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MIZUE TANI



Earl and Fairy

The Elegance of a Villain


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Earl and Fairy: Volume 1 [Complete]

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The Thin Line Between Villain and Gentleman

“Now then, Mr. Gotham. You have helped me out a great deal, and I should like to find a way to repay you.”

It was a slender young man who spoke, smiling bewitchingly as he pointed his pistol toward a second man with a pompous mustache.

“No! If it’s m-money you’re after, I’ll give you however much you want!” the second man cried hoarsely, his plump body quivering beneath its bonds.

“An exceedingly generous offer. Along with that, I shall take the Star of the Merrow, the fabled star sapphire.”

“B-But that jewel is just a legend... It doesn’t exist!”

As Gotham tripped over his words, the man lowered his pistol and slowly surveyed the room. “It’s a shame to know you won’t indulge me. Even after I went through all this trouble to set up this stage and the chair you sit upon, so fitting for one such as yourself.”

Gotham was tied to a large, white chair in the center of his laboratory, where he worked as a psychiatrist. Its shelves were lined with brain samples pickled in formalin. It used to be Gotham who stared at his test subjects, tied up in the chair, with harsh, cold eyes, but now he found himself in the opposite position. The young man, originally one of those subjects, was instead toying with the various scalpels that were laid out with his free hand.

Though unkempt, his hair was a vivid blond. His clothes were worn, yet there was an elegance to every one of his motions. From the way he strode calmly around the room to the way he stroked a deliberate finger along the medicine bottles that occupied it, and even to the quiet, intimidating light in his gaze as he turned. Gotham had no idea of the true identity this man was concealing.

What he did know was that he was more than your everyday rogue; he was a beast, one that had now exposed the true extent of its vastly dangerous nature.

It prowled the area around Gotham, as if to check how much it had managed to weaken its prey. And then it raised the pistol once more.

Its smile was so perfect as to charm the heart of any human in an instant, but that smile only served to fill Gotham with a desperate dread. His next words were enunciated in perfect Queen's English—and tainted with death.

"It is time I took my leave, sir. It is most unfortunate that the Star of the Merrow, as you say, does not exist, but I suppose you shan't be around to see it in any case." He placed a finger on the trigger.

"W-Wait! Please!"

It wasn't the fear of death that caused Gotham's lips to loosen, but something more: his fear of the demon that lay within this young man; that it would stalk him relentlessly to torment him, even in the next life.

"It is thought that only a 'fairy doctor' would know whether the jewel is real or not. And, in any case, there would be no finding it without the help of a fairy specialist, seeing as it is fairies that hold the key to this mystery."

"A fairy specialist? If you are referring to those suspicious mediums, London is swarming with them."

"There is no longer as much call for fairy doctors as there once was. You may just chance upon one in the remote parts of Scotland or Wales, but more likely than not they'll already have one foot in the grave. And it's no wonder; only children still believe in fairies these days."

"They sound more like entertainers than doctors, yet you claim the jewel cannot be found without their specialist knowledge?"

"That is correct. Merrows, pixies, silkies—it cannot be said who knows the true nature of these beings. But fairy doctors... There is nobody better versed in matters relating to fairies than they."

"Then which of these 'doctors' is best equipped to aid me in my hunt? You say the majority that remain are elderly, but knowing you, you already have one in mind who could actually be of use."

There was no need to lie at this point, Gotham thought resignedly. The young

man had already seen through him.

“Yes. Yes, indeed I do. This fairy doctor lives in Scotland—in a town just outside Edinburgh.”

The young man absorbed that information, a tender smile rising to his lips, as though he were hearing news of the lover he had yet to meet. Slowly, he lowered his pistol again, eliciting a sigh of relief from Gotham.

Yet, the next second, the cold crack of a gunshot pierced through the poorly lit laboratory.

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“*Open for all consultations regarding fairies.*

Lydia Carlton, Fairy Doctor”

Today, as ever, the handwritten sign in front of the house drew snickers from passersby.

“Mam, do fairies really exist?” a child asked his mother as they passed.

“Of course not. Only in stories.”

“Oh, but they do exist!” Lydia interjected, leaning over the fence. “Fairies exist, even if you can’t see them! If you leave a cup of milk out on your windowsill before you retire for the night, a brownie may well come and pay you a visit.” Though she smiled sweetly at the child, he was soon yanked away by his mother before he could stop to listen further. The pair hurried away, but not before the mother shot Lydia a dirty look.

Lydia watched them leave, cupping her chin in her hand. She was sure the mother was warning her son that Lydia was off her rocker.

“There’s no point trying to convince them, Lydia. The ability to see fairies isn’t something that can be acquired. An unbeliever could be *kicked* by a fairy and they’d still just put it down to a trick of the imagination. I’d stop bothering if I were you.” A gray longhaired cat spoke from its spot stretched out on a branch of a garden tree.

This talking cat, who walked on two legs, was a friend of Lydia’s. He wore a necktie and constantly fussed over his appearance, to the extent that he

wouldn’t let a hair on his body stick up out of place. Conversely, the way he would make a song and dance of sitting upright and the way he scratched his belly reminded Lydia of an old man.

“Say, Nico, do you think there’s any way I can get people to understand what being a fairy doctor is all about?”

“I wouldn’t know. We’re past the time where you could find a fairy doctor on every corner and fairies were a daily disturbance that required human knowledge to deal with. We’re midway through the 19th century at this point.”

“But that doesn’t mean fairies have disappeared. They still live alongside humans, helping and hindering, yet everybody ignores them. Don’t you think it’s unfair? Why do people think they don’t exist just because they can’t see them?” As Lydia’s tone was growing more assertive, somebody called out timidly from the other side of the fence.

“Excuse me...I have a letter for you.” A young mailman held out the letter over the fence with an exceptionally wary look in his eye. Nico, as a fairy himself, had the ability to turn invisible—and that was exactly what he had done. The mailman must have thought Lydia was delivering her spirited speech to thin air.

“Oh, I wasn’t talking to myself,” Lydia explained quickly. “There was a cat over there just now.”

The mailman said nothing but responded with a strained, polite smile.

“Not a normal cat, of course, but one who can talk, and...” It was quickly becoming clear that any explanation she could come up with would still make her sound insane. On top of that, she had just spotted a brownie trying to slip its way into the mailman’s bag. “What are you doing?” she cried. “Those aren’t to be played with!”

The brownie scrambled away, leaving a flurry of letters scattering out of the bag, which had been packed to the brim with mail.

“I’m sorry. Brownies love to play tricks on people,” Lydia said, holding out the letters she had picked up from the ground. The mailman was stiff as he took them back, then he quickly disappeared from view, as though in a hurry to get

away.

“There I go again.” Lydia sighed.

Not that it especially mattered; she was known as the eccentric daughter who lived at the Carlton house, and she didn’t have any human friends anyway. All because she had never tried to hide the fact that she could see and communicate with fairies. She had taken on the title of fairy doctor as an act of defiance, intending to make good use of her abilities. But for all her enthusiasm, she had so far managed to accomplish nothing.

“Come on. Don’t get blue just because that postman found you off-putting. He hasn’t been at it for very long.”

When Lydia went inside, she found Nico sitting on the sofa, reading a newspaper.

“That was your fault,” she replied huffily. She wasn’t particularly interested in the mailman, but she did often see him chatting animatedly with other girls her age. Any sort of change was a novelty in this country town, so even the arrival of a young mailman was enough to catch the girls’ attention.

Lydia had gotten her hopes up over just one little thing: that as somebody who hadn’t heard the rumors about her, he might speak to her like a normal human being. But it seemed the first impression she had given him was that she was completely loopy.

For much of her life, Lydia had never had the time to realize how lonely it was to be misunderstood; she had always been too busy playing and arguing with fairies since she was very young. Now that she had reached seventeen, she was old enough to find it just a little bit troubling that men avoided her like the plague.

“Looks like there’s a criminal on the loose,” Nico remarked, changing the subject. He had his legs—that is, his back legs—crossed, and the paws of his front legs were holding on to either side of the newspaper he was reading.

Lydia would have liked to show him as he was now to the townspeople. It might just be enough to convince them that the world was full of creatures they knew nothing about.

“A robber, apparently. Says he broke into the home of Dr. Gotham, a London psychiatrist, severely injured him, then made off with a great deal of money.”

“My, there’s a piece on a London incident in our tiny town newspaper?”

“Must be because he’s on the run—and the victim’s son is offering a reward for the perpetrator’s capture. Apparently, he looks like a serial killer who killed a hundred people in America. Blond, in his early twenties...”

A portrait of the robber’s fiendish face accompanied the article, but Lydia was more interested in the correspondence she’d just received.

“Oh, Nico! This is a postcard from father inviting me to London for Easter.”

“Interesting. He didn’t even take time off last Christmas.”

Lydia’s only family, her father was a professor of natural history who taught at the University of London. His field of study involved researching and categorizing all organisms of the natural world, and he was highly devoted. He tended to use any time off to collect samples and conduct surveys in various locations, and it had been a while since Lydia had heard from him.

“Are we going, then?” Nico asked. “You know how dangerous London is.”

“I do. But it wouldn’t matter even if I did run into a heinous thief. I’m hardly overflowing with riches.”

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Lydia’s mother had been a fairy doctor. Before marrying Lydia’s father, she had lived on an island in the north, assisting the villagers when they came to her for advice on their fairy-related troubles. Life up there hadn’t changed much during the centuries since the Middle Ages.

It had been over twenty years since then. Even after those remote islands had become part of the British Empire, their culture and way of life hadn’t changed. However, Lydia had never gone to the island where her mother used to live. Having married her father, an outsider, Lydia’s mother was considered to have abandoned her birthplace. Even if Lydia visited, she doubted she would be welcome.

Lydia’s mother had passed away when she was very young, and though

Lydia's general memories of her were vague, somehow she had a much clearer memory of the stories her mother would tell her about fairies. From her mother, Lydia had learned about the different types of fairies and their traits, their customs, and how to get on with them. Lydia considered these treasures that she had inherited.

It was because of these stories that she had set her heart on becoming a well-established fairy doctor herself. She didn't want to be ashamed of her ability to see fairies, nor did she want to hide it; it wouldn't matter if people thought her odd. As long as there were fairies in the world, she reasoned, there would be those who required the assistance of a fairy doctor.

Lydia had left her house in the care of the goblin who lived there and had now arrived at the port with Nico, where she would take a ship to see her father in London. She'd left a sign outside her house announcing the temporary suspension of her work, but she didn't think anybody would be inconvenienced by her absence.

Several steamboats were moored to the wharf, and passengers swarmed through the gaps between piles of cargo. Nico lay on top of Lydia's suitcase, looking like an ordinary cat.

"You're heavy," she complained. "Get off and walk."

"It's tiring having to walk on all fours," he answered with a deliberate *meow*.

"Excuse me, are you Miss Carlton?" An unfamiliar man slightly raised his hat to her with a smile, stopping Lydia in her tracks. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Huskley; your father does much for me."

"Um, are you a colleague of father's?"

"Yes, I work as his assistant at the university, and I have come here to escort you. It would no doubt be difficult to travel all the way to London by yourself." He spoke politely and looked to be in his late twenties. Lydia sensed that he was very much a gentleman.

"Father asked you to come all this way, just for me? Surely that's an abuse of his position?"

"Please, don't worry. I was in Edinburgh on university business. I sent a

messenger to your home, but you were already out. I worried we had missed each other."

This was unusually thoughtful of her father, Lydia thought. He was childlike in the way he didn't give much thought to anything outside of his research, and she was surprised that it had even crossed his mind to do something like this for her.

"Thank you very kindly, Mr. Huskley. But how did you recognize me as Professor Carlton's daughter?"

"It is rather unusual to see a lady traveling by herself."

Not only was that true, Lydia was also young and unmarried, both things that made her solo journey today even more of a rarity. Her living alone was already strange enough as it was for a girl of her standing, and it only served to strengthen the eccentric impression she gave off. But there was nothing she could do about that particular aspect of her life; the house she lived in had no housekeeper, so she was the only one who could tend to it. And hiring a housekeeper was out of the question—the fairies were very active there at night.

"It's a good thing too," Mr. Huskley continued. "All I knew of your appearance was that your hair was rust—I beg your pardon, *russet* colored."

Though he corrected himself, Lydia was disheartened by his automatic use of the word "rust," for she often worried how people spoke about her behind her back. Her hair *was* a dull, reddish-brown—like rust—and she was rather self-conscious about it. It must have been her father who had first used the word with Mr. Huskley. It was difficult to blame him for it. He could be obtuse at times and was far from the type of man to pick up on the trivial things that his teenage daughter was sensitive to.

Deciding that this kindly gentleman was not at fault after all, Lydia smiled at him. Setting aside his dubious comments on her hair, Mr. Huskley's current opinion of her seemed to be that she was a girl like any other. He was treating her as politely as a gentleman should treat a lady, and so Lydia felt she ought not to complain.

Would that change, she wondered, if she were to start speaking of fairies?

The question stuck fast in her mind, and she could not shake it loose. Even if he didn't show it through his actions, he was bound to think her strange. Perhaps it was that way of thinking which led her to be withdrawn when it came to strangers.

Whatever others might think of me, I am who I am.

Collecting herself, she tried to set her thoughts on more positive sentiments as she passed her luggage to Mr. Huskley. Her suitcase had been heavy in her hand, but he carried it with ease.

When he started walking, Nico leaped down from atop it and came over to whisper, "Are you really going to trust him? The professor's hardly the type to send you an escort."

"Then please enlighten me as to what motive he might have in approaching me? If he's looking for somebody to kidnap in exchange for a ransom, there are plenty of richer victims he could target. Any spare money we come across goes straight into father's collecting and research efforts."

Though Nico seemed dissatisfied, he offered no counterargument. There was no need to suspect Mr. Huskley. He walked straight onto the ship that Lydia was to take. After that, it was something else that caught her by surprise.

"Um, excuse me, but my ticket isn't first-class..." The room she had been escorted to was *huge*.

"This was the room the professor booked for you. Feel free to make yourself at home. I shall be in the room next door, so please do not hesitate to call for me if you need anything."

With that, he was gone. In the end there had been no trouble, nor any danger.

"See, Nico? You're being far too suspicious." Lydia said, throwing herself down onto the spacious bed. "There's still some time before we set off," she murmured to herself.

Just then, there came an unusual sound from the corner of the room.

"What was that?"

Identifying the closet as the source of the sound, Lydia approached it carefully. Then, she flung open the doors in one fell swoop.

It was empty.

No sooner had relief settled in her breast than she felt the presence of somebody behind her. A figure emerged from the curtains, clamping one hand over her mouth as they pinned her shoulders to their chest from behind. Though she put every ounce of strength into struggling free, she couldn't move an inch.

Nico was hissing, the fur along his back standing on end, but he was a cat. There was nothing he could do.

"Save me. Please," the intruder whispered into her ear.



Wasn't *she* the one who needed saving? Lydia continued her attempted resistance.

"Please, keep quiet and listen to me. That man—the one who brought you here—he's working for a villain. Terrible things will happen to you if you do not heed my warning."

His tone was calmer and more refined than Lydia had expected.

Mr. Huskley works for a villain? She let the tension drain from her muscles.

As though sensing she would not cry out anymore, the intruder removed his hand from her mouth, but he did not let go of her.

"A villain? Who are you?" she asked.

"That man caught me and held me captive. I somehow managed to escape and hide away in this room. That was when I witnessed him bringing you here. It likely shan't be long now before he notices my absence, but I am not the only one in danger here. That is why I require your assistance."

"I don't understand."

"Time is a luxury we do not have. We must disembark from the ship before it sets out. All I can ask is that you trust me for the time being. I shall explain everything in detail later."

He finally released her, allowing Lydia to turn around and face him. He was a tall young man of slender build. His dark-brown hair was messy, his face covered in stubble. Putting aside those things and the poor quality of his clothing, and judging solely by his features, Lydia guessed his age was around twenty or so.

Despite the raggedness of his appearance, there was a mysterious elegance to his face. His strong, ash mauve gaze took Lydia in unabashedly, making her falter.

"What would happen to you if he caught you again?"

"I would be killed."

Scarier than his words were the bloodied rope marks around his wrists. There

were also several thin wounds on his neck that Lydia could only imagine had been made with a knife.

“This room is at the end of the corridor. In order to leave here, one has no choice but to pass by Huskley—well, I assume that’s a pseudonym—that man’s room. That is what allows him to keep you here. And if you *were* to leave the room, his younger brothers would be keeping a very close eye on you. They are eight brothers, six of them on this vessel. All of them are physically strong and used to dealing with manual labor. Huskley is the eldest; he leads them in their misdeeds.”

The man crept slowly towards the door. “Even if you were to attempt to leave quietly, you would pull on the string that is set outside this door and the next room would be notified immediately. Their intention is likely to render you unconscious and abandon you at the next port.”

When Lydia studied the doorknob, she caught the glint of a thin, almost imperceptible thread. That was all the proof she needed. There was no reason for an assistant to her father to trip her room like this.

She folded her arms and stood in front of the stranger. “How do you propose we escape, then?”

Standing in front of the door to Huskley’s room, Lydia drew in a deep breath. He would already know that she had moved out into the hallway. He may even have had his ear to the door, listening for her.

She knocked, and after a short moment, the door opened to reveal Huskley behind it.

“Ah, Miss Carlton. May I help you?”

“I heard a curious noise in my room. It sounds as though there is something in the wardrobe, and it’s making me nervous. Please, could I ask you to take a look?”

There was the subtlest change in Huskley’s expression as he hurriedly called over his shoulder to the other men in the room. “The room next door. I’m sure of it.” It seemed he was so flustered by the news, he didn’t take the time to

consider that his words might sound suspicious to Lydia. “There may be a pervert in your room, Miss Carlton. Please wait here where it is safe.”

Inside Huskley’s room were five muscular men. Six in total, just as the intruder had said. All six of them disappeared into Lydia’s room. Then, the intruder appeared from behind a post, slipping past her door.

“Let’s go.”

He took hold of Lydia’s hand as though it were the most natural thing in the world and led them at a run down the hallway.

“Nico, are you following us?”

The cat had made himself invisible, but Lydia spotted a flash of his tail when she asked her question.

“He’s escaped!”

The voice came from behind them. The man clicked his tongue as he realized their escape had already been noticed. Still, he didn’t slow, racing down the stairs. It was then that one of their pursuers launched himself over the railing on the deck towards them. Lydia screamed as he grabbed her handbag, but the young intruder slipped in between them and swept out the man’s legs. Crashing into the handrail, the force sent the thug tumbling over it into the sea, bag and all.

“My bag!” Lydia cried.

“You’ll have to leave it.”

The man took hold of her wrist, leaving Lydia no choice but to run again. He led her along the deck, down another set of stairs, and then across the gangway, until they were off the ship completely. But he didn’t stop there, weaving swiftly through the crowds on the wharf. She could do nothing but follow, even as her lungs protested from the lack of oxygen.

When they finally stopped, the pair collapsed to the floor. It wasn’t until Lydia’s ragged breathing and pounding heart rate had calmed that she realized the surface she was lying face-down on was strangely fluffy. Specifically, it was a luxuriously soft rug. She raised her head and looked around to find that the

room they were in was filled with extravagant furnishings, like one would find in a noble's estate.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Ship," the man answered, still sprawled on his back beside her.

The sea and wharf were visible outside the window. This really was a ship, and apparently a different ship from the one they had just been aboard. Lydia could only imagine the trouble they would get into, entering an expensive room like this without permission.

"Excuse me," she began.

"Apologies, but please allow me some respite. I don't think I could sit up even if I wanted to." The man closed his eyes.

No matter how much Lydia tried to rouse him after that, he didn't respond, like a pocket watch that needed winding. With nothing else to do, she stood up by herself and began examining the room. It had a spacious drawing room, three bedrooms, a study, and a bathroom with a shower.

"I didn't realize cabins could be this lavish..." Lydia briefly considered leaving the room, but she didn't want to run the risk of being discovered by the other passengers, nor could she discount the possibility that Huskley and his men had followed them aboard.

"This whole thing smells way too fishy." That was Nico. He was currently studying one of the large paintings on the wall, his whiskers twitching. "Who is that man?"

"I have no clue," Lydia replied, "but he prevented us from being tricked."

"Are you sure? Perhaps he is the real trickster in all of this."

The possibility sent a small ripple of anxiety through her. But whatever the case, there was no denying that Huskley was untrustworthy. She couldn't think of a single reason a simple university assistant would need so many brawny, bodyguard-esque men in his cabin, brothers or not.

"I suppose all we can do now is listen to what he has to say."

Lydia sat down on a leather sofa. When she leaned back against the silk

cushions, she found them so comfortable that she was soon drifting off.

“Lydia! Wake up!”

Lydia awoke to the feel of Nico’s tail against her cheek and the sound of water. She had slept for longer than intended—outside, the sun was starting to set, and oil lamps were now illuminating the dim cabin. She noticed that the man who should have been asleep on the floor had vanished. Instead, she spotted him in the bathroom through the gap in the open door.

As their eyes met in the mirror, Lydia’s widened. Formerly a dark brown color, his hair was now a vivid blond. His stubble had been shaved off, and he was now smiling at her as he ran his fingers through his bangs. He suddenly seemed graceful, Lydia noted, as though he were a different person altogether.

“You’re awake, I see. You looked rather sweet as you slept.”

“Mm...” Lydia made a noncommittal noise in response.

“I should have liked to gaze upon you longer, but it seemed to displease your cat.”

Nico scratched at his ear with a hind leg where he sat on a cushion, as though the comment didn’t concern him. That was unusual for him, as he was normally one to complain about being made to act like a normal cat.

“Your hair has changed,” Lydia said.

“Ah, yes. I had dyed it before. My natural color is much more conspicuous, you see. Although those rogues shall know me by both colors now.”

The man roughly dried his hair with a towel, and she caught a glimpse of his eyes beneath his shining blond hair. They were undoubtedly the same shade of ash mauve she had seen before. He then proceeded to pull off his worn shirt and throw it to one side, as though it were something unpleasant.

“My lord. You are in the presence of a lady.”

A boy with dark brown skin had entered the room. He seemed to be around Lydia’s age, a servant who was perfectly composed and without a shadow of a smile on his face.

A servant? And he referred to this man as "my lord"...

"Please excuse me. It appears my mind has yet to fully process the situation."

When the young servant attempted to put the new shirt he had brought in on the man, he paused. "My lord, you are hurt..."

"It is a graze, nothing more. Clothing shall conceal it, and so I shall have that clean shirt." He lay a hand on his servant's shoulder. "Worry not, Raven. There is no need to kill over something so trivial."

"Kill"?

Lydia furrowed her brow. If the comment was in jest, it wasn't particularly funny.

"Yes, my lord."

The servant showed no amusement in response to his master's quip, and Lydia couldn't even be sure that the man *wasn't* seriously considering slaying the responsible party. The servant's expression was plain as he fastened his master's buttons with practiced hands.

"I feared you would not make it in time."

"Everything proceeded as planned, Raven. This is Miss Carlton."

"Excuse me, but how do you know my name?" Lydia asked.

"Huskley and his band were searching for a girl named Lydia Carlton. In other words, you." As though he had made up his mind, he suddenly told his servant to pause in his work and approached Lydia. "Please accept my apologies for not introducing myself sooner, Miss Carlton. I am Edgar Ashenbert, an earl. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Taking her hand, he placed a small kiss on her fingers, then smiled in amusement when her expression showed only bewilderment.

The moment she regained her senses, Lydia slapped away his hand. "A-An earl? You? I don't believe it. I have business in London, and so I'm afraid you will have to excuse me."

"You're too late. This ship has already departed."

“*What*?!” Lydia rushed to the window only to find that the land had indeed become nothing but a faint shadow in the distance. “What is the meaning of this? You realize you have essentially kidnapped me?! And my luggage—it was left on the other boat! My bag is in the sea, and I have no money with me...meaning that my very presence on *this* ship makes me a stowaway!”

“Yes, it is a most vexing situation indeed. But fear not; I shall escort you to London—just as soon as you’ve fulfilled your purpose. As for your personal belongings, I shall see to it that you have everything you need. And finally, this cabin is my own, and I have made sure that you *do* have a ticket for this voyage.”

“So...you mean to say that it was your intention to get me aboard this vessel from the very start? And that your ‘capture’ by Mr. Huskley was an elaborate charade?”

“*That* part was true. I wouldn’t have allowed myself to be injured for the sake of deception.”

Lydia looked at the raw cuts on his wrists and neck, and for a moment her anger lessened—if only a little.

“However, being captured by them was my only means of getting close to you. I had no idea what you looked like.”

Was this man saying he’d been caught *on purpose*?

“Well, then...why did you go so far as to dye your hair?” Lydia pressed.

“Now that was simply because I didn’t want them thinking that I *wanted* to be caught.”

His stream of nonsensical answers was making her dizzy. The confusion was so overwhelming, it slipped her mind to ask what he wanted her for in the first place.

“What time is it, Raven?” The man made use of the lull in conversation to change the subject.

“It is almost seven o’clock, my lord.”

“We must hurry or supper shall start without us. Ah, yes—I suggest you

change, as well. We have been invited to join the Marquess and Marchioness of Eugen, Denmark. It was they who invited me on this voyage also. This isn't the type of vessel one can ride without an invitation."

In other words, he had managed to bring Lydia on board a ship that was off limits to Huskley. Lydia couldn't believe that he just so happened to have an invitation for the ideal ship for his needs departing the port that day. It was much more likely that he had spotted the ship and approached the noble couple himself to curry favor with them.

Lydia was starting to worry what else this man was capable of.

"Please do not jest, Mr...." Lydia began, glaring at him suspiciously.

"Please, Lydia. Call me Edgar." The man's tone was good-humored. "Where is Ermine? Lydia shall be requiring a gown."

"I am here, and I have one prepared. Raven, that tie does not match the color of those cuffs. Pass it to me." A woman in men's clothing appeared, carrying with her a gown and a tie. Her stylish pants were perfectly tailored, and she wore the same black jacket as the young male servant. Though her hair only reached her shoulders, she had made no effort to hide the curves of her body that made her instantly identifiable as female. In all likelihood, she was a servant too.

"Your thoughts, my lord?" the boy asked.

"Hm...let us take Ermine's advice. However, Ermine, I am not especially keen on that gown."

"Then it is lucky that you shan't be the one wearing it."

"I quite agree. But I wonder whether you have something with a more open collar?"

"Something so revealing has no place at the supper table. This gown would suit Miss Carlton much more," the woman said, making it clear that the matter was not up for debate. It seemed she was close enough to her master that she felt no qualms about freely speaking her mind. "Please follow me, Miss Carlton." She led Lydia to one of the bedrooms, where she made to help her change.

“Um, I can get changed by myself,” Lydia said, unused to having somebody assist her.

As it turned out, however, she wasn’t able to change into the gown without help. It was much more formal in style than what she was familiar with. They needed to start all over again from the corset and crinoline until Lydia was completely dressed with not a bead, delicate ribbon, or sliver of lace out of place.

“I shall now pin up your hair.”

Lydia had a vague sensation that she was being treated like a child. The servant had her sitting in front of the mirror and was smiling as she did her work. There was an elegant femininity about her that made Lydia feel quite self-conscious. Though the servant’s facial features were sharper than they were round, she was in no way masculine, and her short, blunt haircut did nothing to take away from her femininity either. Her pale skin was completely unblemished, and her eyes and hair were such a dark shade of brown that they almost appeared black. The cherries on top were her well-defined eyebrows and her lips, red as rose petals.

Then there was Lydia, who compared her own reflection to the other in the mirror. Her skin could hardly be called pretty, her reddish brown hair was as dull as could be, and her gold-green eyes were such an unusual color that they perturbed rather than charmed. Her features were bold but praised only by her father, and her rash personality only added to the abrasive impression she could give off. Never mind that she tended to be written off as eccentric before her sex even came into the picture.

Lydia was aware that wearing her hair down at the age of seventeen made her appear more childish, but she struggled to tame it, and it wasn’t like there was anybody she needed to impress in any case. If she really tried, she was just about capable of a plait.

“It is time to go, Ermine,” came a voice from outside the room.

“We shall be there in a moment. There, I’m finished.”

While Lydia’s thoughts had been drifting, her reflection in the mirror had become an elegant lady whom she hardly recognized. But she had no time to

study her reflection further; she was whisked out of the room almost as soon as she'd laid eyes on herself.

"Mmm, you look even lovelier than you did before."

"Please do not tease me."

"Why not? Although I must say I think you would look even lovelier if you smiled."

"And why should I smile?"

"For my sake, perhaps?"

Lydia still couldn't work him out, and she knew her displeasure was clear on her face. "I'm not even sure what business I have attending this supper."

"You're hungry, aren't you?" he replied, quite naturally.

She was definitely hungry. All she'd had for lunch was some bread from the stagecoach stop.

"I am, but I would have found it more comfortable to eat alone," she replied.

"That would have deprived me of the opportunity to show you off."

"Excuse me? I am *not* your accessory."

"Of course not; yours is the leading part. My role is to support you, and I have every confidence you shall enjoy yourself. An unskilled escort is liable to detract from his companion, but if both of us play our parts well, we shall each enhance the other's charms."

Evidently, he hadn't brought her here out of concern for her empty stomach. Though Lydia was still feeling contrarian, they were already at the entrance to the dining room. The doorman was gracefully reverent as he opened the door, and her escort motioned her through the door in a way that suggested he was used to treating ladies politely.

"Now, Lydia, your role now is to show *me* off. Please try to bear that in mind."

Lydia could hardly imagine a more arrogant sentiment. But she soon realized why such a sentiment was necessary. Gentle music lapped through the wide

hall like waves on a shore. Light glinted from chandeliers, silverware, and precious jewelry. Each dining table was alight with its own conversation.

Unlike the bewildered Lydia, Edgar was flawless as he escorted her. There could be no doubting from his conduct that he was a true nobleman. His body had seemed scrawny wrapped in those ragged clothes when they'd first met, but in a tailored dinner jacket, it was the graceful body of a man who had never toiled. Around his white, high collar was a cravat tied in a waterfall knot, with a pansy garnishing his buttonhole. His features struck a perfect balance between stern and soft, and his golden hair seemed to shine; it was almost unbelievable how well his appearance suited high society.

Lydia knew she was not alone in her impression of him. As a young earl, Edgar was charming everybody, from the older marquess and marchioness who had invited them to the array of colorful nobles who were in attendance.

As for Lydia, Edgar introduced her as a friend. She was content to let the conversation happen around her and enjoy her food in silence.

Edgar's story went like so: Lydia came from a well-to-do family and lived with her grandparents in Edinburgh, where she diligently volunteered at an elementary school. She was currently on her way to Leeds to attend the wedding of a childhood friend who had moved there. Her strict father had been strongly reluctant to allow his young daughter to take the short voyage but eventually relented when Edgar had offered to accompany her on the way there and back.

The imaginative tale impressed her.

"Your Lordship is certainly very considerate."

"I daresay anybody would go to such lengths to draw the attention of a charming lady friend. Am I right, my lord?" the marquess asked.

"Was it that obvious?" Edgar replied. "Unfortunately, even after all this time, she will not allow me to refer to her as anything other than 'friend.'"

He says that as though we have been acquainted for more than a few hours!

Nevertheless, his devotion to playing the part of an innocent young gentleman was going down well with both the senior guests and the marquess

and marchioness themselves, who were looking at him as though he were their own grandson.

“Dear me, what a shame!” exclaimed the marchioness.

“A sea voyage is a wonderful opportunity to escape the tethers of everyday life, and I think you shall find that even the most stubborn of women soften up a little out on the water. Is that not so, Miss Carlton?”

