a good lad. Honest, moral, thoughtful, earnest. Is that something humans look for in a mate? Too serious for me, but I think Aurora likes it. Not impulsive, so he's a good temper for Aurora that way. After I suggested it to him, it took him a few days to make up his mind to ask you about the Moors history, but I knew he'd go through with it when he did."

Maleficent turned and raised an eyebrow, lips pressed together in displeasure. "I have you to thank for that, do I? Why am I not surprised?"

Whatever Diaval had to say for himself was muffled by the lavender bush that had sprung up directly in front of him. He stumbled out the other side spitting leaves. "Thanks," he muttered, picking a twig out of his hair.

She kept her gaze on the distant trees. "Why did you come back?"

"I always do."

"That's not an answer."

He was ahead of her now, walking backward so he could shrug at her. "Isn't it?"

Flowers blossomed around them as she crossed her arms and stared at him. He stared back, his eyes oddly serious for his flippant tone.

"Are you going to answer me?"

He smirked. "Forgive me, but I've wanted to do this for a long time." Then he shifted, passing so close the downsweep of his wings ruffled her hair. He croaked at her from a nearby branch. Could a raven sound smug?

"I suppose this is retribution for changing you when you tried to say something I didn't like."

He croaked again. Definitely smug.

He swooped down and shifted. He expected his human form, but a black stag stood before her. Except—Maleficent let out an undignified snort of laughter, her annoyance pushed aside. "This is majestic? You look ridiculous." She reached up to rub the fur between his single antler and the space where the second should have been. "Majestically lopsided, perhaps."

He huffed and stamped the ground before taking a few steps in the direction they'd been going. He'd thoughtfully positioned himself so that his remaining antler was on the side opposite her so she could walk at his shoulder and focus on the plants.

"Don't think you've won," she told him. His ears, which had pricked toward the sound of her voice,
flicked dismissively.

Diaval remained as a stag, picking his way along the sprouting lavender, occasionally trotting a ways off to shake his head vigorously in an attempt to remove his remaining antler, but to no avail.

"You could change back," Maleficent got out through her laughter as Diaval assaulted a yearling tree in his quest. He looked up, huffed at her, and kept trying. A few of the younger fairies, attracted by his antics, gathered at the edge of the Moors, their chiming voices tinkling with giggles. He mock-charged them and they scattered, still tittering.

With one more unsuccessful whack against an innocent tree, Diaval shifted into his raven self and perched on the birch Maleficent was coaxing back to health. He kept pace with her, flying from branch to branch on the human side of the border. He took to the sky a few times, spiraling up until she could barely see him, but he always came back to croak something at her like she could understand him, a habit she hadn't managed to break him of in seventeen years. His last perch was a crevice on the final standing stone, almost lost amongst the climbing ivy.

The ivy needed neither help nor encouragement, and the sun was beginning to set. "Home?" she called up to him. He cawed and flapped down to the ground to shift again.

"I had an idea," he said so soon after the change his voice creaked with it, "while I was away."

"Did you," she replied, eyebrow raised.

"Don't say anything until I explain." Without another word, he walked around the stone and out of her sight before she could point out he was in no position to give her orders. She felt him shift on the far side, but the magic stuttered in strange spasms, nothing like the smooth flow it should have been. She thought something had gone wrong when he circled around, still man-shaped.

Then she noticed the wings.

Glossy black raven wings, at least as large as hers.

Her mouth opened and closed without uttering a sound.

Shifting into a fairy should have been impossible. The inherently unmagical could not become magical, but perhaps he'd been steeped in her magic for so long she had well and truly warped the nature of his existence. Or perhaps that final desperate change into a dragon was at fault, tearing at the boundary between magical and not. His hair was falling around his face, hiding his ears from view, so she tucked it back, fingertips brushing the still-rounded tips while he stood stock-still. So: not a fairy.

She circled him, taking in the bold arc of his new wings. His innate raven self had always shown through no matter his form, but this—this was deliberate choice. He was so finely in tune with his own being—despite his protest otherwise—he'd managed to twist the magic to manifest only the parts he wanted. Her magic had never been entirely separate from her emotions; perhaps it was no wonder that it was fond enough of Diaval to let itself be manipulated after spending six months next to his heart.

The impulse to touch was almost too much to ignore. Were his wings as strong as hers? Could they carry him as far and as fast? Were they the reason for his return? Her hand lifted, inches away from contact, but instead she reached up to her hair and found one of his feathers there, a poor substitute, but it helped her think past the desire to touch him.

An ailing sapling provided an excuse to withdraw to a safe distance. She heard him exhale as she
crouched down to mend a scratch on one thin twig. "I wasn't trying to be dramatic," he explained, tipping his chin toward the standing stone. "Sometimes I concentrate too much on the wings and, ah, forget clothes. I never used to care about clothes," he muttered, shaking his head.

She hummed and examined a leaf unfurling at her fingertip. Diaval looked at her, then the sapling, then started pacing, his stride jerky and his hands curled into fists. Maleficent watched him from the corner of her eye, her mind already in the sky.

When his back was to her he stopped, spun around, and stalked closer. "Say something," he demanded, crossing his arms. His wings shifted with the movement. Her own wings were near-quivering with the need to stretch and carry her into the wind as fast as they could go to see if he could match her.

Straightening, she mimicked his pose. "Didn't you require my silence until your explanation was finished? I've yet to hear the start of it."

"Since when are you in the habit of doing as I ask?"

She smiled, sharp and gleeful. "When it pleases me."

"You mean when it annoys me."

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

"You're—never mind." His sigh was a masterpiece of long-suffering, but his eyes crinkled at the corners. "So what do you think?" This time he twirled in place, arms and wings out, reeking of confidence.

"They're nice, I suppose," she conceded, smirking when he deflated, arms drooping. "But the important thing is: can you fly?"

Without further warning, she launched herself into the air, powerful beats of her wings carrying her straight up until the flowers seemed to spool out below her like a ribbon adorning the edge of the Moors. The air shifted and she twisted and dove just in time to streak past Diaval, her laughter carried away by the wind.

He hadn't lost any of his agility with his new wings and wasted no time wheeling around to follow her, determination written on his face. She headed toward the heart of the Moors where the water glittered gold under the setting sun, her heart pounding. The rocks dotting the water provided Diaval with the perfect opportunity to gain on her as he skirted around them without losing a trace of speed.

Yes, he could certainly fly.

When her advantage had been cut to next to nothing she banked and dipped her wingtip low, sending a spray of water directly at him. Even over the wind in her ears she heard him yelp and she laughed again. They'd just sped past Aurora's flowered throne when there was a flash of black in the corner of her vision and then he was below her, so close to the surface of the pool it rippled in his wake. Through some feat of acrobatics he rolled to flick water in her face and swooped away to safety in the same motion.

Now she was the pursuer, racing after him as he twisted and turned around anything that held still, including a stunned pixie sent tumbling head over heels. He curled around the edges of a waterfall, the spray off his wings sending tiny rainbows arcing through the air. She was so focused on Diaval that she didn't notice where he was leading her until their tree on the clifftop was passing beneath her and they caught the thermal at the ridge's edge, trading speed for altitude to spiral together into the
clouds.

Golds and oranges faded into blushing pink and crimson as they climbed, a glowing sliver of the moon waiting in the darkening sky above. Diaval soared like he was born to it and he was, but not like this—this was a gift.

Exhilaration changed to serenity as the familiar peace of flight enveloped her and her heartbeat slowed from the hectic pace of the chase. Diaval angled himself closer, gliding in lazy loops around her as she basked in the last rays of the sun.

The stars had begun to shine when their feet met the earth once more.

"Can I fly," Diaval grumbled as he flopped onto the grass at the foot of their tree and feigned a glare. His wings disappeared with a wobbly surge of magic. "That's insulting, you know."

"Give me the charm." His brow furrowed, but he propped himself up on one elbow and carefully pulled the feathered cord over his head.

She extended one wing and chose an appropriately-sized feather; her wince was accompanied by Diaval's bitten off protest. Waving away his concern, she conjured a glowing light to see by and carefully bound the new feather to the cord, her thread-thin tendril of magic nearly indistinguishable from the golden strand of Aurora's hair. When she finished, the single black feather was flanked by two brown, balancing the magic contained within.

She knelt next to him in the grass and he ducked his head at her gesture. The light lingered long enough to throw the charm into stark relief against his pale chest and then extinguished. The moon washed away the colors of spring, but Diaval was the same no matter the light.

Their eyes met and the air seemed to still as if waiting for something, but she ignored the strange buzzing under her skin and looked away. She got to her feet and beckoned for him to follow. "Try it again."

This time his wings appeared with a smooth flow of power and he stretched them as wide as they could go. "That was much easier." He gave an experimental flap and ducked his head. "What do you think? Not as pretty as yours, of course, but I can at least keep up now."

"You—" she paused, still off-balance from the look in his eyes. "Did you say my wings are prettier than yours? Are you ill?" She put the back of her hand to his forehead, but he was wind-chilled. The way he leaned into her touch before pulling away unsteadied her further.

"Your wings are beautiful." The unabashed reverence in his voice made her grateful for the veil of nightfall; if he saw the slightest hint of pink in her cheeks she'd never hear the end of it.

Someone cleared their throat.

They jerked back, Diaval's arms crossed tightly against his chest as he sidestepped away from her to face the interloper. The tips of their wings brushed together until Diaval shifted his away, and Maleficent was struck with regret, keen and unexpected, the tension in the air gone as if it had never been.

