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MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
Beware the Enticing Trap


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# Earl and Fairy: Volume 2 [Complete]


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# Beyond the Darkness in the City of Fog

“It’s gotten rather foggy, hasn’t it?”

Upon realizing she was being addressed, the nervous girl raised her downward gaze to look outside the carriage. The cityscape looked almost mystical, partly obscured by the thick fog starting to hang low over it. When she looked up, she could see the blurry silhouette of St. Paul’s Cathedral towering over the other buildings and the hazy city like a titan.

“They say that incidents are much more likely to occur on days such as these. A lady such as yourself ought not to be waiting alone for a cab when the fog sets in.”

The girl chanced a glance at the speaker sitting next to her before immediately returning her gaze to her hands upon her lap. “Yes, I would have to agree. I was most anxious to find myself separated from my attendant. Thank you for your kindness, my lord.”

“Come, there is no need to be so humble. I consider myself blessed to share my cab with a sweet young lady such as yourself.”

“Oh, but I’m not...” Her heart raced, despite knowing he was only flattering her. She was too bashful to even look directly at the owner of this carriage, which was lavish both inside and out.

He was a gorgeous young earl who had recently returned from abroad. He conducted himself with flawless elegance, and his vivid blond hair attracted the eye even from a distance. Well-practiced in the art of conversation, he had a reputation for charming ladies and gentlemen alike. The social season hadn’t yet begun, and he had been in London for less than a month, but the rumors were still fervently exchanged among the girls of the upper classes. She could scarcely believe that he remembered her despite them never having spoken, much less that he had happened to pass by and offer her transport home when she couldn’t hail a cab.

The girl was reluctant to step outside on the best of days, and she had little

interest in her role assisting at the charity bazaar. She knew it was a responsibility of girls of her status to be involved in philanthropy, and that it was preparation for her future domestic duties, but as far as she was concerned, the day had been an utter disaster. Not only had she lost her attendant to the crowds, but the weather had taken a turn for the worse.

She stole another glance at her companion, as if to reassure herself he was really there next to her. She remembered her cousin, Rosalie, who had been taken with this earl at once and had actively spoken to him. Would she be envious?

“You are a quiet girl, aren’t you?” She didn’t have to raise her head to know he would be smiling softly. “Or are you perhaps regretting accepting a lift from a man with whom you are barely acquainted?”

“Of course not. Everybody says you are a kind gentleman, Lord Ashenbert.”

“Rumors are like the fog. They roll in from who-knows-where before dissipating into nothingness. Nobody knows the truth, nor do they care to seek it.”

Suddenly, he drew towards her, and the girl stiffened. His delicate fingers reached out for her hair—but they had barely touched it before he pulled back, holding a leaf between them.

“Forgive me. It must have blown into your hair.”

She looked up instinctively, and their eyes met. His smile was flawless, but she suddenly had the sense there was a shadow lurking behind it, and she shuddered. He was right when he said they were barely acquainted. His name and status may have preceded him, but that didn’t mean she *knew* whether he was truly honest or a gentleman.

“There is darkness lurking in London’s fog. Do you know, Miss Walpole, how many children have been swallowed up by the haze, only to never reappear?”

“No, my lord...” She shook her head, unable to keep her eyes off him.

“Stay vigilant, that you do not fall victim to the darkness yourself.”

The carriage came to a halt. The coachman opened the door, and the girl was

relieved to see they had arrived at her family's estate. It had briefly crossed her mind that the earl might be plotting to whisk her away deep into the ever-deepening fog, but she knew now she was being ridiculous. And yet, when his carriage vanished beyond the thick wall of haze, she found herself wondering whether his territory could not be reached without passing through that fog.

Lord Ashenbert's official title was the Earl of Ibrazel; it was said that he possessed territory in Fairyland.

"Where *were* you, Doris? Was that not Lord Ashenbert in that carriage just now?"

"Rosalie! Oh, um..."

Her cousin, standing before the gate, seemed deeply perturbed. She must have witnessed everything.

"Are you trying to steal him from me?"

"Of course not."

"Why are you not looking me in the eye, then? It seems as though you have been keeping something from me lately."

"I haven't," Doris insisted.

"You know, of course, that you could never keep anything from me. You haven't forgotten the oath we made with that fairy, have you?"

"Of course not."

"Tell me, then. What was that letter you were writing the other day?"

"You saw that?!"

"Is it an inconvenience that I did?"

Rosalie's reaction told Doris that she hadn't seen the letter's contents. She was relieved, but that relief only served to anger her cousin further.

"So you *are* hiding something! You *do* know that breaking the oath means receiving punishment from that fairy, don't you?"

Doris thought back to the promise they had made together. They had sworn that, as the best of friends, they would never keep secrets from one another.

Rosalie had said if either of them broke that oath, they would be punished by the Fogman.

"Are you sure the Fogman even exists, Rosalie?"

"I'm sure! But you've done it now. I shall do nothing to save you from your punishment. In fact, I *hope* the Fogman kidnaps you and takes you away!"

Every child in London learned about the Fogman from a young age. Doris was past the age for believing in fairytales, but she did feel frightened—perhaps because some small part of her did believe. She had seen a poor child captured by the Fogman before. The memory was fragmented, as it had happened when she was very young, but she didn't think it was a dream. Even now, any mention of the fairy made her anxious; she associated it with darkness and death. What would happen if the Fogman really were to take her?

Doris watched her cousin's ginger hair disappear, overcome by a striking loneliness as she was left alone in the fog.

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The most magnificent homes in London could be found in Mayfair. One such home was a mansion belonging to Edgar Ashenbert. It was a chalk building bought by the twenty-year-old earl on his supposed return to Great Britain one month ago, and one of its rooms was reserved for Lydia to work from. It had been two weeks since the seventeen-year-old fairy doctor had started working there as a consultant after having been hired against her will.

Although Edgar's official title was the Earl of Ibrazel, he was not truly descended from the Ashenberts. His lineage was unknown. It seemed highly likely that he had been born into the nobility, but he didn't know the first thing about fairies. Like most people, he could not see fairies or hear their voices, and yet fairies lived on the land he had inherited with his title, and they recognized him as their lord. As such, he had anticipated that he might run into fairy-related issues for which he required a fairy doctor, hence why he had hired Lydia.

It was the job of a fairy doctor to use their knowledge and ability to communicate with fairies to maintain peace between man-and fairykind. Things had been this way ever since humans and fairies started living in close proximity

to one another. However, with the turn of the nineteenth century, fairies had been relegated to folklore, and most people were beginning to forget that they were, in fact, mankind's neighbors. Fairy doctors were now few and far between. When Lydia had advertised her services as a fairy doctor in her hometown, she had barely been taken seriously, let alone ever hired.

It was during such a decline for the profession that she had received official employment. It should have been a great honor, given how little experience she had, but she felt no gratitude in the least, all because of her employer and the incomprehensible inner workings of his mind.

Not for the first time, the sight that greeted Lydia that day as she opened her office door sapped her energy instantly. Bouquets of flowers everywhere she looked.

"What on earth are these?"

"A gift from Lord Ashenbert," Tompkins answered from behind her. He had been a steward of the Ashenbert estate and had now taken on the duties of a butler. His brisk steps as he approached the windowsill to place a large vase of yet *more* flowers there were at odds with his short, stout stature. "His lordship is out today, and he asks that you not work too hard in his absence."

Lydia was relieved to hear that Edgar wasn't around. "I suppose that means I can stay in today."

It seemed as though she was accompanying him every single day to theaters, tea parties, concerts, or whatever other amusements he felt like partaking in. She very much wanted to point out that none of those things should fall under a fairy doctor's duties but, somehow, he had managed to justify it one way or another for the past two weeks.

Lydia still hadn't done anything that actually pertained to her job. It was as though he hadn't hired her to *work* for him at all.

*It's more like I'm his plaything.*

Even her office was hardly an appropriate place to work, from its light green carpet and wallpaper to the sofa and tablecloth decorated with delicate embroidered lace to the silk pleated curtains. Even the glass ornaments and

china dolls lined up in the cabinet were more reminiscent of a private room belonging to a well-to-do young lady. What was Edgar thinking?

"Furthermore, several garments have arrived for you. Please try them on to make sure they are of the appropriate size."

"*Garments?*"

Tompkins stopped on his way out of the room. "Yes. For your excursion to the Royal Opera House next month."

"Opera? This is the first I'm hearing of it."

"I am sure it won't be the last either. I have also arranged several outfits for you to wear for similar excursions going forward. Please do not take offense. They are all being provided by his lordship."

"What do you mean by 'similar excursions'? None of this seems to be related to my post at all. This sudden opera trip is an inconvenience." She had the sense that, to Edgar, a girl was nothing more than an accessory to accentuate his own charms. With that in mind, the bouquets and extravagant outings only served to make her indignant.

"His lordship has said that *I* will be made to wear a dress and accompany him to the opera house if you do not comply. Please, think of the consequences for this poor old gentleman."

An ultimatum that couldn't quite be called a threat. Edgar was good at those.

Lydia wanted to pull her hair out. "Say, Mr. Tompkins, don't you ever tire of working for him?"

Tompkins's family had served the earldom for generations, and the butler had seemed overjoyed when his master had returned for the first time in three hundred years. But working for such a flippant young man couldn't be the least bit satisfying, surely?

"Miss Carlton, it is a master's job to make full use of his butler. And a good butler may be measured by how much of his master's absurdity he is able to manage." Tompkins smiled kindly at her, but his satisfaction with his work shone through.

“So it’s a contest of sorts! Well, *I* have no intention of competing with Edgar.” Putting on her shawl again, Lydia stepped out of her office.

“Where are you going?”

“A walk. I’m not bound to stay indoors, am I?” She needed something to occupy her mind, else she feared she would become irritated at herself for allowing Edgar to do as he pleased with her all this time.

“The fog is likely to thicken up again this afternoon.”

“You can tell?”

“Indeed. The humidity is making the fin on my back ache.”

“In that case, I shall return before the afternoon.”

Though it was past Easter, London’s unseasonable foggy days continued as though the spring breezes had been delayed on their way to the capital. Lydia wondered how much longer she would be staying here. She had originally left her rural Scottish hometown for the sole purpose of spending the Easter holidays with her father. A professor at the University of London, he had always seemed anxious about his only daughter living alone in Scotland, and had said he would prefer her to stay here. But her country home was where the few memories she had of her mother, who had died when she was very young, lived on.

Apart from anything else, she liked her village; it was full of nature and fairies. Her father hadn’t demanded that she move to London, even when Lydia’s grandmother passed away and she began living alone. If she chose to return home, she was confident he would accept her decision.

The problem was Edgar. The earl was her employer; she could not leave London without his permission. However, he had hired her somewhat heavy-handedly, so she wasn’t scared of being dismissed. As such, she found she took a rather bullish attitude about the whole thing. There would be periods where he had no need for her skills and knowledge, and at the moment all she was doing was accompanying him on his frivolous outings, which could hardly be considered work. Perhaps he would allow her to return to Scotland while

remaining under his employ.

Lydia strolled in the direction of the park, thinking about what she might do to convince Edgar to let her go home.

“For goodness’ sake, the fish here is appalling.” At some point, a cat had appeared next to her. In fact, he wasn’t a cat, but a fairy—but for now he was padding along atop a brick wall on all fours like a real feline.

“You ought to stop loitering outside shop fronts to steal food, Nico.”

“I can see now why even the strays don’t bother with it. Their offerings are far beneath me.” When the passersby around them became scarce, Nico jumped down from the wall and stood up on his hind legs. He briskly smoothed down his gray bushy fur and readjusted his necktie, then puffed out his chest like a proud gentleman.

“What is that, then?” Lydia asked, referring to the item he had wrapped up delicately in his tail.

“Tinned food, or so I’m told. The hobgoblin napping under the eaves told me this is the best food in all of London.”

“But it’s tinned fish.”

“*Fish?* I’ve never seen fish like this before.”

“It’s inside the tin. See there, it says so on the label. Fish marinated in herbs.”

“You mean to say this is a container? That can’t be right. There’s no lid.”

“The lid has been welded shut; you’ll need a tool to open it.”

Nico turned the can over and over as he inspected it, knocking his paw against it to test its solidity. Once he realized what Lydia was saying, the fur on his back stood up and he hissed. “Curse that rotten hobgoblin for tricking me! Pinching my walnut bread just because he couldn’t open this thing himself! And you say this is fish?!”

Lydia took the can from him before he could toss it away. “Why not hold on to it? We can have it opened for you later. It may be fish, but I doubt it was caught anywhere near here.”

The pair entered the vegetation-rich park and started following the footpath. The clouds hung low overhead, and the fog was starting to roll in, but for now, the trees were enough to produce a sense of calm. The weather meant that the park was quite empty aside from the heads of squirrels, birds, and fairies poking out from among the branches.

It seemed there were still fairies in London, though not nearly as many as in the forests of Scotland. They bustled around Lydia when they realized she could see them; it was a rarity to come across a person who could. She sat down on a bench to lend an ear to their chatter without paying too much attention to *what* they were saying. There were likely very few people who understood the pleasure of listening to the fairies as one listened to the singing of birds.

Lydia took her time enjoying the park, until suddenly, she found she couldn't see very far in front of her anymore. She must have wandered into a thicker part of the fog. The muffled howl of a dog sounded in the distance. The fairies scattered; the dog's howl was coming closer.

"Oh, Nico. I wonder if there's a stray about?"

"There had better not be. I shall see you later."

"Nico! Wait!"

He vanished into thin air just as a nearby bush began to rustle. One large dog appeared, then another, until the growling beasts were closing in on Lydia from every direction.

"No! Stay back!"

As one made to jump at her, she instinctively threw the tinned fish at it. It made contact, sending the dog sprawling onto the ground—but that only served to enrage its companions. It was as Lydia was trying to tear a branch from a nearby tree that a figure appeared behind it. A large, dark figure, slipping out from the thick fog.

"The Fogman," she murmured.

That was who the figure reminded her of: the ill-omened fairy who emerged from the fog with his fairy dogs. It stretched out a hand toward her. A sharp, chemical scent sent a wave of dizziness through her.

*Is he a kidnapper?*

All of a sudden, the man stiffened and stopped in his tracks. Then he collapsed where he stood. His bright red blood pooled onto the ground, watched by the impassive eyes of a dark-skinned boy who stood rooted to the spot beside him. Lydia knew the boy. A foreign soldier, he was practically a sentient weapon. It was Edgar's loyal servant.

She yelped as a set of ravenous fangs suddenly appeared before her. Edgar's servant spun around and slashed with his knife, cutting the beast's throat with a single swipe. Without missing a beat, he slipped in front of her and tore through the dogs that were now lunging in her direction one after another.

"Let us make haste, Miss Carlton."

"What are you doing here, Raven?"

"We can talk later." He gestured for her to follow him, and she did so at a run.

When they finally made it to an area with other people—albeit, only a few—Lydia suddenly found she was feeling quite unwell. Now that the adrenaline was losing its grip, the combined scents of blood and chemicals seemed to cling to her. She checked her clothing and hair, but they were perfectly clean—yet she felt as though she were drenched in the man's blood.

Despite Raven coming to her aid, his merciless methods had left her feeling terrified rather than grateful. She would have liked to suggest he be a little less ruthless, but she knew that his threshold for using such violence differed wildly from her own.

"Are you hurt, Miss Carlton?"

"No, I'm fine." Lydia forced herself to stand up straight, not wanting to be touched at that moment.

The city was a dangerous place. Lydia had thought the daylight offered sufficient protection, but even that wasn't the case in its more deserted areas. One had to be careful of pickpockets in crowded parts, and burglars and perverts where things were quieter. It was no wonder that Lydia, who was unused to London's geography, was a perfect target when she walked around

alone.

None of that made her any happier about the fact that Raven had been tailing her. Edgar's devoted servant was a bloodthirsty killer, not unlike a savage beast himself. There was much she still didn't know about him. But then, the same held true for his master.

"Oh, Lydia! I am so relieved you're unharmed."

Edgar rushed into her flower-filled office and scooped up her hands in his own. Lydia could do nothing but furrow her brow at him. His smile shone with innocence, but that was where his innocence ended.

She hurriedly shook his hands off. "Yes, I'm perfectly safe. Who knows what might have befallen me had you not sent Raven to follow me?" She loaded her words with as much sarcasm as she could muster, but they seemed to have no effect on Edgar.

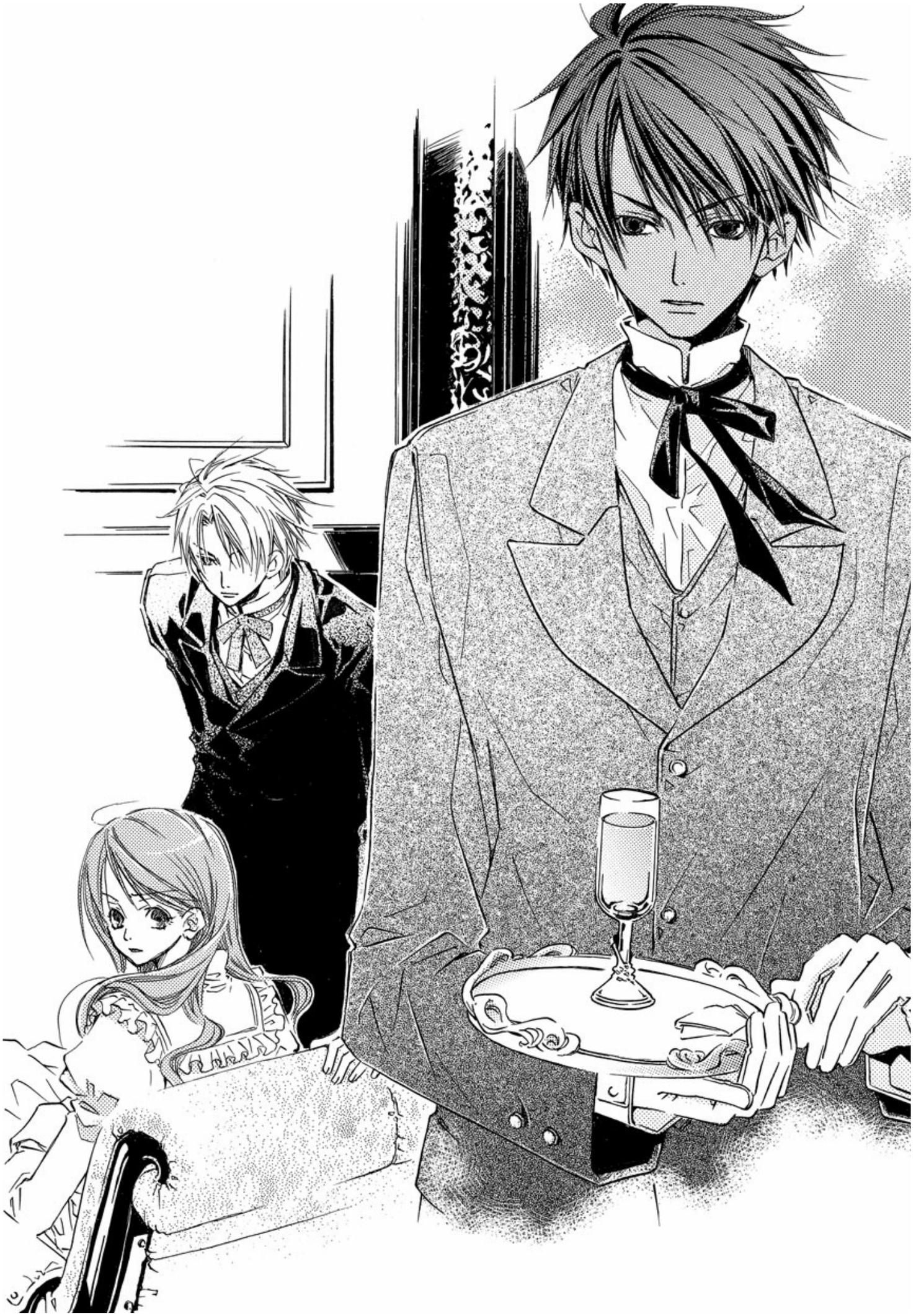
"I am glad he was able to help."