“Is that right, Lydia?” The gentle tone of Edgar’s voice brought forth a curious feeling within her, as though he truly was fond of her.

“Who can say?” she eventually replied after a pause. She kept her tone a touch cold to communicate that she was somewhat irritated without being overly offended. Edgar seemed a little dejected as he shrank back, though she had been right in thinking the response would garner the warm sympathies of their tablemates.

“It rankles that I cannot make any advances, seeing as I am accompanying Lydia on the request of her father.”

Edgar was playing her up as a saint who had earned the affections of a charming earl such as himself but was too stubborn to accept them. Apparently, this was how he planned to use her to flaunt himself. Just being next to him was enough to earn her envious glances from the women sitting at nearby tables.

It meant very little to Lydia herself. No matter how pleasant their surroundings, Edgar was *not* her friend; he was more akin to a decorative piece overly embellished with counterfeit gemstones. Which begged the question: why did he feel the need to adorn himself with a false female friend? He certainly seemed the type to enjoy games, but if that *was* how he saw this situation, his story only painted him as one of the pawns on the board. And away from the board, he would be nothing. Lydia couldn’t help but wonder if he was even an earl.

“Say, Lord Ashenbert, you mentioned that you are descended from the renowned Blue Knight, yes?” The question came from a man sitting at one end of the table: a literary scholar who had just been waxing lyrical about Chaucer.

“It would be excessive to call him renowned,” Edgar replied. “To the average

Englishman, the Blue Knight is as real as Hamlet—but not nearly as well-known."

"Are you saying then that the Blue Knight really *did* exist?" a noblewoman asked. "I know, of course, of the novel by F. Brown...but that was a very curious story indeed."

Lydia knew about the story of the Blue Knight too, but she had never expected Edgar to claim he was descended from the legend. Her interest piqued, she listened in.

The scholar explained, "He did exist, my lady. The character in the novel was based upon a knight who swore allegiance to Edward I and led the Crusades with the king before he ascended to the throne. They say he hailed from Fairyland and charmed the people with tales of his numerous adventures to foreign lands. Brown's novel was closer to a work of fantasy, describing the help given to the Blue Knight by the reliable 'fairies' who served him. However, fairies aside, it *was* true that a man known as the Blue Knight worked closely with Edward I."

Edgar stayed silent, nodding politely and allowing the scholar to continue.

"The Blue Knight was subsequently made an earl by Edward I. Since the knight held territory in Fairyland, upon receiving his eternal loyalty, they say the King of England also holds dominion over this mythical land where fairies live. Now there is some fine British humor for you!"

"But the Blue Knight really *did* have territory in Fairyland," Lydia blurted out. At once, everybody's gazes focused on her, and she prepared herself to be made fun of as she was used to. But she refused to be silenced—not after what the scholar had said. "Um, what I mean to say, sir, is that I cannot understand why you write Fairyland off as a joke yet believe in the Blue Knight. Both were passed down as part of the same legend, so why do you consider one to be true and the other fictitious?"

"Well, it is because the side of the legend relating to fairies is exceedingly absurd. Meanwhile, there are records of the Blue Knight's receipt of his earldom, which prove his existence without a doubt."

"Indeed." Edgar smiled. "However, in those same records, the Blue Knight is

named the Earl of Ibrazel. In Gaelic, 'Ibrazel' refers to a mythical fairy country across the sea, indicating that this part of the legend is also true. I wonder if the people at the time would have laughed Fairyland off as a joke too?"

Lydia wasn't quite sure if he had succeeded in backing her up or not, but it was certainly enough to ward off the suspicious gazes that had been centered on her.

"It is said that the people of the past never doubted the existence of fairies, demons, and the like, and in all likelihood, Edward I believed similarly," the noblewoman said. "In which case, I wonder whether I might ask your lordship directly: do you hold territory in Fairyland?"

"I certainly do; I inherited it," Edgar replied smoothly, something the other guests seemed to interpret as that same "fine British humor."

"Oh! I shall eagerly look forward to my invitation to go and see it."

"My ancestors dictated that I am permitted to bring my bride home to that land and nobody else."

"An even more tempting suggestion. I can understand now why Miss Lydia holds so fast to her belief in such a country."

"Am I to interpret that as a reason to hope?" Edgar turned an affectionate eye towards Lydia.

It was clear that the topic of conversation was seen as farce by the table, yet nobody had denied the existence of fairies outright, creating an unusual atmosphere. It was as though they were humoring a child before a skillful twist of the conversation from Edgar had the guests' eyes focused on Lydia again, warmer this time—and all without her feeling as though she were being made fun of.

There were compliments on the dull, reddish-brown hair she disliked so much; she was told it was lovely and smooth. Then there was the comparison of her eyes, usually called witchlike, to peridots. As the evening went on, Lydia found herself getting slightly drunk on the high-quality wine, the twinkling chandeliers, and the soft scent of perfume.

A quiet whisper crossed her mind: that this earl, descended from a human

knight with dominion over fairies, might just understand her.

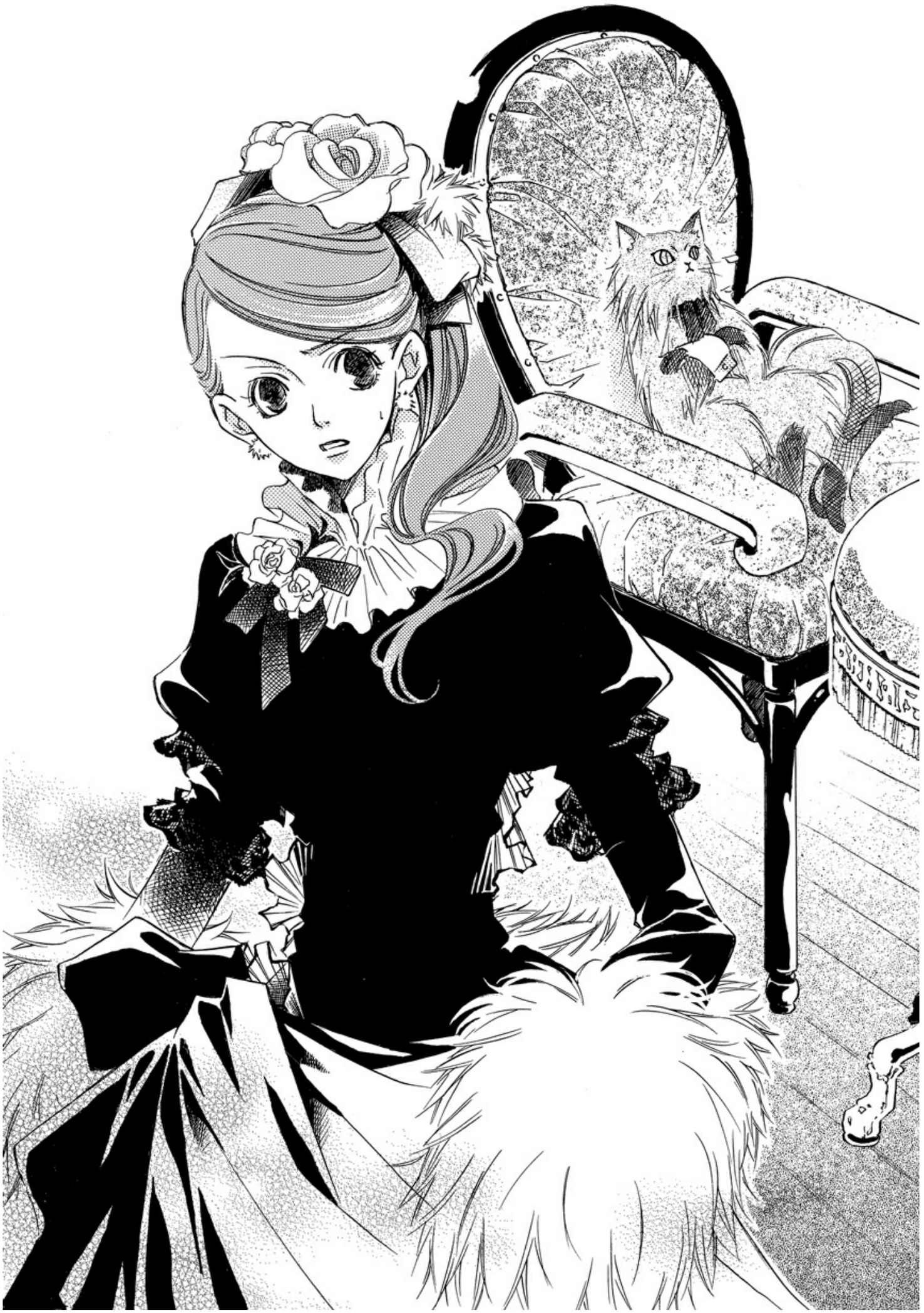
“I feel as though I’ve received enough praise to last a lifetime,” Lydia murmured, the seabreeze cool on her skin as she stood out on deck. The water below was so dark, it was impossible to see anything. Above, the white steam from the ship obscured the outline of the moon.

“Those useless servants gave me nothing but a saucer of milk for supper! What am I, a cat? I can’t drink milk from a *saucer*!” Nico, looking for all the world like an ordinary gray-furred cat, was reclining in a deckchair as he lapped at a glass of scotch. He had some deep-fried fish to go with it. “Lydia, could you let them know that tomorrow morning, I want pancakes, bacon, and a hot cup of milky tea—served on *real* tableware.”

“You’re perfectly capable of talking. You should tell them yourself.”

Nico clicked his tongue. “Most humans pretend they haven’t heard me when I say something.”

No doubt that was because most people wouldn’t want to admit to themselves that they’d encountered a talking cat.



“What did that man want with you in the end?” Nico asked.

“I haven’t asked him yet, but he claims that he is descended from the Blue Knight Earl. That might have something to do with it.”

“The Blue Knight? That’s the legendary knight who holds territory in Fairyland, isn’t it? In that case, perhaps the fine earl is after your services as a fairy doctor.”

If that was true, then Edgar already knew Lydia was a fairy doctor. But now that she was starting to sober up a little, she had her doubts that he really was sympathetic to her belief in fairies, or that he genuinely held territory in their land. She had the impression that he operated more on logic and pragmatism.

“Either way, I think you’re better off not getting involved with him,” Nico continued. “He’s at odds with that Huskley fellow, isn’t he? And both of them seemed like they were trying too hard to charm you, though neither of them is that impressive.”

“I think Edgar is handsome.”

“Thank you.”

From behind Lydia came the voice of the man himself. She hadn’t put much thought into her words before uttering them, but knowing that Edgar himself had heard her turned Lydia’s face bright red.

“Oh, um...I was speaking objectively! What I said has absolutely no reflection of any favor I may or may not hold towards you!”

“I thought as much. It was more my will than yours to have you board this ship, and as such, I wasn’t expecting you to open your heart to me so readily. Incidentally, with whom were you speaking just now?”

“Um, with...” Lydia shot a glance in Nico’s direction, and he promptly curled up like a normal cat. She decided to double down. “Is it so strange to share one’s thoughts with a cat?”

“I don’t think so. It’s wonderful that you are able to communicate your feelings with an animal.”

Lydia was certain he didn’t actually think that—though there wasn’t the

slightest hint in his expression to suggest he was teasing her either. She watched as he noticed the glass of scotch next to Nico's chair.

"Were you having another drink? Was the dinner too stressful for you?"

Lydia had excused herself from the table earlier, saying she was feeling a little tipsy and was in need of some fresh air. Finding her out here with another drink, Edgar must have thought her a raging alcoholic.

Embarrassed, and irritated at Nico for feigning ignorance, she hurriedly began to explain. "Th-That isn't mine; that's Nico's. He drinks, you see, and he has awful manners, yet he's incredibly fastidious when it comes to his necktie and the glossiness of his fur. Not to mention how demanding he is, complaining that he can't drink milk from a saucer and that he needs a breakfast of pancakes and bacon and milky tea!"

Edgar was looking at her dubiously at this point. Here was a man who claimed quite openly to be descended from the Blue Knight, and yet even he thought her nutty. A sigh escaped her lips as the realization caught up with her.

"It's all right to laugh if you find me strange. I don't know what your intentions with me are, but as you can see, I'm not exactly normal. Please just let me off at the next..."

Her words dried up as Edgar suddenly stepped closer to her. His ash mauve eyes looked down at her softly. He was close enough that she could make out his blond eyelashes, even in the low light of the lanterns.

"Wh-What is it?"

"They say fairy doctors can see and hear things and voices that ordinary people cannot. I very much have the sense that those pale green eyes of yours are capable of seeing through the mysteries that plague this world," he said, confirming that he knew Lydia was a fairy doctor.

"You're exaggerating. My eyes do nothing of the sort."

"I don't know about that. In the light, your irises shine like golden flowers and they look even more mystical."

That was exactly why her eyes had been likened to a witch's, and why Lydia

had no idea how to react when she had been complimented on them for the first time that evening.

“Are you truly a descendent of the Blue Knight? If so, I wonder whether you are able to see fairies as well. If not, there would be no way for you to reach your inherited land.”

“I am indeed. However, my forebears’ abilities to enter into that land and converse with fairies have been lost over the generations. All I have inherited is my title. My father, grandfather, and the generations before them lived abroad whilst traveling the world. I eventually returned to Britain, where it was my intention to greet Her Majesty. However, I do not possess the treasured sword given to the Blue Knight Earl by Edward I. That is, the sword which proves I am descended from him.” As he spoke, Edgar moved to close the already short gap between them.

Lydia continued shuffling backwards. “Wh-Which sword would that be?”

“Approximately three hundred years ago, my ancestor Julias Ashenbert hid the sword within his territory, then set out on a long journey, during which he perished in a foreign land. Its whereabouts are described in a mysterious text filled with references to fairies and their protection. Since I have lost the curious powers of my ancestors, I cannot fully make sense of it.”

“By ‘his territory,’ might you mean Fairyland?”

“I hold land and castles in places inhabited by humans too. Some of it was bestowed upon me with my peerage, some was a reward for distinguished service, and some I inherited.”

“And all of this is why you require a fairy doctor?”

“I’m afraid it’s rather more complicated than that. The sword is embedded with a large star sapphire, which is being targeted.”

“By Mr. Huskley?”

“Correct. Your would-be kidnapper. He does not know that I require the sword to prove my heritage, but he knows that I also seek it and consequently wishes death upon me. If I die now, my lineage ends, so it is imperative that I retrieve the sword before it is stolen. For that, I would like to ask your

assistance, Lydia."

Making to take another step back, Lydia felt the sudden loss of floor under her back foot and promptly lost her balance. She was on the cusp of falling down what she now realized were stairs.

Before she did, Edgar swiftly looped his arms around her back to support her and pulled her firmly towards him. Lydia clung to him instinctively.

"Careful. There isn't a lot of lighting out here," he breathed.

Lydia had never been this physically close to a man before, with the exception of her father. "L-Let go of me."

"You'll fall."

She could only imagine that Edgar found it amusing that she had no choice but to hold fast to him. "Let go!" she insisted.

With quick feet befitting a dance, he turned them both around and placed Lydia back in front of the stairs. He looked somewhat reluctant as he unhooked his arms from her but smiled almost triumphantly when he saw how she scowled at him. He was surely affirming to himself that he could hold command over any girl.

This irritated Lydia. "I don't believe for one second that you're *really* descended from the Blue Knight. I would never assist a swindler in stealing the knight's sword, so—"

"You'll turn me down? I suppose you intend to swim back to Edinburgh, do you?"

"Are you threatening to push me overboard?" Lydia distanced herself further from Edgar and the taffrail, anxious.

"Perish the thought. I'm far from atrocious enough for that. But if I may advise you of one thing, it is that you will find it difficult either to return home or make your way to London from the next port without any money. Not to mention Huskley and his men are currently hunting for you like hounds."

Simply put, Lydia was without options. *Not atrocious enough to push me into the sea, but atrocious enough to threaten me.*

Edgar procured a key from his jacket's inner pocket. "This is the key to your cabin. You are staying on the same floor as me, opposite my room. Make yourself at home."

Pushing the key into her hand, he disappeared down a gloomy passageway.

Sir John’s Cross

In the sixteenth century, there had been an earl named Ashenbert among the lords of Queen Elizabeth’s court. Claiming himself a descendent of the Blue Knight, he was an adventurer who had traveled all over the world, and he’d shared his curious anecdotes with the people who gathered at the court.

One of those who had listened, the author F. Brown, had compiled the earl’s stories that concerned the Blue Knight into a book: *The Blue Knight Earl: Traveler from Fairyland*.

Lydia knew this book well. It was one among many storybooks that her father had read to her after her mother passed away. She remembered her father telling her those stories were true. And Lydia, who knew of the existence of fairies, had no reason to doubt him. Some of the races who had built that land had fairy monarchs, but Lydia was astonished to learn that some had chosen human rulers.

Perhaps it was only natural that most people saw this book as fiction based on the legend of the Blue Knight, who had actually existed, and regarded the fairy aspect to be pure fantasy. But as far as Lydia was concerned, every part of this mysterious book was just as capable of holding water as another.

The treasured sword that Edgar had mentioned was also described in the book. At the very end was a scene where the Blue Knight left Edward I’s side, saying that he was to return to Fairyland. The king asked whether he would ever come back to court, to which the Blue Knight replied:

“Should Your Majesty call for me, I shall return at once, for I am forever your servant. The only caveat is that time flows differently in the Land of the Fairies. One year over there may be equivalent to a hundred years here. Equally, should I grow old over there after the passing of a few decades, you may find that mere days have passed in the human realm. I humbly beg Your Majesty to bear that in mind, should there ever be a time when I or my descendants return to you.”

It was then that the king had entrusted the Blue Knight with his sword. It was a guarantee from Edward I that no matter how much time passed, England

would forever recognize the Blue Knight Earl and welcome him back into the royal court.

It was said that there were several instances of the Blue Knight's descendents appearing at court after that. Most likely, one of them had met with Mr. Brown himself. And now Edgar was claiming to be a descendent and seeking the sword that would prove it, enlisting Lydia's help as a fairy doctor.

"I can't see any reason *not* to lend him a hand, myself," Nico said. He had been in an unusually good mood this morning, having been served the pancakes and bacon he had asked for at breakfast.

"Just yesterday you were calling him fishy!" Lydia protested.

"That was before he threatened to throw us off the ship at who-knows-where without any money."

Lydia couldn't help but wonder whether Edgar's threat was genuine. "Even if we help him, there's no guarantee we'll actually find the sword."

"Then you ought to get him to pay in advance—*and* charge him a premium. You could even run off with it afterwards if you wanted to," Nico suggested lightly. He'd tucked a napkin into his neck fur and was eating his bacon with a knife and fork as though it was everything he deserved.

Requesting money for a job meant taking responsibility and doing the work properly. But Lydia's main concern wasn't the money, it was that she wasn't sure if Edgar was the true successor to the sword. There was a kernel of truth to Nico's words too, in that if she *didn't* run off with the money, refusing Edgar would become much harder.

"I should write a letter to father." Lydia took out some paper and an envelope from the desk by the window.

Dear father,

I am likely to arrive in London a little late. A man named Lord Ashenbert has requested my help with a fairy-related matter. He says he is a descendent of the Blue Knight. I am not convinced that it is true, but I do not think he will let me go until the work is done.

Lydia paused, wondering whether to mention her near-abduction by Huskley. She decided to omit it in the end, as it would do nothing but worry her father.

Please do not worry about me, and please take care of your health.

When Lydia had finished writing the name and address and sealing the envelope, there was a knock at the door. It was Edgar. He bid her good morning with a dashing smile, his golden hair almost blinding in the morning sun.

God has blessed this man with far too many desirable features, Lydia thought bitterly.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I would like to have a meeting regarding our next movements," he said, stepping into the room as if it were his own and sitting on the single sofa. The foreign servant from before had followed him in. He took his position by the door and then didn't stir.

Nico had already finished eating and was stretched out on a cushion, meaning Edgar had missed the rare sight of him sitting up to dine.

"First, I would like you to have a look at this." Edgar placed a gold coin on the table beside him.

Lydia sat down across from him and picked it up. "It's an old coin," she remarked.

"It is engraved with my family's coat of arms. There is text on it too. According to legend, it was engraved directly by a fairy, in fairy script."

"I couldn't say for certain. It's far too small."

"Despite the fact you're a fairy doctor?"

"You ought to use a magnifying glass for this," she retorted, indignant. "Perhaps you were expecting to present me with your mysterious fairy-related problem and watch me solve it with a snap of my fingers, but I am *not* a sorceress. I am a fairy doctor. The tools of my trade are my knowledge of fairies and my ability to communicate with them."

"I know. Here is a copy, rewritten with the use of a magnifying glass. I wonder whether you might be able to read *this*?" He handed her a piece of paper.

Lydia did not try and hide her displeasure as she took it from him. Why had he not presented this in the first place?

There was text written in slightly curly handwriting on the page. Unless one was very much distracted by the fact that it was related to fairies, one would see immediately that it was written in the Latin alphabet.

“This is clearly English,” Lydia said. “Are you trying to test me?”

“I know nothing of your skills. There are people out there who like to claim a unique understanding of spirits, fairies, or future events, taking advantage of the fact that the majority of people cannot see these things. You, however, do not jump at the chance to class every little thing as spiritual, nor do you use my lack of comprehension as an excuse to speak nonsense. I believe it to be beneficial to both of us to start from common ground.”

His casual tone made Lydia’s frown deepen. She didn’t like to be underestimated. “You are descended from the Blue Knight and yet you cannot see fairies. I wonder if *Your Lordship* truly believes it was a fairy that engraved this coin?”

“It was engraved by a person,” Edgar replied. “At the very least, I do not think such delicate work is beyond the capability of human hands. Nor does that coin prove anything of the existence of fairies.”

“Essentially, you don’t believe in fairies, then. Yet you believe there exists this sword, said to be protected by them, to the extent that you would hire a seeker in the form of a fairy doctor, who may or may not be a fraud?”

“The Blue Knight’s sword itself is a historical artifact with nothing mystical about it. The sword’s hiding place is where things get more complicated. The text describing its whereabouts references several fairy names. Lydia, you said that the tools of your trade are your knowledge of and ability to communicate with fairies. I’m after the former, not some sort of supernatural power. I just need to know the meaning of the text engraved on this coin. Or does it hurt your pride to be asked for your assistance by a man who doesn’t believe in fairies?” There was a challenging glint in Edgar’s eye, and Lydia found she was eager to show him why fairy doctors had been needed since the olden days. The connection between fairies and humans was something too complex to

approach with mere knowledge.

"Edgar, if all you rely on is my knowledge, you will never obtain the sword."

"It sounds as though you know what you're talking about. In which case, please read this."

Lydia took a breath, then accepted the paper. "*The Jack in the Green from a spunky's cradle. A dance with the pixies on a moonlit night. Beyond the silky's Cross. The pooka is a labyrinth...* What is this?"

"That is what I'm asking you."

There were more fairy types in the text; Lydia scanned it right to the end. "*Exchange the Star of the Merrow with another. Lest they sing a forlorn song.* Is that all of it?"

"The Star of the Merrow refers to the star sapphire embedded in the sword."

"In which case, this last part refers to the all-important sword. I wonder what it means to exchange the Star with another?"

"I don't know. Nor do I understand much of the rest of it," said Edgar.

"The first half does seem to be a sort of hint at the sword's hiding place. Where is the Blue Knight's land? I cannot comment on much of this without seeing the earldom for myself."

"It consists of various pieces of land and buildings scattered across Britain." Edgar spread out a map, with red *x*'s marking certain locations.

"Where should we start?" Lydia asked.

"I was hoping you could answer that question."

Lydia couldn't; investigating each location one by one would take an inordinate amount of time. And here was Edgar, making it sound like it should be an exceedingly simple question. She supposed this was part of the job he'd hired her for as far as he was concerned.

"My job..." Lydia murmured to herself. She couldn't see a way out of taking Edgar's request on now; if she regarded the situation with more optimism, she could recognize that a client, and one who took her this seriously, was a very

rare thing indeed. If she wanted to make a name for herself, she couldn't afford to fumble this opportunity. A desperate desire to face the challenge began to stir within her.

Perhaps there was a hint in the text as to which portion of territory was most significant. It was when Lydia compared the text with the map that she noticed something.

"Many of these fairies are Irish."

"Is that so?" said Edgar. "But I hold no land or property in Ireland."

"And merrows are what those in Ireland call mermaids...so if this is a clue to the sword's hiding place, it may refer to somewhere near the sea." There was one *x* marked along Britain's western coast, close to Ireland, that commanded a view of the Irish Sea. "This could be it—The Isle of Mannan. As an island, it's likely to have a few legends relating to mermaids."

"Then we shall start there."

It would take them a long way off course from London, that was for sure.

"I should mention now that I'm not willing to work for free," Lydia said, "and that I would like to take payment in advance."

"Very well. How much will it be?"

It was only now that Lydia realized she had never given much thought to her rates; she'd never taken on a decent job, after all. There was no way she could let Edgar know that, or he'd take advantage of her, so she was careful to keep a neutral expression. If she asked for too little, he would think her naive—so she spread out her palm and showed him five fingers.

Edgar made no comment, instead calling on his servant. "Raven."

Raven left the room, following a silent order, and reappeared mere moments later. He carried with him an ebony tray with a check upon it. Edgar signed the check right in front of Lydia. She had to hold back a gasp when he handed it to her.

"Will that suffice?"

Lydia had thought she was overcharging with fifty pounds. She never

expected Edgar to come back with five hundred. She was almost ashamed to be receiving so much money at once, and there was no way for her to tell Edgar what she had really meant now.

“Then it’s settled. Do not let me down.” He stood up.

It was then that Raven addressed Lydia for the first time. “Miss Carlton, Would you like me to post that letter for you?”

Normally, Lydia would be impressed by his powers of observation, that he had spotted the envelope on her desk, but this particular utterance suddenly created tension in the air. Raven had spoken not out of politeness, but in order to alert his master to the fact that Lydia was attempting to contact an outsider.

“No, thank you,” Lydia replied hurriedly. “I shall post it myself.”

It was too late. Edgar had already turned his keen gaze on the letter.

“To whom are you writing?”

“My father. I need to let him know that my arrival in London has been delayed. Or do you have an issue with that?”

“I cannot let you do anything that risks exposing our movements. What if Huskley and his men beat us to the punch?”

“You’re exaggerating. I’m only telling him that I’m going to be late.”

“That is already enough evidence that you are assisting me. We have an agreement, Lydia, which makes me your employer. You must remain at the height of vigilance in regard to sensitive information, and you must do as I say.” Edgar’s tone wasn’t especially stern, but there was a peculiar assertiveness behind it that prevented Lydia from arguing back. He was clearly used to having people obey him, and the authority of his words was backed up by everything that gave him his noble qualities: the calmness in his gaze, the dignified tones of his voice, and the straightness of his posture.

Though she felt a small spark of rebellion within her, Lydia could do nothing but remain silent.

“I realize I am being unreasonable, and I apologize. However, Lydia, I ask that you do not give me cause for concern. For your sake more than mine.”

Would he abandon her to the ocean's depths if she sent the letter off secretly? There was a strange somberness to Edgar's tone that suggested he didn't want things to end up that way. That his tone sent a shiver up Lydia's spine was even stranger. The only thing she was sure of now was that her current situation was not so different as when she had been on the verge of being captured by Huskley. Perhaps that might have been preferable—she had no way to compare Edgar to Huskley—though she had the sense that being confined with the latter would have been much more straightforward.

Lydia's letter to her father remained on the desk. That Edgar had not taken it from her suggested that he was confident Raven would step in if she tried to send it, and indeed, she had lost the will to do so. More than a loyal servant, Raven seemed to be Edgar's right-hand man, and a shrewd one at that. From what she had seen before, she wouldn't have been surprised if they were thick as thieves—perhaps even literal thieves. Maybe Raven *would* kill anybody who dared to hurt Edgar.

"Make sure you serve my tea hotter next time," Nico called out as Edgar and Raven made to exit the room. "I'm not a brainless feline; I can handle the heat!"

Lydia turned to stare at him, confused by his sudden outburst. However, Edgar didn't seem to have heard him, and though Raven turned his head just a bit, he seemed to decide he was hearing things and quickly followed after his master.

"He calls himself the Blue Knight Earl's descendant, but refuses to believe that cats can talk, *and* I bet he can't even see fairies. How does he ever hope to find what he's after with that mindset?"

Edgar might not have been who he claimed after all, but Lydia had lost the opportunity to refuse him long ago. All of a sudden, she felt very exhausted, like a prisoner who had finally come to the realization that escape was impossible.

Whenever Lydia left her cabin from then on, Ermine escorted her. She would often engage in conversation with Lydia in a way that set her apart from the mysterious Raven, but her behavior may have been disingenuous, especially considering who her master was.

“The sun’s rays are particularly harsh today, Miss Carlton. What unusually fine weather for this country.” Ermine held a parasol over Lydia, who had come to stand out on deck. The maid ignored the stares of some of the other passengers, who seemed curious about her masculine attire. Lydia wasn’t so delicate as to fear the sun tanning her skin, but she was certainly jealous of Ermine’s pale complexion.

Lydia could almost see the yearning for another land’s sun plain on Ermine’s face. “Have you ever traveled abroad, Miss...”

“Please, call me Ermine. Indeed; I am not British.”

“Edgar did mention that he had been abroad all this time... I suppose that means he was telling the truth.”

“Do you find you are unable to trust him?”

“Yes, for all sorts of reasons. Our very first encounter involved him restraining me. I also cannot tell whether he is kind or scary, a gentleman or something else all together. Or even whether he is truly an earl.”

Ermine merely smiled noncommittally.

“And what of that young man, Raven? He’s young but utterly expressionless. Has Edgar ordered him never to smile? He seems the type to obey such a command with the utmost devotion.”

“That is just how Raven is. Lord Ashenbert has issued no such command, though if he did, I think Raven probably would give his all to obeying it.” The way Ermine spoke of Raven’s character hinted at a deeper intimacy; specifically, one of a caring nature. She elaborated before Lydia could voice her question, as though she had sensed it coming. “Raven is my younger brother.”

“Really? But—”

“Our skin colors differ because we have different fathers. I hear you know everything there is to know about fairies, Miss Carlton. Have you ever traveled to their world?”

Lydia faltered. “Well, it’s perfectly all right if you don’t believe me, but there are entrances to their world everywhere. On boundaries between shade and

sun, in spots where the wind suddenly changes direction, in hawthorn, elder, and other trees, or in the shadow of shamrock."

"Belief in spirits was commonplace in our country as well," Ermine said. "Although their existence was mostly feared. On occasion, there are children born who are said to be descended from the spirits. Raven is one of them."

"He is? Does that mean he can see and communicate with spirits as well?"

"I wonder about that. He seems reluctant to speak on the topic."

Lydia could well understand. Had she been more withdrawn herself and not used the spiritual world as a means to remember her mother, she might have been the same.

Ever since she was very young, people had whispered about Lydia being a changeling. She resembled neither her father nor mother, her eyes were of a peculiar color, and, as a baby in her cot, her eyes would often follow something unseen, after which she would suddenly break into laughter. When she was a little older, she would play exclusively by herself and speak to thin air, something which spooked her caretakers.

Lydia could ignore being called eccentric, but when people said she was a changeling, they were denying her connection to and memories of her mother, which was rather more painful.

"I wonder if he found that others couldn't understand him," Lydia said, "and suffered as a result."

"It's quite likely. And, in Raven's case, his supposed heritage was that of evil spirits. Such spirits are fated to be shunned by society, so even as his sister, I cannot fully understand his experiences. We both abandoned our birthplace, though we were effectively chased out. But we eventually found belonging at Lord Ashenbert's side."