"Um," said Thistlewit, wringing her hands. "Message from the queen? N-no one knew where—"

"The message?" Maleficent demanded. Already on edge, she tensed further in preparation to fly at the slightest hint of trouble.
"Nothing's wrong!" Thistlewit squeaked, covering her head with her hands. "The queen, um, she—she wants to see you, both of you—" she peeked through her fingers at Diaval as if there'd been some uncertainty about to whom she referred, "—at your convenience. And she says she misses you, so come soon. Please. That's all, I swear. I don't know why that crow followed me here." She flapped her hand over her shoulder and wasted no time zipping away.

"Raven!" Diaval shouted after her as the raven in question squawked in outrage from a nearby bush. "Not a crow, you witless creature. Sorry, Orlaith." He glanced sidelong at Maleficent before holding out his arm for the raven—Orlaith, evidently—to perch on his wrist. "News?"

Through a series of caws, croaks, and knocking sounds, Orlaith conveyed her message. Maleficent could understand none of it, but Diaval's frown got deeper the longer she went on. There was a pause and Orlaith repeated her last few calls, this time pointedly clacking her beak in Maleficent's direction.

Diaval shook his head.

The sound Orlaith uttered was more akin to a shriek than a croak and Diaval winced. "Fine, fine, I'll tell her." He shook his arm until Orlaith moved to the top of a rock. He turned to Maleficent, not looking at her but at a point somewhere beyond her shoulder. "Orlaith, daughter of Miach, daughter of Caoimhe, daughter of Riona, who was my mother, says, 'strength in the wind, sister.' It loses something in translation."

Maleficent inclined her head to Orlaith, grateful to armor herself with decorum. "And to you. Have you come far?"

"The castle. She's part of the flock—" Orlaith croaked. "Was part of the flock there. Kieran?" Orlaith bobbed her head. "I'm sure your choice of mate was the wisest one." Orlaith shifted on the rock and drew herself up straighter, looking pleased.

"The hospitality of the Moors is open to you. Please rest and eat before you journey back."

Maleficent conjured a sprig of berries she knew Diaval liked and offered them to Orlaith, who grasped them delicately in one clawed foot.

"I thank you for the information," Diaval said to Orlaith, but then he made a face that ruined his formal tone and added, "if not for the advice."

Orlaith cawed once more and took off, flying low until she disappeared into the gloom.

Maleficent stared blindly out over the Moors so she had something to focus on that wasn't Diaval. "What did she have to say? I doubt she came merely to exchange pleasantries."

Diaval kept his distance. "The raven flock at the castle—unmated younglings—pass things on to me from time to time. I find it useful."

"From spy to spymaster?" She watched a pair of sprites dancing across the water, their movements in perfect harmony, and she felt a prick of envy.

"Simply expanding my trade. Forewarned is forearmed, after all."

"And what was her warning?" Maleficent glanced over her shoulder in time to see him grimace, expression clear even in the dark.

"Hopefully nothing, but I may have some business to take care of." He shifted from foot to foot, a sure sign he'd omitted something significant. "I should—there's something I should ask Orlaith. We'll
wait til morning to see Aurora?"

Her chest felt lighter, relieved of a burden she hadn't noticed until it was gone. The reprieve was short-lived, however, replaced with a disappointment that felt just as heavy. "Yes. Go."

He stood at the cliff's edge and looked back at her, face unreadable. "May I make a request?"

"No," she replied immediately. "Perhaps. What?"

"Please stop saying that to me." He tipped over the edge and rose again, a raven-shaped void in the starry sky.

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A cool breeze swept across the Moors as the sun rose, dew twinkling in the grass. The clouds Maleficent could see through the leaves spoke of rain yet to come, but it would wait until evening. She was alone in their tree, but breakfast was waiting for her next to a long black feather. She twirled the feather between her fingers for a few moments, mind blissfully blank, then she tapped it against her lips and settled it in her hair so it laid between the others, the length of it hanging down her neck. She fixed it in place with a twist of magic and ate, food balanced on her drawn-up knees. She clothed herself in a robe of deep green, fit for a visit to Aurora, and added the armband she'd worn at the coronation. Her hair and horns she left as they were.

Diaval was waiting when she came down from their tree, perched on top of a rock in his raven form. The feather had obviously been a peace offering, but she could still feel the weight of questions unanswered strung out between them.

Orlaith was nearby as well, preening her wings. Maleficent nodded to her and Orlaith bobbed her head before returning to her task.

Maleficent reached for Diaval's wing and he hopped away from her, croaking. "Let me see," she chided.

As she'd expected, one of his flight feathers was missing. She touched the empty space with a careful fingertip and hurried the replacement on its way, stroking down the length of his back as it grew in, an uncomfortable process even when not hastened by magic.

Orlaith looked on, black eyes gleaming, head cocked to the side. She croaked and clicked her beak at Diaval. He grumbled something, not a proper call, but it seemed to get his point across and she subsided, quiet.

"To Balthazar, then to Aurora," Maleficent decided aloud and took to the air, a raven trailing at each wing.

Once Balthazar had been informed of their imminent journey, Maleficent turned toward the castle with a brief stop at the new cherry tree between the standing stones, where she chose a few blossoms and tucked them into a pocket of her robe with a bit of magic to keep them fresh for Aurora's hair. Diaval disappeared for a few moments and came back with a sprig of lavender in his beak. She added it to their offering.

They flew low over the countryside and saw no one but a small boy going about his chores, laden with buckets of grain. When he caught sight of Maleficent, the buckets hit the ground, spilling everywhere. She expected him to run, but he jumped and waved wildly. Diaval, being Diaval, paused to do a few loops around the boy's head. Maleficent absentely sent a few tendrils of magic to tidy the boy's mess as she waited for Diaval to satisfy his vanity.
Orlaith cawed periodically and took her leave of their peculiar formation when her call was answered from a copse near the castle. Diaval croaked a farewell.

The wide walkway up to the keep proper was lined with lords and ladies doing whatever it was that humans did. Even from the air, Maleficent could tell they were all aflutter about something, the buzzing murmur of their voices like angry bees. She veered toward the high balcony she used as an entrance, but Diaval cut in front of her and swooped toward the windows overlooking the throne room.

Two of the windows were open, providing enough room for her to sit precariously next to Diaval, one wing held awkwardly against her body, the other half-extended. She did not worry that they would be seen; Aurora was on her throne, and all eyes were on her. The captain of the guard stood behind her left shoulder, Prince Phillip was at her right.

Long-ingrained habit of passive observation kicking in, Maleficent and Diaval silently watched as petitioners from all over the kingdom presented themselves to the queen. A farmer who had lost his family to a winter sickness asked for aid in sowing his crop; a castle seamstress sought a household position for her daughter; a lord requested permission to hold a tourney.

It was only when a knight approached the queen and knelt that Maleficent's attention wavered; Diaval had tucked his head under his wing. The knight seemed unremarkable, but she asked, "Who is he?"

Diaval only shuffled farther away and resettled his wings.

"Most gracious queen," said the knight, his booming voice carrying easily. "I am Sir Perrault of Aulnoy. The news of your recent battle with the Moors—"

Aurora sat up straighter and Phillip took half a step forward. "I am sorry to interrupt, Sir Knight, but you are mistaken. There has been no battle."

Sir Perrault barreled on. "The news has only recently reached Aulnoy. I have journeyed far to slay the one known as the Witch of the Moors, who can turn into a great dragon at will. That fearsome dragon has appeared on the outskirts of Aulnoy—"

Maleficent's eyebrows shot up and she glanced at Diaval, whose feathers were so agitated only his beak was visible.

"—and I encountered the great beast myself on the northern border of Ulstead. She escaped with her life, but I have dogged her steps ever since. I implore you, gracious queen—"

"Sir Knight," Aurora stood, her hands clasped in front of her. She looked every inch a queen; Maleficent was torn between pride and the cold anger taking root in her chest. "You are mistaken."

He faltered. "Ah, about what, your majesty?"

"There was no battle, and the dragon is not a dragon; he is a raven."

"A—a raven?" Sir Perrault looked around at the courtiers present, waiting for some indication that Aurora wasn't in her right mind. He found them placid, some of them smiling openly. "He? The Witch of the Moors is a warlock?"

Before Aurora could continue, Prince Phillip stepped forward and bowed. "If I may, your majesty?"

Aurora nodded but did not resume her seat.
"Sir Knight, I am Prince Phillip of Ulstead. I assure you, Ulstead was under no threat from the
dragon you saw, fearsome though he may be."

Diaval perked up a little at that. Maleficent would have rolled her eyes at his conceit, but she was
concentrating on the white skin of her knuckles around the window ledge instead of imagining ways
to magic Sir Perrault out of his armor and drop him from a great height.

Sir Perrault was becoming visibly agitated. "Your highness, it was a dragon. They are always threats.
And a witch—a warlock—that can take the shape of such a creature is even more dangerous and
**must** be slain, for the good of all kingdoms!"

Diaval squawked and hopped as a tongue of green flame curled up the window frame, but the noise
was lost in the sudden clamor of the court.

Phillip stood firm in the face of Sir Perrault's anger. "There is no witch and there is no warlock. The
Moors has a protector; she is fierce but not unfair, and she is an ally to this throne."

"This is a terrible misunderstanding, truly," Aurora said, her fingertips at Phillip's elbow. He bowed
his head and stepped back. "The Protector of the Moors is my godmother and very dear to me. Her
companion—the raven, whom you encountered—meant no harm."

"It was a dragon!" Sir Perrault shouted.

A hush fell over the assemblage as Aurora blinked, bemused. The guard captain clanked forward,
but a sweep of Aurora's arm halted his advance. "If you will not listen, you will leave. You will find
no aid here, nor in Ulstead. This is one quest you must abandon, Sir Knight. Venture near the Moors
at your own peril."