"Don't be! What were you thinking? Has Raven been following me and reporting my every move to you this entire time? Would he *still* be doing so, had that pervert not appeared?"

"You misunderstand. I was merely having him guard you."

Lydia wasn't sure she believed him. He looked genuinely worried as he looked down at her, and she eyed him warily. She knew that those handsome features and soft ash mauve eyes tended to obfuscate more devious designs. As ever, she was struggling to work out how he truly felt.

Raven slipped in through the door. "I have medicine for you, Miss Carlton, since you mentioned suffering from a headache."



“A headache, Lydia? You must have been awfully frightened.” Edgar leaned in even closer to get a better look at her, so she shifted away along the sofa she was sitting on.

There was a reason he didn’t hesitate to get in close to others: he *knew* that his looks, speech, and mannerisms meant that most people were more than happy to let him. It was arrogance, pure and simple. Treated as an outcast for most of her life, Lydia wasn’t used to men in her personal space, and it made her uncomfortable that she didn’t actually find Edgar’s proximity all that unpleasant. Regardless, he pressed his hand to her forehead.

“You don’t seem to be feverish.”

“I felt unwell because of the blood. I’m perfectly fine now!”

Edgar turned his attention to Raven, finally giving Lydia a bit of space. “Blood? Did you kill somebody?”

“Yes, my lord.” It was rare for Raven’s expression to change. His loyalty to Edgar knew no bounds; he answered the question directly and without hesitation.

“Just the one person?”

“One man and four dogs.”

“Dogs?”

“He was using them in his attack.”

Edgar paused thoughtfully. “Understood.”

Raven nodded, then placed the glass of medicine and what appeared to be a lump of tin on the table. “You dropped this, Miss Carlton, so I retrieved it.”

It was the can she had thrown at the dogs. Edgar picked up the warped, dented metal in his hand like it was a curiosity.

“Tinned fish?”

“More likely a weapon, my lord.”

Raven was not one to joke. Lydia could only reason that he genuinely thought she carried around tins such as this in case she needed to defend herself.

Suddenly feeling strangely humiliated, she glared at Nico, who had been buried in the cushions like an ordinary cat the whole time. He responded with an unconcerned yawn.

"How does one yield such a weapon?" Edgar asked teasingly once Raven had left them.

"Would you like me to give a demonstration?" she snapped back.

"No, that's quite all right." With a gentle smile, he sat down on the opposite sofa. "Lydia, I should like it if you could refrain from walking outside alone from now on. If you do not wish for Raven to accompany you, I can have the housekeeper do so in his stead, and I shall continue to have the carriage pick you up and take you home from here."

"You need not go that far. I shall be more careful from now on."

"I am being reasonable. The majority of children from respectable families would never leave the house without an escort."

"*I'm* not nobility, though. I'm more accustomed to doing things by myself, and in fact I am quite happy in my own company."

"You are not in Scotland anymore; this is Her Majesty's capital. Others *will* evaluate you based on your attire and behavior. Your father is a member of the Royal Society and an academic well known to those in high society. As his daughter, you ought to be more aware of what it means to be a lady."

"My father isn't concerned with such things."

"Does that mean he would be *opposed* to you acting more ladylike? It isn't as stifling as you may imagine. As long as you adhere to the fundamentals, you will be forgiven for the occasional eccentricity or slip of the tongue. You would be free to speak of fairies and how you can see them and hear their voices, and others would accept it as a simple idiosyncrasy."

Lydia considered that. Back in the countryside, she was treated as an eccentric because she spoke openly of her abilities. Yet Edgar was upfront about his title as an earl of Fairyland, and others accepted it without question. It wasn't as though the upper classes believed in fairies—they understood the title as a long-running joke that had been passed down through Edgar's lineage

—but perhaps they wouldn't even humor it if he didn't act like the perfect noble.

"Is that why you're so happy to wear the mask of a noble despite formerly being part of a gang?" Lydia asked.

"Precisely."

But Lydia didn't *want* to behave like an aristocrat. Even if it did have its benefits, she didn't like the fact that it was what Edgar wanted her to do. "You only want to fashion me into a proper lady because you've too much time on your hands. This room and all the flowers make that plain enough already."

"You don't like them? I selected everything in here because it reminded me of you."

"I *beg* your pardon?"

"Take, for example, these roses. They are a rare variety with ice-green flowers. Under a lamp, they give off a golden-green glow, just like your eyes."

Edgar pressed his lips against one of the nearby roses, but his heated gaze stayed firmly on Lydia. In that moment, she could almost feel his lips against her eyelid. Standing up, he approached her as he continued.

"You are the fairy in this field of flowers. Your very presence transforms this room into an exquisite painting, one that is every bit as wonderful as I had imagined. Ah, I wonder if you would allow a small violet to bloom by your side? It would bring out the gorgeous tones in your caramel-colored hair, and it could constantly watch over you, just as I long to."

"Yes, a violet, *fine*! Just please stop!" Wishing she had never asked him to elaborate, she wearily accepted the flower that he held out to her. Its petals matched the color of his eyes. She had forgotten that this rake would take every opportunity to lavish compliments on whichever female was in his presence if given half a chance.

Edgar merely shrugged as though he could have gone on if she had let him. He was good at spouting lines that she felt should have embarrassed him, but she knew he didn't mean a single one. It bewildered her how she felt that letting her guard down would allow him to sneak into her heart, despite

knowing how he operated.

“I did not hire you to be my servant. That is why I treat you like a lady. You are an essential member of this estate.” With an unusually earnest expression on his face, Edgar placed a hand on the back of the sofa she was sitting on. “You gave me my title, and as such, I feel it does not solely belong to me. As a fairy doctor, you are an invaluable partner.”

“I would be happier if you let me work quietly behind the scenes. I do not wish to be dressed up and flaunted as your accessory.”

“Gemstones have value because they attract the eye. It would be a waste to hide my young, beautiful fairy doctor from the public eye.”

“Young,” she could agree with. “Beautiful,” however, was subjective. Lydia had only ever received compliments from her immediate family, and she hardly considered herself attractive. She had often been told she lacked charm, both in personality and appearance. Edgar was the one exception, but then, he showered praise onto anyone and everyone.

She suddenly found she was somewhat annoyed. “*Why* do you want to show me off? I bet it’s to make yourself stand out more.”

“It isn’t. Rather, I...want you by my side at every opportunity.” His tone was hesitant, restrained. It almost gave Lydia the impression that those feelings had been burning a hole in his heart.

She desperately tried to remain calm and still the throbbing of her heart. She mustn’t trust him. He wasn’t rotten to the core, but he had no qualms about playing the villain if he needed to. As long as he required her abilities, he would do whatever was needed to keep her there, including making dramatic statements.

“Are you really that desperate to keep an eye on me? It’s because I’m the only one, apart from Raven, who knows you’re a criminal and that you were supposed to have been executed in America, isn’t it? Well, you may rest assured I don’t intend to tell anybody. It is my desire to lend a hand, as your fairy doctor, for the sake of the fairies who have accepted you as their lord. So there is no need to flatter or feign attempts to seduce me!”

Edgar averted his gaze from her, suddenly looking quite crestfallen.

*Did I upset him?*

Despite finding it difficult to believe, Lydia was quickly racked with guilt. Supposing he had meant it when he said he considered her a partner, then perhaps her doubt and rejection had hurt him.

“I...didn’t realize you disliked me quite so much.”

“Um, that isn’t what I meant.” Lydia stood up as he tried to leave the room.

“So you *don’t* dislike me?” He turned around and wrapped his hands around hers in a single movement.

“No, I couldn’t really say that I *dislike* you.”

“Meaning that you like me?”

Lydia could only gawk at the encroaching smile that would have any girl instantly lost in her fantasies. “I... I couldn’t say that I *like* you either! I am your fairy doctor and nothing more, so I would appreciate it if you stop speaking to me so inappropriately—and took your hands off me.” She liked to think she kept a resolute tone even as she looked back into his eyes.

Edgar released his grip on her with a wry smile. Apparently, the message had gotten through that she wasn’t interested, and he had the grace to feel awkward about it.

“Very well. Then let us move on to a topic that you may find more agreeable. Have you heard of the Fogman?”

Lydia had half-turned away, but now she quickly spun back around to face him. “What about the Fogman?”

He gave a thoughtful hum. “Those golden-green eyes of yours light up at the first mention of fairies. It would seem I am in competition with them before any man.”

She was beyond listening to his grumbling. Instead, she was recalling her terrifying encounter in the park. Her would-be attacker had been human and not fairy, but hearing Edgar mention the Fogman now, she couldn’t help but feel there might be some connection.

“A lady has come calling seeking your opinion on it,” he explained. “As long as you are not too tired after your experience in the park, would you mind speaking with her?”

Once Lydia had left the office, Nico got up from his cushion and sat instead on a chair, folding his legs.

“She’s playing right into his hands.” He sighed, neatening his tie in the reflection of a spoon.

Nico belonged to a higher class of fairies, and as such could make his reflection appear and disappear at will. Though he disliked how often he was mistaken for a cat, he was fond of his impressive whiskers, his jewel-like eyes, and the luxuriously deep silver shade of his fur.

“I do have to wonder. We both know he’s a criminal, but I suppose I don’t mind staying as long as he doesn’t harm Lydia.”

Despite his words, Nico wasn’t as displeased about Lydia finding employment at the new earl’s mansion as he would have her believe. The tea served here was, after all, exquisite. The food and spirits weren’t all that bad either. The air in London was filthy, and its streets were noisy and dangerous—but he could put up with being here a while longer for Lydia’s sake.

“That sentimental farce of his went on for so long that my tea has gone cold!”

“Would you like me to brew you another cup?” asked the butler, who had just entered the room.

“That sounds like a fine idea! Make sure it’s piping hot too!” Nico held out his teacup.

The butler’s merrow blood had ensured that he had picked up on Nico’s presence very early on, so Nico had stopped bothering to conceal himself. Edgar seemed to hold vague suspicions of his own, but the fairy wasn’t ready to let down his guard just yet, so for the most part, he still behaved like a regular cat. There was no reason to be honest when the earl held fast to so many of his own secrets. It was much more enjoyable to make him doubt himself and question his grasp on reality.

“What is the good earl plotting, exactly?” Nico asked the butler, who was now pouring his darjeeling tea.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Recently, I saw him leaving for the less savory parts of the city by himself. Far from being dressed in his usual perfect fare, he was in filthy rags. I lost him to the crowds then.”

“Are you quite sure you had the correct man?”

“Please tell me you’re joking. That obnoxiously bright hair of his might have been hidden under a cheap hat, but it was unmistakably him. He stands out no matter what he does, and I think you know that as well as I do. There’s a different *air* about him, though what it is, I cannot say for certain.”

“You may be right about that.”

“So, who was that young lady he had in the carriage with him three days ago?”

“There was somebody with his lordship?”

“I think he called her Miss Walpole or something similar. I have to wonder what his interest in her is.”

“I daresay I wouldn’t know.”

“Hmph. I suppose it’s your job not to disclose your master’s secrets. Your devotion to your work is most impressive.”

Tompkins’s thick lips curved into a smile and he said no more.

*Fish.*

Perhaps it was the butler’s merrow-like features that left Nico’s mouth watering. He turned his eyes to the tin on the table.

“Would you open that can for me?”

“Are you going to eat it now?”

“I’m going to *sample* it.”

The butler produced a chisel from his pocket. Nico had to wonder whether

there was anything Tompkins *didn't* happen to carry around with him.

The cat swallowed in anticipation as he fixed his gaze on the tin. Suppose it *did* contain the best food in all of London? Before he had time to find out, it appeared to shake slightly. There was something hostile about it, as though it were protesting Nico's desire to eat it.

"Wait a moment!" he cried before Tompkins could open it.

He prodded the tin with a paw, shook it, and even gently tried his teeth against it. When he placed it back on the table, it moved slightly, like it was trying to get away from him. What on earth was hidden inside it? Unfortunately, there was no way to know without opening the can, which in turn would be too dangerous as long as its contents were unknown.

"I'm afraid I have lost my appetite," Nico declared, looking down at it with his front legs folded.

***

Edgar took Lydia to the south-facing reception room, where a lone anxious woman stood.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting, Mrs. Marl. Please allow me to introduce Miss Lydia Carlton, my fairy doctor.”

The woman’s expression relaxed a little. “Oh, goodness. I would have expected a witch to be much older. I am not sure it is appropriate to frighten a young girl like Miss Carlton with such a terrifying tale, my lord.”

Lydia wanted to point out that fairy doctors and witches were two entirely separate things, but it was a common misconception. She decided to do the mature thing and keep the quibble to herself.

“There is no need for concern, madame. Miss Carlton is quite aware of the sometimes horrifying reality of fairies.” Edgar gestured for Mrs. Marl to take a seat. “Now, you mentioned your concern that Miss Doris Walpole may have been kidnapped by the Fogman?”

From her chair, Mrs. Marl lowered her gaze once more. “Yes, my lord. She was last seen at the estate more than three days ago. She went out to volunteer at a charity bazaar when, according to the maid escorting her, the two of them became separated. She has not been seen since.”

It sounded like a serious incident indeed. Lydia listened intently. According to Mrs. Marl, sixteen-year-old Doris had lost both her parents (a baron and his wife) and was now under the legal guardianship of her uncle. She lived with her cousin, who was one year older than her. Mrs. Marl had been a governess to the Walpoles until her marriage but had maintained a close relationship with Doris. They were distantly related as well, and after hearing of the young lady’s disappearance, she had felt compelled to investigate Doris’s whereabouts as a friend.

However, due to the young woman’s status, the barony feared that the incident might have a negative impact on her ability to find a suitor, so the matter was being taken care of internally. When Mrs. Marl had approached them with talk of the Fogman, she had been laughed out of the estate.

Lydia was sympathetic; she was often ridiculed for talking about fairies

herself. Mrs. Marl had been conflicted but eventually decided to consult Edgar despite knowing that she was making a third party privy to Doris's disappearance. Apparently, she felt that Edgar was an honest gentleman deserving of her trust.

*He's managed to deceive her too,* Lydia thought.

The woman may have been married, but she was still young and relatively beautiful. It was no wonder Edgar was eager to make a good impression.

"I remember the fog, three days ago," Edgar said. "It was so thick, one could see no farther than a few paces ahead."

"Why do you think Miss Walpole was taken by the Fogman?" Lydia asked. "I understand that it was a severely foggy day, but one is hard-pressed to find anybody who believes in the Fogman these days."

"Yes; in fact, I am far from a believer myself. I am nevertheless extremely grateful for your willingness to listen. It is just that not a single clue was left as to Miss Walpole's whereabouts, as though she were swallowed up by the fog, and there was a part of her that *did* believe in such fairies. She used to be highly interested in 'fairy eggs.' Apparently, they are part of a fortune-telling game. I do remember Miss Walpole being frightened about breaking some promise or another and receiving punishment from the Fogman. That is why I cannot help but wonder..."

"Fairy eggs?" Lydia asked.

"You haven't heard of them, Lydia?" Edgar asked. "They are very popular among girls."

The question sprang to mind, *Why should you know about them, then?* But Lydia feared she already knew the answer.

"One places a glass bead and a coin atop a piece of paper with the alphabet written on it," Edgar explained. "The participants place their fingers on the coin and call upon the fairy that is said to reside within the bead. Friends may make a vow on the egg, or they may ask the fairy questions. If the latter, the unseen fairy will answer the question by moving the coin along the letters, through which one may learn if one's love is unrequited or if one may have a secret

admirer—things of that nature."

"It sounds to me as though you have tried it for yourself," Lydia said.

"I have. It was an interesting game; everybody was most excited about it. By moving the coin over my own initials in response to a lady's question of 'whom shall I marry?' I found myself instantly at the center of her attention. It was a far sight easier than seducing her with words."

Thoroughly unimpressed, Lydia glared at him. The corner of his mouth quirked up in response, but when he turned back to Mrs. Marl, his expression was stoic once more.

"There is no reason to believe that it is anything more than a simple game, madame. A participant may move the coin, whether consciously or not, without the need for a fairy. If the girls playing believe in fairies, they may become a little frightened at the thought of angering them by breaking their promise or taking their finger from the coin partway through, but it is nothing more harmful than that."

"You cannot say there *aren't* fairies involved," Lydia interjected. "Fairies love to play jokes. If a fairy happened to develop an interest in such a glass bead, it is quite possible for it to take part in the fortune telling."

Mrs. Marl leaned forward anxiously. "Do you mean to say that a fairy *might* kidnap somebody who had offended it?"

"I wonder. I should not want to say it is impossible, but the Fogman is not interested in such games. It is closer to an evil spirit, a malicious mass. It would not strike deals with humans."

Mrs. Marl gasped and shuddered.

"Do you know if the fairy egg game can result in the Fogman's punishment, Edgar?" Lydia asked.

"I wouldn't know. There was no mention of the Fogman when I played, only a generic 'fairy.' I am quite certain none of the girls were anxious about inciting its wrath either."

"Yes, something that induces anxiety could not rightly be called a 'game.' So I

wonder why Miss Walpole suggested a connection between fairy eggs and the Fogman."

"Could it not be possible that she was taken by a different type of fairy? A mischievous one?" Edgar asked.

"I shouldn't like to make such an assumption at this time."

"What will you do, then? Are you capable of taking on this work?"

To answer that question, it was crucial for Lydia to determine whether this was the work of people or fairies. She didn't hesitate as she turned to Mrs. Marl.

"I shall look into it," she promised, "with the hope that I can be of some assistance."

"If I may..." Mrs. Marl suddenly looked puzzled. "Could I ask that you summon a fairy now to ask about Miss Walpole's whereabouts? Or perhaps make an inquiry with your crystal ball?"

It seemed she was now mixing up fairy doctors with mediums and fortune tellers.

"It is beyond my ability to solve problems with the use of magic," Lydia said hesitantly. "I am simply somewhat knowledgeable about fairy matters, so I shall be able to look for any clues they may have left behind."

Mrs. Marl looked a little disappointed, which in turn discouraged Lydia. The former governess had come here seeking answers. As illogical as it may have been, she was likely expecting Lydia's mysterious abilities to include one that could definitively tell her where the young lady was and what she was doing, whether that was in this realm or another. But a fairy doctor's abilities were modest; Lydia wasn't capable of any mystical tricks that could prove to a client what her skills were worth. Hence why she was usually seen as an eccentric.

"I think it is worth considering, madame," Edgar said quietly. "Miss Carlton can make inquiries of fairies the same way you make them of people. If what happened to Miss Walpole took place in an otherwise uninhabited area, it may well be that there were fairies present to witness it." His explanation seemed to hearten their guest.

“Yes, quite right, my lord. I beg your assistance with this matter, Miss Carlton.”

Lydia gave a grateful nod. Edgar winked at her; certainly, he had come to her aid, but such a gesture suggested he lacked an appreciation for the severity of the situation. She did marvel at his thorough understanding of her profession, however. He had never regarded her with any excessive wonder or fear, perhaps because he had originally hired her for her knowledge rather than any special powers. It was likely part of the reason she found it difficult to push him away despite knowing he was a villain. Edgar was the only person who had ever fully accepted her abilities, which made her turn a blind eye to his faults more often than she probably should. She wondered if that made her easier to manipulate.

“Thank you ever so much, my lord. You are the only one to have listened so cordially to my admittedly absurd suspicions.” The eyes with which Mrs. Marl looked at Edgar had regained some of their calmness. “Thank you, also, for recommending your fairy doctor to me. I have no experience with fairies, and I was at a complete loss.”

*Edgar suggested she talk to me?* Lydia frowned, puzzled.