"Because he is an earl of Fairyland?"

"Because he is an unhappy man. It has nothing to do with his status."

Unhappy? To Lydia, he seemed anything but. He was proud, coercive, and had no qualms about treating complete strangers, such as herself, as pawns in his

personal chess game; a man who enjoyed dangerous gambits and treasure hunting.

Ermine's red lips curved as she witnessed Lydia's confusion. It was a smile that conveyed neither happiness nor sadness.

"He can be kind and strict, yet both stem from his unhappiness. That is how he is able to accept the same from my brother and me. I only pray that locating Fairyland shall bring him true respite."

What does she mean by "true respite"? Was it because Edgar was descended from the Blue Knight that Ermine wanted him to return to the land where he belonged? Or was it because it was a false heritage that he would only find peace upon reaching it before anybody else?

The more sides Lydia saw to Edgar, Raven, and Ermine, the less she seemed to know them at all.

The ship's horn blared, the low, rumbling sound gradually swallowed up by the pale blue sky. A group of passengers who had been chatting on deck were now looking out to sea and pointing at something. Lydia craned her neck to get a better view.

It was a naval patrol boat, its large, black shadow drawing closer to the ship. At the same time, the ship started to slow.

"Has something happened?" Lydia wondered aloud.

Ermine furrowed her brow. "Let us return indoors, Miss Carlton."

Ermine led Lydia to Edgar's cabin. He was standing by the window, looking chagrined at the sight of the patrol boat outside. Then, he suddenly broke into an amused smirk and turned to Lydia. "It is quite possible that Huskley is searching for us."

"I beg your pardon?" she replied. "Does that mean he is using the navy to do so?"

"That, we shall find out shortly." Edgar looked unperturbed at the prospect of Huskley closing in on them.

The captain came to the cabin only a few moments later, explaining that they suspected a dangerous man was stowing away on board, and his men were there to conduct a search. Perhaps it was a fictitious complaint that Huskley had made to the military after seeing Lydia and Edgar board the ship.

Another man appeared with his subordinates in tow and introduced himself as lieutenant commander. “Please pardon the intrusion, my lord. I wonder if we might be allowed to search your cabin.”

“By all means. I shudder to think that there might be somebody dangerous stowing away in *this* cabin. There is another room which is not in use, so please check that one too.” Edgar made his request confidently without getting up from the sofa.

While his men searched, the lieutenant commander checked the identities of Raven and Ermine, and posed Lydia a few simple questions before requesting permission to enter her room too.

“What is the nature of this dangerous man?” Lydia asked, curious as to what sort of information Huskley may have passed on.

“It is quite possible that he is the same man behind a robbery incident in London. According to our information, there is a possibility that he is holding a hostage, so it was deemed a matter of utmost urgency.”

“A hostage?”

“Indeed, madame. Apparently, he threatened a young lady around your age and kidnapped her.”

“Mind you don’t frighten her, lieutenant commander,” Edgar warned. “This whole situation is unsettling enough as it is. Might this rumored robber be the same man who killed a hundred over in America?”

Only then did Lydia remember the newspaper article on the incident. She wondered whether Huskley was capitalizing on the fact that the robber was still on the run. By adding the detail of a hostage, he would be able to have the navy search for both her and Edgar at the same time. Most likely, he was unaware that they had tickets and was hoping to have them caught as stowaways.

“I beg your pardon, my lord. However, the only link between the two

criminals is their physical features. The American killer has already been executed."

The lieutenant commander's men returned and reported that they had found nothing suspicious. Just then, the man who had been taking notes behind him spoke.

"Now I think of it, that robber is said to be a young blond man with violet eyes..."

The lieutenant commander made no move to hide his discomfort, knitting his brow. "Enough, Royne."

"Ah yes, perfectly common features," Edgar remarked casually. "They happen to match my own."

Lydia couldn't help but stare at him. His description *did* match that of the robbers—but then so did that of several other men. It was an uneasy stirring in her chest that kept her gaze locked on Edgar.

"Yes, quite." The lieutenant commander chuckled. "Well, I believe our business here is finished. Thank you very much for your cooperation."

"I wish you good luck in your search, lieutenant commander," Edgar said.

Once the officers had left, he turned to Lydia, apparently having felt her gaze. Though she looked hurriedly away, she knew it was too late, and she was annoyed at herself for allowing him to sense her doubts.

"Lydia."

"Y-Yes?"

"We shall be arriving at Scarborough Harbor in two hours' time. Be sure you are ready to disembark." He shot her his usual flawless smile without questioning her at all.

"Care to explain yourself, Royne? Was it *really* your intention to brand His Lordship a thief?"

"No, sir," Royne replied. "I just couldn't help but note the similarities in their appearance..."

“Those similarities end at their hair and eye colors. The man depicted in the portrait had the look of an utter scoundrel about him!”

“That may be true, sir, but such sketches are unreliable. Besides, isn’t there one more significant feature of this criminal aside from his hair and eyes? One that would allow us to be absolutely certain?”

Until that moment, the lieutenant commander had been leading his subordinate down the passageway with hurried, important footsteps. Now, he stopped and turned to the younger man.

“Don’t tell me you were about to request that His Lordship stick out his *tongue*?”

Nico had been lying on the sunny spot of a marble lampstand when his nap was suddenly interrupted. He pricked up his ears.

“Do you really think we would have gotten away scot-free having asked him to disgrace himself in such a manner? Not only would we have been refused, he would have put forward a complaint to the higher officers. Besides, it is the *American* murderer who has that Cross tattooed on his tongue. The newspapers are only conflating him with the thief for sensationalist purposes—so don’t you start.”

“Sorry, sir. But is it really true that the murderer was executed? Sir John, they called him, didn’t they? A murderer and a robber... They said he had a high-class air about him and plenty of charisma...but according to rumors, the body that was hanged had neither.”

The lieutenant commander shrugged off his subordinate’s concerns. “I’ve yet to encounter a dead body that possesses charisma—or class, for that matter. There’s another mistake you’re making, Royne, and a very basic one. We’re searching for a stowaway rogue, not a passenger in an expensive cabin.”

Nico twiddled his whiskers thoughtfully as he watched the officers pass by, then returned to Lydia’s room on two legs.

“I wonder what that was all about...”

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After arriving at Scarborough Harbor, Lydia and her escorts took the railway going west. The view outside the window was monotonous; inside the compartment, Lydia sat across from Edgar, the air thick with unease. She wouldn't find peace no matter where she looked. Now and then, she would leave her seat without purpose.

"Why can't you stay put?" Nico appeared in the passageway, standing on two legs. "Are you trying to make him suspicious?"

"I know what you said earlier, Nico." Lydia hesitated. "But are you sure you weren't mistaken?"

"That officer was sure it wasn't him—I'd trust what he said."

"Yes. I wouldn't think that a dangerous criminal could speak the Queen's English perfectly either." Despite what she said, she still felt as though something were amiss. She had found Edgar suspicious from the very beginning.

"If you're that worried, you just need to have a look at his tongue."

Nico had told Lydia what he had overheard about the cross tattoo. She struggled to comprehend the madness required to come up with the idea of tattooing one's tongue, let alone to go through with it. Regardless, it was a valuable piece of information. Lydia had been fretting over how she would be able to check Edgar's tongue ever since Nico had told her about it on the ship.

"One's tongue is normally out of sight," Lydia pointed out. "And it's the American criminal with the tattoo. Finding out that Edgar doesn't have one won't prove he isn't behind the incident in London."

"At the very least, you'll know he hasn't killed anybody, which would be reassuring enough. That chap who got robbed in London survived the thing."

That was true, but his survival may just have been a coincidence. Lydia could see Nico's point, though. She would still like to know for sure whether Edgar had that tattoo on his tongue.

Though she continued to think on it, eventually Lydia returned to the compartment without a single idea. Edgar was dozing against the window, his

cane resting across his lap.

This could be my chance...

Lydia approached him tentatively, keeping her footsteps light. He showed no sign of waking. Even the way he *napped* was elegant, with one hand supporting his cheek. If his portrait were to be taken just at that moment, it would require a very extravagant frame indeed.

Edgar's golden hair cast a gentle shadow across his pale cheek. Lydia studied his lips for a while, though she knew they would not part for her eyes alone; pushing her fingers past them was sure to wake him from even the deepest slumber. Still without inspiration, she found that she could not take her gaze from him, nor move from where she was crouched before him.

I thought men were supposed to be...burlier than this.

Edgar had long eyelashes, shapely lips, and a delicate jawline. Lydia had the sense that she was regarding a work of art and was suddenly seized by the urge to touch it.

Just as Lydia made to reach for him, his lips moved—curving up into a small smile. He opened his eyes, immediately catching her gaze with his own. There was very little distance between them.

"Did you need something?"

Lydia stiffended. Her index finger was almost touching the tip of Edgar's nose.

"Had you attempted to steal a kiss from me, I would have carried on feigning sleep. I hadn't expected a poke."

"Um..." Lydia stuttered. "I wasn't..."

"You may touch me if you like."

"Oh! I wasn't going to!" She hastily withdrew her hand and tried to stand up, but Edgar's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"My apologies. I didn't mean to embarrass you. If this is what you were after, I shall gladly comply."

Seeing Edgar's face come ever closer, Lydia panicked. "N-No! Your tongue!"

“Tongue? You prefer the French style, do you?”

“H-Have you taken leave of your senses?!”

As she struggled to push him away, Lydia spotted Raven over Edgar’s shoulder, carrying some tea. He ignored the fact that Lydia was in danger of being pinned down against the seat and placed the tea on the table with an impassive expression before turning to leave.

“Excuse me! Lend me a hand!”

“Raven would not stop me,” Edgar said. “Not even if I were in the process of snapping your delicate neck in two.”

Was there no end to Raven’s loyalty? Or were Edgar and his companions simply a gang of thieves?

Lydia was overwhelmingly incensed. The next moment, she had forgotten both herself and the fact that she was dealing with an earl. She swung at him as though she were defending herself against an atrocious villain. Her palm made contact and Edgar finally let her go—but that wasn’t enough for her. She grabbed one of the nearby teacups and brandished it above her head.

“My lord!”

Raven’s shout brought Lydia back to her senses. He leaped forward to intervene. Unfortunately, it was too late to do anything about the burning-hot tea that rained down onto his arm.

“I-I’m so sorry!” she cried. “We must cool your skin!”

“There is no need for concern,” replied Raven. “I shall go and prepare a new pot.”

“Leave the tea,” Edgar commanded, “and have Ermine see to your arm.”

This time, Raven nodded. Lydia watched him go with a sigh.

“You need not worry about him,” Edgar told her calmly.

“Th-This is all your fault!” she protested. “Forcing me into... A-And entertaining ideas such as snapping my neck!”

“That was merely an example.”

“I wish that tea had spilled on you instead! It wasn’t my intention to hurt Raven!”

Edgar sighed. “Have you no sympathy for me, then? The man whom you struck?”

“None!” Lydia snapped, turning briskly and fleeing the compartment.

She spotted Raven’s dark figure in the washroom, but when she made to approach him, she heard Nico’s whisper, “I wouldn’t, Lydia. You tried to hurt his master; you’ll likely be killed.”

She swallowed anxiously. But it didn’t sit right with her to just ignore the fact that she’d spilled tea on him either. She was sure Raven must have heard her approach, but he didn’t turn around.

“Um, did I burn you?” she asked timidly.

“It isn’t serious. However...” Raven finally turned. As usual, he wasn’t smiling, but nor did he seem particularly angry. “You were correct. I ought to have stopped His Lordship.”

“Because I wouldn’t have ended up throwing tea at him?”

“I hadn’t expected you to go to such extreme lengths, Miss Carlton.”

Lydia was a little miffed; she found her sympathy for Raven’s injury dwindling. “You ought to know that there are plenty of women who would *not* be pleased by Edgar’s advances.”

“Indeed. I have learned as much.” He sounded earnest, his tone neither meant to tease nor reproach Lydia for her statement. Raven didn’t embellish his words. In some respects, that made him easier to read than Edgar, despite the lack of emotion on his face.

“How old are you?” Lydia asked, now that she had the chance.

“Eighteen.”

“Is that right? That makes me your junior by one year.”

“I have a baby face,” Raven admitted sincerely. His large eyes did give the impression that he was more boy than man. It was a feature that she could

imagine would make him look highly affable, if only he smiled.

“Is it true that you wouldn’t stop Edgar if he tried to kill someone?” Lydia asked.

“In such a situation, I would likely be the one doing the killing.”

Raven’s bold admission made Lydia shiver. Unlike Edgar, Raven didn’t make it sound like a joke.

“You mean to say you would dirty your hands in place of your master? You can still be a loyal servant without resorting to such things, you know...”

“If I am ever to sin, it shall be for His Lordship’s sake. He told me I need not kill for any other reason—though it took me a while to understand what he meant.”

Lydia herself was struggling to understand. She felt as though Raven’s words had placed her in a dark, bottomless abyss. She had always thought that Raven’s eyes were jet black like his hair, but from up close, she could see that they were tinged with dark green. Perhaps it was their color that led people to believe he was descended from spirits.

Once that thought struck, his eyes seemed to draw her in. He stared right back into hers.

“Ah! I’m so sorry. It’s just, your eyes are such an interesting color. My eyes are green too, you see. Here in Britain, the color green is associated with fairies, and since I can see them and seem to share other fairy-like characteristics, people often say I must be a changeling. A changeling...that is: a fairy child that is left to human parents in place of the human child whom the fairies take away.” Lydia babbled, attempting to clear the awkwardness created by accidentally staring at Raven.

“Spirits inhabit the forest,” said Raven. “The forests of Britain are a bright green, touched by the color of sunlight—much like your eyes. Where I come from, forests are thickly overgrown. A dark green that light cannot penetrate. The fairies here are too full of light; I cannot see them clearly. I would therefore wager that you would not be able to see the spirits I know either.” Lydia could swear she almost saw a smile on his face then. It was a dark, lonesome smile

that seemed to highlight the differences between them, despite the similarities in their abilities.

A boy born of spirits from another land.

They said that the Blue Knight enjoyed traveling and would endlessly amuse the royal court with stories of distant lands. The countries of Asia were farther than Fairyland and, at the time, more curious from the viewpoint of an Englishman. One of the earl's stories centered around a mysterious servant whom he had brought back with him from the land of the fairies.

Remembering the ancient legend, Lydia suddenly felt as though she herself were a character in one of the Blue Knight's tales. Could Edgar and Raven be the Blue Knight Earl and his retainer, returning to the human world? Or were they merely murderous thieves?

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The group alighted at the terminus, where the world was sinking into dusk. Train stations were normally situated in the suburbs, and here, too, there was only a single, quiet road outside the building. The few passengers who had gotten off had already hurried away, leaving Lydia, Edgar, Raven, and Ermine as the only people around.

Raven stepped out onto the road to hail a carriage. There was usually a stop behind the station.

"Looking for a carriage, sir?" A man appeared from the building's shadow and called out to them. "Where to?"

"No, thank you," Edgar replied curtly. "My servant has just gone to fetch us one."

"Come now," the man said, approaching. "I'll give you a fair price."

The next thing she knew, the man had grabbed Lydia's arm. She didn't even have time to scream before a knife was pushed against her throat.

Edgar and Ermine shifted into a fighting stance—but the three of them were already surrounded by more men who had slipped out of the shadows.

"Stay just where you are, sir." A single man stepped forward, flashing them a

pistol that was hidden beneath his frock coat. It was Huskley.

"Huskley," Edgar said, his voice tinged with mockery. "That you go by that name now is news to me."

Huskley scowled at Edgar. He was unrecognizable from the man who had previously treated Lydia with such courtesy. "Think you're clever, do you? You do realize that just *claiming* to be an earl doesn't make you one?"

"It is more than just a claim. And please, take care in how you address me. It is 'my lord,' or 'Your Lordship.' Not 'sir.'"

"Enough of this! This is how you're squandering my father's money, is it?!"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your father's solatium was rather paltry. Completely unsatisfactory, in fact. But I let it go; I am not wanting for money, after all."

"Solatium?" Huskley growled. "You stole everything he had and now you're still after the jewel he sought?! It's your fault that he's—"

"In hospital, straddling the boundary between life and death? No, it was your poor shot that put him there. Your father was right behind me. You should have known that, with your aim, there was a strong likelihood of hitting him. I'm rather incredulous that you managed to convince everyone that it was I who shot him."

"Silence! Unless you want me to make it so that that haughty mouth of yours can never utter another word!"

Dumbfounded, Lydia listened on. She was finding it difficult to comprehend the men's conversation. All she had was something about Edgar taking Huskley's father's money, and Huskley shooting his own father—although by mistake.

"Miss Carlton shall be assisting *us* from now on," Huskley said. His next remark was addressed to his men. "Tie them up. We'll hand them over to the police; let them hang."

"I wouldn't if I were you," warned Edgar. "That would make your and your father's crimes plain for all to see, and you'd be joining us on the gallows. Or

perhaps I ought to let you go first.”

At that exact moment, Lydia caught sight of a dark shadow moving beside her. It flew, brushing against Lydia’s cheek in the process, like a flutter of wind. The man restraining Lydia collapsed without a sound, his twisted neck robbing him of any recourse.

The raven’s shadow danced on. It floated down in front of its master, protecting him from the barrel of Huskley’s gun, and bearing a small knife as its weapon.



Huskley's men moved as one in an attempt to seize Raven. Lydia didn't recognize all of the faces as those from the ship; presumably, some of them were rogues picked up elsewhere. They were counting on their numbers advantage. What they didn't realize was that Raven wasn't their only opponent.

Ermine downed the man next to her with a single swoop of her leg. She then went to back up Raven, knife in hand. Lydia, amid her astonishment, realized that Ermine's masculine attire was to afford her ease of movement.

The Blue Knight Earl and his mysterious servants, a raven and an ermine. It was like they had stepped right out of a fairytale.

Edgar had appeared at Lydia's side before she registered it—and presently, he pulled on her arm. At that same moment, a gunshot split the air, its bullet denting the ground at their feet. After a swift jump to the side, Raven kicked upward, knocking the pistol right out of Huskley's grip. Then he spun around, covering Edgar from behind while deftly evading the men's attacks.

"My lord. There is a cab around the next corner."

"May I leave the rest to you?" Edgar asked.

"Just be careful," was all Raven said in response.

Edgar turned on his heel and began to run, leading Lydia by the arm. The small lights of the coach flashed far ahead through the dark twilight. Then, Lydia tripped, her feet entangled with the hem of her skirt. When she tried to stand up again, she found herself face to face with the tip of a saber.

"I thought I told you that *we* would take the girl. Struggle all you want, John. Dumping you in a rubbish heap and leaving you to die would be too good a death for you."

John?

Huskley had a firm grip on Lydia now.

Why is this happening? Suddenly, Lydia was seeing red. *Why does everybody think they can trick me—threaten me—and that I'll just go along with it?!*

So angered was she that she no longer gave a thought to the blade in Huskley's grip. She began to thrash her body this way and that, putting up a

fight.

“Cease this, Gotham!” Edgar shouted.

Lydia bit down on Huskley’s finger, causing him to raise his saber in anger. He thrust the weapon toward Edgar—it grazed him, and cut open a hole in the shoulder of his coat. Edgar screwed up his face in pain. Huskley went to strike again, at which the injured Edgar whipped out his cane, pulling a flexible rapier out from within it. Its blade met that of Huskley’s saber and, after the swords locked briefly, forced it away. The rapier still had some momentum left, and it sliced through the cuff of Huskley’s coat.

Huskley backed away hurriedly as Edgar started running again, Lydia in tow. When they finally found a coach, he bundled her aboard.

“Wh-Who are you?!” she demanded. “Who’s John?! And Gotham—”

Edgar grabbed her by the mouth to cut her off, then addressed the driver. “Get moving—posthaste.”

The coachman must have noticed Edgar’s injury and the fact that he was carrying a girl onboard against her will, but the roll of notes Edgar pushed into his hand ensured he asked no questions.

Pooka of Truth and Falsehood

The well was abandoned, but it still held water. The pail was hidden beneath overgrown grass, and Lydia had to wash it before drawing the water. In a corner of a room with a dirt floor—presumably a kitchen at one point—she picked up a chipped cup and a warped iron pot. The wind pushing against the wooden door made it wail, as though it were mourning the abandoned hovel's dilapidated state.

This place was a short distance from the road and concealed within the woods. Once the night had come in fully, Huskley and his men were unlikely to notice the house's presence should they come searching this way.

"Say, Lydia, don't you think now would be an opportune time to make your escape?" Nico suggested, appearing on the stone that surrounded the well.

"And where have you been?" Lydia asked. "I thought for sure we must have been separated."

"I stuck closely to you the entire time. I just chose to stay invisible."

"As you always do when there's any hint of danger."

"What do you suggest I should have done instead during all that fighting? It was difficult enough to keep you in my sights," Nico retorted. "Why on earth are you out here drawing water anyway?"

Lydia sat down next to Nico with a sigh. It was a pertinent question. She might not get another opportunity like this to escape. Even if Edgar were currently keeping an eye on her from within the hovel, his injury would likely prevent him from stopping her.

Lydia wasn't sure how far the carriage had taken them. After some time, Edgar had asked the coachman to stop and continue on to the next town without them. He'd then paid the fare and a great deal of hush money before leading Lydia on a meandering walk around the nearby fields.

Edgar must have assumed that Huskley was tailing their coach. It was when evening had truly set in that they came across this small, dilapidated house and

decided to spend the night there—awake and alert. Edgar hadn't done anything to physically force her compliance at that point, and yet Lydia had followed him. She almost had to laugh at herself when it crossed her mind that the presence of this thief might have comforted her, out on a dark, wild road at night, with no lights and no houses.

Yes. A thief.

"He really is the robber the police are after, isn't it?" Nico said.

"It would appear so..."

Edgar had referred to Huskley as "Gotham." Gotham was the name she had read in the newspapers, the victim of that burglary who was now on the verge of death—and Huskley was his son. When Edgar had entered their residence and stolen their money, "Huskley" had missed his shot and the bullet had hit his father instead. That was as much as Lydia had gleaned so far.

"Edgar said the money he stole was a solatium—compensation. He spoke as though both Dr. Gotham and his son were involved in some sort of wrongdoing."

"Listen, Lydia, if these villains want to fight amongst themselves and kill each other, that's up to them. But we ought to stay out of it. The man in that house is more than just a common thief—you don't need to check his tongue to work that much out. What was it they called him? Sir John? The criminal who was *meant* to have been executed in America..."

"I *know*, Nico. It's just..." Lydia stared at the graze she'd received on her palm when she had struggled against Huskley. "He protected me."

"Of course he did. He needs you to find the Blue Knight's sword."

"You're probably right. But suppose he had died defending me? Nothing I could do would have helped him then."

"He didn't die, and that injury he got isn't exactly lethal. Perhaps if he'd known your compassion was this easy to come by, he wouldn't have paid a whole five hundred pounds."

Lydia knew that Nico was likely correct. Her companion stuck out the pad of

his forepaw, upon which lay a white pill.

“Dissolve this in some hot water and have him drink it.”

“What is it?”

“A secret fairy sleeping pill. Put him to sleep; you’ll easily get away then. Those walking weapons of his—sorry, *servants*—are nowhere to be seen either.”

“I see... Yes, now would be a prime opportunity.”

“See that you make the best of it.”

Lydia wondered what was wrong with her. There was no telling what that larcenist would do to her if she stayed within his reach, and yet...

She stood up, powder in hand. When she ducked through the house’s entrance, whose wooden door was barely clinging to its hinges, she found Edgar slumped against the wall in a corner of the cramped room. He seemed exhausted. Seeing him weak and injured made Lydia want to think twice about fleeing, but she also had the sense that it would be naive to forget what he was capable of.

The fire was burning in the hearth; Edgar must have had matches on him. The flames flared red around broken chairs and other debris that took the place of firewood.

“You mustn’t move too much,” Lydia said, “else you may worsen your injury.”

Edgar looked up and cocked his head at her slightly, as though he hadn’t expected her to return. Though that might just have been what he wanted her to think. “All I did was light the fire.”

Lydia hung her iron pot, now filled with water, over the flames. Then, she took a few steps in his direction.

“Are you in pain?” she asked.

“A little.”

“This is comfrey,” she explained, holding the herb out to him. “Crumple up the leaves and spread them over your wound. It will stop the bleeding and

disinfect the area."

For a few moments, Edgar looked perplexed. His eyes narrowed as though he wished to comment, but eventually he took the comfrey, saying only, "You did well to find such a plant in the darkness."

"Speaking of which, might I have one of your cufflinks?" Lydia asked.

Edgar paused. "Ah. Payment." He unfastened one of his cufflinks, decorated with garnet, from his sleeve, then tossed it in Lydia's direction as though it were worthless.

"This isn't for me, you understand," Lydia explained, proceeding to throw the cufflink from the window.

"There's somebody outside?"

"Fairies."

"They charge a high price for such a common plant."

"You'd be hard-pressed to find such a well-grown comfrey plant this early in the season otherwise."

Edgar stared at the soft leaves for a spell, and then started to chuckle. "Is this a result of your ability to communicate with fairies?"

"And what if it is? Does that amuse you?"

"I am amused at myself," he clarified. "For one brief moment, it was as though I, too, believed in fairies."

"Do you mean to say that the comfrey leaf isn't enough to convince you?"

"I wonder. But more than fairies, I'm struggling to believe that you are really still here in front of me."

When Edgar admitted his own failings to her like that, Lydia couldn't help but feel like *she* was the villain for considering escaping and leaving him here alone. He wouldn't have been injured if it hadn't been for her.

At the very least, I ought to tend to his wound first. Then I'll plan my escape, Lydia told herself. It sounded like an excuse.

Raven and Ermine should be chasing the carriage just as Huskley was, so she

wasn't in any rush. Besides, it would be safer to walk closer to dawn, rather than in the black of night.

How curious that her resolve should be faltering so much in the first place. *She* was the one who had been deceived in the first place.

She stepped away from Edgar again and sat down on a creaky chair. "And why *is* it so hard to believe? Isn't tricking people, threatening them, and manipulating them to do whatever you want your specialty, *my lord*?"

"My magic has already worn off."

"I was never under any spell to start with," Lydia insisted, although inwardly she doubted her words. Might her present reluctance to leave be down to her inability to resist his dangerous charms?

The possibility crossed her mind, but she vehemently rejected it. She couldn't deny that he possessed the good looks and smooth tongue required to work his way into a woman's heart, but her own impression of him was far from sweet. If anything, she felt something akin to fear.

Edgar may have been born into a noble family, but he was still a savage criminal. He drew people in with his well-honed charisma and perfect smile. But that elegance was all a lie designed to hide the truth and use people.

Then again, if that was the case, why had he put himself in harm's way for Lydia's sake? Nico's explanation—that Edgar had done it so she would think favorably of him—made sense at first, but she couldn't imagine that he had had the time to calculate a move like that in the split second before the attack landed. And Lydia herself had acted so recklessly, she doubted Edgar could have foreseen her actions.

All this led to was a powerful curiosity to learn the truth behind this mysterious man—though perhaps that, too, was simply a spell he had cast on her.

"Who are you, really?" Lydia asked. "Lord Edgar Ashenbert? Or perhaps Sir John?"

Edgar seemed to mull her question over as he removed his frock coat, after which he answered, "Edgar. That was my first name."

“What do you mean by ‘was’?”

“‘Edgar’ is dead. The boy who carried that name died when he was twelve, along with his parents. After having been suspected of treason, his father killed his entire family before ending his own life. That was where the family’s lineage ended—I am but a ghost. It hardly matters what you call me.”

“But you didn’t die,” said Lydia.

“Indeed. Now, I’m sorry to have to do this in front of you, but...”

Edgar started to remove his waistcoat, followed by his blood-stained shirt. His neat eyebrows drew together as he inspected his wound. Despite his apology, his spot away from the hearth was too dim for Lydia to make out anything anyway.

He continued impassively. “It wasn’t because anybody came to my aid that I now live. When I came to, I was in a hellish town in southeast America. I had been sold to a man in want of a white slave, in a place where those who were technically dead didn’t count as human beings. During my fourth year there, I escaped—along with Raven and Ermine. We hid ourselves away in the town’s less affluent areas, evading our pursuers and doing whatever we could to survive.”

Even as she listened to Edgar’s magnificent tale, Lydia did not find herself moved to help him tend to his wound. She still didn’t trust him fully and wasn’t even sure whether what he was telling her in this moment was true.

“Whatever you could,” she mused. “Does that include theft? Murdering a hundred people?”

“The rumors have heavily embellished the truth.”

“And what is the truth?”

“We lived in filth; it was the lowest one can get. A place where other boys my age stole or sold their bodies in order to survive. Unable to read, they lived like stray dogs and had given up on everything—even rational thought. They simply didn’t know better. They didn’t know where to find the riches waiting for them, nor the means to reach them. Dirty money, which shouldn’t have existed, but did, beneath society’s surface.”

Lydia paused. “So you became their leader? Sir John?”

“Leader? King of a collection of down and out children? Well, I suppose you could put it that way. A king does nothing more than hand down commands to his men. He puts together a plan, positions those men, hands them weapons, then orders them forward. People die on the battlefield. Those deaths are caused directly by the king’s actions; in that sense, I cannot deny that I have killed. However, I do not wish to cause you anxiety, so I shall tell you this much: your remuneration for this work is not stolen money. I worked by day, then multiplied my earnings through gambling...dishonestly. I don’t suppose you like the sound of that either. Aside from that, I invested in businesses and bought up stock. That makes up the majority of my current assets. Fortunately, my finances are now in a position where I can call myself nobility without being questioned.”

Lydia could no longer do anything but keep quiet and listen. Edgar’s expression didn’t change once as he spoke, as though he were narrating the life of another.

“Technically, I am a dead man without a name or social position. Even my lawful business dealings are carried out under a different name. No matter where I run, I cannot shake off my mark of slavery and am in constant fear of the shadows of my pursuers.”

“Your...mark?” Lydia asked.

“You already know, don’t you? The Cross that I bear. I believe that is what you were looking for on the train?”

Edgar had known what she was up to. Hence the reason he had brushed it off with his tomfoolery. She wasn’t sure whether he could tell that the memory annoyed her, but either way, his eyes softened.

“I couldn’t help myself. Your reactions were rather sweet.”

How could he still talk like that, right in the midst of a serious conversation? “Next time I will douse you with boiling water!” she promised.

“There shan’t be a next time.”

“Good. Am I to take it, then, that you really do have a tattoo?”

“Not a tattoo; a brand. From the man who didn’t let me die. He branded all his livestock with that mark. I have no idea where the tattoo rumor spread from, but it seems to have been adopted by gangs in various areas. Consequently, my mark is less conspicuous.”

It seemed there was a collection of thieving gangs out there who were imitating Sir John. The heinous murderer could therefore be any one of them. Lydia was already giving Edgar the benefit of the doubt before she knew it.

“What of this man named Gotham, then? And how did you find your way back to Britain?”

“Gotham is a physician. He came to America seeking subjects for human experimentation. More specifically, he was after criminal brains for the sake of his psychiatric research.”

“Brains? Human experiments?”

“Yes,” said Edgar. “An anonymous report preceded my capture, and I was due to be hanged a few days later. Gotham secretly arranged for a substitute to take my place. I can only guess at how much money those involved walked away with.”

“Does that mean he took your brain?”

“Now, that *is* an amusing notion.”

Is it really? Lydia wondered. Edgar’s tale was already so fantastical that she was having trouble taking him at his word. The way he removed his tie and used it to bandage his wound suggested he was used to impromptu medical aid, that getting injured was an everyday occurrence for him.