Sir Perrault turned and stormed out of the chamber without another word.

He would never set foot near the Moors; Maleficent would make sure of that.

She braced herself on the windowframe, preparing to charge inside, but Diaval spread his wings
across the open window and refused to move.

"Diaval," she hissed, hand raised to turn him into a cockroach. He buffeted her with his wings and
twisted to dart under her arm into the air, croaking. He flew from ledge to ledge, moving down the
outside of the castle. Maleficent looked from Diaval to the throne room where the knight had long
since disappeared. She gritted her teeth and followed him.

There was another open window on the lowest level of the castle. Diaval swooped in without a
problem, but Maleficent had to half-crawl to fit. She found herself in room full of staring laundresses,
linens fluttering in the breeze.

"This way!" Diaval called from somewhere beyond the hanging sheets. Keeping her wings close to
her body, she maneuvered around the women and stepped carefully over the buckets toward the
sound of his voice.

"Did you come back because you were in danger? Why didn't you tell me?" Maleficent demanded as
soon as she caught up to him. The laundresses were conspicuously not listening.

Diaval stared at her before turning sharply on his heel and setting a rapid pace down the hall. "No, I
did not come back because I was in danger. I was never in danger in the first place. I was trying not
to involve you in this, in fact; I never thought that foolhardy idiot would go to Aurora."
"Orlaith," Maleficent realized.

"Yes." He took a right turn down a narrower corridor. They had to walk nearly on top of each other to avoid the passing servants who were just as desperate to pretend they weren't seeing a fairy and a shapeshifter stalking through the bowels of the castle. "If the man had taken a moment to listen to kingdom gossip, he would've known coming here was pointless. But he also tried to kill a dragon, so I shouldn't have assumed he'd have anything resembling intelligence."

"What happened?" Maleficent asked, nails digging into her palms.

"You want the whole story?" The air began to smell faintly of straw and animal dung as he turned left down an even smaller passageway. "I was minding my own business—as a dragon, granted—when he rode up, called me 'Witch of the Moors,' and tried to skewer me with his pointy stick, which I didn't much appreciate. I thought about reasoning with him, but getting rid of the scales and fire-breathing seemed unwise, given the attempted slaying. I flew away, he pursued. So I broke his stick, dropped his sword in a river, and put the fear of dragons in his horse. I thought that would be the end of it." He stopped abruptly and Maleficent almost ran straight into him, her nose coming within inches of his shoulder before she caught herself. "If I'd realized he thought I was you..."

She frowned at the cold fury evident in his voice; Diaval had never been quick to anger. Her own simmering rage was more familiar. "It's better you didn't—dispose of him."

His head turned toward her, his hair shadowing his face. "Forgive me if I don't agree."

As he had so often been a balance for her, she centered herself in icy calm. "It's better," she repeated and made herself believe it, just a little. For now. "We don't know how far these rumors have spread; I'm sure Sir Knight will volunteer the information given the right... persuasion."

"There are other ways," Diaval said, but he didn't argue. They turned once more and descended a flight of narrow stairs before Diaval stopped and gestured to a heavy door surrounded by a halo of trampled hay and dirt. "He came here on a horse; presumably he won't leave without it."

Wishing she'd brought her staff, she plucked one of the less-mangled pieces of straw from the floor and made it grow. The result was brittle and mottled gold, but it would suffice. Diaval barred the door to the stables to prevent any interruptions, and they waited.

As an armored knight, they heard Sir Perrault coming long before he caught sight of them. Maleficent spread her wings as far as the narrow corridor would allow and stood tall, her chin tipped up and her staff in front of her, weapon and symbol combined. She'd expected Diaval to remain human in order to have a voice in the imminent conflict, but he shifted to his raven form and forwent his typical perch on her staff for her shoulder.

Sir Perrault clanked down the last steps and saw them.

He uttered a startled oath and went for his sword, but Diaval burst into motion, a streak of black darting at his unprotected face. The sword clanged to the flagstones as he stumbled, tripped on the stairs, and hit the floor in a discordant crash of metal. Diaval wheeled in a tight circle and shifted in midair, dropping to the ground on the paws of a wolf. Maleficent's expressionless facade nearly cracked in shock as he bared his teeth and growled at Sir Perrault, hackles raised. His hairless, pointed snout made him look the part of a hellhound.

"You're the witch." Sir Perrault scrambled to his feet and eyed the sword laying safely between Diaval's paws.
"We haven't even been introduced and you're hurling accusations? My, my, how unchivalrous."

"Call off your dog, witch!"

Diaval's snarl echoed off the stone walls.

"I'm afraid you are mistaken," Maleficent told him, intentionally echoing Aurora's words to watch his face redden in anger. "He's a wolf, not a dog. And I," she said, raising her wings as green flame licked at the hem of her robe and traveled up her staff, "I am no witch, human. I am much worse."

"A demon," he breathed and lunged for his sword.

Diaval blurred into motion, forepaws connecting with Sir Perrault's breastplate as his teeth snapped inches away from his nose. He crashed to the ground once more, this time with a furious grown wolf on top of him.

Her staff tapped on the stone as she strolled over to look down at him. "I am not a demon, either. I walk the world as you do when I bother to let my feet touch the earth. I am a fairy, you wretch, and I am the strongest, fastest, most powerful fairy. I am the Protector of the Moors, and if you harm any creature under my care, from the lowliest worm to the queen herself, I will have no mercy. Is that understood?" She punctuated her question with the end of her staff at the hollow of his throat.

There was a shrill squeal of metal as Diaval leaned forward against Sir Perrault's chest, claws scraping against his armor, his hind legs planted firmly at the juncture of Sir Perrault's. His growl grew louder with each passing moment.

"Yes," Sir Perrault finally gasped out.

She removed her staff from his neck. "Good. Did you have any allies on your dragon hunt? Answer truthfully, my companion's teeth are quite sharp, and he can smell lies."

"N-no. No allies."

"You thought to take on a dragon alone?"

"I sought to rid the world of a great evil!" The last word ended in a wheeze as Diaval bore down. With a flick of her wrist, Maleficent multiplied his weight threefold and Sir Perrault's breastplate began to dent inward under his paws.

"Ah, I see. You didn't want to share the glory. Governed by greed, as usual. I have good news for you, Sir Knight," the title rolled from her tongue coated in disdain, "you have found your dragon. He is there, atop you, and I know he would very much like to finish what you started. And he can do it in so many ways."

The only sound from Sir Perrault was his labored breathing.

"All we ask is that you leave and never return. Do not think to rally others to your cause. Do not speak of the Moors. Return to Aulnoy, take a ship across the sea, become a hermit—do not come back. If you should choose to pursue your quest to become a dragonslayer, know that you will lead a long, long life wishing you were dead." She leaned over to look him in the eyes. "Have I made myself clear?"

His throat worked as he swallowed and nodded.

"Let him rise," she told Diaval. Reluctance in every movement, Diaval backed off. When Sir Perrault
stood before them without trying for his discarded sword, Diaval shifted back into a raven and took up his perch on her shoulder, his sharp black eyes ever watchful.

Maleficent tapped her finger against her lips. "I find I don't trust you, human." Diaval croaked an agreement.

Face still red, Sir Perrault began to speak. "On my honor—"

She laughed. "Your honor is worthless to me, but I have other ways to ensure your honesty." Magic swirling around her hand, she began, "Should you ever speak of the Moors or cross its borders, know this: you will be voiceless but not mute; when you speak the truth, only lies shall be heard. The tales of your feats, no matter how great or worthy, will be fit only for children." The magic forced its way past Sir Perrault's clamped lips, his eyes and nostrils glowing golden for a moment before fading. He looked as though he'd swallowed a live insect.

"Now sleep," she commanded, and let him drop to the floor for a third time. She let her makeshift staff fall beside him and contemplated what to do next as she looked down at his unremarkable face. She did not think about what it meant that Diaval had willingly taken the shape of a wolf.

Kneeling by the unconscious knight, she reached out to begin removing his armor only to jerk her hands away with a hiss at the sudden sting of cold iron, proof that she wasn't as focused as she should be. "Diaval, I need you—"

He was beside her before she finished speaking, yanking at the straps and buckles until they gave way. He cast the offending pieces of armor aside, making a hideous racket in the process. She stayed next to him until the last sabaton joined the haphazard pile.

"Now what?" Diaval asked as he rifled through Sir Perrault's pockets.

"Now," Maleficent said and unbarred the door to the stables, "we find his horse."

Sir Perrault hovered a few inches off the floor to make him easier to transport, but his hands and feet dragged through the stable muck. The stables themselves were conspicuously devoid of servants, but finding the right horse was a simple matter of matching Sir Perrault's overwrought sword-and-lion livery to the unfortunate beast tasked with carrying him.

"She remembers me," Diaval said when a black charger shied violently away from him. In the back of her stall was a caparison that bore the sword-and-lion they were looking for. With a judicious application of magic, the horse was bridled and saddled and Sir Perrault, deadweight as he was, was slumped over her back. The horse pranced nervously, not accustomed to bearing an unconscious rider. Maleficent led them out through the lower bailey, Diaval trailing behind so as not to spook the horse. The guards watched them pass without challenge.

They stopped at the copse of trees closest to the castle. Maleficent threw the reins over a branch and steered herself for the task of convincing Diaval to leave.

"About the curse," he said before she could speak, "maybe you could change it so a limb falls off each time he tries to say anything about the Moors. Or I could peck out one of his eyes now as a surprise for when he wakes."

"Diaval, that's disgusting. What would—never mind, you'd eat it. Or store it in the tree."