It was evident that he did not think fairies were responsible, particularly from how he had spoken about the fairy egg game. In which case, wasn’t it somewhat irresponsible to suggest a fairy doctor might be able to help? It was as though he were trying to involve Lydia on purpose.

“You’re very welcome. Miss Walpole is an acquaintance of mine and, as such, I am also anxious to see her safe.”

Lydia studied his warm smile with a gaze full of distrust. She wasn’t sure he was the type to help others purely out of the goodness of his heart. It was quite possible that he simply wished to appear favorable in the eyes of any female who appeared before him. She couldn’t be sure, but she had the sense that she was only involved because it was convenient to him. Could he be planning something heinous again?

*What if he’s the culprit?*

There was no evidence to suggest she was right. But he *was* a former thief

with no qualms about breaking the law.

# The Bogey-beast's Egg

It was suspicious no matter how she looked at it.

Lydia was in her kitchen at home, waiting for her cookies to bake. She was finding it difficult to quash her irritation. Her suspicions toward Edgar were steadily growing, not least because of what she had heard from Nico afterward. Apparently, Edgar had been with Doris on the day she had disappeared. While it may have been a coincidence that he had given her a ride in his carriage, Mrs. Marl seemed to be unaware of that fact, and it was unlikely that Edgar had filled her in on it either.

"*He* couldn't have kidnapped her...could he?"

The fearful Fogman would certainly make for a convenient way to dodge suspicion. She knew he was a former criminal, but "former" should have been the operative word. Still, the more she thought about it, the more confused she became.

"Why would he have done something like that?"

"Young, attractive girls are worth a great deal of money." Nico appeared on the kitchen countertop, a bottle of her father's prized Scotch in his paws. "Not that it looks like the chap's short on funds."

That, and the fact that it would be incredibly risky for Edgar to return to crime now that he had his own title and territory in the United Kingdom, especially if money was his only motivator. There was no reason for him to take such a risk, but there was still much about his behavior that was difficult to explain.

"I've seen him hanging around the pubs by the docks and in the seedier parts of town, always in a disguise. Tell me that isn't fishy. He frequents those high-class casinos too, and I get the sense it's not just the thrill of gambling that he's after. I'm sure he's only having you investigate Miss Walpole as a distraction."

As Nico attempted to open the bottle of Scotch, Lydia took it from him. "I do wish you wouldn't deprive father of his pleasures."

Nico clicked his tongue and tossed a scrap of paper in her direction. "Take a

look at this. I found it in his room."

She picked it up. It was a cutting from a tabloid newspaper. *"The children lost to London's fog...and the secret operations of a human trafficking organization."*

The article told of a boy who had been rescued by an Englishman after being kidnapped in London and sold to a farm in Brazil. He claimed to have been placed on a ship with countless other boys and girls.

*"The stories of children vanishing from the streets of London show no signs of slowing. The majority of cases go unsolved, something that almost gives credence to the fantastical tales of the 'Fogman.'"*

"He's been collecting a fair few other articles on the same theme. It's obvious that he's planning something reprehensible. I'd wager what happened to you in the park was no coincidence," Nico said.

"You mean to say that was Edgar's doing? Raven murdered the attacker, you know."

"I can't say for certain what's going on, but I do know that hanging around him is dangerous. Why not return to Scotland as soon as possible? Though I suppose cutting ties with the good earl isn't going to be easy."

Edgar had told Lydia about how he had once been sold as a slave. He might have been gathering such articles to investigate what had happened to him. She wasn't sure that somebody who had had their freedom taken away, and had themselves been sold off, would go on to do the same thing. But perhaps Lydia was just being naive. There was a lot of darkness in this world that she remained unaware of.

"Miss Carlton, your cookies will burn."

The maid's warning had Lydia hurriedly checking the hearth. She pulled out the iron plate and found that, fortunately, none of them had burned.

"Thank goodness. I haven't baked in a long time. I wonder whether they'll taste like mother's."

It was a Sunday, and for once, Lydia's father was at home. They had attended

church together in the morning, and she was now baking them cookies for their afternoon tea, using one of her mother's recipes. It would have been a perfectly peaceful day if only she hadn't had Edgar to worry about.

Though the Carlton residence hardly compared to the earl's, they did have a maid and a cook. There was no need for Lydia to help out with the domestic chores, but she had taken on the role of baking treats, just as her mother used to do. Her mother had also been a fairy doctor, and she had shared these herb cookies with the little creatures often.

Lydia put one cookie into the hearth's fire and another on the windowsill. Nico had already helped himself to one the moment they were ready.

Leaving the maid to prepare the tea, she took the plate to the drawing room. As she approached, she heard a male voice speaking to her father. Mr. Langley, his student, must have been visiting.

"Good afternoon, Miss Carlton."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Langley. You've come at the perfect time. I've just baked these cookies, so please help yourself."

"Why, thank you. This house certainly comes alive when young Miss Carlton is around, professor."

"Do I take that to mean it was lifeless before?" her father asked.

With the stones, skeleton samples, and taxidermied beasts that were scattered around the drawing room, Lydia could well imagine that the majority of visitors wouldn't like to stay for more than five minutes at most.

"Perhaps not *lifeless*, but not especially welcoming to the fairer sex. At the very least, it might be an idea to remove those skeletons. I'm sure Miss Carlton would thank you."

Carlton pushed his rounded spectacles up his nose as he surveyed the room. Langley's suggestion seemed to have taken him entirely by surprise. "I personally find this space rather relaxing. Do these items disturb you, Lydia?"

"Not at all, father."

"That's the daughter of a naturalist for you." Langley sighed. "If only more

women were as understanding as you, there may yet be hope for us unmarried scholars." He himself was twenty-seven and without a wife.

"Was the purpose of your visit today to make advances on my daughter?" Carlton inquired.

"Is that the first conclusion you jump to, sir? In that case, I imagine you would fall out of your chair should the day come that Miss Carlton *actually* finds herself a suitor."

"Lydia is still far too young to be thinking of such things."

Ever since she had begun living with him again, Lydia's father had picked up the tendency to treat her like a child. It was possible that her living in Edinburgh meant he had only noticed *now* that she was at the age to be thinking of marriage. The way the villainous earl casually flirted with his only daughter had caused him quite a shock.

The maid brought the tea, and Nico wasted no time in securing his own cup and saucer. He held them in his paws as he sat beside Lydia on the sofa, making sure he wasn't visible to Langley. The scholar may have noticed the presence of a cat, but his mind didn't seem to register the astonishing things it was actually *doing*.

Nico had formerly worked with Lydia's mother. According to him, it had been two years into the Carltons' marriage that the professor had noticed the mysterious talking cat. Langley's mind may have worked in a similar way. In fact, Lydia found a number of similarities between the two, possibly because they were involved in the same discipline. Neither of them were perfectly reliable; both were fine scholars but lacked competence in other areas.

Lydia was satisfied to find that her cookies hadn't come out too poorly. She gazed at her smiling father and allowed herself to enjoy the peace of the afternoon. There was no question about it: the best thing about Sundays was not having to come face-to-face with a certain tricky gentleman.

It only took a few words from the maid to turn it all to ash.

"Lord Ashenbert is here to see Miss Carlton, sir."

"I beg your pardon?! Send him away!" Lydia demanded reflexively.

“It would not do to turn an earl away at the door, Lydia,” Carlton said, quite rightly. He looked at the maid. “Please bring him in.”

Lydia slumped down in her seat, instantly sapped of her energy. Her father must have had a vague sense that Edgar wasn’t a real earl, but he saw no problem in referring to him as such, given his recognition by the College of Arms. The noble class was something beyond his understanding in any case, which was partly why he had allowed Lydia to work for Edgar without a fuss, knowing it was her wish to be accepted as a fairy doctor. Of course, Edgar hadn’t allowed for her refusal, but she had still given it due consideration and decided that she was willing to accept the post. The earl was now both nobility and his daughter’s employer, so Carlton likely felt a need to treat him with the appropriate respect.

A short while later, Edgar appeared in the drawing room dressed as elegantly as ever. He wore a black evening coat complete with a brilliant wine-red waistcoat, as though he planned to attend an evening party once he had finished his business here. What stood out more than his attire was his brilliant blond hair and angelic smile, one that was completely at odds with what Lydia suspected was his true nature.

“Please pardon the intrusion, Professor Carlton.”

“Not at all, my lord. Thank you, as ever, for the opportunity you have bestowed upon my daughter.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Edgar passed his tophat to the maid and exchanged a handshake with Carlton.

Lydia shot him only a cursory glance, then got to her feet, despondent.



She waited for Carlton to introduce Langley, and then said, “What is your business with me?”

“Don’t be impolite, Lydia,” her father chided. “Please take a seat, my lord. Would you like a cup of tea? Unfortunately we only have cookies to accompany it. Lydia made them.”

“Fascinating. I should very much like to try them.”

*“Fascinating?” It’s as though he’s never seen a cookie in his life!* She knitted her brow.

Her pout was met with a smile from Edgar, who very deliberately took the seat next to her on the sofa, even going so far as to pick Nico up by the scruff of his neck and move him. Indignant, Nico showered him with frightful insults, although to Edgar’s ears they probably sounded like wordless yowls.

“These taste most interesting,” Edgar remarked upon eating one of the cookies.

“If you don’t like them, you should say so,” Lydia said.

“I can see myself growing fond of them, much as I have grown fond of you.”

Carlton cleared his throat loudly. Edgar smoothly changed the subject and turned his earnest gaze on Lydia’s father.

“That reminds me, professor. I recently had the pleasure of reading your latest essay.”

“You’re interested in natural history?”

“The more one looks into it, the more one finds there is much to discover about the natural world. It is full of surprises, so much so that ‘miraculous’ becomes the only word capable of describing it. I was especially taken with your analysis of crystalline structures.”

Edgar had managed to draw Carlton in almost as soon as he had started talking. He sought knowledge from the scholar like a young student, eagerly exchanging with him a series of perfectly selected questions and answers. It impressed Lydia that he could utilize his charms with men as well as he did with women. He could probably make himself look favorable in absolutely anyone’s

eyes.

It shouldn't have surprised her, given how wise Edgar was to the ways of the world, but it sounded to her like he really *had* read the essay—and she could think of no better way to get into her studious father's good books than that. What she *didn't* like was how quick Carlton was to open up. She had to stop herself from saying something.

"That reminds me, professor, I recently found a reference to a stone called a 'Fairy's Egg' in an old document."

*That* caught Lydia's attention.

"Yes, I know of it," Carlton said.

"Does such a stone exist, father?"

"It's a romantic name for a rare agate."

"Agate? Like that one?"

Among the various stones in their cabinet was an agate the size of a child's head. Carlton stood up and fetched it to place on the table. The outside was dark and rough like any other rock. It was hard to believe it concealed brilliant streaks of precious stone on the inside.

"This is an agate; one may see it as an egg made of rock. Only when the shell is cracked can one see what is inside."

Edgar studied it with interest. This agate was already split, its cross-section a spread of glittering strata.

"This isn't a 'Fairy's Egg' though, is it?" Lydia asked.

"'Fairy's Egg' refers to a very specific agate, not a *variety* of agate. According to records, it is a gorgeous stone with a pattern of green and milky white. That 'peppermint leaf' coloring is rare in and of itself, but what makes the Fairy's Egg even more special is the water inside it."

"Water?"

Edgar had been the one to broach the topic, but now Lydia was asking all the questions—likely because Edgar already knew about agates filled with water.

“Can you see the hollow in the very center of this agate? On occasion, there may be water trapped in these hollows. Of course, one cannot split an agate apart to check for the water, as it will evaporate in an instant.”

“How does one know whether there is water inside, then?”

“It is audible when shaking the rock. Should such a rock be discovered, it must be chipped away, little by little, from the outside. As one draws closer to the center, there is a point at which it becomes faintly visible through the layers surrounding it. The water within it would have been slumbering deep beneath the Earth since ancient times.”

The very thought of it made Lydia let out a sigh. How would that center, trapped beneath a layer like clouded glass, be cast in its first exposure to sunlight?

“The name ‘Fairy’s Egg’ presumably comes from the rock’s coloration, which makes it look like it is enclosed in peppermint leaves, and the fact that the water inside it is likened to a mystical creature.”

“But father, it wouldn’t surprise me if a fairy really did happen to find its way into such a rare rock.”

Only Langley, who wasn’t so used to her, showed any sign of surprise at Lydia’s eccentric comment. He raised his head to stare at her blankly.

“Fairies are drawn to beauty,” she continued, “and there’s a mystique to the idea of water that was trapped in agate during the six days of creation. That’s more than enough for it to lure in a fairy. Precious stones are those that capture light and trap it inside them. They even have the power to seal away dark magic. If a fairy were to get inside, it would be unable to escape, wouldn’t it?”

“There are indeed records of stones being used in such a way, and while I cannot speak for other water-containing agates, there are anecdotes of the Fairy’s Egg being used to seal away demons.”

“Does the Fairy’s Egg still exist?” asked Edgar.

“I am inclined to believe so. However, the most recent record of it dates back to the early sixteenth century. It was in an abbey in Canterbury.”

A question suddenly occurred to Lydia. “The fairy egg used in that fortune-telling game isn’t an agate, but a glass bead. Isn’t that right, Edgar?”

Of course the rare Fairy’s Egg, of which there was only one in the world, wouldn’t be used for play.

“Correct. I was merely asking out of curiosity.”

*If only he held such curiosity about fairies themselves.*

“I just so happen to know where those glass beads are sold. Would you like to come and see some?”

“*Now?*”

“It’s what I came here for. I’ve heard there is an event on Sundays at Cremorne Gardens.” Edgar looked at Carlton. “Might I ask permission to take Miss Carlton to the gardens, sir? It relates to a matter she is investigating in her capacity as my fairy doctor.”

“I shouldn’t like to get in the way of her work, but it is evening already. How late are you intending to be out?”

“I’ve heard there has been a recent spate of disturbances at those sorts of pleasure gardens.” Langley shot Lydia an anxious glance.

“I shall escort her home the moment our work is done. I shall also be keeping a close eye on her, so there is no cause for concern.”

Lydia sighed; Edgar would be the most dangerous man around even in a den of thieves. Having said that, it probably *was* important for them to obtain a fairy egg and see where they were sold. She had a few questions for him too.

“Let’s go. Could you give me a few moments to get ready first, please?”

As Lydia made to stand up, Langley spoke. “Pardon me, Miss Carlton, but I meant to give you these.” He held out to her a bunch of large daisies tied with a ribbon. “I wanted to show my appreciation since I always call empty-handed. Those cookies were delicious too.”

“My, thank you so much!” Lydia smiled, genuinely enthralled by the gesture.

Once she had donned her shawl and hat, Lydia climbed into the carriage that was waiting for them. Raven was standing at attention beside it, as she supposed he must have been the whole time Edgar was inside.

During the journey, Lydia never once felt her companion's intense gaze leave her as he sat beside her. It grew so uncomfortable that she could no longer stop herself from speaking out.

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

"After a considerable amount of thought, it struck me that I had never seen you smile in such a manner."

"Excuse me?"

"You seemed utterly delighted to receive those flowers from Mr. Langley. And yet, on all the occasions *I* have given you flowers, you have never once looked pleased."

"It isn't that I'm *not* pleased, but I do know that when you give me flowers, it is a superficial gesture."

Only after she said it did Lydia realize she might have gone a little too far. She was quick to treat Edgar with disdain, possibly because he had never done anything to completely dispel the suspicions that lingered in her mind. Still, perhaps it wasn't fair to call his gifts superficial.

"I understand. A girl would much rather receive flowers picked by the roadside from a man she adores than an extravagant bouquet from one she cares nothing for."

Though she knew his depressive display was just a trick he relied on time and time again, she still found herself feeling guilty. She told herself she ought to know better by now, but it was such a change from his usual brilliant and confident manner that she fell for it every time.

"Mr. Langley lives nearby, so he often drops by for a visit. That's all."

"How close does he live?"

"In the lodging house two doors down."

"Did you hear that, Raven?"

“Yes, my lord,” the boy replied from where he sat across from them.

“Hold on a moment! Why does Raven need to know that?!”

Raven mercilessly slayed anyone who was a hindrance to his master.

“Because I’m a little envious,” Edgar said.

“And that small amount of envy is enough for you...for you to...”

Her panic made Edgar chuckle. “That was in jest, Raven.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Of course, I cannot guarantee that won’t change.”

*He just can’t leave it alone, can he?!*

Lydia was growing exhausted. “What on earth are you envious of? All you ever do is tease me, manipulate me, and toy with me. Mr. Langley’s only being polite, as I’m his professor’s daughter. He doesn’t even know me that well, which is why he treats me like a perfectly normal girl.”

“You really aren’t aware of your own charms, are you?”

“I am aware *enough* of who I am. I’ve grown up being called an eccentric.”

“Your eyes are a window into a mysterious world. Your ears make sense of the wind’s stirring. Any man would be rendered a coward once he learned that much about you, for it is a terrifying thought that the girl you admire may be able to perceive even your most shameful secrets.”

She couldn’t deny that he was an excellent talker. Lydia fought back, determined that she would not be taken in by it.

“Might I suggest you start by ceasing your attempts to deceive me? I *know* that Miss Walpole rode in your carriage on the night of her disappearance.”

“Oh? And who did you hear that from?” Edgar was unperturbed and responded in the same sweet whisper he had used to compliment her.

“You went to the Docklands that day and stopped by some warehouses. What were you doing there? You then picked up Miss Walpole near the bazaar after she was separated from her maid, and she vanished without a trace after that. There is no more likely culprit than you.”

“Are you clairvoyant?”

“You inadvertently gave a lift to some brownies on the roof of your carriage. They live at the docks and they had never seen such fine houses. Some of them were wandering around your house in confusion. I heard everything from them.” Technically, it was Nico who had spoken to the brownies, but Lydia didn’t feel the need to clarify that point.

Even someone like Edgar had the grace to sit up a little straighter. “I suppose it doesn’t matter how tight-lipped my servants are; I shall have to be careful how I spend my time with other women if we are ever to marry.”

“It is because you lack such prudence that I never *would* marry you.”

There was a quiet chuckle from the opposite seat.

“Did you just laugh, Raven?” Edgar asked.

“Certainly not.”

Lydia stared at him. Raven rarely showed any emotion at all, so for him to *laugh* was highly curious to her. But it was too late; he was already looking meekly back at his master, his smile beyond the reaches of her imagination once more. Perhaps he had laughed without smiling.

“I did indeed allow Miss Walpole into my carriage, Lydia, but I did nothing more than to see her to her home. It was mere coincidence that we happened upon each other that day, and I was shocked when I heard she disappeared. Did none of your fairy acquaintances see me dropping her off?”

“Unfortunately not. They spent much of the journey dozing.”

“How inconvenient. Nevertheless, I am telling the truth, and I ask that you believe me.”

She could hardly believe that he would ask that of her, given some of the outrageous lies he told.

“What was it that made you want to assist Mrs. Marl?” she pressed.

“The case itself interests me. For Miss Walpole to vanish after I dropped her off at her estate... I can see why one might suspect me. That is why I feel I must find the truth.”

This was a man whose lies were more plausible than the truth: he had even transformed his lie about being an earl into reality. It was close to impossible for Lydia to work out the real intention behind his words.

“Is there anything else you are hiding from me?” she asked.

“No.”

“Are you trying to deceive me again?”

“Perish the thought.” His gaze and tone were perfectly serious.

Though she knew it could easily be an act, for some reason Lydia found herself wanting to trust him more than she wanted to doubt him.

It wasn’t long before the carriage drew up to Cremorne Gardens, which were alive with music and decorations. Past the main entrance, the spacious grounds were filled with attractions as far as the eye could see. Lydia had never seen crowds as big as she was witnessing here, at London’s greatest shrine to amusement. There were people in every direction she looked. It was difficult to comprehend where they had all come from. Passing by the circus tent, she could hear the music of a Chinese orchestra, just as a clown was starting a tightrope walk by the main path. There was so much to see that she’d never laid eyes on before, but she forced herself to focus on the matter at hand.