“Gotham didn’t miss his chance to gather as much data as he could from me; it wasn’t every day he was able to take a live criminal back to London, after all. He drugged me and put me through a number of painful experiments tantamount to torture. I wasn’t his only subject; I had witnessed others having their heads cracked open and the contents tampered with, all whilst they were alive. It wasn’t just criminals either. He used innocent people in his experiments too. Countless lost their lives at his hands.”

The very thought of it made Lydia feel sick. She couldn’t imagine ever being

able to understand such a dark world—society's underbelly, where scheming and insanity came together—let alone picture what the people pulled into that world saw or felt. It followed, then, that she would likely never fully understand the man in front of her.

"I believe in the existence of fairies much more than I do the possibility that one's heart could be so irredeemably wicked." Lydia cast her gaze downward. After everything Edgar had told her, this was all she could think to say. "Are you saying these unconscionable people really exist? People who buy and sell human beings, and use them in experiments without a second thought?"

"You ought to see it as a blessing that you are even able to question it. But yes, humanity is capable of cruelty far beyond your wildest imaginations."

A change in the air around her made Lydia look up. She hadn't noticed Edgar move, but now he was standing right next to her and looking down at her face. Assuming this man was telling the truth about having had everything—his name, status, and past—stripped from him, and that he had survived solely by his own efforts...he was dangerous; charming as his smile was, it concealed something that no one but he could possibly comprehend.

Lydia recalled the rapier concealed in the cane he now carried. Her body stiffened.

"I first heard the stories and legends surrounding the Blue Knight as a child. The inscribed coin is something I picked up in an American antiques shop. It was always my intention to return to Britain in order to investigate that text," Edgar explained. "However, whilst I had made it to London, I was unable to make any progress as long as Gotham held me captive. I therefore allowed Gotham to stumble upon the coin and suggested to him that the text told of the hiding place of a star sapphire. Then, I waited for him to look into it himself. It served me well as a ploy to buy time; it wouldn't have done for Gotham to kill me before Raven and Ermine were able to extract me. It also meant that I was roped into this conflict with him over the treasure, but there is precious little I can do about it now."

"Supposing all of that is true, does that mean you were lying about being descended from the Blue Knight? If you are not the true heir, then it will be

impossible for you to retrieve the sword the merrows are protecting, whether you have my help or not."

"I must have that sword. There is no alternative."

"Would it really please you to adopt a false title?" Lydia asked. "Shouldn't you instead seek to retrieve the title you lost?"

Stooping down slightly, Edgar brought his face closer to hers. "You are mistaken if you believe that something is worthless simply because it is false, Lydia. My old name is tainted by the mark of treason. Suppose I did regain it; what would I be then? The enslaved boy and the gang leader are both dead. I require a name that carries a hefty significance, whether it is rightfully mine or not. A power that grants me complete immunity from all those responsible for dragging me into hell. Either I claim the title of earl or I perish in filth. I swear here and now that I shall turn falsehood into truth." At the closing of Edgar's quietly delivered rationale, Lydia found herself staring down the end of his cane as he offered it to her.

"Wh-What is it?"

"I daresay you shall find it difficult to sleep near a thief holding a bladed weapon. I am leaving it in your care." Edgar stepped away from Lydia and sat back down in the corner.

His true self was dead and buried. If, since that death, he had lived a false life as somebody else's property, then his entire existence was a lie. To Edgar, life wasn't divided into truth and false—*everything* was false. The only difference was whether something had value or not.

Lydia still wasn't sure how much of his story was true—but she was willing to bet that Edgar could clad himself in glass beads and they would shine as convincingly as diamonds. And yet, she could feel herself being deceived and drawn in by his tale. After all, what was so wrong with allowing herself to mistake glass for diamond?

A curious sentiment was taking over her mind: Though it wasn't strictly his, didn't the title of Blue Knight Earl suit this man more than any other? Not only that, but he had been nothing but gentlemanly in his conduct toward her, even going so far as to surrender his weapon to her. His intention may have simply

been to garner her sympathy, and indeed Lydia found herself wanting to believe he was a good man—though she was still wary of him. Edgar's relinquishment of his weapon may also have been a test to see whether she had any designs to flee. If she did, he would be in a bind. It would become that much more difficult to retrieve the Blue Knight's sword, and the risk of him getting caught by Huskley or the police would increase.

It was possible that he doubted a lone girl like Lydia would be able to do much with his cane, that he could stop her regardless. What would he do, then, if she feigned an escape attempt? Would he show his true, villainous colors? The sensible thing to do was to have him drink the sleeping pill before that could happen.

Her decision made, Lydia stood up, the pot above the fire in her sights. She scooped up some of the hot water into the damaged cup, then dropped in the sleeping pill and some fresh mint leaves, and handed it to Edgar.

"I'm afraid we don't have any tea, but this ought to help you relax a little."

"Thank you," Edgar responded with a lighthearted smile. Beyond that smile, however, was a sharpness that made an icy tension run up her spine. When he took the cup from her, his hand brushed against hers, and when she instinctively tried to pull it away, he grabbed it firmly. "What did you put in it?"

"Um... Wh-What are you—"

"Villains are constantly on guard. You may have thought you were being discreet, but I saw you add something that wasn't a mint leaf. You would do well to avoid provoking a fiend such as me."

"Let go of my hand."

"So you can run away?"

Lydia hesitated, only to come out with something that would only provoke him further. "Of course! You're a thief!"

"You display a considerable lack of self-preservation, just as you did when Huskley kidnapped you. Escape now, and without a plan, and it does not matter how many lives you have. You will not make it."

“B-Because you’ll kill me?”

“I wouldn’t kill you. Without you, I would have no hope of finding the sword.”

“You do realize it will take more than threats for me to do exactly what you want?”

“You really *don’t* understand, do you? There are countless ways of forcing somebody to do what you need them to. Such a naive girl. I don’t suppose you can even imagine what it is to fall into such despair that you can’t even breathe.”

Unhappy. That was how Ermine had described Edgar. It seemed to Lydia that the man before her was showing her who he truly was for the first time. It made her heart ache painfully enough to drown out her fear. And what she was seeing was not the true colors of a criminal, but the suffering of one who had had his happiness, his future, and everything else stolen from him.

“And you...*do* know what such despair is like?” Lydia asked.

Edgar furrowed his brow, and she instantly wondered whether he was angry at her for asking something so personal.

Perhaps my ability to sense danger really is distorted...

Then, he suddenly let go of her and cast his anguished gaze downward. After a long moment, he whispered, “That’s right. The Blue Knight Earl’s sword is my final hope. Lydia. Are you going to forsake me?”

His eyes seemed to cling to her, as though she were a lover he was begging not to go. Again, Lydia found herself close to forgetting that she was essentially his prisoner.

“Please, do not make me answer that.”

“Don’t leave me.”

“I don’t understand. Was it not your intention to threaten me that I might do your bidding?”

“If you insist on leaving, know that you leave behind a man bound for death.”

“Wait a moment. Is that another threat?”

“Should my final hope die out, then all that is left is for me to endure the suffering that is life.” Edgar gazed at the cup for a moment before downing its contents with a brooding expression. “Assuming that was poison, I don’t suppose the risk of me dying distresses you very much.”

“Poison? It was a sleeping drug.”

“I see. Then I suppose my fate shall be sealed the moment I awaken. Should you have vanished, that will be the end for me.” He sighed softly. “That doesn’t sound too bad, does it? My fate is in your hands. Does that not sound like a sentiment shared between two passionate lovers?”

Lydia willed him to take this more seriously. She, meanwhile, was wrapped up in confusion.

Edgar gave her a sad smile, yet one more relaxed than any she had seen from him. “Goodnight, my fairy.”



Even his more flippant remarks sounded like a serious attempt to lure her in when he made them. Leaving her with those sweet tones in her ears, Edgar wrapped himself up in his coat and lay down on the floor. He drifted off almost at once, leaving himself completely defenseless. Lydia stayed rooted to the spot, watching him.

"Honestly! I have no idea how you made it out of that one." Nico came into view. "You completely misjudged the timing when you slipped that pill into his drink. I suppose it doesn't matter too much, though, seeing as he *did* drink it." Nico nudged Edgar with a hind paw to make sure the drug had taken effect. "All right, Lydia. Let's go."

That man had called Edgar “Ted.” That voice, forever ingrained in his memory, tormented Edgar in his dreams even now.

“Ted, you are perfection. The only thing you need to worry about is to look down on those born in squalor and allow yourself to bask in the light. Do that, and in time, your soon-to-be worshippers will throw themselves at your feet.”

“Allow me to teach you how simple it is to manipulate people. You will learn how to make others do your bidding, believing all the while they are following their own will. And then, you will become me*. You will think like me and dominate and control as I do.”*

It was not to be; Edgar had fled from that man, subverting his expectations.

The man who had attempted to make Edgar his puppet called himself the Prince. A mask covered half of his face, apparently to hide its disfigurement from an injury sustained in war. Unable to be in the presence of others, he wanted a charming puppet, fiercely loyal, who would move, speak, and work in his stead. His machination, to strip Edgar of his free will and sense of self to create a shell of a human being, was destined for failure.

And yet, Edgar grew unexpectedly anxious. Could it not be that, by continuously resisting, he was playing straight into the Prince’s hands? In everything Edgar was doing to run, hide, and survive, he made use of the tricks the Prince had drummed into him. He found success by elevating himself and treating others generously in order to paint himself as a man of charm. All he did was lead them to happiness, anxiety, sympathy, or fear—the rest, they did willingly. By manipulating emotions, he was able to make people act in a way that most benefited him.

However, Edgar soon learned that those he manipulated were not his true allies. Trust could only blossom between those whose emotional states were on equal footing; there was no trust between slave and master or leader and worshipper. Trust was not something that came easily; some people were fated never to believe in each other.

The only people Edgar could truly call his allies were Raven and Ermine. Feeling he had no other choice, he relied on the means most readily available to him for his survival. He would exploit others as he saw fit, for they would never

understand the suffering that he and his allies had endured.

Lydia, too, was meant to be another name to add to the list of those he had used—but trying to win her over hadn't gone so well. A naive young girl on the cusp of adulthood, he had seen her as an easy target. However, her trust hadn't been forthcoming. He hadn't accounted for the appearance of Gotham's eldest son forcing him to reveal his identity, but the wounds inflicted on him by "Huskley" should have served him well in garnering Lydia's sympathies. That was why Edgar had told her about his background. It looked like she had wavered but, in the end, seemingly found it impossible to trust him.

When Edgar saw her slipping that drug into his water, he knew his options had been narrowed down to one: forcing her hand by violent means. Why he had done nothing while her opportunity to escape came closer and closer, he didn't know.

*"And you...*do *know what such despair is like?"*

Why had she shown concern for him when he was a criminal who ought to be despised? By all accounts, she should have been devoting the entirety of her concentration to how she would protect herself. How did she see him through those golden-green, fairylike eyes of hers?

It was Edgar's intention to be ever aware of how others saw him. He was used to consciously putting on an act for people, leaving them with an impression of him that he had picked out specifically. For Lydia, he had played the part of an atrocious villain—and yet it was like she could see through his endless layers of masks to what lay beneath. It astonished him that he had resorted to opening up his heart and begging her not to leave.

He had told her he would die—something that could by no means be called a threat. And then, he had resigned himself to his fate. In fact, he would have rather she'd given him poison.

The sleeping drug was gradually losing its effect; Edgar was being drawn towards wakefulness. Light seeped through his eyelids, which he slowly opened. The morning sun was slipping through the dilapidated roof and the cracks in the walls to flow over his body. The end to his lonesome night had come all too soon.

Upon hearing a *meow*, Edgar righted himself to see a gray cat wearing a necktie on the window frame: Lydia's cat. No sooner had he asked himself what it was doing here than he spotted the girl sleeping in the chair by the hearth with his cane in her arms.

"This is utterly ridiculous," Nico muttered, tossing a scone in the direction of the puzzled man staring at Lydia.

When the scone hit his head, Edgar turned around. Either he was still wondering why Lydia hadn't fled or it was the cat holding a scone between its forepaws that was causing the furrow in his brow. He stared at the scone on the floor, as though he didn't want to believe he had just been offered food by a cat.

"Breakfast," Nico said, making sure he sounded sufficiently haughty.

"Nico, was it? I'm afraid I shall have to decline your generous offer. Just as you prefer your tea hot, it is a principle of mine not to accept food from others."

"Should I take that to mean you can hear me?"

"Though I cannot explain why, you disturb me somewhat."

"Oh, I see. You *can* hear me but you aren't fully aware of it. I run into people like you, who can't make up their minds, now and then. Not that it matters, as long as you can understand me, and this especially: you lay a single finger on Lydia and you're finished." Nico opened his jowls wide and bore his fangs at Edgar.

The message seemed to get through.

"You are concerned for her safety, I see," Edgar said, looking in Lydia's direction again. "Why on Earth didn't she run away?"

"If only I knew."

Nico was monumentally unhappy with Lydia's decision. He had tried to convince her that, as a villain, Edgar's death would be a boon to society, but still she had not left him. Whether it was sympathy for the man who had been

wounded for her sake, or whether the thought of leaving him to die was distasteful to her, he wasn't sure.

Nico had come to realize that Lydia was likely incapable of abandoning somebody who needed her. After all, she had never hated anybody, despite having been treated as an eccentric and called a changeling. On the contrary, she had held fast to the belief that there were others out there with powers similar to hers, traversing the same bridge between human-and fairykind, and that one day, she would be needed by somebody. Though hanging a sign advertising her services as a fairy doctor arguably drew an even larger target on her back, Nico had no doubt that she would treat any clients with genuine kindness. That was why she couldn't bring herself to abandon Edgar; she wasn't able to resent him to that extent.

"You don't think she's fallen for me?" Edgar suggested.

"No."

"I thought not..."

The pale sunlight made Lydia's hair glow in auburn shades. Edgar stood up and made to approach her, at which Nico swiftly jumped onto her lap.

"You don't want me near her?" Edgar said. "I was only after a slight touch. You can permit me that much, can't you?"

"That isn't funny."

Edgar reached out for her anyway. His fingers made contact with a soft strand of hair that had fallen over her cheek. Her eyelids slid open a crack, allowing the light to reflect in her golden-green eyes. Eyes which saw what others could not.

"Good morning, Lydia." As brazen as he could be, Edgar snaked an arm around Nico to take Lydia's hand and plant a kiss on its back.

"Ah... What are you doing, you pervert?!" Lydia dodged out of the way.

"Nothing. I couldn't, with your cat watching."

Nico sighed, lamenting the fact that Lydia had shown compassion for such a flippant man. "I fetched us some scones, Lydia. Let's have breakfast."

She caught the scone Nico tossed her way in both hands, then shot Edgar a

wary look.

“I was worried I had offended you in some way,” Edgar said, “which makes me all the more pleased to be able to see you again.”

“You *did* offend me. I despise liars. Therefore, I despise *you*.”

“But you did not abandon me.”

“That is only because I am a fairy doctor and you are my client. But I will *not* get you the Blue Knight’s sword. I will instead show you that, if there truly are merrows protecting it, you have no hope of ever obtaining it. Merrows are not evil, but they possess a dangerous power. You are an impulsive thief who does not believe in fairies, and it is therefore my role as a fairy doctor to enlighten you on the truth.”

“May I take that to mean that you are concerned for my safety?”

“You may take it to mean that I have principles which sometimes cause me grief.”

“Let us work together and obtain that sword!”

“Edgar? Are you even listening to me?”

“Ah, so you are calling me by that name.”

“It is your real name, isn’t it?”

“I am utterly delighted, Lydia!”

Lydia could barely keep up. When Edgar grabbed her hand again, she winced. “I am starting to wonder whether your talk of death was nothing but a ploy...”

She’s only starting *to wonder?* thought Nico.

“I am alive because you stayed with me,” Edgar said. “You saved my life.”

“Fine! Just let go of me!”

Nico couldn’t help but worry about what was to come. He decided Edgar might end up being more troublesome than the merrows.

***

It had not been long since Professor Carlton had seen Scotland Yard at his

residence in London and spoken with an inspector whom he knew well. He had received a letter from his daughter, Lydia, a few days prior, in which she had written her time and date of departure. However, although her ship should have arrived in London by now, she had not been to see him. Nor had he had any further word from her, so he sent a letter to her residence in Scotland. Not wanting to wait for a reply in case of the worst, he had decided to consult the inspector.

According to the officer, there was no evidence that a “Lydia Carlton” had ever boarded the vessel for which she had purchased a ticket. Additionally, there were witnesses who claimed to have seen a man resembling the Gotham thief on the same day the ship had left the Firth of Forth, apparently with a young woman in tow.

“But that is far from sufficient evidence to prove that your daughter has been kidnapped,” the inspector added. “Is there anything else you feel we ought to know about? Such as an intimidating letter, or something as simple as suspicious persons loitering around your home?”

“Nothing like that. I’m speaking to you now because I want this solved *before* we get to that point.”

Carlton was a laid-back sort, but even he was prone to getting riled up when it came to his precious daughter. The thought that she might have been kidnapped by a thief horrified him. The time he had spent pulling his hair out over it made him appear even more disheveled than usual.

“Should the culprit make contact with you, please inform us at once,” the inspector said.

“And if there is no contact? Are you not going to start searching for my daughter immediately?”

“Every police force across Great Britain is currently focused on pursuing this thief. It is possible he has fled the country already, in which case there would be no way to determine whether he has your daughter. Please understand that searching for her alone would make for a highly difficult task.”

It was with that final businesslike remark that the inspector departed, leaving Carlton to slump on the sofa with his head in his hands. It wasn’t until his

student shook him by the shoulder that his mind regained focus.

“Is something the matter, sir? Aren’t you feeling well?”

“Hm? Oh, it’s you, Langley.” Putting his round spectacles back on, Carlton thought for a moment before suddenly jumping to his feet. “Sitting around won’t do. Not when there’s a chance my daughter has been kidnapped!”

“What?! Is that true?”

“I shall go searching for her myself! Langley, I’m leaving my work in your hands.”

“Hold on a moment, sir! Where exactly are you going?”

“I shall begin by calling on her house in Scotland, and then...” As he spoke, Carlton entered his bedroom and opened his suitcase. Throwing open his closet, he started flinging clothes into the case.

“But you didn’t receive any response to the letter you sent to her house, did you? Do you even have any clues as to her whereabouts?”

Carlton hesitated. “No.”

If the police were saying they had no way to find her, then how could a citizen like him even begin to hope? Drained, Carlton slumped onto the bed.

“Please, do not worry yourself too much,” Langley said. “Let me have the maid prepare you some tea. It would be best to consider your options after you’ve had something to drink.”

Langley was somewhat used to dealing with the professor. His own daughter had called him incompetent when it came to anything outside of research, and Langley could see where she was coming from. Carlton was a lean man who didn’t pay much heed to the state of his hair or dress. It was standard fare for him to walk through the university campus with an open book in hand, only to step into gutters, bump into trees, and be bitten by dogs. From a student’s perspective, however, none of that had any bearing on his qualities as a teacher.

“You’re right—I ought to drink something. I apologize for losing my composure.”

His mind a little calmer, Carlton began to think. Suppose Lydia *hadn't* been kidnapped and she had just run into a spot of trouble that delayed her arrival? All he needed to do was wait and the problem would likely fix itself. Lydia knew how to take care of herself—that was why he had never been overly worried about living so far away from her. He had no doubt that he would eventually hear from her or that she would simply show up out of the blue.

On the other hand, supposing she *had* run into that thief? He may well come asking Carlton for a ransom, in which case, there was little he could do now. However, if the robber's goal *wasn't* money, but a hostage to aid in his escape, then either Lydia would be released when he no longer needed her or...

The deeper Carlton thought, the more dire the situation seemed. Even his brandy and tea was failing to calm him down.

"You're worried about the man who robbed Dr. Gotham's estate, aren't you, sir? Should he be involved, it creates a curious link."

Carlton looked up at his student. "What kind of link?"

"Don't you remember? Dr. Gotham came to the university several times. He wouldn't stop asking you about that fabled hidden treasure."

As part of his specialization in natural history, Carlton was especially well versed in minerals. In particular, he held a deep knowledge about precious stones—not just those that existed in the present, but also those from past eras, including the ones limited to folklore and fables. He classified and sorted them all.

For example, there was Alexander's Emerald, said to bring glory to its holder, or Cleopatra's Ruby, said to bring about destruction. Even more mysterious were Cassandra's Crystal, Salome's Jasper, and King Solomon's Iolite. Carlton's interest in the legends lay solely in creating a comprehensive catalog of the marvelous minerals left behind by the natural world; it had nothing to do with the occultism that had been gaining popularity as of late. However, he was receiving more and more inquiries from those who *were* interested in such things. It was only now that Carlton finally remembered one Dr. Gotham to be among them. As he recalled, the physician had asked after a mythical star sapphire.

“I *do* remember, now that you mention it,” Carlton said. “That was the gentleman who asked me about a so-called Star of the Merrow and whether it truly exists.”

“*Does* it exist?”

“Who’s to say? It’s a stone spoken of in folklore. It supposedly existed around three hundred years ago under the ownership of an earl, Lord Ashenbert, of whom we *do* have historical records. In the appendices of F. Brown’s *The Blue Knight Earl*, it is written that the earl, or a man supposed to be him, entrusted the sapphire to the care of some merrows before disappearing. That story, however, is not found anywhere else. It is unclear whether it is a work of fiction, so it does not constitute definite proof. And, according to historical records, the earl was never seen again after leaving the country, so it is possible that the sapphire went missing with him. For example, he may have perished in a shipwreck, in which case every item on his personage would be at the bottom of the sea. Perhaps that is what inspired the romantic notion of merrows being involved.”

Could any of that have something to do with Lydia’s disappearance? What would she have to offer the robber who broke into Gotham’s estate?

While Carlton was putting the pieces together, his maid returned. “A gentleman called himself Dr. Gotham’s son is here to see you, sir.”

“I beg your pardon?”

The professor rushed out of the room to usher their guest in personally. His visitor introduced himself as Dr. Gotham’s third eldest son. He took a seat on the drawing room sofa, then jumped right into why he was there.

“I am sure you have heard that my father is currently in hospital after having been shot by that thief, yes? Something of the utmost importance has arisen from these circumstances which I must convey to you, Professor Carlton.”

“Does it concern the Star of the Merrow?”

The man looked surprised for a moment but quickly regained his neutral expression and nodded.

“The thief was not only interested in money, but the Star of the Merrow as

well. My father had been researching the gem's whereabouts using the information you so kindly shared with him. He came across a coin belonging to an earl's house, into which a poem seemingly hinting at the sapphire's location was engraved. However, the thief stole that too. The poem lists several fairies, which was beyond my father's comprehension, so he sought out somebody who could make sense of it. That was when he heard that your late wife was a fairy doctor."

Not liking where this was going, Carlton clasped his sweaty palms together.

"Upon learning that your daughter was advertising her own services as a fairy doctor, he decided to seek her help."

"Ah, that's right!" Langley said. "I bumped into Dr. Gotham out and about a while ago, and he did ask me about your daughter, sir."

"Did you tell him that Lydia was a fairy doctor?" asked Carlton.

"No. Well...I suppose it *did* come up during our chat, although as it has been so many years since I've met her, all I could tell Dr. Gotham about her features when he asked was that her hair was the color of rust," Langley said apologetically.

It wasn't as though Carlton had been keeping the existence of his daughter a secret, so he couldn't blame his student for talking about her.

"It's not your fault, Langley." He turned back to Gotham's son. "Do you mean to say that is how the thief learned of my daughter?"

"Lamentable as it is, yes. It is quite possible that the thief already has her."

"Yes, the Yard told me as much." Carlton cast his gaze downward with a deep sigh. Things were as bad as he had feared.

His visitor frowned dubiously. "Is that so? Well, I'm afraid the Yard isn't to be trusted. My eldest brother has had the thief's description published in newspapers across the country and is offering a reward for any information. I have come begging your assistance, professor."

"I am happy to do anything I can."

"We have received firsthand accounts of your daughter, accompanied by a

man matching the thief's description. They were on a westbound train departing from Scarborough. It's possible the thief has threatened her into assisting him. If so, is there anywhere your daughter might be leading him in search of the sapphire?"

"Unlike her, I am not well-versed in fairylore."

"But you know her better than we do, and her safety depends on this."

Carlton could not argue with that. Gotham's son handed him a transcription of the aforementioned poem and a map. The map was marked with locations connected to the Lord Ashenbert who had lived three hundred years ago. Where would Lydia be heading?

"I also ask that you accompany us in the search for your daughter, professor."

"I was hoping to be allowed to go with you too, of course. Are we able to depart immediately?"

"Yes, but what of the location?"

"I shall think on it in the carriage."

It was the first time Langley had witnessed Carlton making such a snap judgment about anything other than his work.

A Night by the Sea

After a string of train and carriage journeys, Lydia and Edgar eventually came to a quiet town on the Irish Sea. Lydia had a perfect view of the moon glittering across the water's surface from where she stood at the windowside. Edgar, meanwhile, was sitting farther inside the room on an elegantly curved chair, enjoying a glass of wine with the manor's lord.

One of the town's gentry, the owner had trusted Edgar at once after he had introduced himself as an earl. An expert at spinning tales, Edgar had convinced him that he had been injured by a thief and separated from his servants. The man had then called a doctor, prepared him some fresh clothes, and when Edgar had claimed to be an acquaintance of a certain noble also known to him, happily arranged for him and Lydia to stay there. He had seemed deeply moved, claiming it was an honor to be able to host an earl.

"Incidentally, my lord, it was the Isle of Mannan you were heading for, yes? I don't believe there is anything worth seeing over there."

"Regardless, it is a part of my land. It would seem that nobody came to see it during my father's lifetime, but as his successor, I am determined to examine my territory with my own eyes. Especially seeing as it is scattered all over Great Britain."

It appeared that Edgar's wound, having been treated properly by the doctor, was no longer hurting. Why else would he be so freely drinking the alcohol that the doctor had warned him to temporarily refrain from? His gorgeous golden hair had never lost its luster, even as he lay in that dilapidated house, but beneath the light of the chandelier, it shone ever more radiantly.

Lydia looked down, comparing it with the state of her own hair. She didn't like how the room's lighting made the dull russet strands look even darker. She was jealous of Edgar's hair color and wondered why she couldn't have inherited the brighter tones of her parents' heads. Even black would have made her look intellectual, at least, whereas her insipid rusty shade did nothing for her. Then again, even if she *did* have blonde hair, she could never hope to attain the same

haughty elegance that Edgar possessed. The manor's expensive furnishings were probably eagerly awaiting the rare visit of somebody just like him to properly complement their splendor.

This petty thought left Lydia exasperated with herself.

"Is that right? My apologies for making such a discourteous comment. Now that we are on the subject, I *do* recall there being an old castle on the island. From what I've heard, it's inhabited by nothing but merfolk. Might they belong to your lordship too?"

At the mention of merfolk, Lydia began to pay more attention.

"I believe the castle was built during the sixteenth century," Edgar said. "From what I know, the earl at the time was partial to the isle's tranquil charms and constructed it as a villa. As for merfolk living there, this is the first I'm hearing of it."

"It's a simple rumor. The island's a treasure trove of merfolk lore."

"Like what? What kinds of stories are there?" Lydia had asked the question before she could stop herself.

Their host was taken aback by her enthusiasm. "Well, for instance..."

"My companion is deeply interested in anything to do with fairies. As for me, I should like to learn anything I can in relation to the island."

"I'm far from an expert on the matter, and I'm sure you will already have heard such stories if you know about merfolk. Stories about their songs captivating people, who are then dragged to the ocean floor. They say the tidal current around the island comes on very suddenly, so the merfolk tales likely come from the ships that met with disaster there."

"One cannot necessarily put so many shipwrecks down to coincidence, especially when merfolk are capable of controlling the waves and the tides. I would also like to ask how the merfolk on the Isle of Mannan came to inhabit the castle and not just the waters. Do any of the stories passed down explain that?"

Their host frowned, every bit as confused and annoyed as Lydia was earnest.

He thought himself long past the age for discussing fairies. It was a reaction she was very much used to from ordinary people, as though they couldn't comprehend what she was talking about and became irritated as a result. All she needed to do was tell herself under her breath that it didn't bother her. This time, however, she was desperate for any information on the merrows that she could get. At the moment, she had nothing.

"Has anybody *seen* the merfolk at the castle?" Only when Edgar asked a question of his own did their host finally respond.

"Not seen, exactly, but there are stories of singing being heard from within the castle, only for the corpse of a thief who entered to wash up ashore the next day. Groundless rumors, of course. Stories of fairies and spirits and such serve no purpose other than to entertain the childish."

The word "childish" had Lydia seeing red. She opened her mouth for a retort, but Edgar jumped in first.

"I happen to be rather fond of groundless rumors. It is tiresome, however, when one struggles to grow up."

The bewildered look on the other man's face gave Lydia a small glow of satisfaction. "I didn't mean any offense, my lord! Ah, but it is about time I retired for the night." He rose nervously to his feet.

"Of course," Edgar said.

"Um, may I ask just one more thing?" Lydia said, still irritated.

"What is it?"

"May I set down a path for some lost fairies? This room is currently filled with them."

The host scowled at her, but at this point, she was past getting any more uncomfortable.

"It's just an inoffensive game, sir," Edgar said. "I ask that you allow her to do as she pleases, so long as it does not cause problems for you."

"Your younger sister is a strange one, my lord. But very well. Goodnight." Leaving only those words as consent, he left the room.

“Sister?” Lydia turned to glare at her companion.

“Had I not introduced you as such, it would have raised needless suspicions concerning why a lone man and woman are together.”

“Introducing us as siblings is even more suspicious! We look nothing alike!”

“Oh? Should I come clean to the landlord, then, and tell him we are clandestine lovers?”

“That... That would also be a lie!”

“Please do not reject the notion so passionately, Lydia, lest you damage my heart. Anyway, is it true that there are lost fairies in here?”

Lydia pointedly turned her face away from him and poured some lemon water from the jug they had into a glass. She picked up the glass and approached a corner of the room.

“Does this mean the room as you currently see it is swarming with fairies?” Edgar pressed.

“That’s right. They seem to have been passing through here coincidentally.”

Edgar put his own glass down on the table. As he did, he deftly managed to avoid placing it right on top of a brownie that was lying there. In fact, he hadn’t trampled on a single fairy since they had entered the room. He seemed to be sensitive to them, even if he couldn’t see them. The way their host had sat on them, squashed them beneath cushions, and kicked them while walking had pushed Lydia to speak up. She was sure that the fairies must have been retaliating night after night. Still, their host seemed like the dense type who wouldn’t notice his hairs being plucked or the bruises that came about as a result of pinching.

Lydia put a drop of lemon water by the wall for the fairies. She continued on, making a path of tiny water droplets leading from the window to the door. Her actions seemed to have piqued Edgar’s interest, as he approached the wall and peered down at it.

“Is this the ‘path’ you spoke of? Is there a line of fairies here, then?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of fairies?”

“A type of brownie. They’re small and brown and have wrinkled faces.”

“Most intriguing. Would I be able to create a path for them too?”

“Would you like to?”

Edgar smiled and nodded. He took the glass of lemon water from Lydia and sprinkled droplets as instructed.

“Are they following it?” He looked as delighted as a child at play.

“Yes. But are you really enjoying this when you are unable to see them?”

“Imagining them is amusing. Is this a part of your work as well?”