"One time—"

"I'm tempted to let you," she admitted, and his mouth snapped shut. She looked over her shoulder at
the man who'd tried to kill Diaval and found her merciful resolve wavering. If he'd succeeded,
Diaval's death would have been a story to be told, sung about, celebrated, and she would have
remained ignorant of his demise for weeks, perhaps months, and it would have been—it would have
been her fault, for casting him out, for giving him the charm, for—

"Maleficent?"

To her horror, her eyes were hot with unshed tears. She blinked rapidly to clear them before turning
back to Diaval. "Yes?"

His eyes searched her face, the worried crease on his forehead deepening as seventeen years of
familiarity worked against her. She swallowed, expecting a question she wasn't sure she could
answer, but he shook his head and waved a hand at the unconscious Sir Perrault. "What's the plan?"

Focusing on the task at hand, she told him, "The horse and I take this obstinate fool to Ulstead, and
I'll wake him at the border. You are going to return to the castle and dispose of his effects, then find
Aurora and tell her I was delayed by Moors business."

"I should come with you." This was the conversation she'd anticipated.

"Diaval, please—" go was on the tip of her tongue, but then she remembered the way he'd looked at
her the last time she'd asked him to go. "Please do as I ask. I don't want Aurora to worry."

The fight went out of him at the mention of Aurora, and his hands dropped to his sides. "I know he is
no match for you, but I don't like this."

"You're right, he is no match for me. I'll be back long before the rain comes."

His lips flattened to a thin line, but he nodded. Moments later he was a raven, his loud croak echoing
in the air. Despite the magical nature of Sir Perrault's slumber, Maleficent reflexively checked to see
if the noise had woken him.

There was an answering call from the trees, and two ravens swooped out to perch on the cantle of Sir
Perrault's saddle. Orlaith, Maleficent realized, and her mate. Diaval landed on the unconscious
knight's unprotected back, and if she knew him at all he was digging his talons in. Whatever he said
to them, it didn't take long before he was on his way back to the castle.

Orlaith and her mate kept their perch on Sir Perrault's saddle and watched as she approached.

"Let me guess," she sighed, "you're to accompany me?"

Orlaith croaked and clacked her beak twice. Her mate ignored Maleficent entirely, much too
absorbed in removing a stray bit of leaf from Orlaith's feathers.

"Wonderful," Maleficent muttered.

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Sir Perrault's horse kept up a swift pace without armor and weapons to weigh her rider down. The
addition of two ravens, both of whom seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely to judge by their
cackling caws, made no difference at all.

The journey left Maleficent with nothing but time to think. Enough of her concentration was
occupied with maintaining Sir Perrault's enchanted sleep and buoying the horse's stamina when it
flagged that flying was merely transportation instead of a sensation to lose herself in.
Mostly she thought about Diaval.

Planning for the coming rain—where damage was likelyest among the weaker trees, whether any of the fair folks’ dwellings would be in danger from flooding—made her think of lazing in their tree, watching the rain patter on the pools and listening to one of the tales Diaval had picked up from the humans to pass the time. Listing which groves in the Moors were due for a brush fire led to thinking of surveying the damage and new growth with Diaval at her side. Even idle speculation about the reason for Aurora's summons made her wonder if Diaval had been lurking in the castle when Aurora had given Thistlewit the message. Just as every flight ended with her feet back on the ground, so did her every thought come back to Diaval.

His absence had been the cornerstone holding her thoughts of him at bay; now that he’d returned, her foundation of solitude was crumbling under the weight of her curiosity. Never one for half-measures, she surrendered to it. How long had it taken him to find his wings? How far had he ventured from the Moors? What on earth had possessed him to willingly take the form of a wolf? How had he recruited the other ravens to spy for him? Most importantly: why had he returned?

The gray clouds above her held no answers.

***

The border of Ulstead looked no different than the surrounding countryside with the exception of a dilapidated stone wall running from the horizon into a dense forest. There was nothing but fields and trees as far as she could see, so she found a stable part of the wall and stood, wings spread for balance and intimidation. Orlaith and her mate reluctantly gave up their saddle perch to circle overhead.

Maleficent lowered Sir Perrault to the ground without finesse and commanded, “Wake.”

Sir Perrault jerked half-upright, his head swiveling as he scanned the deserted landscape. One of the ravens cawed and he made a noise more befitting a small child than a hopeful dragonslayer. He jumped at the sound of her laughter and rolled over so quickly he landed on his back before scrambling to his feet and taking several large steps backward, half-tripping over a stray rock in the process. Never taking his eyes off of her, he patted at his chest and waist as if the absence of his armor and sword were merely an illusion that could be broken with the appropriate amount of disbelief.

"There is a stream there, for your horse," Maleficent told him, pointing the way. "I suggest you care for her, since she is your only hope of reaching a village before dark."

"You ensorcelled me," he accused, because he was horrifically dim and predictable.

She feigned shock, open mouth and wide eyes. "Did I?"

The croaking from above grew louder and Sir Perrault tore his eyes away from her long enough to notice that her raven companion had multiplied.

He started to speak again, but she cut him off. "I did you the favor of removing you from Queen Aurora's kingdom. Do not cross this wall for as long as you live."

"What if—"

"There are no ifs. Leave this place."

It would have been amusing to watch him try to mount his horse while keeping a wary eye on both
her and the ravens, but what little patience she'd had for his pigheaded ignorance had evaporated. "Go," she snarled, summoning a crackle of lightning from her palm to strike near the horse's hooves. It bolted, Sir Perrault clinging desperately to the saddle, one foot a toe's length away from dragging the ground.

By the time he'd righted himself, Maleficent was long gone from his sight, skimming the bottom of the clouds. If he thought to look up he'd take her for a bird, but humans were a shortsighted lot that often forgot that not everything was bound to the earth. She tracked him as he gradually gained control over his panicked horse and felt a moment's regret for scaring the faultless creature.

Eventually he was able to dismount near the stream that came from a small wood and took a winding route between two fields. The trees were thick at the edge of the grove, easily concealing her presence, so she waited and watched. She could hear him muttering as the horse drank, but the words were lost to the distance.

The ravens joined her as Sir Perrault remounted and set off at a trot, heading away from the wall and deeper into Ulstead. "Will you follow him? He should find a village before dark. If he tries to be clever about his promise, I need to know."

Orlaith and her mate cocked their heads simultaneously and exchanged a muted series of caws. Their discussion came to an end when Orlaith turned to Maleficent and croaked low in her throat, wings spread. They took off in the direction Sir Perrault had gone.

Satisfied and reasonably certain she'd have warning should Sir Perrault prove even more foolish than she'd assumed, Maleficent closed her eyes and took a deep breath to center herself, setting aside the tumult of fury and confusion to lose herself in the wind, flying swift as an arrow back to Diaval and Aurora.

***

The balcony doors were open when Maleficent landed, which wasn't unusual. Aurora preferred fresh air to the stuffiness of the castle. What was unusual was Aurora's voice drifting out; few were permitted entrance to her private chambers, and fewer still to whom she would be speaking in such a tone.

With the sun hidden behind gray clouds, Maleficent could see inside from where she stood by the parapet. Diaval had his feet propped up on the great oak table, arms crossed over his chest, facing away from the balcony to watch Aurora pace in front of the unlit fireplace.

Curious, Maleficent drew nearer until she could make out what Aurora was saying, not trying particularly hard to remain hidden, but neither of them so much as glanced toward the door.

"Phillip's intentions are good—no, no, that doesn't do much to recommend him, does it?" Either Diaval's response was too low to hear or Aurora didn't require one. "His intentions are respectable? His intentions are honorable—"

"Ah," Diaval interrupted, "I wouldn't phrase it that way."

"Oh." Aurora's pacing paused. "His intentions... his intentions..."

Diaval leaned forward in his chair, elbows propped on his knees, boots clomping to the floor. "Aurora, it will be fine. She's not going to disown you. She loves you more than anything."

Though his words had been meant as comfort, Aurora's face crumpled and she twisted her fingers together. "That's why I have to say it right, Diaval, it's so important. I don't want her to think I
haven't thought about this, because I have—I've thought it through very carefully—at least I hope I have. Why is this so hard?"

Loathe to interrupt a conversation that Aurora clearly needed to have, Maleficent stepped into the deeper shadow of the wall. She told herself that leaving would surely attract their attention, but it was a half-truth at best.

Inside, Diaval sat back and made an open-handed gesture at the ceiling. "You're trying to bring logic into love, and love is inherently illogical. If you're happy, she'll be happy."

"Do you think so?"

"Wasn't she the one who suggested he accompany you on your visits to the Moors? I'm not saying she won't leave him in his breeches on top of the coldest, snowiest mountain she can find if he ever hurts you,"—as if Diaval wouldn't be right there helping her—"but yes, I think so. Loving this boy is not a betrayal."

Aurora's cheeks were so fair that Maleficent could see them redden from the balcony. Despite the blush, Aurora stood a little straighter and a tentative smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "Are all ravens as wise as you?"

He snorted. "Hardly. Ravens are clever, but our courtships are simple compared to humans and fairies. We impress, provide, and protect," he ticked off each point on his fingers. "That's it. Humans and fairies like to complicate things."

"Simple," Aurora repeated. "Yes, that is best, isn't it? All right, I'll not think on it anymore until godmother gets here. So," she changed the subject with a clap, "did you give her the ring yet? Did she like it? Of course she liked it, but what did she say?"

Taken aback by the sudden hail of questions, Diaval's chair scraped across the stone floor as if he could physically escape them. Despite her curiosity, Maleficent had every intent of rescuing him from Aurora's attentions, but Diaval threw a panicked glance over his shoulder and their eyes met through the window, and she realized he'd known she was there the entire time. She crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows, unmoving.