“Where would you like to go? I find the circus elephants rather entertaining myself.”

“I beg your pardon? What about the fairy eggs?”

Edgar brushed off her concerns and began to pull her along. “We can look for those later, surely? We may as well enjoy ourselves whilst here.”

“Wait, Edgar, is it even true that those eggs are sold here? If not, I’m going straight home. I accompany you on enough outings as it is; you could at least leave me in peace on my days off.”

“Must you be so humorless? Very well, I shall show you the eggs. But might you spare me some of your time afterward? It is precisely because it is your day off that I would like you to spend it with me unbidden by any sense of duty.”

Was it really that vital that he kept an eye on her, even on a Sunday? The mysterious workings of his mind never failed to baffle her.

“Precisely,” she said. “I feel no obligation; therefore, there is no reason for me to spend this time with you.”

“I believe you will enjoy yourself if you do.”

“If it is amusement you are looking for, I am confident you can find another girl much more willing. One who will easily fall under your spell. Surely you would prefer a girl like that rather than one such as myself, who is in a sour mood.”

“I do not dislike it when you pout, although I would prefer that you smiled.”

“How many times must I ask you to stop teasing me?”

“You interpret things too negatively, Lydia—thinking that I am teasing you or that I only keep you around because you know my secrets. Is it so strange to think that I wish to spend time with you because I *like* you? Those are my genuine feelings, and if I did not invite you on these outings, we would have no opportunities to get to know each other. It has not been long since our first meeting—it is far too early to be courting you seriously—but I have invited you out in the hopes that we can learn more about each other.”

Could he be telling the truth? *There I go again, immediately wanting to believe him. No wonder he teases me.*

Still, Lydia nodded. “Very well. I don’t mind accompanying you for a short while.”

“Thank you. Let us cultivate our love for each other.”

Just when she had thought he was being serious, he came out with another joke. Lydia groaned inwardly. Perhaps there was something wrong with her. After all, she had fallen totally silent and was now allowing him to lead her by the hand through the crowds—something her mind insisted it zoned in on. To think she was this happy to be liked, even though there was a high chance he was just flattering her, if not outright lying...

All the same, there was a rational part of her that didn’t trust him completely,

believing that Edgar was only paying attention to her for his own benefit. And it didn't matter what he said. The fact remained that it simply wasn't possible for him to fall in love with her. They hadn't met in the way that Lydia vaguely supposed a man and a woman were meant to, and the reasons they might have to be attracted to each other and form a relationship differed greatly.

Lydia didn't have any major preferences when it came to finding a husband, but she would have liked one who was kind and thoughtful. He could be clumsy, a little untidy, or even have awful bed hair so long as he was understanding of her abilities and could be patient with her. Essentially, she thought, somebody like her father.

Edgar could whisper sweet words into her ear in his smooth RP accent. His slender physique was perfectly suited to the tailcoat he wore. Every last one of his mannerisms seemed to have been honed to perfection. When he smiled, he looked ever so gentle, but when he wanted to intimidate, his sharpness could send shivers down one's spine. On top of all that, he had the fine good looks befitting a nobleman. He and Lydia were totally unsuited to each other no matter how one looked at it. Edgar himself should know well the kind of woman he should wed: a noblewoman, at the very least, which she was not.

Nowadays, it wasn't uncommon to see the richer middle class entering high society, just as there were poorer nobles who sold their estates to live in rented accommodations. Despite that, it only took one look at him to remind Lydia that there was a real difference between commoners and aristocrats.

"There it is. They call it the 'fairy show,'" Edgar said.

She followed his gaze to a small pink hut. Through the crowds, she could make out a stage inside, where a man was making cards and flowers float in the air.

"It looks more like a magic show."

"Are there not fairies flying about and carrying those cards through the air?"

"Not a single one."

"I'd better believe it, then, seeing as it's coming from a fairy doctor."

Once the performance was finished, the man began selling fairy eggs on the

stage. There were glass beads in every color of the rainbow, each of them supposedly containing a fairy. The women in the crowd listened with rapt attention as the vendor explained how to use them for fortune telling.

Edgar stepped up to buy one, then came back and passed it to Lydia. “Well? Anything inside?”

“There doesn’t seem to be.”

“That magician is contracted to perform at these gardens. He’ll come out with new shows under different names and guises, but there’s nothing especially suspicious about him.”

“What I can say for certain is that nothing about these beads would draw the interest of a fairy. This glass is far from pretty—the color is too dull, and it is entirely hollow. Perhaps if there were something inside to attract them, it would be a different story, but one would have more luck drawing in fairies with clean well water in a glass bowl than with this.”

“In other words, one would be hard-pressed to blame Miss Walpole’s disappearance on the fairies.”

“Perhaps, but I think we ought to look into the matter a little further before making such a judgment.”

Lydia passed the bead back to Edgar as she thought it over. Just then, there came the sound of breaking glass and a woman’s shriek from inside the hut. Somebody must have dropped one of the fairy eggs—or so Lydia thought until more eggs began to shatter around them in a chain reaction. There was confusion, with some people injuring themselves on the shards.

The magician called out to try and quell the commotion, “Please, ladies and gentlemen, take due care in handling your fairies! You must not treat them roughly or speak ill of them, else they may become enraged and break their eggs.”

“What utter rubbish,” Lydia murmured.

“Some of them may be filled with a gas that expands when coming into contact with body heat,” Edgar said. “I’m sure those eggs were handed to people he paid, but I can’t say I approve of letting glass shatter in a crowded

place.”

“Lydia! Look up!” Nico called out. The fairy cat must have hidden himself and followed them there.

She did as he said. A fairy was sitting on one of the beams near the roof. It was the size of a baby and had the wrinkled face of an old man, horns, and a hairy body. It was a bogey-beast, and it was laughing atop the beam, at which point it suddenly turned its head in Lydia’s direction and their eyes met.

“Oh, have I been seen?” It vanished at once.

A thought quickly striking her, she dropped her gaze to the fairy egg in Edgar’s hand. “Edgar! Throw that away!”

“Hm?”

She tore it from his grip. The moment she threw it from the hut, the glass exploded. She dragged a nonplussed Edgar away from the attraction as quickly as possible. Looking around, the fairy responsible was nowhere to be seen.

“There was a bogey-beast,” she explained.

“A bogey... I’ve heard of it, but you’ll have to enlighten me as to what it’s like.”

“It’s nasty, like a small devil. It isn’t especially clever, but it is a member of the Unseelie Court, which is made up of the most wicked fairies.”

“Was this one responsible for breaking the eggs?”

“I’m not sure. The magician was calm, so he may have paid people as you said. That bogey-beast was certainly taking advantage of the panic, in any case.”

Was the bogey-beast’s appearance a complete coincidence or did it have something to do with the fairy eggs? Supposing the latter, it would be too hasty to conclude that there was no fairy involvement in Doris’s case.

As Lydia fell into thought, Edgar took her hand. “Are you hurt?”

There was a small blood stain on her fingertip. She must have cut herself on a fragment of glass when she tossed the bead. She removed her glove to check the wound, but it wasn’t especially deep.

“I’m all right. A cut like this will heal just by placing it in my mouth.” She was only partway through her words when she was suddenly overcome by a strange feeling of dread, so she pulled her hand away from Edgar and took a few steps back.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m starting to understand the way your mind works.”

“I was merely hoping to assist you in healing that cut.” He smiled warmly.

“No, thank you!”

She couldn’t afford to let her guard down around him. As she began to walk at a brisk pace, Edgar suggested taking a boat out on the lake. She was beginning to regret agreeing to spending this time with him, but the evening was setting in and the gardens were coming aglow in the light of the gas lamps.

The night was still young, and Lydia couldn’t see Edgar taking her home anytime soon.

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“What on earth was that? You almost injured his lordship!”

A ginger girl was shouting at a spot by her feet. There was an ugly fairy there, but it was unlikely that any passerby would be able to see it. Realizing that she was liable to attract attention shouting at nothing, she hid herself in the shade of a tree and lowered her voice.

“Didn’t I tell you to aim for that girl?”

“But, madame, she can *see* me. Actually, she didn’t just see me, she seemed to sense that I was the one breaking the glass. She has to be a fairy doctor.”

“So what? You are my *servant*. You just need to do whatever I tell you!”

“Yes, madame...”

“Bring her misfortune! Scare and frighten her! She deserves to disappear from the streets of London, just like Doris.” The girl kicked at the ground and began to stomp away.

She was tailing that red-haired girl who was walking with the earl. That stranger was around her own age and seemed to be on very good terms with Edgar Ashenbert, frequently visiting his estate. Aside from her striking golden eyes, there was nothing that attractive about her, and the ginger girl knew that *she* was a much better match for the earl.

*And* I *have a fairy servant. As long as I have his powers, things will go exactly as I want them to!*

“Tch. Madame this and madame that. Silly wench doesn’t know that she’s essentially my master’s slave,” the bogey-beast muttered to himself, not knowing that Nico was in the tree, listening. “She acts like she’s Queen of England! I’m only playing along because Master wills it. But the time will soon come when that all changes...”

The bogey-beast briefly shook his fist after the girl, but then he put a thoughtful hand to his chin.

“That fairy doctor seems to have an idea of what’s going on, which is most troublesome. Should she get in the way, Master’s work will all have been for

naught.” With that, the bogey-beast’s figure slowly vanished.

“Goodness me, it looks like we’ve quite the ordeal ahead,” Nico murmured, swishing his tail. “If only our fine earl was merely a jokester and nothing more. Unfortunately, it’s almost impossible to tell what he’s thinking. We ought to be on our guard...”

# Caramel and Ginger

Boats slid across the surface of the waveless, windless lake. The glow of the lanterns gave the exotically decorated boats a dreamlike quality, as their shadows mingled with the many lights on the water to create a scene that was wonderfully fantastical.

From atop the boat they had rented, Lydia couldn't help but be amazed by how many Londoners seemed to have nothing better to do than this. The other boats they passed were filled with finely dressed ladies and gentlemen chatting pleasantly with one another. Edgar, of course, was himself a member of the class that had no need to work. The boat he had selected could seat around ten passengers, but now it was occupied by only three; Raven, who had been waiting on one of the jetties, had joined them. Two oarsmen were rowing them at a leisurely pace.

"Every visitor to Cremorne Gardens looks forward to the fireworks," Edgar explained, "and the lake gives one the best view of all."

"Fireworks?" Lydia echoed.

"Yes. Have you ever seen them?"

"No."

"How fortunate for me, then, to bear witness to what will surely be a stirring occasion for you."

Raven uncorked a bottle of champagne. Lydia gazed at the golden liquid in the flute he passed her. The dancing flames reflected in it seemed enough to get her drunk without taking a single sip.

"I propose a toast. To my gallant fairy."

"Gallant?"

"You rescued me earlier. You even sustained injury in the process."

That tiny cut was hardly an injury. There was no need for him to claim her as *his* fairy either, although, a part of her was starting to find even the most

embarrassing lines that spilled from his lips quite normal. It wasn't so much that she was getting used to him as the fact that extravagance seemed to be his everyday, and that he acted as the master of wherever he found himself.

The bench they were sitting on was lined with cushions and, though there was plenty of room, Edgar had elected to sit right next to her. At first, Lydia found he was a little *too* close, but she wasn't long bothered once she started drinking the champagne.

"Where have you seen fireworks before?"

Almost immediately, she wondered why she felt the need to ask such a question. She had promised herself that she wouldn't ask anything about his past. It seemed too complicated, and she felt the knowledge would only cause her problems. More than anything, she didn't want to get too involved with his life.

Edgar had been born and raised in a noble family that had fallen victim to a sinister plot. His family had been killed and, though he too was supposedly dead, in reality he had been sold to a wealthy man in America. After escaping, he had continued to dodge his pursuer and survived by any means necessary. Lydia had never heard the full details, and she continued to half-doubt the story, frightened of what it would mean for her mentality if she took it too seriously. That was why she had avoided saying anything that might provoke a discussion of his past, even in casual conversation.

"When I was a child. We would set off fireworks whenever we hosted a party at the manor. There was a lake on the grounds too, and we would sit in boats just like this."

She was relieved that her question hadn't pulled up tragic memories of his time in America. But perhaps it had pained him to remember the loss of what he was supposed to inherit: the manor, the vast plot of land, and the name—which Lydia knew nothing of. It was a time when he'd had his family and his friends around him, and his charming smile was wholly innocent and hid nothing.

Though her mind occupied itself with these thoughts, there was no need for Lydia to seek out more than she already knew. The only person able to share in

Edgar's past was the one able to share in his future.

The earl seemed dissatisfied with her extended silence. "Is that your only question?"

"I'm sorry?" She was caught off-guard. "Oh, well...I'm not exactly interested in your past."

"Is that right?"

*That came off altogether too unkindly again...* "No, I mean, I believe that the future holds more significance than the past. You have been accepted as an earl of the United Kingdom, and your past beyond that is none of my business." Knowing how loathsomely shallow she sounded, Lydia suppressed a sigh.

"Then let us speak of a certain acquaintance of mine. This man once possessed an agate known as the Fairy's Egg."

He had captured her interest immediately. Her eyes widened.

"After speaking with your father, I am sure that what he had was the Fairy's Egg, the agate said to be capable of entrapping evil. However, he tells me he lost it when he was still a child."

"How did he lose it?"

"He cannot recall, but he did mention that he was captured by the Fogman."

Another mention of the Fogman. It seemed she was about to learn the truth behind Edgar's interest in the case.

"At least, he recalls a pitch-black place, somewhere he believed at the time that he had been taken to by the Fogman. He couldn't move, as though bewitched, and there was no means of escape. It was then that fairies appeared, taking on the form of sweet girls in pretty dresses. He had never seen a fairy before, but because his consciousness seemed to occupy a space between dream and reality, he was quickly taken with them. He tried requesting their assistance. The fairies asked what they might receive in exchange, as I am sure you have heard in fairytales, Lydia. The Fairy's Egg was all the boy had and all he could give them. The fairies promised their help and vanished." Edgar suddenly fell silent and looked upward, though the fireworks

were not flying yet.

"*Did* they help him?"

"They did not. That dark place was likely a storehouse. He was soon shipped off like cargo and sold."

*I wonder if this is a boy Edgar met when he was sold as a slave...*

"Is he still in the United States now?"

"He is dead."

"So you want to find the Fairy's Egg for him?"

"No, Lydia. I want to find *him*. Sometimes I wonder whether his true self still lies in that darkness, captive to the Fogman, with no one to come to his aid. That would be preferable to death, for I might now possess the means to rescue him—that being my outstanding fairy doctor."

He wanted to save someone who had died. The illogical nature of his request was so unlike him. Unsure of his intentions, Lydia could only watch him as he continued.

"He disappeared into London's fog. No one knows where he went, but if I could pull him out from those thick clouds, perhaps I could make it so that he never died. Might I ask for your assistance in this matter, Lydia?" He spoke with an expression that was entirely peaceful.

The way he asked for help in achieving the impossible, it was as though he himself were the one asking for salvation. He had, after all, experienced the same darkness. While he believed that Doris's disappearance was the work of humans, he may have had good reason for invoking the Fogman to involve Lydia.

She didn't need to know about his past, but if the events in that past were making him suffer, she couldn't bear leaving him to fend for himself.

"I shall do whatever I can," she answered, without knowing exactly what he wanted from her. She knew she was opening herself up to be used again, but anxiety over his pain pushed her to respond. That pain, at least, couldn't be a lie.

“Thank you.”

Their eyes happened to meet. They were still sitting right by each other. Lydia’s thoughts scattered and she couldn’t move, like a field mouse being stared down by a lion. She was scared, but there was still a part of her that wanted to reach out and touch the golden, elegant beast. Perhaps she would even touch its gorgeous teeth, she thought, as she stared intently at the lightly smiling lips that concealed them.

*Wait, that’s nonsense! Am I really so intoxicated from a single glass of champagne?*

While she was comparing herself to a mouse, romance had been the last thing on her mind, but now she felt a gentle arm around her shoulders pulling her in.

“You know you smell of camomile? I have always thought so. You have the same scent as those cookies.”

She was quickly distracted from thinking up a response. “Look! Fireworks!”

The sky bloomed with colors and noise. For a moment, that new sight was all Lydia could focus on.

“They’re so beautiful,” she breathed.

Whatever strange emotions had occupied her before were gone. As she stared at the sky, transfixed, Edgar laughed. A hearty laugh, as though she had said something terribly amusing.

“What is it?” she stuttered. “They *are* beautiful. Oh, there goes another one!”

“The fireworks seemed to have captured your heart much more successfully than I have.” Though his tone lacked assertiveness, he was still laughing. He seemed to be in an unexpectedly good mood.

Downing the last of his champagne, he offered some to Raven, who stoutly refused. In dodging his jestful master, he was the first to notice the boat that was quietly approaching theirs. His gaze was sharp, filled with the wariness he held for anyone who approached Edgar. However, the boat was occupied by a girl, her attire defining her as a member of the upper class.

“Lord Ashenbert? Why, I never expected to run into you here!”

She was a beautiful girl with expressive eyes, skin as unblemished as a bisque doll, and orange curls.

“Good evening, Miss Rosalie Walpole. I trust you are doing well?”

*Walpole? Perhaps she is from the barony.*

Lydia did recall that Doris Walpole lived with her older cousin and uncle. Next to the girl in the boat was a man who looked to be in his early thirties. He was fairly handsome and had clearly put a lot of money into his clothing. Rosalie introduced him as her uncle, Graham Purcell.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Ashenbert. Although this is the first time we are meeting, I have seen you several times at the club in Piccadilly.” The man tipped his hat, and Edgar nodded in response.

“Ah, so you are *that* Mr. Purcell. I’ve heard you are quite the prominent ladies’ man. The most prominent among the upper classes, in fact.”

In that respect, these men were of the same ilk. Lydia caught a glimpse of an iciness in Edgar’s smile. Perhaps the earl considered Mr. Purcell competition, though she couldn’t tell if the feeling was mutual.

“Who is this, my lord?” The girl turned a curious yet disdainful gaze on Lydia. She ran her eyes over her as though appraising her, which Lydia found a little unpleasant.