“Yes; facilitating the coexistence of people and fairies. I wouldn’t be able to conduct any transactions with fairies if they didn’t trust me. Fairies that get trampled by those who cannot see them will retaliate by pulling tricks, only to be trampled again. It’s a vicious circle that leads nowhere, wouldn’t you agree? All it takes is a little consideration for the fairies to keep the peace; to tie a ribbon by the windowsill or door as a guide, for example. Simple as it is, that sort of knowledge has been forgotten.”

Edgar chuckled as he allowed the last drop of water to fall by the door. Lydia couldn’t tell if he was listening to her or not. She opened the door a crack and watched to make sure all the fairies got out safely.

“But you don’t think there’s any such thing as fairies, do you?” she continued.

“They exist in dreams, not reality. *Your* reality, however, seems much more expansive than that of most. Some people have superior vision and can see farther than others. Hearing you speak, I start to wonder whether this might not be a similar phenomenon.”

“You are a curious man.” It was the first time Lydia was describing someone else with the word that was so often used to describe her. “Oh, please excuse me. I don’t mean to offend; I was just surprised. Nobody has ever spoken of my ability in that way.”

“Is that so?”

Now that the bustling fairies were out of the room, Lydia was suddenly keenly aware that she and Edgar were alone. In order to make a path for the fairies, the two had been huddled together, shoulder to shoulder. Their proximity had not changed, and Edgar was now looking down at her intently. Nico was nowhere to be seen either.

“I-I think I’m talking too much. I’ve never spoken this much about fairies to anybody outside my family, because most people make fun of me. I suppose you likely think me strange as well, though.” Embarrassed, Lydia tried to put an end to the conversation.

“I don’t, as it happens.”

“Oh. If I’m perfectly honest, I really do think you’re strange. You didn’t seem uncomfortable in the least when I spoke of fairies in our host’s presence. That cheered me more than I would have expected, and I was able to say what I wanted to as a result. I often struggle to speak up when I am in other people’s houses and I see fairies in trouble. It would seem that simply having an ally is enough for a large boost of confidence. Even if the only reason for your support is that you wish to avoid offending me before we find the sword.”

The more Lydia spoke, the less sure she was of what she was saying.

“And I know you’re a liar, and that you know just what to say to lift my spirits, but even then I find myself on the brink of being taken in. You seemed to be enjoying yourself when creating that path for the fairies, to the extent that I thought you might actually understand me...”

She suddenly realized that the weight of her words were as profound as a confession of love.

“Please do not take what I’m saying the wrong way,” she said quickly. “I still do not trust you. Your actions simply cheered me a little, that’s all. Aah, please don’t touch my hair!”

“It’s as soft as a feline’s pelt, yet there’s not a tangle to be found. Is that because the fairies are constantly combing it for you?”

How on earth Edgar managed to come up with such lines was a mystery, and yet it was so sweet that Lydia wanted to break into a smile. As such, she didn’t

know how to react.

“Fairies prefer blondes. They have no interest in my rust-colored hair.”

“Caramel-colored.”

“I’m sorry?”

“That description suits you better.” The words were all it took to wipe the thought of slapping him for his audacity from her mind. “I wonder whether it would taste sweet.”

He never gave a single inch or made a single misstep. And Lydia couldn’t even tell whether she found it unpleasant or not.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Edgar ducked away from Lydia, who let out a sigh of relief.

“Come in.”

“Pardon our tardiness, Lord Ashenbert.” It was Raven and Ermine, shown in by a maid.

Edgar had shown no concern when he and Lydia had been separated from them. Since his servants knew they were bound for the Isle of Mannan, Edgar was confident that they could forge ahead, knowing they would reunite eventually. Still, Lydia was impressed to see them here. Edgar and his servants had been through hell and back, so perhaps they all knew exactly what the others would do should they lose each other.

“Ermine! Raven! I’m glad to see you are well.” Edgar flung his arms open joyfully and embraced them as a father would. It was clear as day how much affection he held for the pair. Lydia was reminded much more of a familial relationship than that of master and servants.

“Have you been well, Miss Carlton?” Though Ermine’s voice was kind, Lydia felt very much as though she was looking in on something private.

“Yes, I...”

In fact, it was Edgar who had come out worse, being injured for her sake. She couldn’t help but feel guilty.

“You need not worry about Lydia. I defended her to the last,” Edgar said.

“Are you quite sure of that? I would have thought that, if anything, you are what she would need protecting from most.”

“Ermine,” Edgar warned.

“Am I mistaken?”

“Far from it. In fact, I would have hoped you could have given us an extra ten minutes or so. Things were going so well before you interrupted.”

“A mere ten minutes?” Ermine responded drily.

Lydia, who hadn’t been paying attention to their conversation, suddenly felt Raven’s sharp gaze upon her. Had he noticed Edgar’s injury? If so, did he know it was Lydia’s fault?

“Um, I think I shall go to bed. Goodnight.”

Between the strange atmosphere that had arisen between her and Edgar, and the mysterious palpitations clamoring through her heart, Lydia decided it was best to get away. Edgar’s voice was the last thing she heard behind her as she hurried for her bedroom.

“Honestly, Ermine. Your strange assertions scared Lydia away!”

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“You see her? She’s a fairy doctor.”

“Mm hmm. It’s been at least a hundred years since I’ve seen one in this town.”

“She spoke of going to the Isle of Mannan.”

“The Isle of Mannan... If it is so, might we be able to return?”

“Yes—so long as the merrows are set free.”

Nico was plodding through the manor’s garden on his hind legs when the whisperings of brownies brought him to a stop. “You there. What do you mean ‘return’?”

“Ah! Oh, it’s only a cat!”

“I’m not a cat. I’m with the fairy doctor.”

“Okay, so you’re not a cat. But if you’re with *her*, then please tell her she must help the merrows!”

“Help them how?”

“They have been lamenting the absence of the island’s master for a long time now.”


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“When the merrows grieve, the seas grow stormy. We brownies used to live on Mannan, traveling between there and the mainland, but because of the merrows, the seas are now too stormy to cross. We have not seen our kin in three hundred years!”

“That’s a real pity...though, if they are mourning the loss of the island’s master, then isn’t he the only one who can put an end to their grief?”

“He was human, so a fairy doctor should be able to do something about it!”

“You’re asking too much,” Nico said. “But I’ll let her know about the merrows for now. In return, I’d like to know about the item the merrows are guarding.”

“They’re guarding something?”

“Something left in their care by the master who never returned.”

“Oh, yes! I think I’ve heard about that. But we brownies have been long separated from the isle. We don’t know much about what goes on there anymore.”

Nico ran a thoughtful paw through his whiskers. “You have kin over there, don’t you? I’d like to ask them about it. Will you ride on the boat with us?”

“*May* we? On a human’s boat?”

The fairies started to chatter excitedly. Although the repellent charms and spells of old were gradually being forgotten, boats were still required to traverse the impenetrable barrier that was the sea. These vessels remained protected by charms to ward off fairies and invisible spirits, so the brownies had been unable to use human boats to reach the island.

“I’ll share your troubles with the fairy doctor. You introduce me to your kin on the island in exchange.”

The deal was settled smoothly. The next question regarded how much valuable information the brownies on Mannan actually had.

“Lydia’s far too reckless,” Nico muttered to himself. She had never encountered a merrow in her life, and yet she’d decided to charge ahead when faced with the prospect of meeting them. If only her companion had been their awaited master, the Blue Knight Earl, and not just some thief. What *was* she

thinking? “Because of her, I’ve forever got my paws full...”

Despite how exasperated she made him, Nico had been watching over Lydia ever since she was a baby. It was more than companionship that he offered; he had always tried to support her by taking care of certain things without her knowledge too.

“If all goes well, the merrows will drag those thieves to the bottom of the ocean and that will be the end of it.”

With that, Nico slipped inside through one of the manor’s windows that had been left ajar.

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Edgar was left alone in the room, with only the light of the hearth to illuminate it. He had sunk down onto the sofa and sat there without so much as stirring. He was thinking deeply about their next movements. His features were carved into a stern expression that Lydia would not have imagined possible from the way he had teased her with his carefree smile.

"I believe it would do you some good to retire now, my lord," Ermine said, having just come into the room.

"Have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

Ermine remained standing, her tone anxious as she said, "May I ask something?"

"About Lydia?" Edgar guessed. "And how I managed to bring her here?"

Ermine knit her brows forlornly.

"Don't make that face. You should know by now that I have no qualms about using dirty tricks to get what I want."

"You *must* have qualms. You have always suffered greatly for it."

Edgar sighed quietly. "There is nothing to be concerned about, Ermine. I haven't done anything to Lydia."

"Do you mean that?"

"I *couldn't* do anything. And I do not know why," Edgar muttered, somewhat miserably.

Ermine visibly relaxed, although she still looked as though she was on the verge of tears. "Do you mean to say that Miss Carlton is still willing to cooperate with us, despite knowing that we deceived her?"

"She has no intention of aiding us in thievery. She has said that no one but the true Blue Knight Earl is capable of obtaining the sword, and she will therefore attempt to dissuade us when we are in its presence." Edgar rested his chin in his hand, and a self-deriding smile rose to his lips. "Lydia is a fascinating girl. Just as I think I have her under my thumb, she proves me wrong. And yet, she is exceedingly simple and wears her heart on her sleeve. She says exactly what she thinks. She was unable to deny my earnest supplications, despite my being

a heinous villain."

Ermine cocked her head, as though she struggled to imagine Edgar pleading so desperately.

"I told her a little of our past. Strangely, I believe I wanted to see how she would respond."

"And how *did* she respond?"

"She may well be under the impression that my brain was removed and that I have therefore taken leave of my senses." The memory elicited a chuckle from Edgar. "However, though my tale should have been more dubious to her than the existence of fairies, she believed it. She informed me that she despises liars. I shouldn't be surprised if those curious eyes of hers can see through any measure of falsehoods and untruths. But I do not possess an honest bone in my body. My name, my life itself...it is all fake. In my world, everything is a lie; the difference lies in how earnest each one is. The most earnest of those lies become my truth. I believe she understood that."

Edgar's claim to the Blue Knight Earl's title was one of those lies that was desperately earnest. It was all he had left to cling to. That he would die were he forced to give up on it was also a most ardent lie.

"Does that mean you will tell Miss Carlton everything?"

"No. I cannot do that."

That was precisely what Edgar had been pondering alone. But now matter how deep his ruminations, his answer never changed. He did not consider Lydia a close companion. Even if she remained of her own volition and not by his design, it was not because she understood his wish. There was no denying that to her, he was a despicable criminal; as a fake, despicable methods were all he could rely on to retrieve the sword.

"I shall have Lydia interpret the fairies' verse for me. Whether there are merrows waiting for us or not, we must not deviate from the original plan."

"Why, my lord?"

"Is it not obvious? I am a thief who carries not a drop of the Blue Knight Earl's

blood. While I require Lydia's assistance in locating the sword, that is where her work ends. We *must* take the sword. By any means possible." Edgar stood up and approached Ermine. "Have you really taken that much of a liking to her?"

"She is an innocent young lady. She goes about her life honestly, proud of her convictions. I do not wish to encroach on her happiness in any way."

"I can understand that. My hands are not dyed with blood because I willed them so."

"But your lordship is fond of her too, aren't you? Is that not why you refrained from violence upon her learning the truth and instead appealed to her emotions?"

Edgar couldn't help but smile. His ash mauve eyes, a mixture of bleak blue and ruthless red, softened. "You think too highly of me."

It was then that he noticed a sudden light sway of the curtain and turned his attention to it. There in the fabric's shadow, he spotted a gray, bushy tail.

Lydia's cat.

He took large strides toward the window and, before the cat could dodge, pinned it down by the scruff of its neck.

"Eavesdropping, Nico?"

The cat yowled furiously. Edgar's first instinct was to ignore it; after all, it was a cat. But upon remembering that Lydia claimed to understand what the cat was saying, he decided he couldn't just leave it. Besides, eavesdropping was a very humanlike thing to do.

Ridiculous as the thought was, Edgar turned all of the frustration he had pent up that evening on Nico. He would prove to himself that he was capable of any amount of cruelty and wickedness as the situation required it. Walking straight up to the hearth, he prepared to throw Nico in like a piece of kindling.

"Ah! Stop! Hey!"

"My lord! What are you doing?!" Ermine flung her arms around Edgar, allowing Nico to hop up onto the mantelpiece just in time. The two humans tumbled to the floor.

Edgar looked at Nico without getting up. “That was in jest, Nico.”

“In jest or not, it’s something I won’t soon forget!” The cat seemed to vanish before their very eyes. In all likelihood, he had slipped away into the darkness.

Edgar sighed. Sitting up, he began to stroke Ermine’s short hair, as she was still clinging to him. She looked up at him, her eyes mournful.

“You really do try to be wretched at times, as though you are attempting to rid yourself of kindness and compassion.”

“All to protect you and Raven. We could not survive without callousness.”

“I wish you would spare a thought for yourself and not just Raven and me.”

“I know.”

Ermine kissed him softly. Her lips were gone from him in an instant, but her body remained leaning against his. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

“Can you really not abandon the sword, my lord?”

Edgar knew she wouldn’t have asked without a great deal of thought. Still, he could only imagine that her resolve was wavering. He was sympathetic to her desire not to see any other people sacrificed, but he could not allow her to start having doubts at this point.

“We will never be free unless we take the sword. If we give up, we will never fully shake him off.”

“But we may never obtain the sword no matter what we do. I would much rather we not dirty our hands further than... If we must flee from him all our lives, I can only conclude that that is our fate.”

“The prince is not omnipotent. You are no longer his servant, but my dear companion. You must forget about what is past.”

Ermine gently let go of Edgar, then frowned at him, irritated. “Then lie with me.” The desperation in her eyes put him at a loss. “Make all of me yours. I am not asking to be your lover. I only wish to be sure that you are my true master, else I shall be anxious forevermore. The prince’s chains will never release me.”

“You are not property, nor are you a slave any longer. I should not need to do something like that for you to know that I am your master.”

“How can I be certain? Is it not that you find me dirty because I was once the prince’s woman?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“We have been together for so long, and though you feign ignorance, I am sure you know how I feel.”

Edgar took Ermine into his arms. His heart broke for her. She had been one of the prince’s young and beautiful female slaves. It was after becoming close friends with her and her brother, and wanting to protect them, that Edgar had vowed to make a fresh start. Powerless as he was, he had wanted to do whatever he could to save them. Would Ermine’s wish really be that difficult to fulfill?



He kissed the pale skin of her neck, and her arms gently curled around him. But it was as he attempted to love her that he became more aware of the bonds around his own heart. As Ermine was still bound by the prince's chains, so was he.

Though Edgar had belonged to the prince as much as the other slaves, he had held a unique position among them. The prince was a leader of a mysterious society, and he had tried to raise Edgar as his future replacement. Every one of his owner's tastes, thought processes, mannerisms, and behaviors had been drilled into him. Edgar had been made to learn everything the prince had. Though the wide range of materials covered in his studies told Edgar the prince was no ordinary man, he had never been given the time to think about his master.

The reality he lived was beyond reason. He had been worn down, physically and mentally, his every thought captured to slowly mold him into someone else. Horrifyingly, he had gradually forgotten the person he used to be.

Ermine had originally appeared before Edgar in order for him to learn about the prince. The sickening truth was that the prince had even wanted to impart his own sexual dispositions to his servant. It was in doing so that Edgar had awoken to the absurdity of his situation—that what was being done to him was something akin to witchery.

Ermine had long given up on everything, but Edgar had persuaded her to join him in rebelling against their oppressor. Their first act of rebellion had been to defy his orders. Edgar had never laid a finger on her. For her part, Ermine had never told their master of his resistance. The two had built a bond of trust, and Edgar saw her as a comrade in arms.

He did not consciously think Ermine unclean because she had belonged to the prince. But he did not want to treat her in the same way their master had. Even if they were a free man and woman now, he feared that if he went through with it, the prince's grip on him would resurface.

"Forgive me, Ermine."

In the end, he was forced to push her away.

***

Lydia hurried away from the door, racing down the gloomy hallway. Though she questioned her need to flee, she was equally mortified to have witnessed that scene between Edgar and Ermine. She had not heard the words they had exchanged, but they had been holding one another tightly.

Were they lovers? If so, how flippant did Edgar have to be to whisper sweet nothings to any woman who crossed his path?

“Not that it bothers me in the slightest,” Lydia told herself, as if to blow off the inexplicable gloom that threatened to descend on her. She was just about to rush down the stairs when she ran into a silhouette on the landing. With a startled cry, she fell back onto her rear.

“Pardon me, Miss Carlton. Are you all right?” It was Raven.

Lydia stood up hurriedly. “I...was on my way to the kitchen. I was hoping to make myself some warm milk before bed...” She gave the excuse automatically, without being asked—she had the sense that Raven considered her a danger to Edgar and was keeping a close eye on her. It was no wonder he would dislike her, when she had poured tea on him and gotten him hurt, and the way he said such turbulent things with a straight face, along with the sophisticated fighting techniques he displayed, terrified her.

“I shall bring you some. Please wait in your room.”

“Oh! No, thank you! I mean, you might poison... I mean, um!”

“Poison?” He looked at her sharply.

Lydia recalled the man who had had his neck snapped in a split second; the man who had held a knife to her when they’d been surrounded by Huskley and his men at the station. She had heard the sound his bones made as they snapped. The next thought that struck her was whether she would live long enough to hear the sound of her own neck snap. Overcome by fear, she began to panic.

“No! Stay back! Don’t kill me!”

“Pardon me.”

“What?” Lydia looked up at him, having expected anything but an apology.

“I’m scary, aren’t I? I’m sorry for not being conscious of it.” Raven’s face was as expressionless as ever, but Lydia quickly found she was plagued by guilt.

Had her reaction hurt him? He hadn’t even done anything and yet she was screaming and treating him like a murderer. The time he *had* snapped that thug’s neck, it was only to protect her.

Realizing what she had done, Lydia called out to the retreating Raven, “Um, I’m sorry. That was a horrible thing to say. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

It was with a curious gaze that he looked back at her. “I am a murderer. It is only natural that you are afraid of me.”

“But you weren’t trying to kill *me*.”

Raven fell silent. Lydia started to panic again.

“Or...*were* you?

“Doing so would not be in his lordship’s best interests.”

“So if it were, you *would* kill me?”

“That is difficult to answer.”

It was not a comforting response. Should she refuse to help find the sword, would the kindness that Edgar showed her stop short? Meaning Raven would...

Lydia was starting to regret slightly that she had not fled from the dilapidated house. At the same time, she had made the decision to go to the Isle of Mannan to fulfill her contract with her client. That she was now being threatened and coerced irritated her.

“Wait a moment. It’s no use trying to threaten me. My only intention is to do what I think is right.”

“It would seem that being a fairy doctor grants you a fair amount of freedom.”

“Of course. Fairy doctor is a profession you choose, not one that is forced upon you.”

“I envy you. I have been a slave to the spirits since my birth. I hold within me

spirits of war and slaughter. At times, they monopolize my body and my will."

"Are they still with you now?"

Raven put a hand on his chest, as though showing her where they were. "Yes. They are spirits who obey only their king. It was originally the king's soldiers who were born with these spirits inside them. But my native land was colonized by Britain, and the king is no more. Without a master, the spirits bayed for blood from anywhere they might find it. It was his lordship who pulled me out from that hardship. The spirits now answer to him."

"So if he ordered it, the spirits would make you kill someone even if you didn't want to?"

"His lordship does not give me such orders. Therefore, the spirits attack anybody whom I regard as hostile to my master. In my current position, however, I cannot simply murder people at random, however hostile they may be. I needed to learn how to assess a situation for danger and react appropriately."

"That just sounds like common sense to me."

"Understandably so. But until then, I wasn't even aware that I had a will of my own. I did not know how to stop the spirits once they started their rampage, and have spilt a sea of blood."

Lydia was breaking out in a cold sweat, but she accepted his words all the same. It was likely because he had Raven as a companion that Sir John, the man with the Cross tattoo, was known as a bloodthirsty killer.

"Even through all that, his lordship did not abandon me. I was as knowledgeable as a newborn babe, but he took the time to teach me all kinds of important things. That was how I eventually gained a humanlike free will. It is my duty now to work for him, for if I lost my master, my soul would become the domain of those cold-blooded spirits."

"You require a master, but it doesn't necessarily have to be Edgar, does it?"

"Think of it like this: would *you*, hypothetically speaking, be able to assume responsibility for me? A beast that, without supervision, would jump at any less-than-pleasant man and tear him limb from limb? Could you bear the weight

of my countless sins, teach me right from wrong, *tame* me, all the while resisting the urge to command me to slaughter your enemies?”

Lydia knew she would never be able to tame a beast like him. Yet Edgar had done all of those things, on top of the burden of taking in a human life. He could order Raven to eradicate anyone who dared stand in his way, but he didn’t. Protecting Raven’s free will in that manner was likely a far harder task than it would seem.

Their bond must have been built on an intense confidence that Edgar would never ask Raven to slay. It was that trust that allowed Raven to dirty his hands without hesitation for the sake of his master, and without the need for Edgar’s approval.

“It is only natural that you find me disagreeable, Miss Carlton. I beg you not to do anything to cause his lordship trouble.”

Lydia watched him leave, again with the sense that she was being threatened. Perhaps it was the mysterious nature of Edgar and his servants that would cause her the most trouble rather than the challenging task of communicating with the merrows. They had lived in a world darker than any she could imagine; her simpleminded sympathy for them may have been misplaced.

While spending that time with Edgar alone, Lydia had thought she’d come to understand him a little. She didn’t believe that he was wicked through and through, and he had invariably treated her with kindness and consideration. And while she knew it was all to earn her favor, he had always stepped in without a fuss when somebody was being unkind to her. She had thought those actions spoke somewhat to his true nature rather than merely being a series of cold calculations. However, after what she had seen between him and Ermine, and what Raven had told her, Edgar seemed to be wrapped in mystery once more.

“Am I being deceived?”

“Honestly! This is exactly why I’ve been telling you not to trust him!” Nico had appeared without her noticing, sitting on the stair rail with a pout on his face. “These are dangerous people. Take a look—the tip of my tail is singed!”

“My, how did that happen?”

“His *lordship* almost threw me into the fireplace. Apparently, he didn’t like what I was overhearing.”

“What did you overhear?”

“I didn’t hear very much very clearly, but these people are still hiding something from you. They want that sword no matter what, and it seems they’re planning something reprehensible in order to get it.”

“I see.”

“It looks like there really are merrows protecting the sword on Mannan, just as you thought. We have a difficult road ahead of us.”

“Are you confident about the merrows?”

“I spoke to some brownies from the island. They told me the merrows’ master had entrusted them with something. But he never returned, and they’ve been grieving all the while.”

“Our host said the merrows are living in the castle. I wonder if that means the sword is hidden there.”

“Say, Lydia, I don’t think there’s any sense in quarreling with merrows for *their* sake. You can see why, can’t you?”

“Well...yes.”

She was not part of Edgar’s group. Her sole intention was to make it clear to him that the merrows would not pass the sword to one who did not carry the Blue Knight Earl’s blood. But if he did not back down and instead antagonized the merrows, she would surely be caught up in the middle.

“If it all goes to pot, we’ll have to run for it. We’d be no match for merrows,” Nico warned her.

Merrows were wise, beautiful, and at times, dangerous. They appeared at sea before storms and were thus considered a bad omen. It was also said that they liked to collect the souls of those who drowned at sea. They were much like humans in their temperament, with some of them growing friendly with mankind. Yet, others would drink human blood.

The biggest hurdle would be the merrows’ beautiful singing voices. Their

songs captivated people, allowing them to drag their victims to the bottom of the ocean. Lydia was not confident that she or her companions possessed the means to resist such magic. If the merrows willed it, they would be rendered as powerless as a rowboat in a storm. And Lydia was inexperienced. Though she knew much of the merrows, she had never encountered any before and didn't think she would be able to haggle with them.

The most favorable outcome would be if she could convince Edgar that merrows were not to be trifled with and have him give up on the sword. But she knew now that he would not be easily swayed. She considered the possibility that she would be forced to abandon him if it came to it.

"Caramel-colored. That description suits you better."

Those brief words permeated Lydia's heart, and she became anxious that she wouldn't be able to step back and watch Edgar die. He was a criminal, a liar, and apparently still withholding important information from her. Yet she still found herself fantasizing about persuading the merrows to give him the sword, allowing him to become the true Blue Knight Earl and return to the bright world in which he belonged...all while knowing she was incapable.

"They *deserve* to be caught and drowned by the merrows. They're fiends, after all, and it would solve everything."

Nico did not usually voice such violent sentiments. The bald spot on his tail must have been bothering him.

The Blue Knight Earl and the Merrows' Isle

The Isle of Mannan was not difficult to spot with the steep cliffs that lined its coast. If not for the stormy seas surrounding it having sapped her strength, the seabirds fluttering in the sky and its mystical pale green silhouette might have given Lydia the impression that *this* was Ibrazel, part of the Blue Knight's earldom in Fairyland.

The only vessel available to take them to the island had been a small fishing boat, and it had rocked something fierce. The waves around the island were apparently rough year-round, making it dangerous for anyone but an experienced sailor to approach. It was mostly cut off from the mainland, and the majority of its visitors were fishermen. The owner of the boat they had hired advised them to go to the village's sole inn, which was just what they did upon finally landing.

The innkeeper was an amicable older man named Mr. Tompkins.

"This infusion should help with the seasickness."

"Thank you." Lydia took the cup from where she was slumped against the back of the bench.

"Are you sure none of you are feeling seasick too?" Mr. Tompkins smiled at Edgar, Raven, and Ermine. "It's unusual to see first-time visitors quite this spirited."

Lydia also found it strange that none of them were suffering. Nico she could understand, him being a fairy, but all three of her human companions had remained completely calm, even as the waves threatened to tip them over at any moment.

"I'm sure they've suffered much worse than a few waves in their time committing wicked deeds," Nico whispered beside her.

"That isn't funny, Nico."

"Well, aren't we feeling better?"

With great pains, Lydia managed to swallow the bitter medicine.

“Sir, I hear there is an old castle on this island,” Edgar said.

“Indeed there is. You may wish to stay there should this inn prove too cramped for you.”

Edgar eyed their host warily. There was only one castle on the island and it belonged to the Blue Knight Earl. Exploring that castle was, naturally, the goal he had gone there with, but the innkeeper’s sudden invitation raised suspicion.

“Is one able to use the castle freely?”

“Perish the thought. It belongs to his lordship. But seeing as you went out of your way to reach this remote place, might you be the heir to the earldom?”

Mr. Topkins had immediately identified what they were after. Everybody held their breath, except for Edgar, who smirked.

“So, I gather there have been countless imposters who have come to this island to lay claim to the Blue Knight Earl’s title. You must be tired of dealing with them.”

“I should mention that my family have been stewards of the earldom for generations. In the event you are able to prove your authenticity, I look forward to serving you.” The innkeeper produced a key from the pocket of his jacket. “This is the key to the castle entrance. Feel free to make use of it. I decided to hand it over to those seeking the legendary treasure, as otherwise they would attempt to break the doors and windows, the repeated repairs for which put me through great pains. Furthermore, I hope you’ll pardon my rudeness, but I ask that you not take any furnishings or valuable items from within the rooms, as the inventory is tightly controlled. Should the temptation befall you, please remember that it will not be possible to carry them from the island in any case.”

“How very sensible. I can tell that to leave my estate in your stewardship would be a wise choice,” said Edgar haughtily.

“You flatter me, sir. Now, if you have changed your mind and wish to leave the isle, please do not hesitate to speak up. I shall prepare a boat for you at once.”

“Has anybody ever changed their mind at this point?”

“Unfortunately, everyone I’ve ever given the opportunity to has refused it, only to be found washed up with the seaweed within three days. With that in mind, I pray you shall still be breathing when we next meet.”

“Excuse me. Does that mean everybody who goes to the castle dies at sea?” Lydia asked. She was still feeling a little queasy, but it wasn’t enough to quash her curiosity.

“Quite right. No doubt the merrows dragged them to the ocean’s depths.”

Lydia recalled what the host of the manor had told her the day before—it was said that when the merrows’ song was heard from the castle, there would be a washed-up corpse the next day.

“Have you ever seen a merrow?” she asked.

“While I cannot speak for purebred merrows, everyone on this island carries their blood. That was why the island proved to be too much for its original owner, who passed it on to the Blue Knight Earl long, long ago. It’s said the islanders and merrows together welcomed their new master with open arms.”

“Really?” Edgar replied. “Would that mean you have scales and webbed feet?”

“No, but a fin on my back.”

“Ah, yes. I’d expect nothing less from the Blue Knight Earl’s steward.” Edgar must have thought Mr. Tompkins was joking. He looked more amused than anything.

“I thought he smelt of fish,” Nico muttered.

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The Jack in the Green from a spunky’s cradle.

A dance with the pixies on a moonlit night.

Beyond the silky’s Cross.

The pooka is a labyrinth.

Along the worm’s footprints.

To the right of the Far Darrig.

Beneath the feet of Dullahan.

The leprechaun's treasure.

The clurichaun's crib.

Follow the banshee.

Exchange the Star of the Merrow with another.

Lest they sing a forlorn song.

The castle was on a hill across from a cliff. It was blue with Gothic-style spires and didn't feel a bit out of place overlooking the pale green island. It was an elegant building, very much reminiscent of a villa.

Finally over her seasickness, Lydia accompanied the others to the castle.

"An island of merrows. It seems you were right to lead us here, Lydia. I am sure that the sword lies within the castle." Edgar smiled at her, satisfied.

But as far as Lydia was concerned, this was where things would take a turn for the troublesome. She braced herself. "Yes. 'Jack in the Green' is a green spirit covered in leaves. It must refer to the land itself. As we approached, the island looked just like a crouching man in leaves."

"I see. That's the first line of the coin's text. What of the spunky?"

"They are essentially will-o'-wisps."

"Ought we to be searching a cemetery, then?"

"No, spunkies are said to be the souls of children who died before their christening."

"Such children aren't buried in cemeteries," Ermine remarked, approaching the half-open gate.

Both the paths through the gate and the gardens that stretched out on either side had been meticulously maintained. It was hard to believe the castle had been deserted for three hundred years. The islanders must have been keeping it in prime condition in the hope that its master would one day return.

“This castle is more like a villa. I cannot imagine there being any children buried here, but if there are, I’d have to wonder whose they are and *why*,” Edgar said.

“Yes,” Ermine agreed. “Perhaps there were graves here before the castle was constructed.”

“Or perhaps something resembling a cenotaph.”

The two walked side by side. Though she wore a man’s uniform, her simple clothing and shoulder-length hair did nothing to detract from Ermine’s feminine charms. The way she walked so close to Edgar that their shoulders nearly brushed reminded Lydia of the previous evening, and her cheeks reddened. What had happened after she left? Had they spent the entire night together?

“Let us split up and search for this ‘spunky’s cradle.’ Lydia, you’ll be with me.”

“Ah!” Lydia let out a surprised cry at the mention of her name. It was as though Edgar had seen through the nature of her reverie. “But...why?”

“You seem liable to get lost.”

Raven and Ermine left in different directions to further explore the grounds. Perhaps it was Nico’s eavesdropping that made Edgar unwilling to let Lydia wander off alone. The cat in question had gone off on his own while they were still at the inn. He had wanted to check whether the brownies he had invited to join their voyage had successfully reunited with their relatives on the island. He had also mentioned gathering information about the precise role that Mannan’s merrows played in guarding the earl’s sword.

As a fellow fairy race, it was possible the brownies had more knowledge about the merrows than humans did, even if that knowledge turned out to be trivial. And the brownies on this island would have lived under the Blue Knight Earl, just the same as the merrows. Lydia was even gladder that she had taken the time to lead those fairies out of the manor now, since it had won them the brownies’ cooperation.