Oblivious to Diaval's discomfort, Aurora chattered on. "Is she wearing it? I hope I get to see it, it looked so lovely when you were working on it."

"I never—when did I say it was for someone? It was a silly trinket, something to pass the time."

Aurora blinked. "I suppose you didn't. But... you started over three times—didn't you almost run out of the antler you found? And there was an awful lot of foul language and bandages for a silly trinket."

Diaval put his face in his hands. "You weren't supposed to hear that."

"Perhaps you shouldn't have said it, then," Aurora replied primly. "You were brooding over it like a hen with one egg," she continued, tapping her chin as she looked at Diaval out of the corner of her eye, clearly waiting for his reaction. Diaval did not disappoint.

"A hen?" Diaval squawked. "You wound me, truly."

Finally taking pity on him, Maleficent swept into the room. "You object to being compared to a hen, but not being called broody?"
"Godmother!"

"Hello, beastie," Maleficent said, meeting Diaval's eyes over Aurora's shoulder as slender arms wrapped around her waist.

"I will accept broody without complaint if she takes back the hen part. Comparing a raven to a hen is like—like comparing you to a pixie."

Maleficent's lip curled in distaste and Aurora put her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. "Don't be so hard on my aunties, they did their best."

"Their best was abysmal," Maleficent said, but left it at that.

Aurora lifted her chin and Maleficent was startled to see something of herself in the motion. "I apologize, Diaval, for erroneously comparing your splendid self to a mere chicken."

"Apology accepted," Diaval proclaimed loftily as he pretended their laughter was beneath his notice.

Silly trinket forgotten, Aurora stood beaming at them. "It's so nice to have you both here together, I feel as though I haven't seen you in the same place since—goodness, I don't know when. Isn't that silly?" Maleficent shared another look with Diaval. They hadn't addressed their unspoken agreement to avoid burdening Aurora with the reality behind their separate visits, but now was not the time to break it.

Despite the cold knot of dread in her stomach, she made herself ask, "What did you want to see us about?" The beginning of an official courtship between Phillip and Aurora was no true surprise, but she found herself grateful to Diaval's machinations for illuminating how worried Aurora was over her approval.

The smile fell from Aurora's face and she took a few steps back toward the fireplace, hands clasped tightly in front of her. Wearing a matching frown, Diaval rose from his chair and came to stand beside Maleficent, shrugging when she raised an eyebrow. This was something other than the topic of courtship, then.

"I had best get the bad news out first, I think," Aurora said. "Phillip wanted to send riders out to the Moors to warn you, but I knew once Thistlewit delivered my other message you'd come at once, so I didn't—I'm sorry, it's awful and I don't want to say it." She took a deep breath. "There is a knight from Aulnoy—"

"Stop." Next to her Diaval made a strange noise and Maleficent realized her wings had mantled to curl around him as if Aurora's words were something he needed protection from. She acted as though resettling her feathers took all of her attention in order to give herself a moment to compose an appropriately vague explanation. "We thank you for the warning. The knight you speak of decided to seek his glory elsewhere. I don't expect he'll be any more trouble."

"I see." There was a glimpse of the queen Aurora was growing to be when she asked in a measured tone, "Would his decision have anything to do with the tale the head laundress brought to me about bird-people invading the castle, followed shortly by a distraught stablehand who thought a horse had disappeared?"

Silence reigned for a few long moments.

"It may," Diaval admitted.

A hint of a smile peeked through before Aurora was all business once more. "Then I'll consider the
matter closed. Phillip did insist on sending word to his father, so Sir Perrault may find himself unwelcome in Ulstead should his travels take him there."

"And how is Phillip?" Maleficent asked, seizing the opportunity to change the subject. Diaval's half-hearted attempt to turn a laugh into a cough earned him a sharp kick to the ankle.

Aurora's eyes went wide and panicked. "He's... he's well, thank you. Actually, that's why I wanted to see you. Both of you. To, um, tell you..." Her eyes darted to Diaval, who left off his theatrical winces to nod in encouragement. "To... are either of you hungry? I'll send for some food." Without waiting for a response, she retreated across the room.

Diaval was smart enough to not try to kick her in the ankle, but the look he gave her said he'd like to. "The flowers," he hissed as Aurora opened the heavy door to call for a servant. "It might be easier for her if you aren't staring her down."

"I am not staring her down," Maleficent protested.

"You are," Diaval replied. "Staring things down is your natural state of being, I think."

"It is not—fine," she said, voice dropping as Aurora returned. Her elbow bumped into Diaval's arm when she reached into her pocket for the blooms they'd picked what seemed like a lifetime ago and she spared a moment to wonder when she'd gotten so close to him.

"Flowers?" Aurora already looked more at ease. "They're beautiful."

Maleficent handed her the sprig of lavender and reached out to tuck the first cherry blossom into her hair. She was settling the second amidst the golden curls when Aurora blurted out, "I've decided to accept Phillip's courtship proposal with the intent to marry in one year's time."

The lavender was becoming increasingly mangled as Aurora twirled and twisted it; Maleficent laid her hands over Aurora's to still the motion. "All right." She used a touch of magic to refresh the flower. When it had joined the others in Aurora's hair, she ended Aurora's contemplation of the floor with a gentle finger under her chin. When their eyes met, Maleficent said, "You know your own heart, beastie, there's no question of that."

Maleficent's arms were abruptly full of sniffling girl. Her wings instinctively swept forward in a protective cocoon. "You're not angry?" Aurora asked in a small voice.

"Your life is your own, Aurora, despite how much of it has been decided for you. If this boy is truly what you want, then I am glad."

"It is, he is."

"You've always got a year to change your mind," Diaval said from somewhere beyond the barrier of feathers.

Maleficent flipped her wings back to stare at him in disbelief, but Aurora gave a teary laugh and hugged Diaval, too. He looked stunned before awkwardly patting her shoulder. Maleficent had no idea why he was so surprised; Aurora had never concealed her affection for him. Aurora never concealed her affection for anyone.

Diaval cleared his throat. "He's a good lad. A mite serious, but you'll balance each other out."

Balance, indeed. Aurora's coronation had restored the Moors to harmonious accord and marked the beginning of peace between the human and fairy kingdoms, but Maleficent was starting to realize she
had just regained her own counterbalance. She'd grown to rely on Diaval to see the things she couldn't or wouldn't, and Diaval—Diaval had roamed the countryside in whatever form pleased him most, without a thought for his own safety.

The cold knot in her stomach had been replaced by a strange, uneasy ache that persisted throughout the simple meal of bread, cheese, and fruit brought by the servants.

It was evident from the way Aurora nudged a berry around after a mouthful or two of bread that there was still something on her mind. Maleficent pushed her share onto Diaval's plate. He shoveled the food in as he always did; nothing deterred the appetite of an opportunistic scavenger. It was more pleasant than watching him eat an eyeball, at least.

"I wanted to ask you both something," Aurora finally said as she picked at the embroidery on her sleeve. "Will you stand with me as my family when I accept Phillip's courtship? There will have to be a formal declaration both here and in the Moors," she rushed on, "but that's to give my people something to celebrate. Not to say I'm not happy to do it, I only—I wanted to tell Phillip in private, first, so he knows I have your support. Please say you will?"

Diaval had paused mid-bite when the word family crossed Aurora's lips, and he sat staring across the table at her until Maleficent prodded him in the side to remind him to swallow.

"Are you all right?" Aurora asked, brow furrowed in concern.

"Fine," Diaval rasped, reaching for the water.

"Of course we'll stand with you," Maleficent answered when Diaval seemed determined to drink until his cup was dry.

Aurora's grin was brighter than the sun. "Would you mind terribly if I sent for him now? I feel as though there are hundreds of butterflies in my stomach, but I think that's good. Is it good?"

"Better than spiders," Diaval said, but his eyes were at odds with his jest. "Why don't you send for him and we'll meet in the garden near the elder tree?"

"That would be lovely. I'll have the stabelmaster informed that Sir Perrault's horse has been accounted for, as well." Aurora was already halfway to the door. "You know the way?"

Diaval nodded and rose from the table; Maleficent took his arm when he offered it. Instead of following Aurora deeper into the castle, they stepped out onto the balcony. Standing beneath the sky eased some of the tension across her shoulders and she let her wings droop a little. She waited for him to mention her eavesdropping, but he was quiet.

Now that they were alone, Maleficent could feel a prickle of tension strung out between them like spider silk. She thought of yesterday's sunset, the wings Diaval had created for himself through sheer force of will, and how quickly he'd withdrawn when Thistlewit had interrupted them.

"The rain will come soon," she said, looking to the clouds.

He sighed. "So we'll get wet."

"You hate getting wet."

"I'll dry." He leaned over the parapet, hair falling into his face. "You're taking all of this very calmly."
"Am I?" Her wings ached for the warmth of the sun. "Did you expect that I'd wish for her to be alone forever? She can hardly live with us in the Moors with all these humans to attend to; it's good sense to share the burden of rule."

"Good sense," Diaval muttered, tone disapproving.

It was Maleficent's turn to sigh. "I'm sure the romantic notions you're harboring apply as well. As long as Aurora is happy, I don't care." She spread her wings wide. "Shall we proceed? I'd like to get on with it so this day can be at an end."

"I'm sure another disaster or two could worm their way in before sunset. Perhaps one of the pixies will barge in and proclaim their undying love for Phillip. Maybe a real dragon will show up and burn down the castle. Maybe it'll rain spiders."

Maleficent gave him a black look and took off, flying parallel to the castle walls, so close she could reach out and touch the rough stone if she wished it. Diaval followed as a raven.