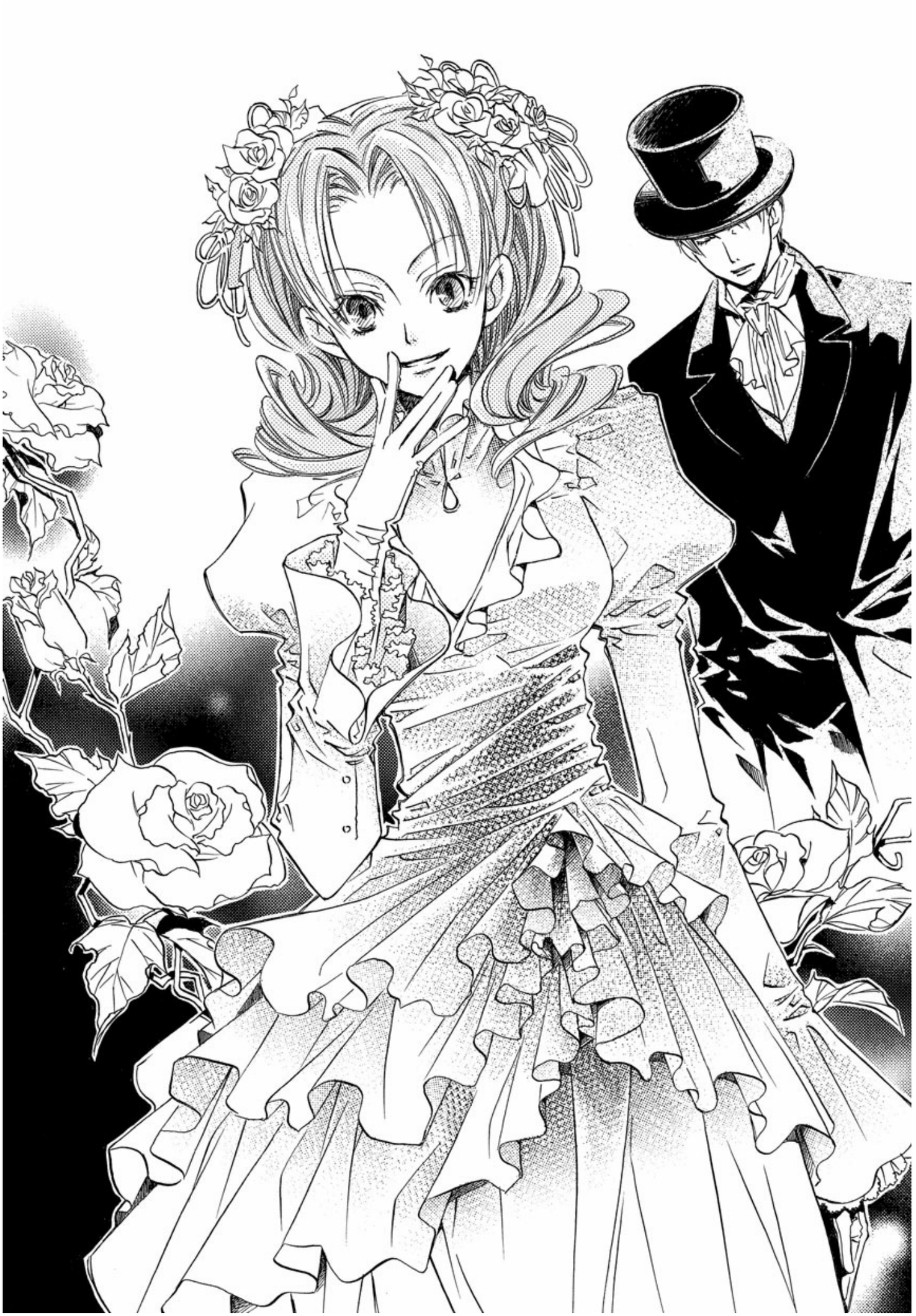
“This is Miss Lydia Carlton.”

“Carlton? Which Carlton might that be? What does your father do?”

“I am Miss Carlton, the fairy doctor.” It was quite common for a girl to be judged by her father’s position, but Lydia decided to be belligerent.

“Oh, are you the rumored fairy specialist? We are similar in age, are we not? And yet you are working? That cannot be pleasant.”

Daughters from wealthy families did not work. She knew this girl was looking down on her for it, but that didn’t bother her. She was *proud* of her work.



“Rather than my employee, she is more of a consultant. A partner of sorts,” Edgar said.

“But you *are* her employer, are you not, my lord?” Apparently, this girl now saw her as a servant.

“Pray, Miss Walpole, did King Arthur regard Merlin as a servant? Our relationship is closer to that of equals.”

Though she was loath to admit it, the way Edgar stood up for her made Lydia’s heart quicken.

“How wonderful. Personally, I would prefer to be compared to a princess than a mage,” Rosalie said.

*And a difficult princess to please indeed!*

“Incidentally, where is Miss Doris this evening? I rarely see the two of you apart.”

Lydia was amazed at his audacity in asking so directly. It made her anxious, but Rosalie answered quite readily.

“She is unwell and has gone to the country to recover.”

“My, I’m very sorry to hear it. You must miss her dreadfully.”

“Not particularly. Doris is incredibly shy and clings to me constantly, as you must have noticed. I am much happier being able to do as I please without needing to fuss over her.”

*What an awful thing to say about her missing cousin!* Lydia thought, assuming Rosalie wasn’t just feigning confidence, though she couldn’t discount the possibility that no one had told Rosalie the truth behind Doris’s absence.

“That aside, my lord, might we be allowed to impose upon you? I understand you are enjoying your time with your friend, Miss Carlton, but seeing as we chanced upon each other...”

*She must like Edgar.*

She was far from subtle about it, too. There was also the way she shot glances at Lydia, clearly considering her a threat.

“Mind your manners, Rosalie,” her uncle warned.

“It’s all right, Mr. Purcell. I don’t mind in the least.” Naturally, Edgar wouldn’t refuse a lady’s request.

“Really? I am much obliged! It is difficult to make stimulating conversation with Uncle Purcell, for he is so much older than me.”

“You speak as though I have one foot in the grave,” Mr. Purcell muttered.

“My dear uncle, you really ought to give up your philandering ways and find yourself a wife.”

Mr. Purcell shot Edgar a subdued grimace. “If you are sure, my lord, might you indulge my niece? I was just about to anger her by suggesting we go home, for I have matters to attend to this evening.”

“Certainly. It would be my honor to spend this night with such a beautiful lady.”

*He really* does *speak that way to every woman.*

Lydia really didn’t like the ever-more aggressive way Rosalie was glaring at her, and she doubted she would be able to enjoy the rest of the fireworks under these conditions.

“That works out well,” she said. “I shall go home now, Edgar.”

“Whatever for?”

“It is getting late, and I am sure father will be worried about me.”

Edgar gave a disappointed shake of his head but did not argue. “Very well. Raven, see that Lydia gets home safely.”

*He’s not going to stop me? Well, good.*

The doll-like girl had her boat affixed to the jetty, then happily joined Edgar in his, rushing right up to him. There was no need to sweet talk her like he did Lydia; she was already eating from the palm of his hand.

“Not that it’s any of my business,” Lydia muttered to herself as she left the shore behind.

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*“A girl would much rather receive flowers picked by the roadside from a man she adores than an extravagant bouquet from one she cares nothing for”*

The sight of the daisies on the windowsill in Lydia’s bedroom reminded her of Edgar’s earlier words. She was honestly happy that Mr. Langley had given her flowers as though she were just like every other girl. For whatever reason, she couldn’t say the same of Edgar when he treated her like a lady. It was as though she was afraid to be happy. As though it would be wrong in some way. As though she would fall into a deep pit if she didn’t keep her distance, a pit from which there was no escape. Fear was the only outcome when she couldn’t identify the source of those unreasonable feelings.

Sitting at the table in the candlelight, Lydia closed the book in front of her. She wasn’t making any progress with it anyway. Instead, she picked up another, which she flipped open. From it, she picked up a pressed violet, thinking she would discard it—until she realized the violet was entirely innocent. She had only picked it and taken it home because she liked it; there was no deeper meaning to it than that. It was rare to see a violet so light. The fact that it resembled his eyes should be neither here nor there.

Either way, she couldn’t allow herself to be taken in by Edgar’s flirtatious ways. She had been so close to fooling herself that she was the only one he treated with such kindness, and now she was deeply regretting it.

“He simply likes girls. That’s all there is to it.” Lydia took a deep breath to calm herself, annoyed by how sullen the thought made her feel.

“Lydia.”

She snapped the book shut in a fluster and turned around to see Nico standing in the doorway. He plodded into the room.

“Why so panicked?”

“I’m not especially panicked,” insisted Lydia.

“I followed that bogey-beast. He went into the Walpoles’ townhouse.”

“The Walpoles’ townhouse? You mean the house of Miss Doris Walpole’s late family?”

“The very same. But, listen to this: that curly, ginger girl was the one who goaded the bogey-beast into breaking the eggs.”

“Do you mean Miss Rosalie—”

“I don’t know her name. But I caught sight of her in Cremorne Gardens wishing you would disappear just as Doris had. It sounds to me like she is after the earl’s affections. I’d be careful if I were you.”

Lydia was already aware of Rosalie’s designs on Edgar, but she never imagined the girl would use a bogey-beast to get what she wanted. Was she hoping Lydia would be injured in the furore?

What stuck out to her more, however, was the comparison to Doris. Had Rosalie done something to her cousin?

“But Nico, why should the bogey-beast listen to her?”

“From what he said, he seems to have a different master. He’s following that girl’s orders for his true master’s sake.”

“Who is this master?”

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think the girl knows he even exists.”

Even if one was gifted with the ability to see fairies, it was dangerous to make contact with them while lacking the proper knowledge. Historically, such contact had led to countless people being tricked and led into trouble, which was when they would call for a fairy doctor. The more mischievous and unkind fairies in particular would sometimes reveal themselves and speak to humans on purpose. In the past, people were taught to avoid danger by pretending they couldn’t see or hear those fairies, but such wisdom had likely been lost to the times.

In Rosalie’s case, she was probably after the mysterious power she thought a fairy could offer her and had made contact without any knowledge or understanding of the creatures, and without knowing that the bogey-beast already had a master. In other words, she was in danger.

Supposing Rosalie had wished for Doris to disappear, the bogey-beast may have used that to its own advantage and led her straight into a trap. In order to

extract the truth about Doris, Rosalie would need to be cut off from the bogey-beast. Unfortunately, Lydia wasn't confident that Rosalie would heed her warning, especially given the latter's attitude toward her that evening.

It seemed that Doris's disappearance was a much more complicated situation than Lydia had originally thought. On the other hand, what Edgar had said about the Fairy's Egg and the Fogman interested her too. He seemed to think that the glass beads and the water-holding agate were connected, even when that could hardly be the case. Perhaps he saw something more between them than their similar names—but why? It reminded Lydia of Doris's fear of the Fogman from the fortune-telling game, even though the two things had nothing to do with each other.

"Oh?"

She suddenly had the sense that a link was forming in her mind, but as she started to ponder it, it drifted farther out of reach.

The only thought that crystallized a little more than the others was that Edgar might still be hiding something from her.

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The Walpole barony, though recently established, was suitably wealthy. Its current head was Doris Walpole, only sixteen years old. She had lost her parents ten years ago in a shipwreck, the same one that had claimed the lives of Rosalie's parents. Both orphaned, the girls had grown up together under the guardianship of their relative Graham Purcell. Since then, Rosalie and Purcell had gone on to do as they pleased with the Walpole estate with no regard for its rightful heir.

Doris was modest and reserved, while her cousin was outspoken and strong-willed. Rosalie was naturally the center of attention, and Doris ended up doing whatever she asked, like a servant. And yet, their roles should have been reversed—but that was exactly why the proud Rosalie wanted to garner more attention than her cousin, to the fullest extent possible. She would constantly put Doris down, even in front of other people, in order to fuel her sense of superiority. Once the two of them were alone, Rosalie had told Edgar quite openly that she was relieved to be rid of the younger girl. She had gone on to

say that Doris had been a helpless child ever since she was small; timid and easily frightened. Rosalie had known that threatening her with the Fogman when she broke their promise would scare her, enough that she had "fled to the countryside," away from foggy London.

Rosalie could talk and talk till the cows came home. Edgar had met her a few times at modest gatherings, and she had invariably proved to be a valuable source of information. He could throw out any question he liked; she would be delighted to answer it. It was almost *too* easy to pluck out whatever he wanted to know about the barony's private affairs.

And now it was time for his next move. Which piece should he move and how?

As he fell into thought, Edgar's brow creased into a deep frown. What he was attempting was no different from a game—only, he wondered whether he even stood to gain anything should he win.

He forced the thought from his mind. The game had already started, and now he had no choice but to seek victory. However he might feel about it was irrelevant.

*How many more moves until checkmate?*

"Welcome home, my lord."

Edgar pushed his hat, cane, and jacket into the hands of his butler, and then approached Raven, who had come to the entrance hall.

"How was Lydia? Did she seem jealous?"

"Jealous?" The question seemed to perplex the young man.

"Think of it thusly: if seeing me familiar with another girl inspires jealousy within her, then I might yet have a chance."

"Perhaps, my lord, but you did not instruct me to *check* whether she was jealous or not," Raven replied, very much sincere.

"Oh, of course. I must have forgotten to do so."

"I would, moreover, find it a difficult thing to determine."

Raven had been treated as a living weapon and had always felt a detachment toward his volition and emotions. It seemed that the emotions of others were even harder for him to understand.

At first glance, his eyes looked pitch-black, but when the light reflected in them, there could be found a hint of green. Apparently, where he came from, such eyes were a sign that one was possessed by murderous spirits. These children of spirits were born to obey and fight for the king, and they had phenomenal combat abilities. At the same time, their human emotions were lacking, and they would kill as ordered without mercy, hesitation, or even a rationale. If a heartless weapon of war was what one wished for, they would make the perfect soldier.

That was who Raven was, regardless of the fact that Edgar had no way of knowing whether those spirits truly existed. However, he could not believe that there was such a thing as a human without a heart. The boy may have been molded into a weapon, but he was still capable of thought and feeling.

Edgar had taken the place of the king that Raven's spirits served, but he knew that his servant sought more than to simply obey him. Their relationship fostered a mutual trust, and it was devotion that motivated Raven to serve. Edgar hoped that he would gradually learn to hold such feelings for other people too.

As he walked up the stairs and opened his bedroom door, Edgar turned his thoughts to the much more important task he had entrusted his companion with. "About the other matter, Raven..."

"I escorted Miss Carlton home safely."

"Did you catch sight of any suspicious persons?"

"None, my lord."

Edgar collapsed onto the sofa, his mind still ticking. "I see. It was no secret that I was escorting Lydia to Cremorne Gardens, and I should have thought that her returning home alone would have been the perfect opportunity. But perhaps he hadn't prepared any men for the task, since I doubt he would be the one getting his hands dirty."

“If I may, my lord, are you absolutely certain that you want to use Miss Carlton to lure him out like this?”

“I would be happy to reconsider if it disturbs you.”

“It does not, my lord.”

Edgar had ordered Raven to protect Lydia and capture anyone who may attack her, a task that was well within his servant’s abilities. Of course, Edgar knew the boy was not questioning his own capabilities, but rather the fairness of using Lydia without her knowledge. Raven had never shown such consideration to anyone other than his master and his sister before.

Raven’s sister, Ermine, had died just before the three of them had obtained their freedom. Her death was still fresh in Edgar’s mind, and it pained him to remember her. She had been against using Lydia as a pawn, so perhaps it was no wonder Raven was hesitating now.

However, as long as Lydia stayed in London, it was quite likely that she would be targeted eventually. She drew attention as the earl’s fairy doctor, and there would be those who would seek to exploit her abilities for monetary gain. That was why Edgar felt he must do something. In fact, it was because he had picked up on unsavory types investigating who was calling on him that he had tasked Raven with guarding her. The incident in the park had followed shortly after.

The thick fog had disguised the scene, and the dogs had acted as a further distraction, meaning Raven had lost the opportunity to discern the attacker’s motivations. The assault could have been part of a darker scheme, and so Edgar thought it best to lure out the mastermind and deal with him as quickly as possible. Identifying their enemy and eliminating the danger was in Lydia’s best interests as well. More than anything else, it tied in nicely with his ultimate objective.

“It will also allow us to seek out the Prince’s pawn. The man using ships for smuggling, periodically managing stolen goods, and even getting his hands dirty by trading slaves. He *must* be in London.”

The Prince, the villain who had held Edgar captive in America, was head of a questionable society. His name, origin, and even his group’s objectives were unknown, but Edgar and Raven had every reason to loathe the man they had

escaped from. The earl's current goal was to seek revenge on the one who served him. The one who had bundled him, as a boy close to death, onto a ship, taken him to America, and handed him over to the Prince. Edgar had already been looking into one possible candidate, but he still lacked the information to determine whether he was the man they wanted or nothing more than an everyday criminal.

"But would he target Miss Carlton?" Raven asked. "The attacker in the park might have just as easily been a pervert seeking victims at random."

"He would. I happen to know that the Prince pays a handsome sum for those with unique talents. One such individual occupied the same boat as me, and several psychics have gone missing from London's streets over the past few years. Supposing the man we have our eye on knows that Lydia is a fairy doctor and really does work for the Prince, he will surely make another move."

The man who had sent Edgar to the Prince might be nothing more than a lackey. Nevertheless, the earl hated him for what he had done. He also wanted to show the Prince that he was *alive* and defying the life he had previously lived.

"It won't be long now until we shall avenge all of them," Edgar muttered bitterly through gritted teeth.

There were many others besides Raven and Ermine who had joined his flight from the Prince. Relentless as their owner's pursuit was, Edgar had been unable to protect them.

"Do you seek revenge for my sister and the others who accompanied us, my lord? If so, I daresay they would not wish to see it done."

Maybe so. Regardless, Edgar had been the one to plan and lead their escape. What else could he do for those who had placed their faith in him and faced a brutal death because of it? He was no longer the nameless rogue he had once been, but an earl, which put him farther out of the Prince's reach. There was nothing stopping him from turning over a new leaf and cutting himself off from those despicable men now that he was able to comfortably defend himself. All he would need to do was discard his past completely. But he wasn't sure he could. He wouldn't be where he was without the help and sacrifices of his allies, let alone have escaped from the Prince in the first place.

“You’re the only one I have left, Raven,” Edgar murmured, resting his chin in his hand.

Raven simply stood where he was, quietly averting his gaze.

“I promised all of them that I would set them free. In the end, I broke every one of those promises.”

“I am sorry, my lord.”

“For what?”

“I do not believe anyone would regret what happened. I am sure they would be overjoyed to see what you have made of yourself; however, I... I’m not sure how to put this, but...”

“I understand, Raven.” Edgar stood up and put an arm around his narrow shoulders. The young Asian boy was now the only reason he had made it this far.

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“I beg your pardon? Might I ask you to repeat yourself, Lydia?”

“Like I said, it would appear that the bogey-beast at Cremorne Gardens yesterday was acting on Miss Rosalie Walpole’s instructions.”

“I was referring to the part after that.”

“The bogey-beast might have had a hand in Miss Doris’s disappearance.”

“No, the *other* part.”

“Dealing with fairies when one is uninformed is dangerous, and I would like you to not only ask Miss Rosalie about the bogey-beast, but warn her off any further involvement.”

Edgar looked conflicted for some reason, despite the fact that coaxing women was meant to be his strong suit.

“You won’t do it?” Lydia pressed. “I would have thought she would be quite open with you about it and would take your warning to heart. You were going to see her again anyway, weren’t you?”

“Does this mean you aren’t jealous in the slightest?”

“I’m sorry?”

When Lydia had arrived at work that morning, Edgar had taken her to the spacious reception room for small talk before she had even had time to step into her office. She had taken the opportunity to share her previous night’s thoughts on Rosalie and the bogey-beast, to which he had responded in a purely baffling manner.

“Over what should I be jealous? You are free to associate with whomever you wish, and in fact I was hoping that this might mean you will stop dragging me along on excursions.”

She lamented that the more time she spent with him, the more unpleasant she seemed to become.

“Do you really mean that?”

*I do. So you would be better off inviting whichever well-to-do girl you like to these occasions, whether that be Miss Walpole or somebody else. You are wasting your time with me.*

But Lydia kept her retort to herself, realizing that it would lead Edgar to believe she *was* jealous after all, when she knew herself that she wasn’t.

“There are much more important matters to discuss,” she said instead. “I suggest you wear a cross of rowan wood in order to repel the bogey-beast. We can think about what to do next if that fails.”

“Oh, if only you would spare me half as much thought as you give to fairies.”

Lydia was grateful that there was a table between them. She shot him a guarded glare, having decided last night not to heed any sweet talk that might leave his lips.

“Please do not look at me as though I am just some philanderer.”

“I cannot help it, for you are the greatest philanderer in all of London.” Her body tensed further. She was determined to reject even the charming smile and gentle gaze that would have any woman’s guard down in an instant.

“You seem even warier than usual today.”

*Can you blame me?* she wondered.

“You have a visitor, my lord.”

Lydia was relieved when the butler entered the room, as it meant she would no longer have to speak with Edgar. Her relief was short-lived, however.

“Lord Ashenbert! Oh, how I’ve missed you!” The ginger girl charged into the room without waiting for the butler to show her in and made a beeline for Edgar.

“Good morning, Miss Walpole. You look especially radiant this morning.”

Rosalie held out her hand so that he could kiss it in greeting. She hadn’t even noticed Lydia. “My lord, the Wattses are holding a performance of a Viennese pianist at their estate. Would you like to go? The invitation extends only to those close to Lady Watts.”