None of this meant Nico was suddenly all for Lydia’s involvement in the job. He still held a deep animosity toward Edgar. And it wasn’t because Edgar had tried to throw him into the fire, but rather purely because his tail had been

singed. Fairies tended to hold grudges over minor slights like that. That was probably why Nico wished such a violent end on Edgar, which was likely the real motivation behind his information gathering.

Lydia wondered to what extent Edgar was aware that Nico was no ordinary cat. Even if he didn't believe a cat could speak, he was clearly wary, hence his anger over Nico's eavesdropping. It was only natural that his wariness extended to Lydia as well.

She decided to go along with his wishes and stay with him. That way, she might be able to glean something about what he was hiding from her.

Her mind made up, she gathered up as much confidence as she could. "Aren't you afraid at all?" she asked Edgar.

"Of what?"

"An imposter who tries to steal the sword is doomed to be dragged to the bottom of the sea by the merrows. Mr. Tompkins said everybody dies, remember?"

"I can only assume those thieves didn't keep their wits about them. In all likelihood, they were caught in a trap designed to protect the sword from being stolen."

"A trap? You don't think it was the merrows? Do I take it that you're confident you *wouldn't* fall into such a trap?"

Edgar grinned at her. "If I did, would you mourn for me?"

"Sorry? Isn't that a question you ought to reserve for Ermine?"

"Why Ermine?"

"She's your...lover, isn't she?" Lydia stared at the ground, embarrassed that her tone had come out more accusatory than she had meant.

"She isn't. Don't worry."

"Don't worry? About what should I have been worried?!"

"If I had my way, many things."

Lydia couldn't help the indignant glare that rose to her face. "It's devilish to

tease people about such things."

"It wasn't my intention to tease, but I am more than happy to change the subject. What type of man would you prefer for a suitor?"

It barely seemed like a change of subject at all. It irritated her that, while she knew Edgar's remarks were borne of flippancy rather than a genuine interest in her, she felt as though she might be swayed all the same. None of his words held any weight, even as flattery.

"A serious and honest man. Not a boor who embraces and kisses other women."

"Ah. Did you perhaps see something you shouldn't have?"

She only had herself to blame for leading him to the correct conclusion. Lydia's face flushed even redder. Edgar looked somewhat amused by her reaction, but he didn't tease her further. The pair continued to stroll down the garden path.

"Ermine is a very dear companion of mine. I would do anything to ensure her happiness." Edgar stared straight ahead, his expression uncharacteristically serious.

He had said they weren't lovers, but it was clear to Lydia that their relationship was special. To have called Edgar a boor just because he had held her, and didn't tease her, was too much of a simplification of that relationship. Lydia didn't have the experience or the power of imagination to fully understand what they were to each other. While she was capable of seeing fairies, she had always struggled with human connections. So perhaps that was no wonder.

"Of course. She's special to you. Um, I wasn't peeping or anything. I was just passing the room, and... I'm sorry. It wasn't for me to pass judgment. I cannot claim to understand you in the least, but I am sure you bring happiness to those around you."

Edgar stared off into the distance thoughtfully for a spell. Without changing his expression, he turned to look at her. "Do you have wings?"

"I'm sorry?"

“I suddenly found myself wondering whether you were hiding a pair of rainbow-colored butterfly wings from me.”

It didn’t feel anything like being called a changeling. She took people’s words to heart and said whatever came to mind regardless of the situation. Others thought her strange for it, but Edgar seemed to interpret it as her being otherworldly. His words were so garish as to embarrass her, but it wasn’t unpleasant to be compared to a fairy. If that was how he saw her, she would readily accept it. There were certain moments when they were together where she believed she had the potential to flourish. Even when she reminded herself he was a villain, she felt conflicted and little else.

Edgar came to a smooth stop, and Lydia did the same. There, in one area of the garden, was a small shrine-like structure. It was accompanied by a tiny angel statue and clearly marked a cemetery for children.

“‘For the slumbering merchildren,’” Edgar read. “It does appear to be a cenotaph. But ‘merchildren’?”

“Mr. Tompkins said the islanders carry merrow blood. These must be the children with so much merrow blood, they couldn’t survive. Depending how old this cenotaph is, they likely died before they could be christened.”

“I see. On an island as remote as this, the inhabitants are often all related to one another. It is no wonder the children of consecutive consanguineous marriages should fall victim to certain illnesses or defects.”

“Are you trying to find an explanation that doesn’t involve merrows? I do not know what the truth is either, but the islanders themselves believe they are descended from merrows. You wish to become their earl, don’t you?”

“Would becoming their earl require me to believe in fairies? I hardly see why it should matter. Whether by mermaids or illness, if possessing fins and scales is normal for the islanders here, then that’s that.”

He accepted it so readily despite his disbelief that it sounded strangely contradictory. He wouldn’t believe in what he couldn’t see, but when faced with something tangible, like scales and fins, he didn’t question it.

Lydia studied Edgar, finding his way of thinking very curious indeed. People

who didn't believe in fairies were wont to believe they didn't exist rather than that they simply couldn't see them. That was why they rejected those who *could* see them. Edgar, however, seemed to abide by the idea that, although he didn't think fairies existed, it wouldn't bother him all that much if they did. Hence why he didn't make sport of Lydia.

"Do you think the same way about Raven's spirits?" she asked.

"Raven? Oh, did he speak of himself to you?"

"Yes. He told me he has been dominated by dreadful spirits since his birth."

"How unusual. It would appear Raven has taken a liking to you. Perhaps it is your affinity for fairies in which he finds a commonality."

Though Lydia was certain Raven had *not* taken a liking to her, she did not give voice to the thought. The servant had simply warned her not to be a hindrance to Edgar.

"I do not know whether or not Raven is possessed by spirits. All I wish to understand of him is the kind of person he is, his needs, and what I may do for him."

That was why Edgar had assumed responsibility for the young man, spirits and all. Lydia couldn't help but feel he was turning a blind eye to something very dangerous, although it may also have been proof of a dauntless heart. No matter how unknown the world may be, he would not be perturbed. The only thing that mattered to him was that he did what he could.

It was much more difficult than it seemed to have a solid sense of truth and fiction. Human hearts were easily led astray, allowing for the intrusion of evil spirits. But with conviction like Edgar's, one could resist the influences of even the most ill-intentioned people.

Without realizing it, Lydia had started to wish that he really *was* the Blue Knight Earl's descendent, even if he couldn't see fairies. That way she could have given her whole self over to assisting him.

"Here we have the spunky's cradle, then. Next we have 'a dance with pixies on a moonlit night.' What might that refer to?"

“Oh, um, most likely a fairy ring. Pixies create rings on the grass by dancing beneath the moon.”

“Rings such as that one there?” Edgar pointed at a collection of rocks on the lawn that were arranged in a circle.

“Yes, that could be it.”

Edgar approached the ring, placing a foot inside it.

“Oh!”

He turned at Lydia’s surprised cry. “What is it?”

“Nothing. It isn’t a real fairy ring after all.”

“And if it were?”

“The fairies would have caught you.”

“Is that right? Come and stand here, Lydia. What one can see from this spot differs significantly.”

Lydia stepped into the circle. From there, the trees around them that had originally seemed to have been planted at random formed a single, straight line. At the end of that line was a part of the castle, previously hidden by the foliage. In its center was an inviting door.

On closer inspection, the door had been painted. All that was there was a small window to let in sunlight.

“There’s no entering through there,” Lydia said.

“The key we have is only for the front entrance in any case. We ought to enter that way and examine this spot from the inside.”

As the pair turned to retrace their steps, there was an unnatural rustling in the nearby shrubbery. A group of men wearing black emerged—Gotham’s sons. Huskley stepped out from their midst, blocking Edgar and Lydia’s path. He swept his gaze over their surroundings and grinned when he saw that Raven and Ermine were nowhere to be found.

“Good to see you again, John.”

“I cannot say I share the sentiment.” Disgruntled, Edgar raised an eyebrow.

“It would seem the Star of the Merrow is somewhere inside this castle. I can take it from here. Release the girl.”

“Release? That’s certainly an odd way of putting it.”

“You abducted Miss Carlton, forcing her to accompany you to this place and that. As far as the Great British public is concerned, you are a robber who has kidnapped the daughter of a respected university professor.”

“There’s no telling what these men might do to you, Lydia. I should think staying with me is the safer option.”

“That’s risible, coming from a thief! You mustn’t trust what that man says, Miss Carlton.”

Lydia was starting to find their back and forth oh so tiresome.

“This way, Raven!” Edgar called out suddenly.

Huskley and his men tensed, casting their gazes around them. Though the air was still, there was a light rustling among the nearby trees. The next second, one of the men on the edge of the group let out a groan and collapsed.

“Curses! Do not be intimidated! He is a single man!”

“This way, my lord!” Ermine had appeared beside them. She beckoned to Edgar and Lydia and led them down a narrow path.

“Lydia!”

They were not long separated from Huskley’s men when Lydia heard a familiar voice. Her father was running toward them.

“Father! What are you doing here?”

“I heard you had been kidnapped—”

Lydia took a step toward him only for Edgar to catch her arm and hold her back.

“Are you the kidnapper? Let go of her!”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Carlton. Your daughter has been most accommodating.” Edgar responded with a standard greeting.

“What is it you want? I am prepared to do anything within my power. Please do not harm my daughter.”

“I apologize for the concern I have caused you. I must assure you, however, that I am quite serious. So please, won’t you allow me your daughter’s hand?”

“What are you saying?!” Lydia protested, but Edgar merely flung an arm around her shoulder and pulled her in close.

“I realize I ought to have sought your permission to court her. But I was so taken with her that all thoughts of formalities escaped me.”

Lydia’s jaw dropped open.

“Should she not stay by my side and abate this passionate love of mine, I fear my life itself shall be in immediate danger.”

She had to wonder how many people could get away with saying such embarrassing things with a straight face.



“Wait...”

Lydia had never seen her father quite this flustered before. He opened and closed his mouth several times before finally continuing.

“Are you certain you want her? She’s a real tomboy.”

“Father!”

“She is the perfect girl for me. The only girl who, in loving me so deeply, can hope to save me.”

“This isn’t what you’ve been saying up till now, Edgar!” It wasn’t her love that would save him, but her ability to seek out the sword.

“Lydia is a wonderful girl indeed. But do you not think it irresponsible for a man to act solely on emotion and whisk away an unmarried girl as you have?” It seemed Carlton was starting to believe he was confronting a young man infatuated with his daughter rather than a kidnapper.

“You are correct, of course. I sincerely regret what I have done.”

“Edgar, stop it!” Lydia cried.

“Step away from her, John!” Huskley reappeared then, seeming every bit the savior to Lydia, who was growing frantic. But she realized how absurd she was being when Huskley pointed a pistol at them.

“Stop! That’s Lydia you’re pointing your gun at!” Carlton protested.

“I am quite aware of that, professor. But I cannot allow this man to kill your daughter. He may be nothing more than a despicable thief at this point, but who knows the depths he will sink to once he possesses the jewel?”

“I can more or less glean the nature of the lies you have told Mr. Carlton, Gotham, but I would refrain from revealing the heinous acts that you yourself are capable of for the sake of finding the star.” The way Edgar smiled thinly while staring his adversary down with a stern elegance was so very like him. Had it been a duel, this would have been the very moment in which the outcome was decided.

“Step away from her. Now,” Huskley growled.

Carlton watched him anxiously. Huskley placed a threatening finger on the trigger.

“Stop that at once!” Carlton grabbed Huskley’s arm, unable to stay still when the gun was also a danger to his daughter.

“Ermine, take care of Lydia,” Edgar whispered.

“Yes, my lord.” With that, Ermine pulled Lydia into her arms.

Edgar unsheathed the rapier from his cane just as a gunshot cracked through the air. Lydia wanted to turn around, but Ermine had pulled her into a thicket and she could no longer make out what was happening.

They slipped through the bushes to another path, where Ermine suddenly stopped. She took a few steps back to protect Lydia—but it did nothing to change the fact that they were fully surrounded by Huskley’s brothers.

***

Lydia and her father were locked away in one of the castle's rooms. The criminals had broken through a window to infiltrate the keep and take over a section of it. From what Lydia could tell, they were currently tracking down Edgar and Raven, who had escaped, and planned to steal the Star of the Merrow.

Carlton had been tricked by Huskley—that was, Gotham—and led all the way to Mannan. Presently, he let out a dispirited sigh.

"Gotham used me. Correct?"

"I'm sorry, father. I never meant for you to be involved in this mess."

"But you too have become involved through no fault of your own. *I'm* sorry that my research into stones caused such trouble."

The trigger for all of this had been Gotham's attempt to use Edgar as a test subject. That, or Edgar's attempt to take advantage of Gotham. Either way, the situation had moved far beyond that now.

Lydia stooped down beside Ermine, who was lying on a couch. Unlike Lydia and her father, who were unlikely to resist, Ermine had been beaten, restrained, and knocked out. Lydia wanted to loosen the restraints, but she had been warned by Huskley that Ermine would be hurt if she tried anything. She wiped the blood from the cut on Ermine's lip with her handkerchief.

"Anyway, about that gentleman from before..." Carlton began.

"Everything he said was in jest, father! Despite how unhumorous it all was. He simply requested my services as a fairy doctor."

"Oh, yes? Are you sure you weren't eloping when I ran into you?"

"Of course I'm sure. I would never do something like that."

A relieved, timid smile played across the professor's lips. He pushed up the round spectacles that were threatening to slide down his nose. "The thought of becoming father-in-law to a thief and kidnapper is rather frightening indeed. I'd started to worry about whether I could confidently voice my opposition to your union should you have been serious."

"Come now, father. Surely you would openly oppose my marriage to a *villain*,

regardless of my feelings on the matter."

"Villain or not, I was sure you must have seen something in him. Hopefully something deeper than his face."

"I would *never* choose a husband based on appearance alone."

"There was something else that bothered me. He is nobility, isn't he?"

"Yes. That is what he says, and it is clear enough from his speech and mannerisms. Does that cause more problems for you than his being a thief?"

"At certain times, I had the sense that he and those with him were somewhat more ill-natured than simple thieves. Or perhaps I am guilty of bias...though I suppose it hardly matters if, as you say, his words were in jest."

"They were not in jest." The murmur came from Ermine who, at some point, had come to. Her eyes opened a crack. "His lordship's desire for Miss Carlton is completely serious. At least, he would fall in love with you, if that was what it took for you to do his bidding."

If only Lydia hadn't known Edgar's true origin, she may well have bought into the romantic dream he had sold her and believed in it completely, doing whatever he wanted from her as a result.

"I know, Ermine. I know that I'm his tool, good for nothing but obtaining the sword."

"No, Miss Carlton. There is still much that you do *not* know. It may have been better had you fallen into enemy hands." She cast her gaze downward, as though struck by a deep sadness. "It is not my desire to see his lordship transformed into a heartless scoundrel. If I may be so frank, it is painful to see him, a man so kind and considerate, cast that humanity away. To see him lie and cause suffering to others for our sake."

Could this be the thing they were hiding from me, which Nico spoke of?

"What does Edgar intend to do with me?"

Ermine sat up, her face twisting as though she were enduring a headache. She seemed to think hard for a while before speaking again. "We know of two items relating to the Blue Knight Earl's treasured sword. The first is the gold coin. We

have heard there are many forgeries of the coin we showed you, upon which the fairies' poem is written. It is likely those forgeries that led so many people here to seek the sapphire before us. The other item is a key, made of silver. There is probably only one. Gold and silver, neither holding meaning without the other. It is written, too, that blood is required to obtain the sword."

"Blood?"

"His lordship believes that the merfolk require a sacrifice to be offered—or rather, that a sacrifice is required in some way—in order to obtain the sword."

It was said that merrows collected human souls like precious jewels. It didn't sound far-fetched to Lydia that they should want one in exchange for protecting the Blue Knight's sword for so many generations.

"Does that mean...he was planning to offer me as the sacrifice?" Lydia squeezed her trembling hands into fists. A nauseating rage swirled inside her. *How dare he deceive me!*

It wasn't that she had ever trusted him, but it was nevertheless devastating to know that *this* was what he had been planning all along. It would mean there had never been a scrap of truth to any of his words.

Overcome with grief, she slumped down into a chair. "There *must* be merrows in the castle. And it isn't just a question of fulfilling their conditions to obtain the sword. Only death awaits any imposter who tries to lay claim to it. No exceptions."

"In which case, his lordship only puts himself in danger by going after it. That is why I—"

"Why you told me the truth. Isn't it, Ermine?"

She holds such a deep love for him...

Lydia gazed at Ermine's face. There was a tension in it that spoke of a resolve with no outlet.

"I doubt we shall be meeting the merrows anytime soon, seeing as we cannot escape," Carlton murmured. He sounded purposefully oblivious, as though he had sensed the air was taut and wished to clear it. There was no telling how

much of the conversation between Lydia and Ermine he had understood.

“Gotham is pursuing the star sapphire embedded within the sword,” Ermine said. “He will not find it without Miss Carlton’s knowledge. I doubt Lord Ashenbert will decide to withdraw either. That is why I chose now as the time to speak. I know that I betrayed him in doing so, but if it forces him to give up on the sword—”

The door burst open. Gotham’s eldest son, Huskley, strode up to Lydia.

“Please pardon the sudden intrusion, Miss Carlton, but you are to come with me.”

Ermine’s prediction had immediately come true.

“I shan’t. I will not be complicit in stealing the sapphire.”

“I’m afraid you don’t have a choice. I cannot guarantee the professor’s safety should you do anything that allows that *villain* to steal the Star of the Merrow before us.”

“You are taking my father hostage?”

“I see no harm in that, if only you do as I say.”

Lydia was out of options. “Will you release us once you have the star?”

“You have my word.”

“Lydia...you don’t need to worry about me,” said Carlton.

“It’s all right, father. I’m sure I will be back in due time.”

Huskley led her away, not even allowing her the time to embrace her father.

Lydia was accompanied by Huskley and three of his brothers. The rest of the brothers had likely stayed to stand guard over Carlton and Ermine. Or they may have been searching for Edgar and Raven.

That said, Lydia didn’t see that Huskley and his men had any need to hunt them down. She already knew where they would next appear.

She led the men along the garden to the south of the castle, using the small, round window from earlier as a landmark. From there, the fairy ring on the

knoll she and Edgar had found should be visible.

"Is this *really* the right way?" Huskley had one hand gripping Lydia's arm so she couldn't run and the other curled around a pistol, likely in case of a surprise attack by Edgar and Raven.

"I'd ask that you refrain from commenting," Lydia replied. "It isn't as though you'd be able to tell if I were misleading you in any case."

"Saucy wench. See what happens if you *do* try to deceive us."

"I know."

As she'd suspected, these men were a sight easier to read than Edgar. They weren't currying her favor all for the sake of killing her later. If she was going to be manipulated, she would much rather it be through straightforward villainous means, such as threats and fear. If only he had acted like that from the start, she wouldn't have ended up in so much pain.

But *was* she hurt by the revelation? Though she had never trusted him and never intended to take part in his thievery, she *had* found comfort in the fact that he had seemed to understand her role as a fairy doctor. It was that understanding that had led her to believe she could convince him that taking the merrows' sword was impossible. Their objectives may have differed, and she would never have been one of his companions, but she couldn't bring herself to hate him. She had hoped he might feel the same way about her.

She knew now it was all an illusion.

The door at the end of their path opened to a drafty hall. It was a strange room with intersecting staircases. Light shone into it from the round window in the corner, where the door was painted on the outside wall.

Wary, Huskley pulled Lydia in closer to him. The small window was the only one in the gloomy room; there was no telling what may have been hiding in the shadows of the stairs or pillars.

"Go in and see what we're dealing with," he ordered his brothers.

The other men *should* have been behind them—but there was no response or any sign of their presence. Huskley turned around. All three of his companions

were sprawled face-down on the floor.

Lydia felt the air move beside her, and Huskley was sent flying. Even as he fell, he raised his pistol. Raven clamped down on his arm with a foot, snatching the weapon away from him before pointing it back at its owner.

“Stop! He’s holding my father hostage! If you kill him, both he and Ermine are in danger!”

Raven didn’t seem to hear her. His eyes were cold and emotionless as he aimed the gun at Huskley’s forehead. They were the eyes of the Reaper himself, one who would not yield to his victim’s pleas.

“Enough, Raven.” Edgar appeared at the bottom of one of the staircases farther inside the room.

Raven lowered his arm at once. At the same time, he delivered a kick to Huskley’s solar plexus, making him fall flat onto the floor.

“I am so relieved to see you are well, Lydia. I knew we would run into each other again here. I foresaw your company as well, of course.” His golden hair seemed to absorb the light around him, his assured smile enhanced by his perfect beauty.

I won’t allow myself to be taken in again, Lydia reminded herself.

“Our reunion does you no good,” she said. “If I do not pass Huskley the Star of the Merrow upon finding it, he will kill my father.”

“So, you mean to contend with us for the sword.”

Obtaining the sword required Lydia’s interpretation of the coin’s text, and the silver key Ermine had insinuated Edgar was carrying. He did not know that Lydia was aware of the key, so her only choice now was to pretend to cooperate until the very last moment, when she could steal the sword away.

“Do not forget, Lydia, that Ermine has also been captured. We have a united enemy in these rogues, do we not? There is no need for you to give them the Star. I shall make every endeavor to ensure your father’s safety.”

As far as he was concerned, Lydia’s father was a stranger. It should make no difference to Edgar whether he lived or died. She was certain he would

abandon him the moment he had the sword. *Before* he had the sword, in her case, for she was the sacrifice he would offer in exchange for it.

But, for the time being, she had to agree with him. “That is all dependent upon whether we can find the sword in the first place.”

“Then let us move on to the next fairy posthaste. What is ‘the silky’s Cross’?”

At the top of the stairs, Lydia slipped past Edgar to take the lead. They passed by several doors, eventually landing on one with the symbol she was looking for.

“I don’t see a cross anywhere.”

“This pattern depicts a rowan tree, and the door is made from its wood. The silky is much like a spirit and can be repelled by a cross made of rowan wood.”

The door opened onto a narrow passageway, down which the three hurried. Following the path laid out by the poem did not turn out to be a difficult feat for Lydia. Most of it was decipherable with her basic knowledge as a fairy doctor. The sword, however, was only meant for the Blue Knight Earl’s successor. It would require much more than an understanding of fairies. It seemed the real difficulty would come when faced with the merrows.

“How was Ermine doing when you last saw her?” Edgar asked as they walked.

“She’s safe. But they bound her, likely because they knew she had sharp wits and was capable of handling a weapon.”

“I see.” His face clouded over with concern.

Lydia stole a glance at Raven to see how he was taking the news, but there was no telling from his expression how worried he was about his sister.

“She’s worried about you, Edgar. She’s worried you will fall into a dangerous trap if you try to steal the sword.”

“But if I obtain the title of Blue Knight Earl, Ermine and Raven will be able to slip free of the danger that perpetually stalks them. It will especially benefit Ermine. She will be able to dress nicely and grow her hair out as a young lady should, allowing her to capture the attention of countless men. Eventually, she will find one whom she can trust implicitly.”

She only wants you.

"Is there no other way? Wouldn't the same be true if whoever is pursuing you simply gave up? One cannot own slaves here like they do in the United States."

"In our current society, one cannot resist power without possessing it oneself. We are not dealing with an enemy who will give up just like that."

Lydia couldn't even begin to imagine how terrifying their pursuer was. What she did know was that Ermine was more scared of Edgar sacrificing another human being than she was of being chased—and Lydia could well understand why.

They were drawing ever closer to the sword's hiding place, and yet she still wasn't sure how to confront Edgar. Would it even be possible to outwit him and take the sword first? If not, was her soul destined to be sacrificed to the merrows as he desired? And supposing she *did* manage to best him, it might just result in *his* death instead.

He would die—because of her.

The pooka is a labyrinth.

Along the worm's footprints.

To the right of the Far Darrig.

They carried on, Lydia solving the poem's riddles one by one.

"Please wait a moment, my lord," Raven said out of the blue. He stepped forward a few paces and carefully listened to their surroundings. "Somebody approaches."

Lydia gradually picked up on the sound of footsteps. There must have been another passage nearby, for there came the noise of creaking stairs. After a short while, the source of the noise began to move toward the door next to them.

Without a sound, Raven flattened himself against the wall beside it. Edgar pulled Lydia in close to one side of the hallway. The very moment the doorknob started to turn, Raven kicked the door open. He slipped through it and grabbed the person on the other side, wrapping his neck around their throat.

“Raven. It’s me.”

He realized it was Ermine a second before pushing the knife into her and slowly let go.

The tension drained from Edgar’s body. “Ermine. You managed to flee?”

“Forgive me, my lord.”

“Think nothing of it. What matters is that you are unharmed.”

“What about father?” Lydia asked.

“They were taking me to a separate room, which was when I took the opportunity to escape. I believe they still have your father,” Ermine replied apologetically, before approaching Edgar. “It shan’t be long before Gotham and his men come after us. Moving will prove difficult in a narrow space like this; I believe it best that we find somewhere to hide.”

“This path leads to the sword. We shall carry on,” Edgar said, apparently not prepared to take any detours at this point. He started to walk again, urging Lydia forward.

“Doing so will only lead them directly to the sword.”

“We shall take it before that happens.”

Edgar’s eagerness seemed to discourage Ermine greatly. But she said nothing more to try and stop him.

“You are behaving strangely,” Raven told her softly, out of Edgar’s earshot.

“Yes. To think I allowed myself to be caught...”

“That isn’t what I mean.” He didn’t elaborate.

Perhaps her brother had picked up on the change of heart that had led Ermine to share the truth with Lydia.

Presently, they came to a dead end with nothing but a mysterious painting on the wall. Lydia crouched down to investigate the space beneath it.

“Is that a painting of Dullahan?” Edgar asked.

“Yes. He is a headless fairy. And beneath his feet... See, the wall shifts here.”

She crawled into the space she had opened. There were stairs leading down. At their very bottom, the group was suddenly faced with the expansive outdoors—they had come to a terrace over a bluff. The castle was built on a cliff overlooking the sea, and this platform seemed to jut out over the waters farther than any other. Beyond the simple railing was a dizzying drop into the ocean. The wind battered the four of them relentlessly.

“This appears to be a dead end.”

Lydia had to agree with Edgar; there didn’t seem to be any way to progress. There had been no branching paths from the stairs they had come down either. The text’s next line was, *“The leprechaun’s treasure.”*

“Leprechauns are fairy shoemakers. They are said to hide their treasures underground.”

“Underground. That wouldn’t mean we are expected to jump, would it?”

Doing so would ensure their demise. Directly below them were jagged rocks under the assault of the stormy waves. Lydia thought deeply about the line’s meaning, but she had to admit it certainly looked as though they were stuck.

“Give me a moment to think,” she requested.

“There will be nowhere to run if the enemy catches up to us.” Ermine cast an anxious glance behind them.

“Let us wait for a moment,” Edgar said.

Everyone fell silent. Lydia thought as hard as she could, trying to recall every anecdote she’d ever heard about leprechauns.

After a while, Ermine spoke again. “My lord, I really think that we have no hope of obtaining the sword. If I must flee from the prince for the rest of my life, so be it. If you are doing this for my sake, and that of my brother’s, I ask that you stop.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ermine. You know more than anybody how terrifying that man is. Did I not promise that I would free you from his curse?”

Ermine looked down, apparently ruminating over something. Then, she

looked up again. “I do not believe that is possible, my lord.” She cast her gaze at Lydia. “The prince knows my every weakness and desire. He knows how happy it makes me, being able to flee with you. We are bound by an insular fellowship, in which we work toward the same goal and support each other, never associating with outsiders. He knows that it is only within that circle that I can be immersed in the joy of having you all to myself. If we break free from the prince, our relationship will become nothing more than that of master and servant. He knows I fear such an outcome.”

“What are you saying, Ermine?”

“Forgive me, my lord. He told me he would stay out of our way for the moment if I agreed to continue monitoring you.”

“The...prince said that?” Edgar’s tone was colored by anger. The rage he felt just by speaking the prince’s name seemed to grate on Lydia’s ears. This wasn’t just the man who had enslaved Edgar and his companions; something made the thought of him inspire an intense and fearful hatred within them. “Have you been leaking our movements to him this entire time?”

“When you faced execution in America, it was your idea to take advantage of Gotham’s desire for test subjects. But it was the prince who informed me about Gotham in the first place. It is with that information that he maintains his hold over us even now. I believe he finds amusement in seeing us struggle continuously.”

Edgar paused. “He knows of the sword too, then? He is as a spectator to our search for it?”

“He knows. He does not seem to believe it truly exists, but by borrowing Miss Carlton’s abilities, you have been drawing closer to it. Perhaps we shall be able to break free from him should you obtain it. But in doing so, you would have discovered my betrayal. That is why I was of two minds. If only you would give up the sword, I would be permitted to stay by your side a little longer. But more than anything else, I do not want you to be exposed to danger. It is reckless for us to proceed, my lord, when we have no connection to the Blue Knight whatsoever. I am prepared for you to denounce me as a traitor. There is just one path left open for me now.”

Suddenly, Ermine flung her arms around Lydia and embraced her tightly. “Miss Carlton. You will have nobody to resent but me.”

“Don’t, Ermine!”

By the time Edgar had shouted, Lydia’s body was already on the brink of being pushed over the handrail and toward the bluff. She quickly tried to grab on to Ermine for support, but it did nothing to help; Ermine was planning to go down with her.

The heavens and the earth had switched places in Lydia’s vision. The sky and the sea seemed to pass by nauseatingly slowly—which was when she felt a pull on her body. Raven had just about managed to grab hold of her sleeve. He had caught Ermine’s clothing too, but he looked to be struggling to support both of them. Lydia could also see her sleeve tearing at any moment. She reached out her hand, desperately trying to grab the bars beneath the handrail.

Edgar caught her hand. “Raven. I’ve got Lydia.” He took a firmer hold of her arm, then carefully pulled her up. He supported her as she collapsed back onto the terrace, and she clung to him instinctively, soothed by his hand as it stroked her hair.

“Raven! What are you doing?”

His shout brought her back to her senses.

Raven was still holding on to Ermine’s arm, but he made no move to pull her up; she was trying to shake him off.

“Please, Raven. Set me free.”

Even if her brother rescued her, she could not stay with Edgar. She would be forever under the prince’s curse.

“Don’t let go! Don’t let her die!” Edgar rushed over to them.

Ermine’s arm slipped out of Raven’s grip before he made it. In a split second, she was lost to the depths below.

Lydia squeezed her eyes shut. There was no scream, nor even a splash over the sound of the waves. When she opened her eyes again, she saw only the tall whitecaps dashing against the rocks as though they had never been disturbed.

Completely drained of energy, Edgar sat down listlessly on the ground.

The Twin Keys and the Sacrificial Blood

"Please forgive me, my lord." Raven kneeled before Edgar, looking dispassionate as ever. It was clear even to Lydia that he was not apologizing for his powerlessness to save Ermine; he had let go of his sister for her sake. She had chosen death, and for that, he had defied his master. Raven had entrusted his spirits to Edgar completely. He would not have disobeyed his orders without a great deal of resolve.

Edgar knew this too. "You are forgiven," he said quietly. He'd pulled his knees up to his chest and entangled his fingers in his golden locks, as though trying to suppress a violent anger. Most likely, that anger was aimed at himself. "I should be apologizing to you. Ermine was suffering, and I was unable to support her fully. Even when I could *tell* she was anxious." His next murmur came with a long sigh. "If only I could have heeded her request."