The garden was full of the vibrant green of spring, from sprouts peeking through the soil to the new leaves of the elder tree. With earth underfoot and surrounded by all manner of growing things eager for the rain, Maleficent felt steadier. Diaval grumbling something under his breath might have helped, too. They were alone for the time being, so she sat on a marble bench and smoothed down the feathers in her hair as she watched Diaval scout out the best place under the elder to stay dry.

"How far did you go?" she found herself asking.

He paused in his contemplation of the foliage. "What?"

While he was distracted, she nudged aside one of the branches above him so there was a clear view of the sky. "When you were a dragon, how far did you go? Aulnoy, at least."

"The sea. I stopped when I got to the sea. Why?"

She crossed her arms and arched her wings over her shoulders. "I was curious. Would you rather I ask about the silly trinket Aurora seemed so eager to discuss?"

"Ah, no. I would rather you forgot you heard that." In his effort to not look at her, he surveyed the canopy again and frowned, sidestepping to avoid the hole she'd created.

"Well then, how was the sea? I've never seen it." His new shelter was as simple to move as the first. For good measure, she added a single raindrop perfectly placed to land on his nose.

"Never?" His nose wrinkled as he tried to elude the rain by stepping closer to her bench.

She did her best not to grin as she tapped her finger twice more for two more raindrops. "Never," she confirmed. "When have you known me to leave the Moors for longer than a few hours?"

"I haven't, I suppose." He wiped his cheek with the back of his hand and glared at the sky. "Shorebirds are a bunch of uncivilized brutes, but the view was well worth it. The falls and ponds in the Moors are nice, but the sea is something else altogether."

She made an interested noise and gathered enough magic to call down a tiny, localized rainstorm before he got too near for her to escape the effects, but she startled when a door creaked open on the far side of the garden and Phillip strode out. The magic sped toward the new target of her attention, and Phillip found himself drenched in short order. His hair was plastered to his head and his sleeves dripped at the elbows as he held his arms out and contemplated the gray clouds with a befuddled
look on his wet face.

"Oops," Maleficent murmured, lowering her hand and biting the insides of her cheeks to keep from laughing.

Diaval had no such reservations and doubled over, wheezing with laughter. The noise attracted Phillip's attention, and he looked even more confused when he caught sight of them. Taking pity on him, Maleficent sent another swirl of magic across the garden, this time in the form of a warm breeze. Possibly it was more of a gust than a breeze, leaving Phillip dry but rather windblown. Diaval, hardly recovered from his first bout of laughter, collapsed to the ground at her feet, his face in his hands as he shook with mirth at Phillip's new hairstyle.

"What, you can dry things off just like that?" Diaval demanded, wiping away a tear and gesturing expansively with his other hand. "All those times I suffered in the rain for you, and I never rated a drying-off?"

"Oh, come now, he needs to look respectable for Aurora," she replied, bumping his shoulder with her knee.

"I think you've missed the mark." He tipped his head back on the bench to look up at her. "I've seen ravens' nests neater than that."

She propped her chin in her hand to contemplate the masterpiece that was Phillip's hair. "It's an improvement," she decided. "Would you like me to do yours, too?"

"A generous offer, especially since I'm sure that was all meant for me, but I must decline. Wouldn't want to disturb perfection."

Unable to resist, she flicked her fingers through his hair and flipped it into his face.

He blew a few strands away from his mouth. "I don't know why I didn't see that coming."

The door across the garden opened again and Aurora emerged, stopping short when she saw Phillip standing there, still trying to puzzle out what had happened to him. She covered a grin with her hand and gently set Phillip's cloak to rights before beginning on his hair, stretching up on her tiptoes to reach the loftiest bits. Phillip froze under Aurora's attention; Maleficent's smile faded as she remembered Diaval doing the same under the half-dead elm tree.

Noticing her sudden preoccupation, Diaval pushed the hair out of his eyes and traced her gaze.

"Ready?" he asked, slinging one arm over the bench.

He was referring to Aurora and Phillip, of course, but she felt the question deserved two answers. Out loud she said, "As I must be," but she looked at him and thought, Perhaps.

His brow wrinkled, but she stood, hands clasped in front of her as Aurora led Phillip around the square beds of sprouting herbs to the elder tree. Diaval clambered to his feet and brushed his hands off on his coat.

"Lady Maleficent, Lord Diaval," Phillip greeted them, dipping in a respectful half-bow.

Maleficent raised an eyebrow and was on the cusp of reminding Phillip that neither of them were human, let alone titled, but, out of Phillip's view, Aurora's lips pressed together and she gave a tiny shake of her head. Maleficent silently lifted her chin in acknowledgement and she saw Diaval nod from the corner of her eye, trying to look serious.
Aurora crossed the small space and stood in front of Maleficent and Diaval, turning to face Phillip. Maleficent's gaze was drawn to the flowers in Aurora's hair, but she focused on Phillip when Aurora began to speak.

"Phillip," Aurora started, "you've been waiting for my answer for some time now, and I thank you for your patience."

The honest hope plain on Phillip's face was a comforting reminder that he was not Stefan and never would be. Maleficent swallowed her heart down and did not let herself dwell on memories. Next to her, Diaval's weight shifted from his left foot to his right, a subtle offer of support. She reached out, her actions hidden behind Aurora's back, and found his hand, twining their fingers together. Diaval went rigid with surprise, but he made no move to let go.

Aurora glanced over her shoulder at Maleficent and grinned before turning to Phillip and saying, "I accept."

Phillip's mouth opened and closed without making a sound. He gulped. "Truly?"

"Truly. I'd like the wedding to be in the Moors, if you've no objections."

"That's fine," Phillip agreed, voice faint. A wide smile began to spread across his face. "Truly?" he asked again, gaining confidence.

Maleficent could imagine the closed-mouth smile on Aurora's lips when she nodded, curls bouncing. Aurora squeaked when Phillip seized her by the hands, but her surprise turned to delight as he swung her around, laughing. He pulled her close, their clasped hands raised between them. "You have made me the happiest man in the world."

It was easier than she'd thought, going from the nebulous knowledge that Aurora planned to join herself to this boy to the reality of the two of them standing beneath the elder tree, holding on to each other as if they'd never part. Perhaps it was true love.

Diaval squeezed her hand, calloused palm tight against hers.

She'd been wrong before, after all.

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Courtiers and servants alike looked on as the four of them made their way to the main gate of the castle. Maleficent would have rather taken their leave directly from the garden, but Aurora, eyes full of hope, had requested they leave in a more traditional manner so that her subjects could see them all together. Diaval had given in before Aurora had finished asking, and Maleficent was not in the habit of denying Aurora anything.

The formal proclamation wouldn't be made until word had been sent to Phillip's parents, but Aurora and Phillip had yet to relinquish each other's hands. Rumor flew faster than they could walk. Maleficent kept her chin up and her stride purposeful, letting the stares glance off of her as if they were her due. Diaval was half a step behind, his shoulders stiff, face set, no doubt uneasy with so many human eyes on him, accustomed as he was to operating from the shadows. Many of the nobles drifted along in their wake, though none were so bold as to keep pace with them.

"We'll visit soon," Aurora promised, and Maleficent nodded. Diaval's parting bow was every bit as refined and graceful as Phillip's.
As they flew over the copse near the castle Diaval cawed the same way he had when they'd been getting rid of Sir Perrault, though this time there was no response. He banked left, toward the trees, and Maleficent followed.

"They're not here," she told him when they'd landed.

He shifted, but the tilt of his head was more raven than human. "Did you turn them into worms for trying to follow you?"

She did not dignify his question with a response. "I asked them to keep watch over the knight for a short time. Despite his honor," she sneered at the word, "I'm sure he is perfectly capable of resorting to deception to acquire allies. Forewarned is forearmed, is it not?"

"I told you the curse should've removed his limbs," Diaval muttered, though his expression implied he'd much rather be the one responsible for any loss of limb Sir Perrault suffered. "Orlaith and Kieran may lose this territory if they're gone too long, but they're young enough not to mind."

"I'm sure there's plenty of room in the Moors for a pair of ravens."

The promise of violence faded from Diaval's face, replaced by surprise. "What, really?"

Maleficent frowned. "Why not? She's your kin, isn't she? I've always thought it would be nice to live near family."

Surprise turned to something else entirely, but before she could place it he'd shifted back into a raven.

"You're going to need bigger wings than that to outfly the rain," she told him, spreading hers wide. The clouds were growing darker with every passing moment; it was doubtful they'd make it back before the rain fell no matter what form Diaval took, but—she wanted to see his wings again. When he stubbornly stayed in his current form she said, "Suit yourself," and took off.

She didn't bother to hide her grin when she felt a wash of magic behind her and laughed outright at his sour expression when he caught up. She spiraled around him once and sped off, challenge clear.

The rain began as the swath of lavender at the edge of the Moors swayed under the beat of their wings. Most of the fair folk had already taken shelter, though the water sprites danced from raindrop to raindrop across the pools. The forest greeted the rain with upturned leaves and a sigh of contentment.

She tried to stay below the canopy as much as possible, but the final leg of the journey—up the cliffside to their tree—had little in the way of shelter, and it showed when Diaval landed on the branch next to her, soaked through.

Before he could start complaining, she warmed the air around them and draped herself over the branch to dry. He settled next to her, leaning against a convenient fork.

She'd had a notion to ask Diaval all the things she'd thought of on her flight to Ulstead, but the quiet patter of the rain seemed too precious to interrupt with mere questions. She laid her head down on her bent arms and closed her eyes, suddenly exhausted. "We'll talk in the morning," she murmured.

The sound of the rain and Diaval's steady breath lulled her to sleep.