“I wonder, then, whether I would be welcome.”

“Of course you would. You would come as my escort. And everyone is so eager to get to know you!”

Lydia decided that now would be the opportune moment to make her escape. “That reminds me, Miss Walpole, I’ve heard it is a good idea to wear a rowan cross, and I would urge you to heed that advice. My fairy doctor tells me it wards off nasty fairies.”

She stopped in her tracks, waiting to hear Rosalie’s vehement objections. Sure enough, the girl’s gaze pierced into her.

“What are you supposing I have done, Miss Carlton?”

With no other choice, Lydia turned back. “I have reasons for giving such advice, Miss Walpole. You must know of the bogey-beast that hangs around you. It is a highly dangerous fairy.”

“He is my servant, and he protects me. I will thank you not to make assumptions about matters that you have no understanding of.”

“He is deceiving you. You are entirely unfamiliar with fairies. Associating with bogey-beasts will only cause you misfortune. Miss Doris’s illness may well have come about from the fairy’s influence.” Rather than “illness,” Lydia of course meant “disappearance,” but she wanted to make sure that her explanation

matched Rosalie's story.

"Are you blaming *me* for Doris's ill health? Whatever have *I* done?"

"That wasn't my intention."

"It is *not* my fault! She's the one who broke her promise, upsetting the fairy that lived within the egg she swore on. She is a coward, and so fearful was she that she fell ill and had no choice but to retreat to the country, away from other people. It has nothing to do with me!"

It seemed that Rosalie truly did believe that Doris was recuperating away from the city. That was the barony's official version of events, put forward to protect its reputation. Perhaps Rosalie's wish to see Doris gone was just that. Maybe the girls had fought and Rosalie wished her away without any intention of seeing her actually harmed.

However, the fact remained that she was associating with a bogey-beast. It was quite possible that what she had intended as mere spiteful words had been seen through to their conclusion.

"Be that as it may, Miss Walpole, the bogey-beast could be tricking you and those around you, or perhaps leading you into a trap. Therefore—"

"It rankles you to see me get on so well with Lord Ashenbert, doesn't it?!"

"I'm sorry?" Lydia asked, confused by the sudden change in direction.

"That is why you are trying so hard to disgrace me!"

"I have no interest in that trickster!"

"Then why so quick to anger at the very suggestion?"

There was no reasoning with her about the bogey-beast at this rate. Lydia cast a glance at Edgar, but he showed no sign of intervening. If anything, she had the sneaking, irksome suspicion that he had somehow orchestrated it. He no doubt enjoyed being fought over by women.

As far as Lydia was concerned, however, she should have no part in this quarrel. She tried to leave, but Rosalie marched around to block her path.

"You really ought to give up trying to get in my way. We both know that I'm

far more attractive and alluring than you. You have the most frightful eye color, like a witch. Could it be that you are not even human, but a fairy disguising herself as one?"

"Excuse me?!"

Lydia had no reason to fight over Edgar, but as a girl, she was naturally concerned about her appearance. She couldn't stay silent after Rosalie had chosen to insult it. Not to mention the comparison to a fairy, which opened up the old wound of being suspected a changeling.

"You yourself are nothing special. How many hours does it take to tame those frizzy strands into those showy curls?"

Lydia seemed to have hit a nerve. Rosalie scowled.

"Frizzy or not, at least my hair isn't the color of filthy rust!"

"My hair is *caramel*-colored!" Lydia was so angry that she offered her retort without thinking.

Edgar was the only one who had ever described her hair like that, as it was otherwise a strange color that Lydia had herself never liked. It had fascinated her, the way in which a single word could make the shade seem even charming, but she was also embarrassed about being so obsessed with his appraisal.

Fortunately, Rosalie's next question came before he seemed to realize the meaning behind her comeback. "Which do *you* prefer, Lord Ashenbert? Ginger or caramel?"

"I cannot say. I haven't yet had the pleasure of sampling caramel."

*What is that supposed to mean?*

One look at Rosalie's proud yet falsely bashful smile told her everything she needed to know. Her face flushed red. She couldn't believe it. How utterly fast did that frivolous earl move?

"I'm not prepared to spend another second entertaining this nonsense!" She pushed past Rosalie and strode toward the door.

"What a naive little girl you are!"

Lydia slammed the door shut behind her.

Although safely back in her workroom, Lydia couldn't shake the murky distress that had overcome her. She had watched Edgar and Rosalie's carriage pull up in front of the house from her window, only hurriedly drawing the curtains when the earl suddenly looked up.

"His frivolity has nothing to do with me. That he should want to kiss a woman immediately upon their first meeting, whoever she may be, is—" As she made to turn around, she immediately clamped her mouth shut when she locked eyes with Raven. "What do you want? It is considered polite to knock, you know."

"My apologies. I *did* knock but heard no response, so I let myself in."

She must have been so angry that she hadn't even heard him. "Oh. I'm sorry. But shouldn't you be accompanying *his lordship*?"

"His lordship is not the frivolous man you presume him to be, Miss Carlton," Raven said suddenly, truly earnest.

Realizing that he had heard her earlier remark, Lydia cringed.

"He *speaks* as though he is," the youth continued, "but he forces nothing. Not unless his partner wills it."

It was hardly a defense.

"Therefore, Miss Carlton, I would implore you to place a little more faith in Lord Ashenbert. You are his fairy doctor, so it would be improper for him to kiss you so casually. Without your permission, that is."

"I would never grant such permission."

"Then I'm afraid I fail to understand what is irking you so."

"You and me both," Lydia muttered. "But I cannot fully trust what you are telling me. I cannot lower my guard around him or there is no telling what he might do to me. That was just as clear to me yesterday as it has always been. He treats me like a girl who should be fawning over him, not the fairy doctor he has hired."

"You ought to take a gamble and believe me."

"And I say you think too highly of your master."

“There is no need to run from him or to keep your guard up around him.”

Here was a boy who would do anything for Edgar’s sake. That included pacifying her, a task that was likely much more difficult for him than eradicating his master’s adversaries. If nothing else, she had to admit to being impressed by his loyalty. She couldn’t imagine Edgar being anything but a pain to serve, given how unreasonable he could be. But he was precious to Raven—the one man who could accept him entirely as he was. The only man who had ever accepted the bloodthirsty spirits that dwelled inside the boy and had even managed to quell them. Knowing how much Raven trusted his master, it felt wrong to continue her negative line of thinking about Edgar.

“Very well. I shall take the gamble, but you must decide on the stakes. For my part, I vow to strike that placid face of his if he ever *does* casually kiss me.”

The corners of Raven’s lips curled ever so slightly as he regarded her with his deep-green gaze. Lydia took that as his answer. It wasn’t until much later that she realized the only way to win the bet was for Edgar to kiss her. At that point, however, she was more than ready to test him. Perhaps her feelings stemmed from wanting to know how seriously he took her.

“You left this, by the way.” Raven placed a whitish bead on the table, small enough to fit in one’s hand. “It was on the floor in the reception room.”

She opened her mouth to say it wasn’t hers but stopped herself when she recognized it as onyx. Its banding wasn’t white, but rather pale green like the veins of a leaf.

*Onyx with peppermint leaf coloring?*

When she shook it, she could hear water inside. She hurried to the window to hold it up to the light and could vaguely make out the movement of dark water where the mineral had eroded slightly.

Could this be the Fairy’s Egg? The genuine article? The stone containing a demon? The one belonging to Edgar’s acquaintance?

If Raven had found it in the reception room, did that mean Rosalie had dropped it?

“Say, Raven, do you recall what Edgar spoke of yesterday on the boat? About

the boy who had been taken from London and died in America?”

Raven stopped on his way out of the room and turned around. “I remember.”

“Was that story true? If that boy was a friend of Edgar’s, then perhaps you knew him as well.”

“His lordship had many, many followers. All of them had been sold and subject to similar conditions. I do not believe he was referring to a specific person.”

“Wait, does that mean that all of them—”

“All of them died, yes.”

“How?”

“They were slaughtered. The Prince cannot abide traitors.”

The children who vanished into the fog only to be sold as slaves. When Edgar had spoken of wanting to rescue that boy from the fog, had he really been referring to all of his lost followers? Had he constructed this fantasy, knowing that those enslaved children could no longer be saved, whether from the fog or their owner’s hands?

If only they had been taken by clouds rather than a heinous crook. Perhaps then he could still do something to save them. Such wishful thinking was inspired by Edgar’s regret over letting those children die. He longed for the repose of those lost souls, including his own, and that was why he obsessed with the fog and the Fairy’s Egg.

“However, when his lordship spoke about meeting those fairies—there were two of them—he was speaking about his own experience,” Raven continued.

“I beg your pardon?”

“He has recounted that tale to me before.”

“Are you sure you ought to be telling me this?”

“I was not told that I mustn’t, although I know nothing of the Fairy’s Egg he mentioned.”

Lydia had already had her suspicions, but she was still surprised when Raven

confirmed them. Although Edgar had told the story as though it had happened to one of his friends, she had suspected that it was influenced by his own experiences to some degree. If he had been the one to meet those fairies, perhaps he had also been the one in possession of the Fairy's Egg.

Agates themselves were not particularly rare, but those of a high quality and unusual coloring could fetch a pretty penny. Larger stones tended to be broken up and the pieces processed to be sold, so the fact that his agate was intact suggested it had been kept in the custody of a wealthy family. It was impossible for the boy with the Fairy's Egg to have come from the working class.

"Was Edgar the only noble boy to be kidnapped?" Lydia asked.

"As far as I am aware, yes."

Confined in a dark storehouse, Edgar had been confronted by a vision of the Fogman. He had traded his Fairy's Egg away for a salvation that never came, and even now she could imagine he felt trapped in an endless fog, just like the friends he had lost. Then he had asked Lydia for her assistance.

"Miss Carlton, I would gladly lay down my life for Lord Ashenbert, and I believe our allies shared that sentiment. But I do have to wonder whether his lordship wishes that our fallen friends *would* have regretted dying for him."

"I think he does."

Raven averted his deeply sincere gaze. "His lordship was not just our master, but our leader. He stood alone, carrying our faith on his shoulders without once asking for assistance or uttering a complaint. There were some who saw him more as an equal—a friend with whom they could be open—but I was never confident that they fully accepted his lordship's weaknesses. Our leader never yielded, never looked back, and never faltered. That was what made us so proud of him."

All the same, no one man was capable of such strength. Edgar must have been under immense pressure, and the fact that he had never lost the will to lead his fellow slaves despite that was extremely admirable. Raven must have recognized as much now that the two of them had attained peace.

"At this point, I think his lordship could stand to let go of some of those

sentiments," the boy said.

"You ought to tell him so. I think he sees you more as a dear friend than his servant."

Raven shook his head adamantly. "I cannot. I am bound to obey his lordship because the spirits that live inside me recognize him as their master. There is no telling what disaster might befall us if I were to overstep the boundaries between us."

Lydia didn't fully understand his spirits, but she gathered there was a very good reason for Raven upholding his position as Edgar's servant.

"Miss Carlton, please do not despise his lordship."

"Oh, I don't *despise* him exactly..." The sudden change in the conversation perplexed her.

"I ask that you do not become disappointed upon learning of his imperfections."

"I was never under any illusions that he was perfect to begin with. I am already familiar with several imperfections of his. His frivolity, his villainy, his dishonesty..."

Despite the insults she was raining down on his master, Raven seemed satisfied with her response and withdrew smoothly from her office. Lydia was left alone, somewhat bewildered.

"What exactly was he trying to convey, I wonder?"

Perhaps he wished for her to tell Edgar that he ought to rest now that he was no longer leading troops into war. He may have wanted her to be the one to listen patiently to his master's grumbles and complaints.

*Why should it be me? Edgar need only find himself a woman to court, and I am sure she would be happy to do all that for him. It isn't as though he lacks choices.*

Rosalie's face suddenly came to mind, and Lydia's irritation flared up once more. Any sympathy for Edgar that Raven's tale had instilled in her dissipated immediately.

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Lydia left Edgar's residence early that day, saying she had something she wished to investigate. Nico took the opportunity to sneak into her workroom, quietly open the closet, and pull out the box he had hidden deep inside it.

Pressing one ear against the box, he could hear whisperings from within. That grumbling had to be coming from the can he had stashed inside. Whatever was making the sounds wasn't yet aware of Nico's attentive presence.

"Rosemary, sage, basil... Plenty of fragrant herbs..."

It was difficult to decipher the words, but there was the cadence of a song there.

"Who knew such a wonderful place existed in London? A bed of rosemary among the barrels... Oh, but I was tricked! A cannery? I took a nap on a bed of herbs, only to wake up inside a tin!"

"That's how you ended up inside a tin of marinated fish, is it, then?" Nico spoke without thinking, and the voice fell silent.

The trapped creature was likely some sort of fairy and was unable to escape. He couldn't help but think it frightfully careless to allow oneself to be lulled into sleep by a pleasant fragrance. As a fairy himself, he also fell victim to the frequent habit of becoming engrossed in something at the cost of everything else. But fairies were proud creatures who would never think *themselves* careless.

"You were tricked, were you? By whom?" he added.

The can shook, an expression of its occupant's pent-up frustrations and wariness.

"Come, let us discuss matters calmly. Who are you? Remember, if you tell me, I may be willing to set you free."

Nico had been posing it the same question for a while now. Initially, the creature in the can hadn't made a peep, but after staying in the closet for so long and perhaps realizing the hopelessness of its situation, it had eventually started muttering. However, the tin around it made it difficult to comprehend.



“You want me to identify myself first?” Nico asked. “How can I, when I have no clue what *you* are? You want to meet the fairy doctor? Not until I’m sure you’re trustworthy. Well, yes, I know you have no reason to trust me either...”

It was like speaking to a brick wall.

Apparently, the creature had been raging all over the place in an attempt to get someone to open the can, but had only managed to scare them instead. It had decided then that a passive approach might be best, only for it to end up in the claws of a hungry cat-fairy, and so now it was cautious. Though Nico had assured it that he had lost his appetite, the creature was already perturbed by the fact that a fairy would try to eat a can in the first place.

The tin could only be opened by human hands, and a fairy doctor was the only type of human a fairy would trust. That was why the canned fairy wanted one to mediate for it, but Nico still wasn’t certain that its intentions were pure. It wouldn’t do for the creature to be released and immediately cause harm to Lydia, so he had persevered with his interrogations.

Eventually, it became clear that he wouldn’t get the answers he was seeking. The tin’s inhabitant was in a sour mood, with both it and its power sealed away. It never stayed awake for very long, and it seemed now as though it had fallen asleep once more. Their conversation was over.

Nico could understand the creature’s intense wariness, especially since its predicament was the result of having been tricked once before. He did feel some pity for it, but he couldn’t discount the possibility that it had been trapped because it was evil, in which case it mustn’t be released. Nor was he sure whether to discuss the matter with Lydia. She was soft-hearted to the highest degree and would surely sympathize with the creature long before considering the dangers. That was why he had been so careful to put the can in a box and hide it deep within the closet, so that there was no chance of the thing’s voice reaching her ears.

Just then, the office door opened. There was no knock. Nico hurriedly tossed the can beneath the tablecloth and sat back in his chair, casually picking up a teacup. However, it was Edgar who entered, not Lydia.

Though he knew the earl’s mind tended to rationalize his behavior in order to

view him as nothing more than an ordinary cat, Nico's current posture might have just been enough to break the illusion.

*Confound it!*

When Edgar returned home and opened the door to Lydia's office, he was confronted by the sight of a gray cat drinking elegantly from a teacup. There was a pile of cushions on the chair beneath it to enable it to reach the table. Its nose twitched as though it was inhaling the steamy aroma of the beverage and, after a sip, it placed the cup back onto the saucer. With a glance at Edgar, it sat back on all fours again atop the cushions as though nothing had happened, looking for all the world like an ordinary cat. So much so that he was inclined to believe what he had just witnessed was nothing more than a hallucination.

"I had heard that Lydia went home for the day. I'm surprised to see you are still here."

"It's rather pleasant here. A single ring of the bell and I am instantly presented with freshly brewed tea." The cat sat back on the cushions and narrowed its eyes, content.

For a split second, its meows had sounded like words. Perhaps what he had just seen hadn't been a hallucination after all.

He sat at the table across from the feline. "Say, Nico, what do you suppose Lydia thinks of me?"

The cat's cold glare seemed to say, "She thinks you're sneaky and a philanderer."

"I can't say I blame her."

"You're not even going to deny it?"

"It isn't as though she has feelings for another man, though, is it? Surely I have a chance."

"I'm sorry? What about that ginger-haired girl with the curls?"

"Rosalie is just a friend. She regards me in the same manner."

"It certainly does *not* seem that way from an outside perspective. Besides,

every advance you've ever made on Lydia seems to be entirely for sport." Nico propped up his chin on one paw, leaning his elbow on the armrest as though thoroughly exasperated.

It was a curious position for a cat to take, but it wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

"None of it is in sport. However, I am not a very confident man, and I fear rejection."

"Fiddlesticks. You're only interested in Lydia because girls like her don't come along very often. You ought to know that the two of you are *far* too different from one another. She understands that, which is why she keeps her distance from you. You need to respect that and leave her alone."

Edgar sighed. The cat seemed to be scolding him.

*Why* am *I going to such lengths to keep her beside me?*

He did think that he needed a fairy doctor for his earldom, and he found Lydia both interesting and attractive, much as he knew they were very different people. Her unpredictability invoked his curiosity, and he found an enjoyment in their conversations that made him want to pursue her. He supposed those points were the source of his feelings, but the fact that he pushed forward so easily despite knowing that he and Lydia were too different was perhaps a sign of their superficiality after all.

"I just wish she would be less guarded with me. What do you suppose I should do, Nico? You know her best."

He was asking a cat for advice, as though this were just a game to him. Again, he was being frivolous.

The cat swished its tail, seemingly dismissing the very idea that Lydia would ever open up to a former gangster. Or perhaps it was rejecting the notion that Edgar was worth sharing its information with—for free, that is.

On a whim, Edgar called for his butler and gave him some instructions. The butler came back with a silver tray supported by four legs. On top of it was a number of sweet-smelling chocolates. He held out the tray to Nico.

“These are liquor chocolates that have just arrived from France. I wager you would enjoy them a great deal.” He leaned forward slightly, watching as Nico studied the round, brown sweets.

Perhaps because of his necktie, the cat didn’t look entirely strange as it picked up one of the chocolates delicately. Nico placed the chocolate on his tongue and rolled it around a little, tasting it. Then, his eyes narrowed in delight.

“Help yourself.”

“You shouldn’t lie to Lydia.”

Was Nico giving him advice? Edgar couldn’t be sure that the cat, who had now drawn the entire tray toward himself with his front legs, had said anything at all.

# The Noble Demon

The treasure had originally belonged to Granada's dynasty, to whom it was highly precious. It was an agate said to hold the mysterious waters that had existed at the world's inception. Legend stated that any demon that touched the mineral would be captured within the crystal, so it was believed that its owner was protected from evil.

It was unknown how this protective stone had arrived in the United Kingdom from the Emirate of Granada. Its pale green pattern, like leaf veins, and its size earned it the name the Fairy's Egg. If one held light to the bottom of it, where some of the material had eroded, it was said that one could see the shadow of the water trapped within since ancient times.

"I haven't any doubt that this is it." Lydia studied the agate before turning her attention back to the book in front of her.

According to records, it had been kept at St. Augustine's Abbey for a long time. However, when the abbey was dismantled during the sixteenth century, the agate was moved to a hiding place. This was because the rock was believed to have entrapped a demon that had once shaken London to its core, and there was concern about the consequences should it fall into the hands of an enemy nation.

"I suppose that back then, people really did believe that demons possessed such power."