Lydia sensed he was talking about last night. She also remembered how he had said he endeavored to bring Ermine happiness. Ermine's feelings were one-sided, and she had known that Edgar instead considered her family. That was why it had come to this tragic conclusion.

"Despite how far we have come...I, too, am still enslaved to the prince. I was always taught that, with him, *everything* was absolute. That is not a lesson that can be forgotten so easily. I've always had this sense that no matter how far we run through this labyrinth, he will be waiting at its exit from the moment we locate it." Edgar paused. "Years have passed, and yet the anxiety has never lessened. And if that much is true for me, how much deeper must Ermine's distress and wounds have been from the time she spent as one of his women?"

Only those who had experienced the same could understand the despair of losing one's humanity and living as a puppet. It was beyond Lydia's powers of imagination to picture the suffering they had undergone at the hands of this "prince." However, she felt she could understand Ermine's feelings, if only to a very minor extent: the true anguish beyond her betrayal that was neither coerced, nor manipulated into her.

Had Ermine succeeded in pulling Lydia off the cliff with her, Edgar would not have been the one to kill her. Ermine was a traitor; her time with him was limited. It would either end once the prince caught him or once her betrayal was discovered. Her love for him was fleeting, destined never to be eternal. And so she had chosen to put an end to it all, here and now.

Edgar got to his feet shakily. “Give me a moment. I shan’t be long.”

As he retreated into the castle, his figure seemed so ephemeral, Lydia feared he might vanish into thin air. It was unbearable to think that it was his desire to acquire the sword for Ermine’s sake that had pushed her to this. All he had ever wanted was for her to be able to live as an ordinary young woman, with long hair, fine clothes, and a smile.

“Do you cry for my sister?” Raven asked. Only then did Lydia notice the tears trailing down her cheeks. “She tried to kill you.”

Lydia was suddenly struck with the thought that that might not be strictly true. If that had been Ermine’s intention, where was the sense in disclosing Edgar’s plan to her? She must have expected Lydia to survive and come to the sword’s hiding place. It *seemed* that she had tried to pull Lydia from the cliff with her, but she knew how agile Raven was. If she had truly wanted Lydia dead, there were surely sounder methods. Had she done nothing, both Edgar and Lydia may have died without him ever claiming the sword. She couldn’t betray Edgar further, and she couldn’t escape the prince. Death was her only remaining option.

Ermine’s sole wish was for Edgar not to sacrifice Lydia and to find a new path to freedom, even if it meant abandoning the sword. At least, that was how it seemed to Lydia. For that reason, Ermine had shown Edgar that she was severing his enduring link to the prince: herself.

“I knew her but for a few days,” said Lydia. “Perhaps these tears are presumptuous. I am sure you are far more deeply wounded than I could ever be.”

“Wounded... I wonder. I am not really sure. I find it difficult to recognize what I am feeling. Maybe that is why I took it for granted that I would never lose my sister. I saw her as my sole kin and nothing more, but I always thought she

would be there to assist me, and me her. While she suffered and struggled with her demons, I thought only of myself." As always, Raven spoke exceedingly calmly.

"I think she understood that you *do* possess emotions. You let go of her hand; you loved her and had the ability to hurt her, more deeply than anybody."

Raven turned his deep green eyes on her. Their dark color was enough to inspire fear in anyone's heart, but there was no threat emanating from them now. "Did my sister say anything to you, Miss Carlton?"

"S-Such as?"

Raven hesitated. "Never mind. Please keep it to yourself."

It seemed he had realized that Ermine had disclosed Edgar's plan to her. But as Edgar's servant, his priority lay with fulfilling his master's wishes rather than worrying about the sins he may commit—no matter what that meant for Lydia.

"His lordship does not seek the sword for his own sake. It is nothing more than a matter of noblesse oblige, a principle he strongly abides by."

It sounded as though Raven wished to defend his master's actions. She could well understand that.

Noblesse oblige: the responsibility a lord had to protect and guide his vassals, their families, and his population. The higher classes had inherited their ethos of chivalry from the times of feudalism. They were more than a group of privileged men and women; they shouldered important responsibilities and duties to the people they led. In the event of war, they were not allowed to abandon their soldiers or people to flee.

Edgar had never stopped fighting, all for Raven's and Ermine's sakes. Raven was implying that he was unlikely to withdraw, even now.

"Lydia. Could you come here for a moment?" Edgar had returned. Though he still looked heart-stricken, he called her over as though nothing were amiss. "Could the leprechaun's treasure, buried underground, refer to gold coins?" He beckoned her to a spot behind the stairs.

"Certainly it might. Have you found something?"

“Do you see this hole in the wall? Its size matches exactly with the Blue Knight Earl’s coin.”

“So it does!”

“Would you do the honors?”

Lydia nodded. She pushed the coin through the slot. As it fell, there was a mechanical sound and the stairs began to move. Eventually, they revealed an opening in the floor, through which more stairs led downward.

“Come.”

Lydia entered the hole after Edgar, with Raven bringing up the rear. The farther they went, the closer she came to danger. But she had no choice but to proceed; the Star of the Merrow was vital to ensuring her father’s safety.

She couldn’t deny that it lifted her spirits somewhat to solve another clue with Edgar and seek out the sword together. On the other hand, Ermine had offered up her life to make Edgar ask himself whether he could go on sacrificing those around him. The gravity of her actions proved he was ready to kill Lydia. If only her wish for Edgar to commit no further sin would reach him.

Raven’s presence immediately behind Lydia was enough to put an end to that thought. Sentimentality was not enough to make the pair’s determination waver. Raven knew what his sister’s death meant and what she had wanted, but serving Edgar was his priority. And Edgar was committed to noblesse oblige, even if he was duty-bound to one less person now. Like them, Lydia also had someone she needed to protect: her father. These two had passed through the fires of hell to get there, and she was nothing more than a naive young woman. There was no hope of her holding her own against them.

And yet her only choice was to carry on.



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“Why, if it isn’t the professor. What are you doing here?”

A voice rang out through the room Carlton was confined in—but there was nobody around him who could have spoken. Suspicious, he looked around until his gaze fell upon a gray cat in a necktie by the window. It was sitting there just as a human would.

“Nico.” Carlton knew he wasn’t actually a cat, but he still found himself rubbing his eyes in disbelief whenever they met. “Lydia’s been taken away by the Gotham brothers. They’re looking for a jewel...”

Nico jumped down from the window, plodded over to Carlton on his hind legs, and folded his arms—or rather, his front legs. “What do you mean, ‘Gotham’? Isn’t Lydia with that blond noble?”

Carlton always had the urge to pick Nico up and investigate him from nose to tail. When the thought struck him that this cat could have been a gentleman of equal stature, however, he reminded himself that even staring for too long would be rude, so he repressed the urge. Nico had been partner to Lydia’s mother and had been watching over Lydia herself since she was very young. Carlton had known him for a long time, even if they weren’t particularly close. With Carlton’s lack of ability to see fairies, Nico was the only one with whom he was able to communicate.

“She *was*, yes, but Gotham captured us. He tricked me into coming here too, telling me we would be able to find Lydia...”

“Whoever’s with her, she’s on her way to the sword’s hiding place. That’s not good.”

“No? There was a woman, wearing a man’s uniform, who said the young noble might be planning to sacrifice Lydia to the merrows.”

“According to the agreement between the merrows and the Blue Knight Earl, if anybody but his descendent takes the sword, death is the only outcome.” Footsteps approached, and Nico fell silent before vanishing completely.

At the same time, the door was flung open. Gotham’s eldest son—who had introduced himself to Lydia as “Huskley”—stepped into the room, his face in such a sorry state that it was obvious he had been beaten. He was clearly in a

bad mood, and kicked over a chair as though ready to take his anger out on Carlton.

“Your daughter’s been taken away by that thief again.”

Carlton sighed. “Either way, she faces the worst possible outcome.”

“As long as we have you, she cannot be allowed to hand the Star of the Merrow over to him. I’m sure she will attempt to take the sapphire as asked, but the man she is with cannot be trusted. A young girl like her won’t be able to handle him by herself.”

“You seem to have trouble handling him yourselves.”

Huskley’s eyebrow twitched, but he managed to suppress his rage. “For now, we’re tailing him to get the sapphire. And you’ll be coming with us.”

The two next oldest sons grabbed Carlton from either side and forced him to his feet. He looked around for Nico, but the cat was nowhere to be seen. Still, he murmured, trusting that the fairy was nearby, “There is precious little time left.”

“Tch. Okay, I’ll go on ahead. Take this, professor.”

Carlton could hear only Nico’s voice. A moment later, a mint leaf was dropped into his inside pocket.

“The brownies should be able to follow the scent.”

“What are you muttering about?” Huskley snapped.

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.” With a sigh, Carlton allowed himself to be led from the room.

He had never objected to Lydia’s wish to become a fairy doctor like her mother, but he couldn’t help feeling that she wouldn’t be in this situation if only she had kept her abilities hidden. Was she destined to a lifetime of struggle because of those gifts? More troublesome than that might be her weakness for helpless men—something else she had inherited from her mother.

The thought of the noble thief-cum-kidnapper who was currently with his daughter did nothing to lift Carlton’s spirits.

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The stairs seemed to continue endlessly down into the darkness. They were interspersed with twisted passages and, if not for the candles, it would have been impossible to see anything in these underground tunnels. Raven took one of the candles, presumably expecting to arrive at some sort of basement, and the three continued onward, guided by its light.

“I wonder how much farther it is.” Lydia was starting to find the enclosed space suffocating. It was like each step was bringing her closer to her demise. As long as she failed to come up with a plan to take the sword from Edgar, she was nothing more than a lamb being led to the slaughter. She might not have felt such despair if not for the darkness of their surroundings.

This artificial space, totally devoid of life, was making her anxious. There were fairies who loved to be underground, but there was no sign of them either, and she couldn’t help but wonder why. It was so unnatural and only served to feed into her anxiety. Not to mention that that may have been down to the influence of the merrows—a fairy race with which she had never even interacted. Fear caused her determination to save her father to waver, and she was starting to think very dark thoughts indeed.

With Edgar in front of her and Raven behind, there was nowhere to run. Why had she followed them here in the first place, knowing they planned to kill her? It was getting harder and harder to draw breath.

Edgar turned around, making her jump. “Are you tired, Lydia?”

“Doesn’t...the air seem a little thinner to you?”

“That cannot be. The flame is burning strongly.”

Raven’s words came just as Lydia stumbled from a wave of dizziness. Edgar caught her and said something that she missed.

“Don’t touch me.”

His touch only made breathing more of a struggle. Cold sweat ran along her skin. Confusion took over her every instinct, and she began to lash out.

“Calm down, Lydia.”

Her arms were caught, and a palm closed off her nose and mouth. She couldn't breathe at all now.

Are they murdering me?

Her resistance became more desperate.

"Stay still and exhale gently."

Where was the air in her lungs to exhale?

Lydia continued to struggle, and then she slipped on a stair, her weight dragging Edgar down with her as she fell. She screamed, releasing the leaden air that had gathered in her lungs—and then she *did* feel a little calmer. Her breaths came more naturally.

"That's it; don't panic, just breathe nice and slowly." Edgar's voice came through the pitch blackness they found themselves in, and his arms were still wrapped around her. They didn't seem to have fallen very far. The seemingly infinite stairs had come to an end.

The light of a candle rapidly approached them. "My lord!"

"I'm fine, Raven. Are you hurt, Lydia?"

"No..." Edgar's embrace had prevented any injuries. "What about you?"

"Not at all. Thankfully, we only fell down a few steps." Once they were fully in the candle's light, he let go of Lydia, then looked down at her with a gentle, concerned smile. "Are you able to breathe properly now?"

"Not entirely, but it's better than it was before."

"You were inhaling too much air. You must have been nervous, and I am sure this oppressive darkness did nothing to help things."

It was only after he pointed it out that she realized how tense she really was.

"It is no wonder you struggled to remain calm after what happened. I apologize for pushing you so hard."

He was referring to Ermine's death. Lydia herself had been incredibly close to sharing the same fate. Naturally, the event had shocked her, but there was something else causing her much more anxiety—more *fear*. And she could

hardly imagine anything worse.

Edgar had saved her countless times. When Huskley had chased them, Edgar had been injured while protecting her. When Ermine had tried to pull her from the cliff, he had caught her, and even just now, he had shielded her from harm. He had always spoken to her with kindness and consideration. She knew she mustn't trust him, yet perhaps it was because she *wanted* to that she had followed him here. She was scared of more than dying; she was scared of dying at Edgar's hands. How cold, how cruel would his eyes be when he looked at her in that moment? The very thought of it made her shudder.

No one else understood her; they dismissed her as too eccentric. Yet she'd always felt that Edgar accepted her as she was, and that the compliments he gave her were genuine. But the moment he tried to kill her, every show of kindness and every gentle smile would be proven a lie.

When she had learned he was a thief, she had tried to flee. He hadn't used force to stop or manipulate her then. He had simply pleaded with her not to leave, telling her he needed her skills as a fairy doctor. Did that not mean he respected her autonomy? Ever since then, Lydia had been determined that he would not use her, that instead they would cooperate as equals. Now, she wasn't sure that she'd been successful. She was terrified that Edgar would upturn absolutely everything.

The only thing that allowed her to move forward was the optimistic thought that it *might* not happen. She had been clinging to that thought for dear life.

"You ought to rest a little while longer."

The compassion in those words, too, might soon be proven utterly false. Lydia stared into his ash mauve eyes. He smiled back at her kindly, as though used to being stared at by girls.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked before even realizing what she was saying.

He didn't seem surprised, and he didn't look away. A chill ran down her spine.

"What are you talking about?"

"Please do not treat me so kindly if you are planning to kill me. You ought

instead to glower at me and flash me your knife, or yell and beat me."

"Are you still disoriented?"

"You're being unfair. I struggle to see you as a villain, so how can I bear a grudge against you when you *do* kill me? All I wanted was to be of use to somebody in my capacity as a fairy doctor. I only came all this way because I wanted to believe that you needed my abilities, even if you are a liar and a thief."

"I do need them. I need *you*."

"Me? Or my life?"

"How did these thoughts find their way into your head? I have no reason to kill you."

"I am not a part of your group. It would cause you no pain to sacrifice me and my father both. That is enough of a reason."

A troubled frown rose to Edgar's face, and he kept his eyes on her as he combed his fingers through his bangs. After mulling things over, he reached out a determined hand toward her. He hesitated when she flinched, but still carried on and placed the hand on her head. He then began to stroke her hair gently, like he was soothing a small child.

"I have made it to this point doing anything I could to protect my companions and myself. I told myself I was 'fighting,' when the reality was far more pitiable; all I was really doing was running away. I was too afraid to look back and constantly tried to forget my past, all the while never realizing that I hadn't fled from him completely. The price for my ignorance was...insurmountable. I do not want to hurt anybody anymore. I see you as one of my companions now; I ask that you trust me."

Edgar looked Lydia right in the eye, and she found herself on the cusp of believing his words. But she knew he was lying. His lies were earnest. He wove the truest of his emotions into the gravest of lies. It was how he manipulated others. He *knew* how the other person regarded him, and he practically held the reins of their heart in his hand.

And yet all Lydia could do was allow herself to be deceived and betrayed. She

understood that from how utterly sincere Edgar's lies were this time around. His determination to see his plans through showed no signs of wavering.

"Please. I want to save my father." The writing was on the wall. If nothing else, Lydia wanted him to heed her one request.

"I understand that."

Praying that those words, at least, were honest, she gathered her strength and rose to her feet.

There was a wine cellar beyond the door—but it clearly hadn't been made for human use. It had likely been built during the castle's construction, for whatever lived this deep beneath the ground. This was the crib of the clurichaun, a fairy that loved wine. It satisfied the poem's clue, even if the fairy itself was nowhere to be found. At this point, there was an audible sound of water, although it was unclear where it was coming from. It wasn't just the sound of waves; there seemed to be a vein of underground water nearby that ran beneath the castle and into the sea. If the merrows' den was near, this wine cellar might belong to them. At the end of the cellar were three paths leading in different directions.

"Which way should we go?" Edgar asked.

"Allow me to investigate. Please wait here."

Raven had used the candle to light one of the lanterns on the wall. It provided much more light than a single candlestick, and Lydia felt herself relax a little, especially given how spacious the room was compared to the tunnels. Raven must have sensed as much, hence why he had offered to go alone.

"Be careful," Edgar said. Once Raven had disappeared into the darkness, he tapped absentmindedly against one of the cellar's many barrels. "All of these are empty."

The absence of the castle's lord had left nobody to offer wine to the merrows. Lydia sat down against the wall to wait, which was when she felt something fluffy tickling her arm.

"Lydia. It's me."

She recognized Nico's whisper.

Still invisible, he jumped up onto her lap. "Listen closely. This is something one of the island's brownies learned from his merrow drinking mate. The merrows are waiting for the earl, who disappeared hundreds of years ago. But apparently they're growing tired of waiting and want somebody to take the sword. The brownie said that not just anybody would do—but the merrows promised the earl they would exchange the sword for a star, so as long as someone agrees to the same trade, they could get their hands on the sword. 'A star? As in, a star from the sky?' I asked. But no; in the merrows' sea, it is the souls of the drowned that twinkle like stars. It sounds like all one needs to get the sword now is to reach its hiding place and offer a sacrifice—I'm sure that even a lowly thief would do."

Most fairy types required a contract in order to work with humans. While emotions and duty may facilitate similar agreements between people, they were not enough for fairies. The merrows only accepted the earl as their master because of a deal made between them, and the same could be said of their reasoning in protecting the sword.

They would not break the contract. But nor would they do more than it required of them. To come to the sword's hiding place with the gold coin and silver key was enough proof of the Blue Knight Earl's blood; the merrows would do nothing more to ascertain their visitor's lineage.

Carefully, so that Edgar wouldn't see her, Lydia nodded to urge Nico to continue.

"The sword has to be close by now. When you find it, you'll need to grab it before *his lordship* does—and cut him with it."

Lydia only just managed to stop herself from gasping.

"It'll be a sign to the merrows. You don't need to inflict a heavy wound. The owner of the blood that soaks the sword becomes the merrows' prey, or so they say. Huskley and his brothers will be here soon with the professor in tow, but any commotion they cause will be favorable to us. You should leave the thugs to their fight and seek out the Blue Knight Earl's sword alone. Okay?"

The sensation of Nico's bushy fur beneath her hands vanished at once; Edgar

was approaching.

“Can you hear something?” he asked.

“No, nothing. Do you mean the water? I’ve been hearing that since we first arrived in this room,” she replied, feigning ignorance.

“Not the water; it sounds like a girl crying.”

“Crying? Of course, the banshee...” Lydia stood up.

It was a faint noise that may have only been the wind whistling through the rocks, but it definitely resembled the weeping of a banshee. To witness a banshee crying by the waterside was said to be an omen of imminent death. Whose death were the fairy’s unsettling wails pointing to?

If Lydia wanted to live, she would need to strike Edgar with the sword. She wasn’t sure if she was even capable of pointing a weapon at someone. But if she wasn’t, it would be Edgar who turned on her.

“The banshee is the next fairy mentioned in the text, isn’t it?” Edgar asked.

“Yes. That sound must be the next hint.” She pressed her ear to the wall, searching for a spot where the noise of the wind became clearer. She found it against the wall of the middle path.

Raven was just returning from the passage on the right. “This one is a dead end.”

“I think it’s this one, the middle path,” Lydia said.

The three of them set off again. The path was not very long. A small way in, the tunnel opened up into a dark cave, across which lay a rope bridge. At its other end, they found a door fixed into a rocky wall. Lydia was about to approach the door when Edgar stopped her.

“After the banshee come the merrows. We ought to be prudent in our approach.”

“Why?”

“Everybody attempting to retrieve the sword so far has died. This door appears to have a certain mechanism to it; you can see part of a cog here.”

The rope from the bridge was affixed behind a rock; what Edgar was saying appeared to be true. He pulled a thin, silver card from the inside pocket of his coat. One side was uneven, engraved with tiny text that was too small to be deciphered, just like the gold coin. It must have been the key Ermine had spoken of; the one that Edgar was hiding from Lydia and that was linked to the mystery of the Blue Knight's sword.

"What's that?" she asked.

"A magic key to open this door."

There was a small groove beside the doorknob into which the card would fit—the keyhole.

Suddenly, there was a rush of footsteps from the direction of the wine cellar. Lamps cast the large, crawling shadows of men against the wall until their light eventually reached the cavern.

"Not another step, John! We won't let you proceed any farther!"

"I'm getting quite tired of seeing your face, my dear Huskley."

"Get them." Though he looked wary in the face of Edgar's arrogant remark, Huskley gave the command to his brothers.

They approached cautiously. Edgar shot a backward glance at them before walking up to the door.

There came a groan out of the blue. Gotham's brothers froze. The noise shook the rocky cavern; it sounded like the howls of a storm, and it was drawing nearer.

"What's that?" At first, the faltering men whispered, but their voices soon turned into shrieks as a gust of wind whooshed into the cave.

"It's the merrows," Lydia murmured. "That's their magic."

The rope bridge shook violently, threatening to throw everyone off it even as they clung to it for dear life. Atop the relentless, billowing winds came a beautiful singing voice. It was like an illusion, passing straight by its listener's ear and instead taking root inside them. Its dreamlike tones threatened to induce sleep. Lydia was holding on to the rope bridge as tightly as she could,

but she felt as though her grip would weaken at any moment. Her mind floated back to the thieves who had come before, likely tossed off this very bridge only to be washed ashore later like flotsam and jetsam.

Edgar grabbed her arm. “Lydia, Raven, come this way. Hold on to the door.” He pulled them toward him, fighting against the wind. Then, quick as a flash, he pushed the silver card into the slit by the door.

The wind stopped at once, as did the merrows’ song. The tension had drained from Lydia’s limbs, and she was in a complete daze. Edgar dragged her through the door at the same moment its cogs started to rotate. She didn’t have time to work out what was happening before the bridge snapped in the middle. Its remnants were sucked into the bottomless darkness below. Huskley and his men hurriedly jumped back onto solid ground. Only one of them had come too far to return, and he instead leaped for the door.

He wouldn’t make it. He began to fall—but not before grabbing hold of Lydia’s ankle. She screamed. Edgar slipped his arms around her waist to stop her from being dragged down and stomped on the arm of the man trying to climb up.

“Don’t touch her, you lout.” A second later, Edgar had kicked him off.

The man just about managed to grab a part of the rope bridge that was still hanging down, sending angry screams in Edgar’s direction while he hung in the air. Even in the midst of her utter shock, Lydia was reminded of how terrifying Edgar could be. He lived in a world without a need to show mercy to one’s enemies. How vulnerable must she have seemed to him? She showed sympathy for him at the slightest opportunity and took all his kindness at face value, all while holding fast to the belief that everyone had *some* good in their heart. How on Earth could *she* hope to steal the sword from him, and even injure him with it?

“Hey! Aren’t you concerned about what might happen to the professor?!” Huskley yelled from the other side of the bridgeless chasm.

“Father!”

Huskley dragged Carlton forward. “Bring us the sapphire, young lady—or I’ll be pushing your father off this cliff.”

Impatient, Edgar began to walk. Presumably, he thought there was no reason to pay heed to Huskley when he was too far away to be stopped.

“Wait!” Lydia hurried after him. “Didn’t you promise to save my father?”

“I doubt he will release your father without a fuss even if you do give him the sapphire. You, too, will be a witness to his crime. He will kill you both.”

“But, what if—”

“We do not have the sword yet.” Edgar stared straight ahead, apparently unwilling to focus on anything else.

They had reached a large natural cave. There was a dim light emanating from deep within, though the projecting rocks hid much of the area around it. At first glance, Lydia thought it might have been light coming in from outside, but then she realized it was glowing faintly and seemed to be concentrated around a single spot.

Edgar approached it slowly, Lydia not far behind. They paused at the exact same moment. There was movement around the light, which they now saw was being emitted by the rocks themselves—or rather, the thin layer of moss that covered them. Water droplets fell from the ceiling into the puddles surrounding those rocks, creating ripples that disturbed the light’s reflection. The entire section of the cavern looked like the ocean floor, if only as far as the pale blue luminescence reached.

The movement they had seen was that of a lone girl getting to her feet. Her hair took on the same pale blue shade as the glowing moss, and was long enough to not only cover her body, but to drag on the ground behind it.

“A merrow...” Lydia murmured.

Edgar turned to her with a frown. “A merrow? She has legs.”

“They can take on human form quite easily.”

“But I can see her. She appears to be an ordinary human girl to me.”

“You can see her because she wills it. You don’t truly believe that there has been a small girl locked away in this cave all this time?”

Edgar looked around them, checking for any sort of secret path. “That may be

a bit of a stretch," he eventually conceded.

"There doesn't appear to be any kind of trap around here either, if that's what you were hoping," Lydia said. "Nothing to disarm. This is no illusion."

"So I should withdraw, should I? Even if I must face a merrow directly, I do not see how it would be able to discern my legitimacy as the Blue Knight's heir."

Neither did Lydia. Merrows were wise fairies, but they did not possess an innate ability to identify a person's blood; instead, they likely relied on the contract they had with the Blue Knight Earl to provide them with proof. His descendent would be the one who had enough knowledge of fairies to solve the coin's riddle, possessed the silver key, and understood what it meant to "exchange the Star of the Merrow with another." In a sense, Edgar was correct in thinking that he didn't *need* to be the true successor; he just needed to fulfill the requisite conditions. Perhaps to him, it wasn't all that different from disarming a trap.

"Greetings," the merrow spoke. "To whom should I entrust the treasure?"

"Where is it?" Edgar asked.

"You do not see it?" the merrow responded.

Lydia squinted. The light wavered and flickered.

Where is it?

Just then, a whitish-blue shape rose up faintly from the shadow of a rock. Edgar saw it too; he moved first.

"Lydia, it's a shadow."

She would have realized it if not for Nico's voice. The shape on the rock was nothing more than the light *reflecting* off the sword—an illusion. The sword itself was...

Lydia turned a hundred-and-eighty degrees from Edgar and ran. She knelt down beside a puddle and thrust her arms into the water. The light diffused by the water's surface erased the sword's image from the rock's shade.

"What?"

Edgar turned around only to witness her pulling up a silver, glittering blade from the pool of water. The double-edged sword shone keenly like it had been recently forged, and there was not a hint of rust to be seen on the weapon. A single blue jewel was embedded in it.

Lydia gripped the handle and turned to Edgar. “Don’t move.”

He stared back at her contemplatively.

“I already know that one must offer a human soul to the merrows in exchange for the sword.”

Edgar smiled at her forlornly, not looking the least bit shocked. “I see. You have bested me. You may do as you wish.”

His easy concession made Lydia falter. She had been expecting him to rush at her in an attempt to take the sword back. How could she swing this weapon at him if not in self-defense?

“Do not interfere, Raven.”

Raven had been slinking toward them, searching for an opportune moment to strike. But now even he stopped.

Edgar knew she would hesitate. He had seen right through her. He knew that she had never wielded a sword and that she was afraid to hurt people. Even knowing the reason behind his docile reaction, Lydia found she was frozen to the spot.



Nico tugged urgently at her sleeve. “Do it, Lydia, or you won’t survive this. Or are you waiting for the merrows to appear and devour *all* of you?”

She knew he was right.

Exchange the Star of the Merrow with another. Lest they sing a forlorn song.

Unless the merrows were presented with what they were promised, they would sing. The moment they did so, everybody there would be dragged to the ocean depths.

Edgar took a slow step toward her.

“I told you not to move!”

“You won’t be able to strike me from this distance.”

“Don’t you remember, Lydia? He was planning to kill you!”

Edgar continued walking until he was in striking range.

“Were you really going to kill me?” Lydia asked.

“Are you scared? You’re shaking.”

“Were you lying when you said you wouldn’t? You said you would save my father. Was that a lie too?”

“No.”

He’s a liar, her mind hissed, but still Lydia hesitated. “Is there any truth to anything you say?” she pressed.

“Why should that matter to you?”

“Because you’ve been protecting me. I don’t want to believe you were doing it dishonestly. When we lost Ermine, I mourned her too, even if I could never comprehend how important she was to you both. That’s why I want to believe that you understand my desire to save my father...”

What *was* the use in him answering her question? It made no difference to anything now.

Whether in discomfort or confusion, Edgar knitted his brow. “Why do you hesitate? Doesn’t the man who would kill you deserve to die? Nobody would

blame you for cutting me down."

"Lydia!" Nico urged. "What are you waiting for?!"

"I don't know what to do!" Perhaps she would never have found the courage to turn the sword on him, no matter the circumstances.

Edgar kept his eyes on her as he let out an exasperated chuckle. "I'm a heinous villain, and still you are afraid to injure me? Let me *show* you what you must do." He grabbed her—and the next thing she knew, the sword had been snatched away. His eyes softened slightly as he stared at it. Strangely, there was a sadness in his gaze. "You are too soft, Lydia. Especially in a world full of utterly heinous villains."

He raised the sword slowly. Lydia was still frozen in her tracks. But then, the blade suddenly changed direction. Edgar pushed it into his own palm—and then he pulled it downward.

"What?"

Blood overflowed from the wound, wetting the sword. It formed droplets that dripped to the ground. Lydia could only stare as Edgar smiled dejectedly at her.

"Why is it, I wonder, that I find it so difficult to lie to you?" He turned his gaze to the boy standing nearby, who looked just as astonished as Lydia. "Forgive me, Raven."

"My lord!"

The sound of crashing waves approached like tremors through the Earth. At once, the puddles surrounding the rocks overflowed. Their water became thrashing crests that charged at the three of them. Lydia squeezed her eyes shut, prepared for the entire cave to flood in a split second. But she never felt a single drop on her skin. There was only the sound of the waves closing in, and then receding. When she opened her eyes again, the raging waters were nowhere to be seen, the puddles were as still as before, and the sword lay on the ground at her feet.

Edgar was gone.

The merrow walked up to Lydia slowly. It picked up the sword and held it out

to her. “I offer this sword to you, the one to whom it did no harm.”

“Are you certain? I thought you were guarding the sword in order to pass it to the earl’s successor.”

“The earl passed away a long, long time ago, drowned in an ocean far out of our reach.”

“Do you mean to say that is where the earl’s bloodline ended?”

“We do not know. We believe so, however, given the hundreds of years that have passed without a human ever solving our riddle correctly. The earls always moved freely between Fairyland and the human realm, returning within a hundred years. We supposed that, if the earl’s bloodline had truly ended, the only human capable of reaching this place would be a fairy doctor. One such as yourself.”

“So you were waiting for a fairy doctor, not the heir?”

The merrow girl nodded mournfully. “It was the earl who allowed us merrows to inhabit these waters. He mediated between us and the humans, allowing us to live in peace. But as the decades went by after his disappearance, and the islanders’ merrow blood became ever more diluted, the gap between us and mankind widened. We kept the seas around the island raging in order to protect the sword and threw any thieves into the water. At first, we sent and received signals to and from the islanders and those who came to visit innocently, to ensure they were not caught up in any trouble. However, those signals were forgotten over time, and eventually, we were unable to tell who inhabited each boat that came to the island, be they thief, fisherman, or merchant.”

“So that’s how the island became cut off from the mainland.”

“The merrow population is dwindling. There are many who have returned to their home waters out of despair for our situation here. The majority, however, refused to break our promise to the earl.” The merrow put the sword in Lydia’s hands and curled her fingers around it. “With this, our promise is fulfilled. This sword belongs to the human realm. This island, too, belongs to mankind. We shall take our leave. Those who rule this island may not be the Blue Knight’s descendents from Fairyland, but their leadership ought to suffice. We shall

entrust everything to them.”