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When Maleficent woke, the side of her face was strangely warm, and she was looking at Diaval's knees. Past them, the sun was beginning to rise, cloudless sky painted yellow and pink. The day was clear and bright and smelled of growing things from the first rain of spring, and Diaval—was snoring. His hand slid out of her hair when she sat up, mindful of her horns, and rubbed her cheek, sparing no more than a moment to wonder how she'd ended up with his lap as a pillow. Diaval's head was tipped back against the branch, mouth wide open. It shouldn't have been charming, but it was. It was also the first time she could remember him sleeping the night through as a human. She walked along the branch until she was far enough away to not disturb his rest and descended to the wet ground.

As was her custom, she stood on the cliff with her wings spread to soak in the morning sun as she surveyed the land. The pools and streams were swollen with the rainfall, luminous in the dawn. Diaval was still snoring, and there was work to be done. Confident in the knowledge that he would remain in the Moors, she leapt into the sky's embrace.

The air was crisp and cool under her wings as she took stock of the damage caused by the rain, little though it was. A dam across one of the streams was in need of repair before the water threatened fairy homes; it was a good place to start. As she approached, she could see a few sprites exerting their meager magic to contain the flood as a pair of beavers trundled about gathering sticks and mud. A nod relieved the sprites of their task, and they began to flit around in search of more sticks as Maleficent's magic cradled the water.

She was foraging a breakfast of greens and berries nearby while simultaneously holding up a sizable branch with magic while the beavers and pixies worked around it when Diaval found her.

"Maleficent?" It was still strange to hear him call her by name after seventeen years of "mistress," but she found she preferred it.

"Yes?" She nudged aside a particularly spiky gooseberry twig with a bit of magic and collected another handful to give to Diaval. He accepted the berries without looking at them, too focused on his study of her face. She raised an eyebrow and his shoulders slumped in relief, though she could not say what his worry had been. She added a handful of greens to his meal. "Was there something you wanted?"

"I... no."

"Very well. Eat, then make yourself useful." She could have given him rocks for all the attention he paid to the food, eyes unfocused as he stared at the water and chewed. When he was done, she said, "Here, hold this," and smiled as he grunted under the sudden weight of the branch that could, conceivably, be called a log. She flew off to retrieve another, and the early morning passed in silence. Surrounded by mud and water, Diaval should have been harboring at least a few mischievous ideas, but she could tell his thoughts were miles away.

"Is something wrong?" she asked when the dam was fixed, trying not to acknowledge her own creeping doubts when everything had seemed clear yesterday in the garden. It was easy to forget six months of absence when other matters occupied her attention, but perhaps they carried more weight than she'd thought.

"The last time you said we'd talk in the morning, you told me to leave," he blurted.

Anger washed over her, though at herself or Diaval she couldn't say. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and pushed it away. "I've no intention of being misunderstood again."
"Right," he agreed, but his voice was strained and his posture was rigid.

"I suppose that's a good place to start," she said and headed deeper into the forest, away from any curious and gossip-prone onlookers. "Why did you come back?"

The pained noise he made was almost a raven croak. "Let's not start there."

"Why not?"

"You're not going to like the answer, and if I tell you, you'll take this away," he tapped the feathered charm around his neck, "and turn me into a filthy dog permanently."

"And you're the authority on what I will and will not do?"

Her flippant question garnered a few moments of serious thought. "Sometimes, yes," he decided.

"Really," she scoffed, coming to a stop under one of the oldest oaks in the Moors. Diaval stopped too, the tentative beginning of a smirk lifting one corner of his mouth. Recognizing it for the challenge it was, she braced herself against his chest, wings spread for balance, leaned up, and kissed him. It was a simple press of lips, but warmth curled in her chest like it was coming home to roost.

The second time he met her halfway, his nose brushing her cheek and his hands hesitating in the air before cupping her face, the touch light as feathers. When they parted, his hands flitted away and he swallowed and licked his lips before speaking. "That was—that was not one of those times."

"I'd hate to be so predictable." Her grin faded when the troubled furrow of his brow did not. "Do you want this?"

"I—" he swallowed again. "There's something I need to tell you. Then... well, you'll have your answers." He ran both his hands through his hair, nodded once, and shifted into his wings. "Come with me."

"What—Diaval!" She launched herself through the leaves after him, wincing when her wingtip caught on a twig. He was already soaring away when she cleared the canopy, a dark blotch against the blue sky. Thoroughly confused, she trailed after him to the edge of the Moors and did not let herself think or else she'd listen to the sense of wrong gathering in her bones. He landed near the elm tree the thorn wall had almost killed and she did as well, tucking her wings tight against her back. "Why are we here?"

"I put something here two days ago that I want you to have." He paced around the trunk, peering up through the branches. "I suppose I'll count myself lucky if your healing didn't close the knot." With that, he changed into a raven and disappeared amongst the foliage.

"What a delightfully unhelpful explanation," she called, certain he could hear her. She crossed her arms and waited and told the wrong that this was Diaval—Diaval, who'd bent magic to his will to keep up with her; Diaval, who'd changed into a wolf on his own accord to protect her; Diaval, who'd known exactly how to ease Aurora's worries; Diaval, who'd come back to the Moors. Diaval, who she was not wrong about.

There was something round in his beak when he returned, but he shifted again before she could catch more than a glimpse. He made a face as he removed the object from between his lips and buffed it with the corner of his shirt. Silently, he held it out.

It was a ring, a simple band the color of cream flecked with tawny brown. She took it, rubbing the pad of her thumb over the faint feather pattern carved into the outside. He said nothing as she
examined it, but the leaves crunched under his feet as he shifted his weight from side to side.

"Thank you. It's lovely for a silly trinket." She put it on, twisting it around her finger as she tried to dredge up a smile and tried not to think of what he considered so terrible that he would give her a gift before answering. For the last time, she asked, "Why did you come back?"

He sighed as though the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. "Because I love you."

The dappled sunlight beneath the elm seemed warmer as relief flooded through her. "I thought so."

"You did know. And you still—"

"Yesterday," she cut in, not sure she wanted to hear the rest, "yesterday I was certain."

Sharp black eyes met hers and a strange expression flickered over his face. "Maleficent, I've loved you for years."

"You..." It hurt to believe him, but she could do no less. She knew how it felt to love someone with a cold, black heart, and she wondered at his devotion. "I don't think I deserved that."

Diaval stood straighter, his gaze locked with hers, his voice soft but determined. "That's not for you to decide. However you saw yourself—that wasn't the Maleficent I knew." He hesitated, then touched one of the feathers in her hair. "I've wanted this, but not without being honest about how I felt. You've made your feelings on the subject clear, so I..." he trailed off, then shook his head and stepped away from her, hand falling to his side. "If you wish me gone, I will go, but I'd stay at your side if you would have me there."

"I would."

Diaval's mouth opened and closed without a sound, thrown by her quick response. She could see the bare edge of possibility dawning on him in the creases at the corners of his eyes. "And will you be turning me into a dog?"

"Your form is your choice, Diaval. If being a dog would make you happy, then by all means, be a dog." She stalled his reflexive retort with a raised hand, not quite close enough to touch. "I've never cared for them, but I suppose I'll adjust for the sake of love. I will miss flying with you, though."

He went from indignant to stunned as her admission sunk in, eyes widening and mouth dropping open.

"I don't think fish suits you," she observed, eyebrows raised.

His mouth snapped shut and he frowned at her. She waited for the clever remark, but his face softened and he took her hand, his palm warm against hers as he laced their fingers together. "Whatever shape I am, I am yours."

"I prefer this one," she replied and kissed him, her heart full to bursting with affection. He melted into her, lips insistent but gentle. They half-stumbled over a root as Maleficent pressed him against the elm, sparing a few seconds for breathless laughter as Diaval steadied them with his arms around her waist. Her wings arched around them, creating a haven where the rest of the world fell away, if only for a short while.

The wind in the trees and birdsong gradually filtered back into her realm of awareness, Diaval's forehead pressed against hers, their panting breath mingling between them. A shiver worked its way down her spine and all the way to the tips of her wings when his lips brushed her ear. "Would it have
been so hard to say, 'I love you, Diaval'?

She laughed. "No, but you seemed like you were enjoying your assumptions. I didn't want to interrupt." Leaning back until she could look him in the eye, too fond by far to tease him any further, she obliged. "I love you, Diaval."

He grinned, his joy vivid as the fiery colors of autumn. "Can I say I like these now?" He touched one of the raven feathers in her hair.

"You may," she allowed.

"Well, I do."

"How eloquent. Feathers, antler—shall I expect dragon scales next?"

He snorted. "I think I'll avoid that shape for a while; it gets the humans' feathers a little too ruffled. Their figurative feathers. You know what I mean." He pushed away from the elm and cast about on the ground, then offered her a stick. "There you are, a customary raven gift."

She looked at it. "Am I supposed to be impressed?"

Grinning, he tossed it away. "I've already gotten one impossible thing today, I'd never presume to hope for another."

Maleficent hid her smile by leaning up to kiss him once more and saying, "Come along, there's work to be done."

"Will this involve more logs?"

"It was a branch."

The look he gave her spoke volumes. "I've just remembered another important raven custom."

"Oh?"

"Yes." He took a few surreptitious steps backward. "It's traditional that we not lift heavy things."

"Diaval," she protested, but he'd already shifted into a raven, croaking with laughter from a low branch. He swooped down and landed on her shoulder, fluffing his feathers and rubbing his head against her cheek. "You are impossible," she murmured, but she stroked his back and grinned.