One theory was that the royal family had taken over custody of the agate. Though that seemed reasonable, there was unfortunately no evidence to suggest it had been passed down within the monarchy until the present day. Another idea was that it had been given to an aristocratic family with a penchant for curiosities. But whether it had been royal or noble blood that had received it, there was a long-standing tradition that stated that evil spirits feared those with elite lineage. As such, it wasn't a stretch to assume that there was a family out there who had quietly been looking after the rare stone as part of their collection, unperturbed by the fact there was a demon lying dormant

within it.

“Father’s essay is rather sentimental for an academic paper.”

Lydia closed the book and returned it to the shelf. She had hurried home today to do some research on the water-containing agate, but after finally finding what she had been searching for, she found the sources lacking. Now she stood in her father’s study, pondering the situation deeply. No matter how long she stared at the agate before her, there was no way of telling whether it contained a demon or not.

“Supposing it had been passed to a noble family, that wouldn’t discount Edgar from having had it.”

Though she didn’t know what had happened to Edgar’s family all those years ago, she could well believe that he had been kidnapped with the stone and sold. If what Raven had told her was true, that was when Edgar had encountered the two fairies. In all likelihood, they hadn’t been fairies, but girls dressed in fine clothing. Actual fairies wouldn’t have broken the agreement they had made with him. And if they had been human, then perhaps they were still in possession of the agate they had taken from him. In other words, Rosalie might have been one of the “fairies” Edgar had seen.

“Oi, could I get that back off you?”

Lydia looked up to see a bogey-beast practically plastered to the outside of her window. “Certainly. Be my guest.”

Though she opened the window, the bogey-beast made no move to come inside.

“Try and trick me if you like! It won’t work! Pick up the stone and bring it to me.”

Apparently, he was aware that by touching the agate, he would be sucked into it. It was a sacred stone—a protective charm of sorts. It posed a danger to the bogey-beast, so what was he doing hanging around the agate’s owner? What did his true master seek in making the fairy cozy up to Rosalie? Was it something to do with the Fairy’s Egg itself? There were too many questions and not enough answers.

“I’d be happy to return it to the person who dropped it.” Picking up the agate, Lydia approached the bogey-beast again.

“No! Stay back!” The fairy waved his long, slender limbs in a panic, lost his balance, and fell from the windowsill. “Wicked wench! He would have you pay for this in an instant!”

“And who might *he* be?”

“No... Nobody in particular! Now, come outside. Miss Walpole is waiting in a carriage. She came all the way here to retrieve what she lost!”

If Rosalie was there, it would be a simple matter of having her clarify Lydia’s doubts in person.

Lydia left the study, agate in hand.

The carriage was parked a few doors down at a street corner. Rosalie commanded Lydia to get in, and she obeyed.

“Lord Ashenbert’s Arab servant informed me that he had picked up the stone and given it to you.”

Lydia was fairly certain that Raven’s origins weren’t Arabic, but not being entirely sure herself, she didn’t pursue the matter. “Yes, he entrusted me with it. I have to wonder, though, Miss Walpole, whether you know what it is.”

“Yes, it’s a magic stone. One that will grant me any wish.”

The carriage began to move.

“Where are we going?” asked Lydia.

“Somewhere we can speak at length. I have the sense there is something you wish to say to me, Miss Carlton. Am I right?”

Lydia looked for the bogey-beast, but he didn’t appear to be in the carriage with them.

“Would you return the stone to me first?” Rosalie requested.

Lydia did as she asked. The stone wasn’t hers to begin with, so she had no right to keep it. “How long has that fairy been with you? Perhaps since you’ve

had the stone?”

“No, it appeared several years afterward. This is a fairy’s egg, you see. The fairy was born from this egg, though it took years to do so. All to serve me, its mistress, or so it tells me.”

But Lydia knew it was impossible for a fairy to have hatched from the agate. Nothing that was trapped inside could escape on its own strength. What Rosalie was relaying to her were merely lies that the bogey-beast had fed her. Although Lydia wanted to tell her as much, she was aware that Rosalie seemed to be amenable to talking to her at the moment, and she didn’t want to change that by outright denying what the other girl was saying.

In any case, the bogey-beast knew what the agate was, and it had made contact with Rosalie while in possession of that information. Whatever it was planning, it must have involved the Fairy’s Egg.

“How did you come to possess this stone, Miss Walpole?” Lydia’s expression darkened. “Whoever gave it to you must have had good reason for parting with such a precious magical item.”

“What are you implying?” Rosalie asked sharply, glaring at her.

“I do not believe that this egg truly has the power to grant its owner’s wishes, so I am curious about who gave it to you.”

“Very well. I suppose I can tell you. Its previous owner did not receive the fairy’s blessing. It is no wonder, seeing as he stole it.”

“Stole it? Is that true?”

“It is the only explanation that makes sense. That is why the fairy chose me in his stead. We shall be there soon: the place where I came across this egg. There, we shall be able to talk without interruption.”

The evening had rolled in and with it, the fog. The carriage drew up to a riverbank lined with old buildings.

Rosalie entered a storehouse that looked unused. Lydia followed her. The inside was caked with dust and spiderwebs. There was the stench of damp, and much of the place was dark, the only light source being a round window built

high into the wall.

Rosalie led her through a door into a small, empty room, which was where she stopped.

“It must have been eight years ago now. There was a boy lying on the floor here. His clothes were burnt, and he was covered in mud—clearly, he was one of those vagrant children. I knew at once that he had done something wicked and been caught for it.”

“But how could you have known that?”

“It was *obvious*. His arms and legs were bound. Innocent children are not tied up like that. Every child living in a ditch in *these* parts of London has surely stolen once or twice.”

It was simplistic reasoning indeed, although Lydia could see that a girl like Rosalie, who thought that the world revolved around her, would be incapable of thinking any differently.

“Would you believe it, the boy asked us for help. I spotted the stone he was holding so tightly and promised to help in exchange for it. But the stone was so pretty that I knew it must have been valuable, and that he must have stolen it. I told him, then, that I was under no obligation to assist a thief.”

“Did that not anger him?”

“I’m not sure he had the energy for anger, although Doris was anxious that he might seek us out and enact his revenge.”

*Miss Doris was the other “fairy”?*

“Doris would never have been scared of the Fogman if not for that boy. He was moaning and muttering something about the Fogman in his sleep, leading her to believe he had been kidnapped.”

Two cleanly dressed girls in the middle of a filthy storehouse. Edgar had described them as fairies...

Turning over ideas in her mind, Lydia crouched down to inspect the ground the boy had lain on. She gently touched one of the floorboards that sat under layers of dust. It felt as though she were coming directly into contact with

Edgar's past.

*If only I could reach out to him through that dark fog. Surpass the limits of time itself...*

Her thoughts took a turn for the foolish. Then she was struck with another thought. If that boy had truly been Edgar, how would he feel about those two girls now? Surely he didn't still think they had been fairies. Even if it had seemed that way at the time, reflection should have led him to the conclusion that they were human all along.

No matter his thoughts, the fact remained that he had passed the agate on to the girls. It was the one thing that might have proven where he had come from, and he had given it away to a pair of strangers—fairies or otherwise—because that had been his only hope of rescue. That assistance had never come, and it had taken years before he was able to escape using his own strength. Years and countless sacrifices. What would he do if he learned that Rosalie and Doris had been those girls? Perhaps he knew already. It would explain why he had taken an interest in Doris's disappearance, and why he had told Lydia about the Fogman and the Fairy's Egg.

*Wait a moment...*

What exactly were Edgar's intentions in all of this? What if he had never been planning to help search for Doris at all?

Feeling the draft of a moving door, Lydia turned around. The door had been closed, and then there was the *clunk* of a latch from outside.

"What are you doing, Miss Walpole? This isn't the time for practical jokes."

"Oh, I quite agree."

"Open the door!" Though Lydia banged on it, she achieved nothing but to make Rosalie giggle.

"If you'll allow me to be frank, you are a nuisance. You and Lord Ashenbert are ill-suited to each other, and you ought to keep away from him."

"I daresay you've taken leave of your senses!"

"My fairy told me it would be best to keep you here until you've learned your

lesson, so I would ask you to wait here most quietly and politely."

"He's a bogey-beast! You mustn't trust him! I'm sure that Edgar is up to something too. You cannot be taken in by his flattery, Miss Walpole!"

"I *knew* you were jealous of me!"

"I already told you, I'm not—"

"Farewell, Miss Carlton."

Those were the last words Lydia heard before her banging stopped eliciting responses from the other side of the door.

"Oh, if only I had thought to bring Nico with me."

He had stayed behind in her workroom to indulge in the tea and comfortable seating. She would hazard a guess that he was still there now.

"Why is he never around when I really need him?"

For the time being, Lydia did her best to suppress the anxiety and panic that threatened to overwhelm her. She needed to remain calm. The first thing she tried was to shout for help, but it quickly became apparent that the surrounding buildings must have been unoccupied. With the only light coming from a gap in the door, she started to rapidly lose hope. She wondered whether Edgar had felt the same way when he had been in this very room eight years ago. Only, he had been a child and already in a weakened state. Just imagining it was making her throat feel unbearably tight.

Unable to sit still, Lydia tried shouting and knocking on the door again, then slammed her entire body weight against it. There was a snap and the door broke, sending her tumbling onto the floor with the debris.

"Unbelievable... I cannot be *that* strong, can I? Oh, this section by the latch is beginning to rot. I suppose I'm lucky this storehouse is so old."

Her escape from the room turned out to mean very little, as the storehouse's main entrance was locked. This door was made of iron and wouldn't break so easily. However, the skylight let in plenty of illumination and the space was much larger, making it easier to remain calm.

Now that she thought about it, Rosalie had had the key to the storehouse and

opened it herself.

*What now?* Would she be left here for days until she died from starvation? *No, I doubt she would go to such extremes. I hope not, at least.*

Lydia decided to search deeper inside the building for another way out. Rosalie had the key, and she had come here as a child. Did that mean her family owned this storehouse? But if that was the case, it would mean that it was someone from her house who had locked up the boy here. Was one of her relatives responsible for selling Edgar?

Lydia's thoughts were growing more and more muddled. She had gotten involved in this incident all while the most important information remained unknown to her. Edgar likely knew much more than she did—enough to form the basis for a scheme. A scheme in which, unbeknownst to her, she had a role to play.

"That liar! He said he wasn't hiding anything from me—eek!" She lost her balance and tripped when her foot went through a floorboard. It was as she was standing up again that she heard a feeble voice.

"Is somebody there?" It was a young, female voice.

"Who's there?" Lydia stuttered.

"Oh, I didn't mean to startle you. I'm... My name is Doris Walpole."

"Miss Walpole...daughter to the baron?"

"Yes...um, if it isn't too much trouble, might you be able to assist me? Assuming you aren't one of those villains..."

Lydia walked up to the door where the voice was coming from. Like the room she had been in, there was a latch holding the door closed from the outside. She undid the latch and the girl who emerged from within practically collapsed against her.

"Are you all right?" Lydia asked.

"Yes...merely exhausted with relief."

"You ought to know that I have been locked in here myself. I'm still searching for an exit."

“Was it also my uncle who trapped you in here?”

“Your uncle... You mean Mr. Purcell?!”

At present, Doris looked nothing like the daughter of a noble family. Her hair fell around her face, and her clothing was plain. She looked gaunt, and at the news that she wasn’t yet going to be released, she slumped unsteadily onto a wooden crate.



Doris explained that the front entrance was the only way out. The storehouse belonged to Mr. Purcell, for use by his shipping company, and she and Rosalie had once explored it in secret.

*That must have been when they came upon the boy,* thought Lydia, but currently, she was more interested in Mr. Purcell.

"I learned that my uncle was misappropriating the Walpole fortune," Doris explained. "I wrote to our former governess to ask her advice, but my letter was discovered, and for a while, I was confined to a residence that I believe belongs to one of my uncle's employees. However, this morning, I was thrown in here and told that I was to be sold abroad. It seems my uncle has been involved in this business for a long time. I was shocked to learn that he is a criminal, on top of misusing my parents' fortune."

"So the bogey-beast wasn't responsible for your disappearance."

"Bogey...?"

"Miss Rosalie Walpole's fairy. I heard the two of you fought and that you were frightened of fairies. I then spoke with Mrs. Marl and began searching for you."

"Mrs. Marl? Who are you, exactly?"

"My name is Lydia Carlton. I work for Lord Ashenbert as his fairy doctor. The fairy you mentioned concerned Mrs. Marl, so she came to consult with his lordship."

"You work for Lord Ashenbert?" Doris let out a sigh of relief, apparently having confirmed that Lydia was on her side. "Yes, I was afraid of fairies. I played the fairy egg game with Rosalie and swore that, as her closest friend, I would never hide anything from her. But I couldn't tell her what our uncle was doing. It was far too terrible. And my uncle and Rosalie are very much alike...or I suppose, you could say they trust each other. I could not accuse him without definitive proof. But my anxieties over the situation led me to become depressed, so Rosalie realized I was keeping a secret and lost her temper with me."

"Is that when she threatened you with the Fogman?"

“Well, yes. I do not think she meant it. Rosalie says many spiteful things, but she isn’t the kind of girl to act on them. And certainly, I had been afraid of the Fogman up until now, but I have learned that people are much more terrifying than fairies.”

*That may well be true.* All one needed to do was understand the rules of fairy society for them to become pleasant neighbors.

The storehouse had started to grow darker and darker. Once night fell, there likely wouldn’t be any light left at all and the temperature was certain to drop. Lydia had no idea how long Rosalie was intending to keep her here, but she wasn’t about to wait around to find out. The risk of Mr. Purcell’s men returning to take Doris away was too high.

“We cannot resign ourselves to the possibility that there is no escape, Miss Walpole.” Keeping her tone as bright as she could, Lydia stood up.

“But whatever can we do?”

“Let us search for a tool of some kind.”

Presently, there came a peculiar chuckle. Lydia looked up to see the bogey-beast sitting on a beam.

“You!” Lydia cried. “How dare you say such irresponsible things to Miss Rosalie Walpole! What are you playing at?!”

“You’re a nuisance, fairy doctor.”

“What have I ever done to you? If your wish is to bring Miss Walpole and Edgar together, I am the last person you should be tormenting!”

The bogey-beast hopped down from the beam and landed atop a pile of crates. “That girl must not have any brains if she thinks she has a chance with the earl!”

“What are you scheming, then?”

Again the bogey-beast snickered suggestively. His mouth, already ugly in the way it spread to his ears, twisted even more nastily.

“Is there something there, Miss Carlton?” Anxious, Doris drew closer to Lydia.

“The fairy that has been hanging around your cousin. Can you not see him?”

“I have never been able to see him, although sometimes he has moved things to show me.”

“That one is thickheaded,” said the bogey-beast. “She can’t see me, even when I reveal myself like this. I wanted to use her for Master’s sake, but I had to go for her cousin, who *can* see me.”

“Your master? Do you mean Mr. Purcell?” Lydia asked.

“You’ve got to be joking! What business would I have serving a *human*?”

*His master isn’t human, then.*

The bogey-beast had shown itself to Rosalie, the owner of the water-holding agate. Could its true master be trapped inside the stone?

“Is your master...a demon?”

The bogey-beast clicked his tongue disapprovingly. “Master doesn’t like to be referred to that way. He doesn’t like to be associated with *them*. He is the magnificent Fogman, not a lowly demon.”

The *Fogman* was inside Rosalie’s agate?

Lydia’s bewilderment seemed to please the bogey-beast, who took it as encouragement to go on.

“Master was sealed away in the stone. How tragic! And all those who have held the stone until now have been of noble blood, meaning Master has not been permitted even to speak!”

It seemed that what she had read in her father’s paper—that noble blood had been protecting the Fairy’s Egg—was true. It had meant that not even the tiniest drop of the demon’s power had been allowed to leak from it. This was thanks to the latent property of ancient noble blood, such as that which had been passed down since the Middle Ages, to repel evil. A recently established aristocratic family such as the Walpoles would not have such potent blood.

“But at last, Master can be freed. I have heard his voice and have been aiding him. Yes, it seems my luck has turned! Together, Master Fogman and I will restore our former glory. I can pinch as many children as I like these days, and

not one thinks to be afraid of me. Haven't they ever heard of a bogey-beast before?!"

It was easier for one to see fairies during childhood, but even that wasn't as commonplace now as it used to be. Whether that was because the presence of fairies was weakening or because children weren't hearing as many stories about terrifying fairies as they used to wasn't clear, but it was very likely that they wouldn't recognize the pinch of a bogey-beast anymore.

"Hearken to me, humans! The Fogman is about to return! London's fog will be fear-tainted once more, and the Blue Knight Earl will not be allowed to interfere. This time, the Fogman will send him to his grave!"

"The Blue Knight Earl?!" Lydia cried in surprise. That would mean Edgar, as he was the one currently in possession of the title.

"Yes, fairy doctor! I know you work for him!"

"But what did he ever do to you?"

"What do you *think*? He sealed the Fogman away! Breaking the agate will free the Fogman, but after so many years, his power has weakened. But, if Master replenishes himself with his captor's life, his strength will be as before! I will make it so that Master can do so the moment he is freed from the stone. The earl must die so that the Fogman's power can be restored!"

"Miss Carlton, are you all right?" Doris stepped in to support Lydia, who was overcome with dizziness.

"The earl was missing for so many years but has finally returned," the bogey-beast continued. "That means everything is in place for my plan to commence!"

The Blue Knight was a name given to a lord of Fairyland who had sworn loyalty to one of England's kings. One of his descendents, a Lord Ashenbert who had inherited the same title of Blue Knight Earl, was spoken of in legends. Said to possess a mysterious power, he was known for traversing the line between his territory in Fairyland and the mortal realm.

If this bogey-beast spoke the truth, then a Blue Knight Earl of an unknown generation must have used the agate containing the holy waters to seal away the Fogman, the demon who hid in the haze and carried people away. The

creature had been waiting for its chance at restoration and revenge ever since. While it couldn't have done anything during its lengthy stints in the abbey and in the care of a long-standing noble family, once the "Fairy's Egg" was passed to Rosalie, it was able to release some of its waning power from the agate and set things in motion. After a few more years, this bogey-beast had detected that power and answered its call. With its help, the Fogman had used Rosalie's connections in high society to seek out the current Blue Knight Earl.

It was around a month ago that Edgar Ashenbert had reappeared in London as the rightful holder of the title, after the previous Blue Knight Earl's disappearance around three hundred years prior. He was already well-known in high society. The bogey-beast and the Fogman must have been keeping an eye on him from the moment Rosalie had learned who he was.

However, for as much as the Fogman sought revenge, Edgar did not actually carry the Blue Knight Earl's blood. He did not have the power required to take on a demon. Nor, for that matter, did Lydia.

Edgar had approached Rosalie so that he could get involved in the search for Doris, and Rosalie had approached Edgar because she was being manipulated by the bogey-beast and the Fogman in her agate. The moment the Fogman was freed from the agate, it would all be over. But what could be done?

As Lydia thought it through, she stole a glance at the bogey-beast. Without the small fairy, the Fogman must have been powerless, for there were surely much stronger allies the demon would have preferred. But this fairy was likely the only creature that had answered the Fogman's cries for help.

The answer lay in hindering the bogey-beast.

*Is there anything I can use to capture him?*

Lydia's gaze fell upon a glass bottle at her feet. Hiding it under her skirt, she feigned dizziness and slumped to the floor. Then, she secretly picked it up. What she would need to do was pluck a hair from the creature's shaggy body and place it in the bottle. Fairies didn't have physical forms, so even a single hair was equivalent to their soul. The bogey-beast would enter the bottle to retrieve its hair, at which point she would replace the lid and trap it inside. A small bottle wouldn't be enough to hold the fairy forever, but it could certainly

buy her time.

“What’s the matter, fairy doctor? Has mention of the Fogman filled you with awe?”

“I... I wish never to see such a horrifying creature...” Lydia pretended to cry fearfully.

“I can see why! You may be a fairy doctor, but you’re just a little girl, after all. You could never stand up to Master!” The bogey-beast swaggered up to Lydia, bringing its eerie sneer forward to peer at her.