The large sapphire embedded in the sword’s hilt drew Lydia’s eye and refused to let go. That was when she noticed there was no six-stranded light in its center. A star sapphire was a rare deep blue stone said to encompass the milky-white light of a star in its center. While this sapphire possessed a velvety luster, there was no starlight within it. That made it an ordinary sapphire—not a *star* sapphire.

“There’s no star,” Lydia said.

“The earl possesses the star. It is a tradition of the earldom to pluck out the star to engrave upon its master’s body whenever the sword is left. If there is no heir who has inherited the star, it cannot be returned to the sapphire.”

“Exchange the Star of the Merrow with another.”

The text referred to the sapphire’s light inherited by the earl’s successor. It wasn’t a human soul that was required to obtain the sword, but the return of the gemstone’s star. Yet the real earl would never return, while the merrows remained bound by the promise. The only thing they could do was alter the poem’s interpretation. To merrows, human souls sparkled like stars. Therefore, they must have decided that a human soul could also be used to fulfill the promise.

If that truly is the case...

Lydia had the sense that she had just realized something very important indeed; she just didn’t know *what*. She fell into thought. But it was then that a sudden commotion at the cavern’s entrance interrupted her.

“Miss Carlton. It’s Huskley.”

It appeared they had taken a ladder from the wine cellar in order to cross the bridgeless crevice. The men were now attempting to flood into the cavern.

The merrow vanished as Raven went to block the entrance. Lydia wondered why—it wasn’t as though Edgar was here anymore. Raven should have resented her. His beloved master had been taken away by the merrows because of her. But, possibly because Edgar had been unable to hurt her, it seemed Raven felt the need to protect her too.

The sight of him stopped Huskley and his men in their tracks, but it didn't stop his mouth. "Hand over the sword. Else your father—"

Out of nowhere, Nico appeared and leaped atop Huskley's head, trampling down his hat.

"Get down, Nico!"

"Hurry up, will you?" the cat called. "This is the man I was talking about!"

High-pitched cheers rang out from behind the men: brownies. They advanced in a large group. Lydia recognized some of them as the ones she had helped in the manor on the mainland.

"Tear out their hair!" Nico instructed, swishing his singed tail tip.

The brownies charged at the men, some of them on foot, some riding mice, and others clinging to bats. They clambered up the men's legs, biting all over their bodies and plucking out their hair. In all likelihood, the men could not see them. They screamed without a clue of what was going on.

"Father! Over here!"

Though the fairies had clambered over Carlton, they hadn't harmed him, and Lydia was able to pull him away from the turmoil.

"Lydia... I'm so relieved to see you unharmed."

They shared a long embrace and celebrated their reunion. A determined seed sprouted with her, then. The desire to protect someone important to her, the hesitation such a desire could cause, and the suffering when she *couldn't* fully keep someone from harm—these were emotions that all people could relate to. Lydia hadn't lost anything through this experience, but she wasn't prepared to let things end there.

Once her father released her, she walked over to Raven, who was standing stock-still like a lost sheep without a shepherd. "Would you happen to remember what was written on Edgar's silver key?"

"A little."

"It wasn't explicitly stated that the merrows would exchange the sword for a human soul, was it?"

“Indeed. The final section read, ‘He who receives the sword must test it, that the merrows may take the shed blood to the sea.’”

The part of the coin’s text that spoke of exchanging stars, and those words on the silver key, must have constituted an important part of the Blue Knight Earl’s contract with the merrows. Together, one might interpret them to mean that a human soul must be offered. However, as the “star” referred to the sapphire’s light, so must the blood shed by the sword hold a separate meaning.

“May I entrust my father to you?” Lydia requested, an idea forming. Raven looked at her dubiously. She glanced at Huskley’s group, and saw that they were still being battered by the brownies. “I doubt they will have the will or the energy left to fight, but please be cautious. I’d like you to take my father and leave the castle.”

“What will you do, Miss Carlton?”

“Whatever I can. Even if that ends up being nothing.” She turned to her anxious father. “Father. Do not forget: I am a fairy doctor.”

“I know. Do be careful.”

Lydia tightened her grip on the sword and approached the glowing mossy rocks where the merrow had stood moments earlier. “Nico.”

“Please, Lydia, don’t tell me you’re planning to make a contract with the merrows?” Nico frowned as he joined her, his whiskers twitching irritably.

“These puddles are connected to their waters, aren’t they? And you are a fairy—you can guide me down their path.”

“Well, yes, but...making a contract is dangerous. If you make a wrong move and enrage the merrows—in their own den, no less—they’ll have you drowning at the ocean floor in a matter of seconds.”

“I know.”

“You would go to such lengths for that earl?”

“He didn’t lie to me.”

“He only faltered at the very last moment. He was very much ready to kill you until then, and I’m sure he is regretting letting you live as we speak. That is, if he

is still in a state capable of regret.”

“If you won’t show me the way, Nico, I shall go by myself.”

“All right! *Fine!*” Nico stuck out his tail before Lydia. “Hold on tight.”

The Earl’s Star

When Lydia and Nico jumped into the seemingly shallow puddle, they ended up sinking to the bottom of a deep sea. They were already in the fairies’ realm—an otherworldly space that, despite being underwater, allowed them to breathe freely. It wasn’t cold, nor did the ocean wet their skin. The only forces they did feel were the typical pressure and buoyancy that came with walking through water.

A school of blue fish passed before them. Led by Nico, the pair progressed toward a distant bright light: the merrows’ town. The homes were decorated with shells and seagrass, built together in hillock-like arrangements. Lights twinkled high above. Perhaps they were the souls of the sailors the merrows had collected.

“Look, a human.”

“Walking around without a care.”

“Meaning it’s not ours?”

“What’s that small creature with it?”

“It looks like a fairy.”

Nico clicked his tongue. “We aren’t zoo animals.”

Lydia could sense the merrows’ glances that came from the rocky shadows. The females were just as she had heard: their upper half resembled that of humans, but even more beautiful, and their lower half consisted of a long tail with fins, covered in scales like a fish. The males, however, had scales over their faces and arms, and fins on their backs and heads. They looked closer to fish than human.

Lydia stopped in her tracks. The merrows were still staring at her. “A human was brought here just a few moments ago, yes? Did any of you see him?”

“Unless its soul has already been harvested, it will be on the meadow.”

They continued in the direction the merrow had indicated, and it wasn’t long

until a hill came into view, covered in green seagrass. Swarms of fish swam in circles around the meadow's center. The blond hair of the man watching them idly was hard to miss.

"Edgar! Thank goodness you still have your soul!" Lydia rushed over to him.

He eyed her curiously. "You even appear in my dreams now. You must truly resent me."

"You aren't dreaming."

"I must be. Here I am, on the ocean floor, watching the fish swim by as though it is the most natural thing in the world. Pinching myself causes no pain either."

"Yes, I can see why this might be unreal to you, but I can assure you that *I* am not dreaming."

Without warning, Edgar pinched Lydia's cheek.

"Ouch! What are you doing?!"

"It's true. I wonder what's happening."

"Honestly, does it matter? You're coming with me. I am here to save you, after all." She tugged on his sleeve.

He didn't budge an inch from where he stood. "Save me? There is no hope for me in salvation. Ermine is gone, and I did not possess the strength to rescue Raven."

"Raven still needs you. I just know it."

"If we were to be returned to the prince, the loyalty his spirits hold to me would only be exploited."

"The answer is simply not to get caught."

"I thought I'd already said that's an impossibility. I had thought we were fleeing when, in reality, he was watching us the entire time. Besides, I deceived you so cruelly. You should have no reason to want to save me."

He admitted it.

Lydia's heart sank. But that was all the more reason she didn't want to let

Edgar die so easily. “If you die, I shan’t be able to forgive you. You didn’t injure yourself out of regret for what you did to me; it was because you noticed there was no star in the sword’s sapphire, wasn’t it? Only the star sapphire would legitimize you as the Blue Knight Earl. You abandoned all hope upon realizing that all of this was for nothing.”

He looked at her sadly and let out a laugh that sounded closer to a sigh. “Precisely. And yet...”

“I’m going to make sure you *truly* regret trying to kill me. You *will* learn that sacrificing another’s life out of pure arrogance has repercussions. So I’m giving you something that, had you injured me then, would have been forever out of your reach.”

Edgar stared at her in astonishment.

“I cannot guarantee this will work, but know that you will regret it if it does!” Lydia tugged on his sleeve again. This time, he followed, although he was still out of sorts.

“Oi! I can’t let you take him.” A male merrow, presumably the meadow’s caretaker, appeared to stop Lydia.

“I’m not *just* taking him. I plan to negotiate for him. Could you please tell me who was responsible for protecting the earl’s sword?” She pointed the blade at him threateningly.

The merrow ducked back and gestured to a house at the top of the hill. “I feel sorry for you, human. If all your women are this wilful, you may consider that becoming a star is a kinder fate.” He shot Edgar a sympathetic glance.

Edgar simply smiled noncommittally and allowed a miffed Lydia to lead him away from the meadow.

“So I’m wilful, am I?”

“You express yourself clearly. I rather like it.”

“You can flatter me if you like, but I still cannot guarantee your release.”

Nico hopped up onto Lydia’s shoulder and whispered into her ear, “This isn’t funny anymore, Lydia. You can still turn back.” Confident that he wasn’t

listening, Nico turned in Edgar's direction. "Don't think you've found peace just because she's saved you, brute! I won't rest until those brownies have pulled every last golden hair out of your scalp!"

"That isn't going to happen, Nico. Edgar assisted me in creating a path for the brownies. They will not attack one to whom they are indebted."

"*What?* Confound it! Why did you even bother to rescue him, then? I had no reason to lead you down here after all!"

"I'm sorry, Nico. To make up for it, I shall buy you a nice long jacket that can hide your tail until the hair grows back." Edgar didn't seem to find it at all strange to be communicating with Nico, likely because he still thought he was dreaming.

"Do you mean that?" The cat's tone softened at the promise of a new garment.

"You have my word. Of course, we need to ensure that we make it out of here alive first."

At the top of the hill, they passed through a gate made of starfish, where they found themselves faced with a lacy curtain of jellyfish. A single merrow appeared from behind it—the same girl they had encountered in the Blue Knight Earl's castle. She looked from Lydia to Edgar, then let out a conflicted sigh.

"Fairy doctor, what is the meaning of this?"

"Were you the one responsible for the sword?" Lydia asked.

"My father was."

"I would like to speak with him."

The girl hesitated. "Please follow me." She led them into the house.

Merrow homes did not have roofs. Nor did they have many of what could be considered walls. Their dwellings mainly consisted of pillars and arches constructed with rocks and fishbones, and rooms were separated by curtains fashioned from seagrass and shells. The most strikingly beautiful room had a

pillar decorated with pearl oysters. That was where the merrow's father was.

"Are you sure about this, Lydia? This chap looks like one stubborn merrow..." Nico whispered.

"I'm not sure at all, no." She bowed respectfully. Edgar stared down at the short, stout merrow like it was a curiosity, but Lydia didn't go so far as to scold him. "I am the fairy doctor, Lydia Carlton."

"Your business?"

"I have come to collect the Star of the Merrow." She showed him the sapphire on the sword's hilt.

"It is in the earl's possession. I am sure you've heard that the star cannot be placed in the sapphire without his return."

"I would nevertheless ask that you do something about it. This sapphire is the Star of the Merrow. Was it not your people who originally placed the star inside it?"

"Yes, it was us. One of our forefathers, an attendant to the Blue Knight, placed the star into the sapphire before his master and the king as proof of their bond. But you are mistaken if you think we can imbue it with a new star without the earl present."

"This gentleman *is* the earl. He obtained the gold coin and the silver key, solved the coin's riddles, and arrived at the sword's hiding place. I believe it was your intention to accept whomever could fulfill the contract's conditions as the new earl."

Edgar turned to her in surprise but refrained from interjecting.

"The final condition has not been fulfilled; the sword drew blood."

Therein lay the key.

"Why did the Blue Knight Earl include the final condition that the sword must be tested? Was it perhaps a late addition to protect the earl's descendent from those who would plot against him?"

The merrow stayed silent, so Lydia continued, earnestly choosing her words. "It would be quite possible for the earl's descendent, not knowing he carried

the earl's blood, to be manipulated. Likewise, he could be tricked and followed to the sword's hiding place by one who seeks to steal the sapphire. But the sword is enchanted. It is incapable of harming the earl's descendent or his trusted subordinates. Is that correct?"

"Quite so, earthen child. All those who have claimed the earldom and come for the sword have been made to test it. It was our duty to remove those whose blood it spilled."

The true earl would not mistake what it meant to exchange one star for another. He would not bring a sacrifice with him to the sword's resting place; rather, a companion or two whom he could trust. The spilling of blood, therefore, was proof of one who sought the sword deceptively. And if the one hurt was the true earl's companion, it was the merrows' duty to protect him from them.

"You exchanged the sword for the soul of the man it injured," Lydia said. "In doing so, you have enacted upon a loose interpretation of your promise with the earl."

"We have followed the contract to the letter. If you intend to refute that, we shall have no choice but to reclaim the sword and drag everybody present when you received it to the ocean floor."

Perhaps it was *somewhat reckless of me to attempt a negotiation with merrows. I must do something or I risk putting everybody in danger.*

"I...do not believe that is what you really want. Waiting indefinitely for the return of the earl, whose bloodline may well have ended, will only bring misery to you and the islanders." Lydia swallowed around the lump in her throat. She *needed* the merrows to come around to her side in order to save everyone. "Please, accept this man as the new earl. I beg of you."

The merrow studied Edgar, looking rather displeased. "This *thief*?"

"He isn't just a thief, but a heinous villain who treats others like dirt. But I can assure you that he fully understands the obligations a noble must adhere to, if nothing else."

"'If nothing else'? I am well versed in a fair few more subjects than that, thank

you.”

Ignoring him, Lydia continued. “That is what you seek in a human lord, is it not? He will take responsibility for everything, including allowing the merrows to remain on the island.”

“Wait a moment, Lydia.”

“You can do that much, can’t you? You are nobility. What does it matter if there are fairies living within your territory?”

“That much I can manage. However, it will take more for the merrows’ acceptance to become lord of this island.”

“Which is why we need a star for the sapphire,” Lydia countered.

“Fairy doctor, if the star is that indispensable to you, then I beg you understand our position.”

“Certainly, I intend to.”

“Our sole responsibility is to fulfill the promise exchanged with the Blue Knight Earl. Can you understand that much?”

“Yes...”

“No, Lydia!” Nico cried out suddenly.

She had just walked straight into a trap laid by the merrows—but by the time she noticed, it was already too late. While they had been speaking, water had come in to lap at her ankles.

“Very well. You may have the star. But only in exchange for yourself; a fairy doctor’s soul is worth more than that of an ordinary human.”

The merrows’ priority was to keep the promise with the earl unaltered. Lydia had tried to use that to her advantage to have them transfer the title to Edgar, but now the rug had been pulled from underneath her. The merrows were adamant that the sapphire’s star should be exchanged for a human soul. Even if it would be to their advantage that Edgar become the new earl, there was no contract that allowed them to create a new star.

“Wait a moment.” Edgar stepped out in front of Lydia. “The contract’s original

intention was for the star from the earl's descendent to be re-engraved into the sapphire, correct? Then perhaps you would consider taking *my* star?"

Lydia panicked. "You... You don't have a star!"

"I do. Here." Edgar stuck his tongue out as though he were teasing her, and showed her the Cross branded upon it. To call it a star felt so wretched that she couldn't bear to look at it. "It may not be the precise star referred to in the promise, but I understand that your willingness to stick to the contract is a matter of honor. In which case, you need not to change the interpretation of the promise, but the star's *form*. Doing so will allow you to follow the agreement to the letter."

"I'm listening."

"As Lydia stated, I am prepared to defend your right to reside on this island, should you accept me," Edgar said, his tone resolute. He must have been purposely calling to mind the image of the Blue Knight when the latter originally confronted the merrows.

The merrow's bewilderment lasted only for a second. The heavy water sucking on the ground beneath Lydia's feet quickly receded.

"Yours is a tetrastar. Very well; the star sapphire's star was a hexastar, but there is no reason why the Star of the Merrow should be also."

The undulating waves wrapped around Lydia and Edgar, feeling just like the wind.

"Do not forget, earl, that we merrows are your subjects too."

"The waves are coming," Nico warned, holding fast to Lydia's skirt.

At the same time, Edgar wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in close.

"What are you doing?!" she demanded.

"Being safe."

"I don't need you to protect me!"

"I'm not protecting *you*."

"I'm sorry?"

“Doesn’t it seem less risky for me to hold on to you?”

“Hold on to me? You’re *embracing* me!”

“Well, I *have* been deeply moved. You risked your life to save me.”

“You mustn’t think too much of it; I was simply doing my job. Besides, I was very close to ruining everything.” With how tightly Edgar was holding her, all Lydia could do was press her cheek into his shoulder. But even that was enough to sap the tension from her, and she felt like she would burst into tears at any moment. She had genuinely thought she had sealed their deaths for a moment.

“You really can be quite stubborn. But that is part of...”

The end of Edgar’s sentence was washed away by the powerful currents that engulfed them and their feline companion.

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“Madam... Madam, are you all right?”

Someone was shaking her. Lydia slowly opened her eyes.

“Oh, thank God! You’re awake.”

Two unfamiliar men were peering down at her. She appeared to be lying in an unassuming room of somebody’s house.

“We found you unconscious on the beach. The owner of the house didn’t recognise you either. Said you weren’t an islander. Might you be Miss Carlton, then?”

Lydia nodded, her mind still hazy. “Yes, I am... Who might you be?”

“We are from the local constabulary. We received a report from the Yard that you had been kidnapped and were possibly being confined on the Isle of Mannan, so we came to investigate.”

“Your father, Mr. Carlton, reported your disappearance two days ago.”

He must have contacted the Yard before traveling here with Huskley and his brothers.

Lydia sat up hurriedly, eliciting a mewl from Nico, who was right beside her.

Where's Edgar?

"Incidentally, the man we discovered with you was also unconscious." The officer turned to look at the doorway to the next room, which had been left open.

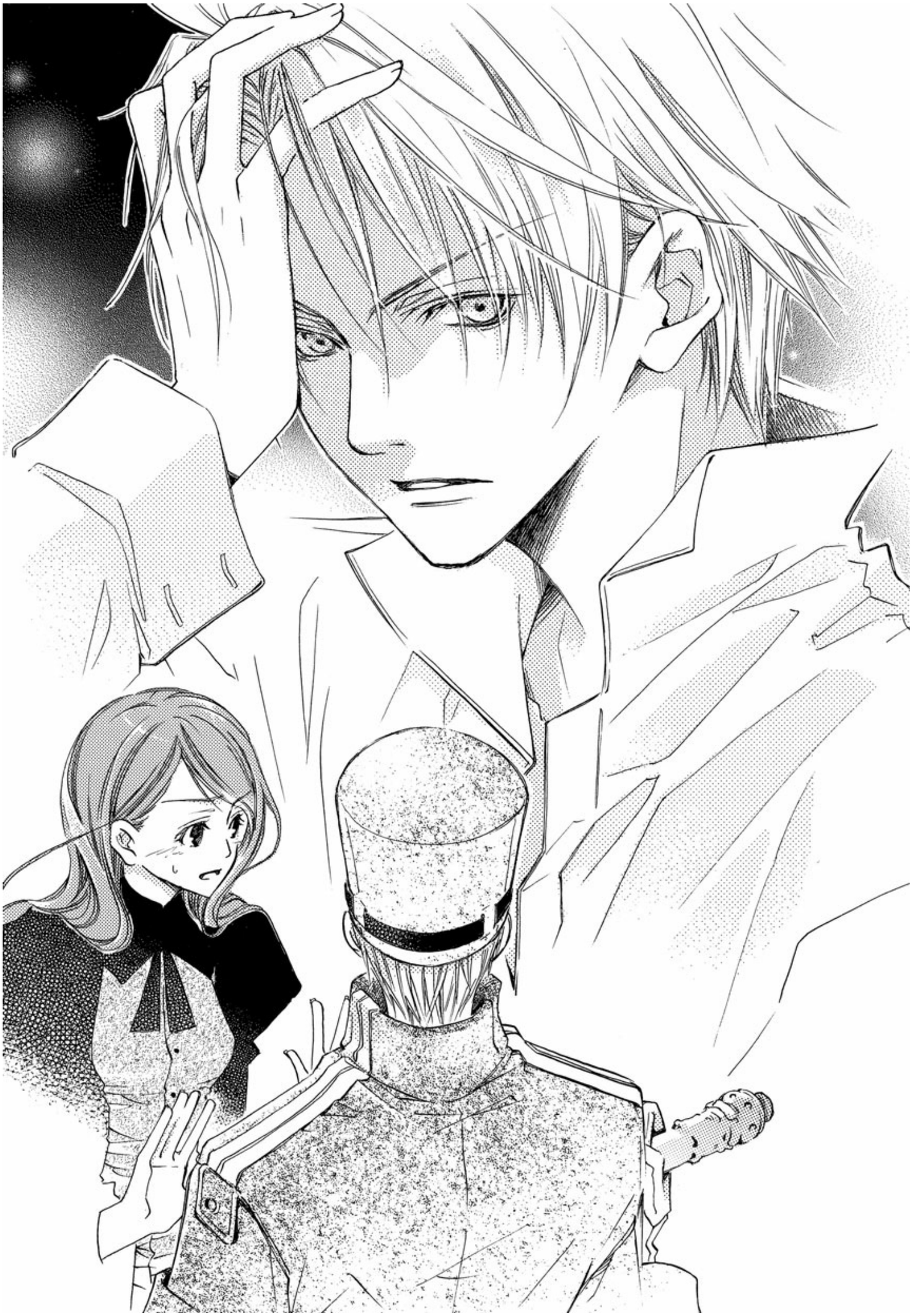
Lydia followed his gaze to see Edgar lying on the bed. The officer stepped up to the door, peering through it with a suspicious light in his eye.

"I must say, his description matches that of the thief who burgled the Gotham estate—the one they said kidnapped you—very closely."

"Oh, no, that's..." While she struggled to finish her sentence, one of the officers spotted the Blue Knight Earl's sword leaning next to the hearth. A long sword without a sheath, it looked almost absurdly out of place here in an ordinary house; much more conspicuous than it had been against the mystical cave's backdrop. Lydia had to hold back a groan.

"You don't see swords like this around nowadays. I heard something about you being threatened whilst wielding it—"

"Don't touch that." In the next room over, Edgar languidly pushed himself up into a sitting position on the bed. "That sword belongs to me."



Intimidated, the officer placed the sword back in its original spot. He seemed to recover quickly, however, as he asked, “Begging your pardon sir, but now that you are awake, might I ask for your name?”

“My lord!”

The front door swung open, and Mr. Tompkins, innkeeper and steward to the Blue Knight Earl’s estate, came rushing in. The moment his eyes fell on Edgar, he straightened his posture, nodded at the policemen, briskly approached his new master, and kneeled before him.

“Welcome back, my lord.” He looked so moved that Lydia had to wonder how many of his ancestors before him had awaited the day they would be able to greet their master. “Please forgive my informal dress. I was informed by the house’s owner that your lordship was here, so I rushed over as soon as I could—but it was all rather sudden.”

“It is quite all right.”

“Wait a moment. Does that mean this gentleman is...” the policeman asked, looking even more suspicious after Mr. Tompkins’s sudden appearance.

“Lord Ashenbert, Earl of the Isle of Mannan,” the steward said.

“Really? I’ve never heard of any lord living on this island.”

“His lordship has been abroad for a long time.”

“Tompkins, could I trouble you to fetch me a glass of water?” Edgar made the request of Mr. Tompkins as though it were the most natural thing in the world, apparently unaffected by the policemen’s suspicions. But then, he was incredibly used to making use of people.

“Yes, my lord.” Mr. Tompkins marched off cheerfully for the kitchen.

“Now then, my lord, could you please explain how you came to be unconscious with Miss Carlton on the beach? We have it on good authority that she was kidnapped.”

“Excuse me, but this gentleman is my rescuer!” Lydia blurted out, not entirely sure what she was doing defending a villain like Edgar.

Ultimately, however, she had chosen to follow and stay with him of her own free will. That much had been true when his terrifying motivations were hidden, and it had remained true even after she had discovered them. She had even wandered into the merrows' town to save him; she wasn't about to hand him over to the police now.

"It was the eight Gotham brothers who attempted to kidnap me. I believe they are passed out in the castle's underground room. Please, arrest them."

"*Eight*, passed out? Was it your gallantry that ensured such an outcome, my lord?"

Edgar shook his head and turned to look at Lydia, seeming just as curious about the answer as the police officer.

"My...friends fought them off," Lydia said.

"We would like to ask them a few questions too, if possible."

She faltered. Admittedly, stating that said friends were fairies would only invite ridicule.

Sensing her discomfort, Edgar answered in her stead. "I'm afraid that won't be possible. The friends this young lady speaks of are fairies." He smiled at her like an accomplice who was in on the same secret.

The policemen exchanged quizzical glances just as the door burst open again. It was Carlton who bustled in this time, accompanied by Raven.

"Father!" Lydia ran up to him and embraced him. As they rejoiced heartily in each other's safety, she observed Edgar and Raven clasping each other's hands out of the corner of her eye. Theirs was likely a much more somber celebration —losing Ermine would still be weighing heavily on their hearts.

And yet, Edgar had chosen not to kill Lydia in the end. Perhaps he had recognized that Lydia felt Ermine's sacrifice had been necessary for the sake of her father. If so, then despair at the sword's lack of a star wasn't the only reason he had turned the weapon on himself instead of her. Perhaps there was some truth to his words after all, including his profession that he struggled to lie to her as he had injured himself with the sword. She wanted to believe that he sought to avoid hurting people as much as possible, and that he was trying to

save Lydia, and keep his promise to save her father too.

“Oi, Lydia. Come outside for a moment.”

Only when Nico called for her did Lydia finally let go of her father. Carlton was immediately accosted by the policemen, who were full of questions and had been waiting for him to finish reuniting with his daughter.

As Carlton explained that he and Raven had tied the Gotham brothers to the castle’s gate posts, Lydia stepped outside. The beach spread out before her, the waves lapping peacefully at the shoreline. It was a complete change from the stormy seas from their journey over. She could see brownies rowing out in logboats. From now on, they too would be able to travel between here and the mainland as they pleased.

Nico raced off to thank them for their help, and Lydia went back into the house. She picked up the sword by the hearth; in the center of its deep, marine-blue sapphire shone a bright, cross-shaped star.

“Curious, isn’t it? I would be perfectly content dismissing all that has happened as a dream, and yet there is the star.”

At some point, Edgar had appeared beside her. His proximity reminded her of the way he had held her not too long ago, and suddenly she was keenly aware of his presence. To him, it may also have been a part of his dream, but to her, it was very much real.

“Well, then, have you learned your lesson at all?” Even she had to admit that her attempt to distract from her embarrassment lacked charm.

“I certainly have. Spending time with an unexpectedly soft girl like you has led to ever more unexpected occurrences. Never could I get you to do as I wanted, which was most frustrating, and I learned for the first time what it is to put in every ounce of effort that one possesses.” Edgar smirked. His response was even *less* charming than hers, to the extent that Lydia wondered if he was trying to pick a quarrel with her.

“Soft? Are you making fun of me?”

“Perish the thought. I am exceedingly grateful to you, not to mention a touch pleased with myself, for you were unable to abandon me even under the most

dire of circumstances." There was an amorous spark to his gaze as he peered at her, and she shrank back farther.

"I... Didn't I say not to think too much of my actions?"

"Would *most* people think to save a man who was intent on killing himself? I do not have to think too much of what you did to be heartened by it."

"I simply...wanted you to repent! After all the pains I went through to save you, how can you continue to treat me with such disrespect? In the first place, it's wrong to think you can make people do whatever you want them to. You ought to reevaluate that attitude."

"You would have trusted me under normal circumstances. Had you not learned the truth, I should think you would have been well enamored with me by now." Despite the absurdity of his conceit, that elegant smile still threatened to sway her.

*He's so utterly...*beyond *ridiculous!*

"You are nothing but a bigheaded villain after all. I was wrong to think there might be a lick of good in you. Listen, I have not forgiven you, and I daresay I shall *never* forgive you!" Lydia made to slip past him.

"Wait."

"Nothing you can say now will—"

"Leave the sword with me. I need it to fulfill my promise to the merrows."

Patient as she was, even Lydia couldn't let that slide. She tossed the sword at him. "This is all that matters now, isn't it? Our contract is hereby ended, and I do not wish to see your face ever again! Do not involve yourself with me any further! Do you understand?"

Edgar held up two hands, as if in surrender. He wasn't taking her seriously, and that only stoked her anger. With a fiery "Goodbye!" she turned her back on him, dragging her father, who had been in deep discussion with the police officers, out of the house with her.

"Let's hurry back home, father. Nothing good has come of this mess, and I wish to forget it as soon as possible!"

“She doesn’t beat around the bush when she loses her temper. I’d almost call it delightful.” Edgar picked up the sword, his eyes glittering with amusement. Lydia had clearly intended for him to hear her final words to her father, and hear them he had.

Raven stepped up to him. “My lord, why did you intentionally say something that would enrage her so?”

“I suppose I was attempting to hide my embarrassment.”

“Oh?”

“I had told her while she was in my arms, that her stubbornness is part of what makes her so sweet.”

“You are embarrassed by that? I have regularly observed you saying far more embarrassing things, always with a straight face.”

“You misunderstand me, Raven. It does not embarrass me to say what I don’t really mean.”

“In that case, why allow her to leave that way?”

A confident chuckle escaped Edgar’s lips, but he soon stifled it and averted his solemn gaze downward. “I ought to show some restraint for the time being, don’t you think?”

Though Raven’s quiet eyes seemed vacant of emotion at first glance, they were plagued by confusion and grief.

Edgar lay a hand on his shoulder. “Let us pick some flowers as a final gift to her.”

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“What on *earth* is this?!”

Two weeks later, Lydia, who had returned to her family home in London to celebrate Easter, cried out at the article she saw in the newspaper. It described an audience that Her Majesty the Queen had had with the descendent of an earl who had not been seen in around three hundred years. The queen had

officially reinstated his title, but that was not what made Lydia scream. Rather, it was the part of the article stating that the legendary earldom also included territory in Fairyland, and so the decedent had hired a personal fairy doctor by the name of Lydia Carlton.

"He *cannot* be serious!"

Lydia hurried to the study to alert her father, but she stopped when she caught sight of Nico posing before the full-length mirror. He was wearing a finely tailored overcoat that hid his tail and happily preening his chest fur as he admired himself.

"Nico, that coat..."

"It arrived earlier. I'm quite impressed that he remembered. He may be a villain, but he *does* have excellent taste."

Lydia didn't like where this was going.

"A letter has arrived for you, Lydia," her father said, joining them.

She was too distracted by Nico to pay any attention to the letter until it was in her hands and she caught sight of the gaudy emblem on the wax seal. She frowned. She *definitely* didn't like where this was going.

Tentatively, she cut the seal.

Dear Miss Lydia Carlton,

It is my pleasure to inform you that you are hereby appointed to the post of Fairy Doctor to the Earldom of Ibrazel. Your presence is therefore requested at my townhouse within the next few days. Furthermore, Her Majesty the Queen has agreed to your involvement in the governing of my territory both in the United Kingdom and Fairyland as a consultant.

I must emphasize that it would behoove you to accept this appointment promptly for the sake of your honor, and I ask that you give it careful consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Edgar J.C. Ashenbert, Earl of Ibrazel

There was no room for Lydia to decline. Shaking with rage, she curled her hands into tight fists.

“That...*despicable* villain!”