***

The next day, Orlaith and Kieran returned with the news that Sir Perrault had spoken no more than the words necessary to sell his horse and obtain passage on a ship. Maleficent offered them their pick of territory in the Moors for their assistance, resettled her wings against the tree trunk, and stared at Diaval until he remembered he could be as close to her as he liked.

"Do you think he's gone for good?" Diaval asked as he laid back down with his head in her lap.

"We can hope."

The next few minutes passed in silence, and she resumed her task of plaiting tiny sections of his hair until he took notice. She was on the verge of finishing the seventh when he sat up without warning and tugged the last bit out of her fingers.
"Ow," he grumbled and touched the side of his head. His eyes widened when he felt his hair. "I knew that felt strange."

Maleficent raised an eyebrow. "Were you going somewhere? I wasn't done."

"No—yes—maybe." Hair forgotten, Diaval propped his chin up in his hand and stared hard at an unremarkable patch of grass.

"Perhaps his ship will run afoul of a whirlpool. Or sirens," she offered, guessing at the cause of his consternation.

Diaval blinked and his eyes flicked back to her face, one side of his mouth lifting. "Maybe a sea serpent."

"A suitable fate," she agreed, but Diaval's attention had returned to the ground, his brow still furrowed in thought. Leaning forward, she reclaimed the seventh plait, finished it, and tucked it behind his ear. He twitched when her fingers brushed his skin, but his face cleared. It was the same look he got when he'd decided the best course of action was to blurt out whatever it was he was thinking, but instead of speaking he got to his feet.

"I am going somewhere, I think. A few somewheres. I've some business to attend to."

An icy curl of dread wrapped itself around her throat. "There was a knight who wanted to slay you the last time you said that."

"Forgive me." Diaval held out his hand but she ignored it and stood, arms crossed. "It was a poor choice of words. No knights this time, I promise. And I'll be back before Aurora and Phillip come to the Moors to make their courtship official."

Her displeasure was obvious when she pointed out, "That's days away."

"Yes," he agreed, scanning the horizon. Mischief flashed across his face. "Will you miss me?"

Armoring herself with pride, Maleficent lifted her chin and did not answer.

He cocked his head to the side. "That's a yes," he decided with a grin and shifted into his glossy black wings. He walked to the edge of the cliff and scanned the horizon, wings flexing. She followed and thought about asking where he was going, but he would have told her if it was important for her to know. Her trust would remain with him, as it had for the last seventeen years.

He swayed into her when she kissed him, soft and lingering, but she stopped him with a gentle finger on his lips when he tried for a second. She would not persuade him to stay, no matter how much she might wish it. Mere days were nothing compared to six months. "Be swift. Be careful. Come home."

He swallowed and nodded. "I will."

***

In Diaval's absence, Maleficent had thought to complete the work of healing the land and plants marred by the wall of thorns, but when she stood alone at the stone where they'd left off, it hadn't seemed right to continue on without him. Looking at the dichotomy of the barren, muddy earth next to the field of lavender, she felt a brief pang of regret for not pressing him for information on his destination.

To take her mind off of it, she flew to the castle and landed on Aurora's balcony, where she was
greeted by a wild-eyed Phillip.

"Help," was all he said before he led the way inside to where Aurora was bent over the oak table, a sheaf of parchment and two broken quills at her elbow with perhaps five words written on the page in front of her. Having expected something worse, Maleficent started to laugh, relieved. Aurora looked up, eyes narrowed, and Maleficent found herself conscripted for her mirth.

After a few strange hours assisting in the composition of an official declaration of courtship, Maleficent was glad to return to the Moors with only the full moon and stars for company. When she curled up to sleep, there was a drowsy raven croak from nearby that made her heart skip a beat before she identified the source as Orlaith.

Strangely comforted, she slept.

***

A few days later, the Moorland fair folk were gathering around the flowered throne, excited whispers sweeping through the crowd in fits and starts as they waited for the appointed hour of the proclamation. Sprites danced across the water, elaborate patterns rippling in their wake, making Aurora beam in delight even as she and Phillip fended off Knotgrass's increasingly shrill questions. The wallerbogs were behaving themselves in the looming shadows of the impassive tree warriors, though that wasn't likely to last long. The Moors itself had turned out an impressive array of flowers for the occasion, a veritable rainbow of early spring blooms as far as the eye could see.

Diaval yawned for what seemed like the hundredth time and Maleficent elbowed him in the side, pointedly ignoring his grunt and feigned wounded expression. He'd come back only that morning from his mysterious errands, hair windblown in a way only hours of flying could achieve. She had missed him, but she refused to tell him so.

Orlaith and Kieran swooped down from the top of the standing stone, diving so low over the heads of the assembled fairies that one jumped and fell into the pool with a splash. A stern look from Balthazar froze the wallerbogs in place before they could start an all-out water fight. Maleficent fished out the errant fairy and righted him with magic as Orlaith and Kieran croaked with laughter. Diaval made a poor show of hiding his own, earning him another poke.

"That was funny," he protested, claiming her hand in an act of self-defense that quickly turned to affection as he laced their fingers together.

Aurora had used the brief commotion to duck around Phillip and dart behind Balthazar, successfully evading Knotgrass for at least a little while. "Is everyone here?"

Maleficent straightened the coronet Aurora wore with a light touch. "Not yet. A few minutes more."

When the last stragglers approached, she nodded to Aurora and stepped back, pulling Diaval with her as Aurora did the opposite with Phillip, taking their place on a raised ledge so everyone could see them. The crowd fell quiet as Aurora began to speak, but Maleficent hardly needed to give her full attention to a speech she'd heard rehearsed more than a dozen times. She watched the other fairies, noting their reactions.

"I was thinking," Diaval started, voice low as he leaned close, "we should go to the sea."

His straight-faced declaration almost startled a laugh out of her. Luckily, a cheer from the fair folk covered her overloud, "What?"

"I'm serious. I've been thinking about it since the garden. The Moors is home, but the sea is—you'd
"I'd like for you to see it. With me. That is, if you want to." There was no mistaking the faint blush adorning his cheeks in the bright sunlight, and Maleficent felt a wave of tenderness so strong her heart was lost to him all over again.

"Diaval," she murmured, regretful, "it's a nice idea, but I can't leave the Moors undefended for so long."

"I thought you'd say that," he said, blush fading into a smug smile, "so I made a few arrangements."

"And what would those be?" The journey on its own would take the better part of a day, though the promise of hours of uninterrupted flying with Diaval was not unappealing.

When Aurora finished, it was Phillip's turn to address the crowd, but his eyes were trained on Aurora. Maleficent looked away from the blatant adoration on his face and found nearly the same expression focused on her.

Diaval cleared his throat and held up his unoccupied hand to tick off the salient points on his fingers. "Balthazar will gladly double the guard for the duration of our absence. Ah, wait," he cut her off before she could even open her mouth to protest. "No one is complaining about the peace, of course, but it is peace. You and I both know the guard has had little to do in recent months. If something does happen, I've devised a raven relay that spans from the Moors to the coast that will alert us to any news in less than half a day." Above them, Orlaith looked up from preening Kieran and chirruped in the back of her throat. "And," he continued with a final flourish, "to let Phillip get to know the fair folk without you looming over him, he and Aurora will stay here while we're gone." Unspoken but implied was the assurance that there was no safer place for Aurora than the heart of the Moors.

"I do not loom," she corrected. Diaval's eyebrows climbed to his hairline. "And when could you possibly have had the time to—oh. Your business you needed to attend to?"

"Maybe. Will you come?"

For his presumptuousness, she left him to fret as another cheer went up from the fair folk, this one accompanied by the wallerbogs seizing Phillip and hoisting him up over their heads. They carried him off, presumably to dump him in the nearest mudpit. The rest of the fairies scampered and frolicked after them, trailed by Aurora, who giggled through her token effort to stop them.

After a few moments, Diaval asked, "Should we do something?"

"If you've a desire to be covered in mud, I would be happy to assist you." She raised her hand, magic twining around her fingers.

"I'm still finding mud from the last time," he muttered, head bowed, one foot scuffing the dirt. The sun glinted off his dark hair, highlighting a pair of the tiny braids that had somehow endured his recent venture.

She laughed and he looked up, hope written across his face. "When do we leave?"

"Now?" he offered. "Aurora asked that we bring her back a seashell, by the way."

"Of course she did." With Diaval next to her and the sky an inviting shade of blue above, she could no longer bear to have her feet on the ground. "Shall we?"

Diaval sketched an elaborate bow and shifted into his wings, stretching them a little when he caught her admiring look. "Please, after you."
They climbed until they reached the headwinds and the land was spread out below them, lush green awash in sunlight. Their wingtips brushed and Diaval spun away, grinning back at her. She darted after him, and the chase began anew.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! All kudos & comments are greatly appreciated. :)  

**Fanart!** There is beautiful [Diaval fanart](https://www.fanart.com) & [Maleficent and Diaval](https://www.fanart.com) by [spuffy93](https://www.fanart.com) inspired by this fic! Thank you so much!  

**Fanvid!** Camelot836 has created an [amazing fanvid](https://www.youtube.com) based on this fic. Holy crap, thank you! :D

I'm on [tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com), if anyone is interested. I do rec lists. Sometimes.

A selection of references:

- [All About Birds - Common Raven](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/races/a1-116)
- [National Geographic - Common Raven](https://www.nationalgeographic.com) - "mating rituals include an elaborate dance of chases, dives, and rolls."
- [Raven playing in the snow](https://www.youtube.com) - adorable
- [Mule deer shedding antlers](https://www.youtube.com) - this is just funny to watch, as if a one-antlered deer wasn't ridiculous enough on its own.
- [Carved antler ring](https://www.etsy.com) @ Etsy

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.archive.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!