She lunged, seeing her opportunity to catch it—but the bogey-beast’s body shrank to the size of a mouse, allowing it to slip out of her arms. By the time she realized what had happened, the bogey-beast had already plucked out one of her hairs, put it in the bottle, and sealed the lid.

She collapsed on the spot, and Doris hurried toward her.

“Miss Carlton? What’s the matter? Please wake up!”

But no matter how much Doris called out to her or shook her, Lydia did not open her eyes. She had tried to trap the bogey-beast, but failed.

Instead, her own soul had been shut inside the bottle.

***

When Carlton arrived at Edgar's residence to report Lydia's disappearance, it was clear that he had already been from pillar to post in search of his daughter. He had come on foot, too, apparently having forgotten that a carriage would have been much faster. The housekeeper had informed him that Lydia had come home just past noon and holed herself up in Carlton's study, only to leave again in the evening. She had said that she was going to deliver a lost item and wasn't dressed as though she planned to be out for long.

"Forgive me, my lord. I wondered whether she hadn't returned here on some errand." Seeing that Lydia hadn't come to the door, Carlton immediately turned to leave.

Edgar stopped him. "Please do not fret, Professor Carlton. I have a line of inquiry that I shall pursue." He called for Raven while his butler prepared his overcoat and hat.

Rosalie was the first face that came to mind upon hearing Carlton's report. When they had returned to his residence after the concert, she was making a fuss about having dropped something. Raven had informed her that he had handed such an item to Lydia, at which point Rosalie's face flushed with intense emotion, and she had barreled out of the mansion. Raven had described the object as something akin to an Easter Egg, but Edgar had sensed that it was the Fairy's Egg that had once belonged to him.

In the spacious manor house where Edgar had grown up, there had been a cabinet of curiosities, a room bursting with articles from all around the world and spanning several centuries that had been collected over several generations. Its purpose was to inspire wonder in the guests who saw it. There were countless objects with questionable histories, including mummies and taxidermies of unknown origins. Though crass, it was quite common for nobles to hold such items dear.

The Fairy's Egg was a part of that collection. The outside was striped with thin veins, and the inside encased a small amount of water. As a child, Edgar had been taken with the mysterious shadow of the liquid as it moved. He hadn't known its name, its past, or that it was an agate, and in his naivety he had taken it from his father's collection. He recalled keeping it constantly in his pocket,

but he couldn't remember when he had lost it. Until, that was, he found out that Rosalie had it.

Edgar had first met Rosalie at a noblewoman's tea party. She had declared that the fairy eggs used in fortune telling were toys designed to trick children and had produced the agate to show them. In that single moment, the fragments of his memory rejoined.

Tied up and with a foggy mind, he had awoken in a chilly room. He had only half-awoken from a torturous nightmare and found himself deathly afraid of the Fogman's presence. There he saw two girls, whom he took to be illusionary. He remembered relinquishing that agate, which had never left his side, to them.

Edgar realized at once that, if Rosalie had been one of those girls, then his tormentor was likely somebody close to her. Specifically, he had narrowed down Graham Purcell as being involved in his kidnapping and had been investigating the gentleman since. It was immediately obvious that Rosalie was ignorant of her uncle's misdeeds. The girl's head was filled with nothing but her own fancies. Knowing that, Edgar was not especially concerned when Lydia told him about the bogey-beast. The fairy's involvement had nothing to do with Purcell. Of that, he was sure.

He was also sure, therefore, that anything that had happened to Lydia was likely to be a result of her quarrel with Rosalie this morning rather than Purcell's doing. However, their relationship as uncle and niece could not be ignored. Should Purcell begin to target Lydia, things could get very dicey indeed.

"Has Lydia gotten herself involved in something dangerous again?" Carlton asked, his eyes anxious.

"Worry not," Edgar said, keeping his tone as light as he could. "I believe she is merely being held up by a slightly domineering acquaintance of ours."

It was difficult to find any resemblance to Lydia in the thin, tired man before him. There was a scattiness to the way he pushed his round spectacles back up his nose—but the gaze behind them looked Edgar straight in the eye. "My daughter trusts you a great deal, my lord. Fairy doctor is an occupation that comes with certain dangers, and yet she has chosen to work under your employ. I ask that you protect her in turn."

Edgar wondered whether Carlton's sharp academic eye had already discerned the type of man he was. The professor had picked up on the possibility that Lydia had been caught up in some sort of incident, but he had made the decision not to comment and instead place his trust in that which his daughter held for her employer.

Carlton was a softie. Just like Lydia.

"You have my word," Edgar replied. "I shall protect her to the very last, for I owe her a great deal."

Taking his promise to heart, Carlton departed. The earl hadn't lied to him; he *did* feel that he was deeply indebted to Lydia. But her father was mistaken in thinking she trusted him. He was a shady criminal, and it was only right that she should want to keep a certain distance between them. For his part, Edgar was unable to show Lydia every card in his hand. She wasn't the same as Raven or the companions he had lost, so he struggled to decide how close he should get to her. They didn't share the same traumatic experiences, so to tell her about a troubled past she had nothing to do with would only bother her. Perhaps that was just an excuse for him to use her without having to explain everything. It was because of that doubt that Edgar hadn't been able to bring himself to make use of her to the extent he otherwise might have.

"So there *is* a shadow of a conscience rattling around in there," Nico mewled from down at his feet as though talking to him. Edgar supposed the cat must have picked up on his frown.

"Where are you off to, Nico?"

"I'm going to find Lydia. I'm not leaving it to *you*." Nico suddenly dashed through the doorway and disappeared, as though swallowed up by the fog that hung over the street.

Taking his cane from Raven, Edgar also stepped outside.

"My lord, I have just received news from an informant."

"Bad news?"

"In light of the timing, yes."

“The man who targeted Lydia in the park worked for Purcell, didn’t he?”

“Indeed. He was known as the ‘Dog Tamer,’ and Purcell would make frequent use of him. Purcell had also instructed a number of other deprived rogues to target ‘Lord Ashenbert’s fairy doctor.’ This information came from a man who has had a hand in kidnapping girls with supernatural powers such as clairvoyance, but this time he refused to help.”

“That would mean that Purcell is undeniably the Prince’s pawn.” Edgar paused to think. “And what is that?” He had spotted the dented tin in Raven’s hand.

“I have been told quite adamantly that I ought to deliver this to the fairy doctor.”

“By whom?”

“By this.”

Edgar struggled to understand, but Raven didn’t seem distressed at all; he simply placed it carefully in his jacket pocket. The earl decided not to make too much of it.

“Incidentally, Raven, it seems we shall have to alter our arrangements.”

His servant replied after a pause. “Yes, my lord. I certainly didn’t expect danger to come to Miss Carlton at her home either. Nor had she been leaving the house by herself as often since the incident in the park.”

Perhaps Lydia had only gone out because she hadn’t been alone. Edgar didn’t know how Rosalie had done it, but she must have managed to call Lydia outside without alerting the Carltons’ housekeeper. If all Rosalie had wanted was the return of her agate, she would have paid a visit like normal. Her hatred for Lydia must have run much deeper than he realized if she had gone so far as to lure the fairy doctor out of the house.

Edgar suspected Purcell’s involvement in Doris’s disappearance based on his investigation, and he had only intended to get closer to Rosalie to use her for information. He lamented that he hadn’t kept a closer eye on her.

“I had almost forgotten that one ought not to be satisfied that one

understands women."

"I am sure it won't happen again, my lord."

Exasperated with himself, Edgar boarded the carriage.

***

At the Walpole residence, one of the maids was delivering a secret letter from Edgar to Rosalie's room. The girl's heart exploded in ecstasy the moment she read that he wanted to meet, and she made her way alone to a hotel that was often frequented by the upper classes. The hotel had a long history of putting up nobles from the country who didn't have a London townhouse for long stays, and even those who did often hired it for private getaways.

Rosalie was shown to a guest room bordered by unassuming furniture. The golden-haired earl welcomed her inside, his smile filling her chest with smug pride.

"I was ever so surprised to receive your letter, my lord."

"You were? You must have realized by now how utterly head over heels I am for you." There was a desperation to Edgar's ash-mauve gaze as he stared at her, and her heart stuttered.

"We only saw each other but a few hours ago."

"*Several* hours ago." Edgar corrected her. "And I wanted a chance to speak with you alone."

The fairy was right. Doing just as it had told her had brought fortune upon her. She gave herself over to his comforting whispers and drank the wine he offered her. She was elated. Miss Carlton—or whatever her name was—had claimed that Edgar was dangerous. Clearly, she didn't know what she was talking about. And anyway, even a man who was slightly dangerous could be made honest by the presence of an attractive lady.

"I have something I wish to give you," Edgar said.

"Oh? Whatever could it be?" Rosalie opened the velvet case he passed her to find a ruby necklace inside. "You're giving this to me? Are you certain? It seems so expensive."

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“Then tell me where Lydia is.”

She must have misheard him, because the yearning did not leave his gentle gaze. “I beg your pardon?”

“I know you know where she is. I had thought she would still be with you, but your family’s maid informed me that you had come home by yourself a while ago. Lydia met with you and now she is missing.”

Rosalie was suddenly seeing red. Insulted, she flung the necklace back at him. “How dare you! I do *not* know where Miss Carlton is! Nor can I accept this gift!”

“I cannot take it either, for you see, it is a gift to you from Mr. Purcell.”

“It’s from my uncle?”

What was going on? The man across from her chuckled quietly, seeming very much a stranger to her. The Edgar she knew was not capable of such a coldhearted smile.

“Are you aware that Mr. Purcell owns this hotel? Unfortunately, he has built up quite a large amount of debt: money lost to gambling and luxuries, and a mortgage on this very building. As a creditor of his, I have just seized the property from him. In fact, he had been using this room and, as you can see, his belongings are still here. Aren’t they fascinating, the curious items he keeps here away from his home? For example...”

Edgar stood up and held out a bundle of papers. Rosalie’s mind was too deep within the throes of confusion to take them, and they ended up scattered across the floor.

“He has been appropriating assets that belong to Miss Doris,” Edgar continued. “Naturally, you, too, are a victim in all of this. However, his debts started to catch up to him, and he became desperate for a solution. First, he would have Miss Doris go missing. The way in which you tried to control her and often treated her spitefully are well-known. Therein lay the key. It was your ostentatious personality, your naivety in showering money on any needy man

to whom you took a liking. Mr. Purcell had been chasing off these men continuously, attempting to put an end to your extravagant spending. Fortunately—though perhaps I am misusing the word—your passion seemed to die out as quickly as it was inflamed, and each man found himself forgotten in the blink of an eye. Mr. Purcell, however, decided to use this against you by making it seem as though *you* were the one misusing Miss Doris's fortune. Once you were gone too, society would assume that you had killed your cousin and run away after being unable to cover your tracks."

Several of the sheets scattered at Rosalie's feet were marked with forgeries of her signature, pointing to her as the purchaser of so many extravagant items. No doubt the same false signature could be found on the receipt for the ruby necklace.



“Now that I have enlightened you as to the nature of your situation, I’d like you to answer my question.”

As the reality of her uncle’s scheme slowly took shape in her mind, Rosalie found that she was terrified of the man standing before her.

*Who in the blazes* is *he?*

He was supposed to be a handsome, mild-mannered earl, but that familiar agreeable face was now sending icy shivers down her spine. She took a step backward, intending to run, but he grabbed her firmly by the arm.

“I... I shall scream,” she warned him.

“Be my guest. The other rooms on this floor are empty, and I have already informed the manager that he need not interfere should he hear a woman’s scream. Where is Lydia?” Edgar demanded.

“If you do anything to me, no one will *ever* find her.”

“Oh yes?” He turned his eyes away from her to address somebody unknown. “Open the window.”

It was only then that Rosalie spotted the dark-skinned servant in the corner of the room. Edgar started to drag her toward the window.

“Stop... Stop it! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“If you aren’t going to talk, it makes no difference *what* I do to you, does it?” His hands wrapped around her throat without a moment’s delay. As she choked, he shoved her toward the open window. “Drunk on wine, you lost your inhibitions and fell to your death.”

*I’m about to die.*

Rosalie began to wail, having no sense of where she was anymore. The next thing she knew, she had sunk to the floor, and she felt as though she must have cried out what she had done to Lydia while her mind panicked. She sobbed, unable to regain control over her trembling body. Despite that, an intense drowsiness was taking over. He must have put something in the wine.

“You’re a naive little girl. You ought to recognize that it is ignorance that has

led you to believe that the world revolves around you.” Slipping on his overcoat, Edgar made to leave with his servant. “Incidentally, that wine was here when I arrived. Anything that might have been added to it has nothing to do with me.”

*No...*

If Rosalie fainted, her uncle would find her. Regardless, the golden-haired demon abandoned her. She was inexplicably reminded of the blond boy she had deserted with just as little concern all those years ago.

# Emotions Beyond Glass

Lydia screamed from inside the fallen bottle. The vessel stopped when it knocked against a wall, its side slamming against her back. “Ouch! What do you think you’re doing?! You shrimp! Scrub! Pot belly!”

The bogey-beast trifled with the bottle while she yelled insults at him, but no matter what she said, he just held onto his sides and laughed at her. His actions weren’t actually hurting her. It was her soul that had been trapped in the bottle, and though it felt as if her body had been shrunk and placed inside it, in reality it was nothing more than her imagination. The rolling around, the striking of her head against the glass—it was all an illusion. She knew that, and yet the pain still seemed real.

The bogey-beast shrank himself so that he was the same size as Lydia, then started jumping in glee outside the bottle. “You’re a half-wit, fairy doctor! This serves you right for trying to trap me!”

She should have known better. Attempting to catch a fairy meant stepping into their realm. And that meant being forced to adhere to their laws. She had exposed herself to the same danger as the bogey-beast: of having her hair plucked and sealed away.

“What to do, what to do? Maybe I should throw you into the river!”

Fear rattled Lydia’s mind. She could see herself floating the waters of an unknown ocean for all eternity, never to be found.

The bogey-beast shrieked as it was suddenly crushed by a mound of tufty fur. Lydia pressed herself against the bottle’s glass wall and looked up. A giant gray cat was smirking with the bogey-beast squashed under its paw.

“Nico!”

“Fine fix you’ve gotten yourself into, Lydia. Did this idiot fool you?” Nico trampled the bogey-beast over and over then kicked it through the air, where it crashed into the wall and disappeared. That vanishment was akin to losing consciousness. It would come to in time, but not for a while yet. Lydia was just

relieved to have such a nasty creature gone from her sight.

"I'm here to get you out of there."

"You were watching me being made sport of from the window over there, weren't you?" She had noticed the dangling tail and became irritated when it stayed in that spot refusing to do anything.

Nico ran a paw through his whiskers and straightened his necktie as he tried to think up an excuse. "I was waiting to get my timing right." Said timing must have been when the bogey-beast had shrunk and was easily dealt with.

"Fine, then," Lydia said. Even if Nico had taken his time about it, he had still saved her. "Thank you. I'm surprised you managed to find me."

"The hobgoblin at the professor's house had been keeping an eye on you as thanks for the cookie. It followed you here after the bogey-beast showed up."

"I just knew fairies would be keen on mother's cookies."

"What's happened to your body, then? Where is it?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know where the bogey-beast has taken me either."

Not long after Lydia was trapped in the bottle, several men entered the storehouse. One of those men was Graham Purcell, come to take Doris away. They found the girl desperately trying to wake up another, and though the latter's presence confused them, they thought nothing else of it when they realized that she was the only stranger present. So they tied Doris up and took her away. They left by a small boat from the riverside directly outside the storehouse, leaving nothing but the sound of splashing and the vessel's creaking. From the bottle, Lydia had been watching Purcell peer at her unconscious body.

"Corpse, is it?" one of his underlings asked.

*How frightfully rude!*

"No, looks like she's just sleeping. Ah, but I believe this is the fairy doctor who was with Lord Ashenbert."

"What's a fairy doctor?"

“I’m not entirely certain, but I should think it’s similar to a medium or fortune teller. I’ve heard they possess supernatural powers.”

Lydia had to stop herself from protesting as she continued to watch.

“That reminds me, sir, didn’t you give the Dog Tamer a job the other day? I thought you told him to kidnap the fairy doctor.”

The Dog Tamer? Could he be talking about the man in the park?

“I did, yes, but he got himself killed. I’d been looking for a new contractor at that point, you see. The usual rogues I rely on for these kidnappings lost their nerve upon learning of that capable man the earl keeps.”

“You see girls like this all over the place. Will she really fetch that high of a price?”

“That man pays exorbitant amounts for anyone with interesting abilities. She must have something, else the earl wouldn’t have bothered to hire her. She’ll prove to be a fine catch, I’m sure.”

*So they plan to sell me to somebody?*

Sealed inside the glass bottle, Lydia could do nothing other than panic.

“Limiting ourselves to his bidding of smuggling goods, stolen or otherwise, is too much of a risk for too little reward. Children from working class families aren’t worth much, either. Even the gifted ones we’ve sent so far haven’t been all that, and none of them have pleased him. Hopefully this pair will be able to put us in his good books.”

“What good luck we have, if this girl is who you think she is.”

“According to Doris, Rosalie trapped this girl here out of jealousy. All I need to do is make sure Rosalie keeps her mouth shut, and no one will ever know what happened to the fairy doctor.”

*No! Don’t kidnap me! I’m warning you!*

But Lydia could only watch as her body was carried away.

“I see,” Nico muttered once Lydia had finished, folding his front legs. “So this

Purcell fellow is off to sell you. Who is he, exactly?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, but as she did so, an uncomfortable thought struck her.

Edgar had been sold from this storehouse eight years ago, so Purcell must have been connected to the man who had taken the young boy captive. Quite possibly, he was supplying that man with other slaves aside from Edgar, and now Lydia herself might be in danger of being sold to the Prince.

“What now, Nico?” she lamented.

There came the sound of the main door opening.

“Hush!” Nico picked up the bottle and concealed himself in the shadows.

Figures rolled in together with the thick fog, their footsteps echoing through the building. They ventured deeper, cautiously illuminating their surroundings with the light from their lantern.

“It appears there’s no one here,” Raven said.

“We must have missed them,” replied Edgar.

They must have been here searching for her, Lydia realized, but she couldn’t show herself to them in her current state. She and Nico continued to watch.

“I wonder if Mr. Purcell was here.”

“Look, Raven. A handkerchief.”

The boy picked it up. “It’s embroidered. D.W.”

“Miss Doris Walpole? I wonder if Mr. Purcell locked her up in this storehouse of his too.”

*Wait a moment. They’re speaking Mr. Purcell’s name so naturally...*

Had they already realized that it was he who had taken Doris captive? How long had they known that for? And if they knew, then what was the point of bringing up the Fogman and getting Lydia involved?

“Perhaps, then, Miss Carlton is with Miss Walpole?”

“That is a distinct possibility.” Edgar combed his fingers through his hair in

thought. Its golden hues were conspicuous, even in the gloom. He leaned his slender body, wrapped in an overcoat, against a drab post and muttered grimly, “If they fall into the Prince’s hands it will be too late. We must rescue them from the docks before the ship departs.”

It seemed as though the man Purcell spoke of was indeed the Prince. A heavy stone settled in Lydia’s stomach as it became apparent just how much Edgar knew.

“I shouldn’t have used Lydia as bait.”

*Bait?*

“This was bound to happen, my lord. Regardless of whether Purcell knew about Miss Carlton’s abilities, he would definitely have taken her if she and Miss Walpole were here together.”

“Yes, but he *did* know. He is likely going to be keeping an extra close eye on her now so that he can sell her to the Prince.”

Without thinking, Lydia cried out, “What’s this about bait?! Edgar! Were you planning to let Mr. Purcell kidnap me?!”

“Lydia?”

“Impossible. There’s nowhere here for a person to hide.”

Indeed, the places Edgar was checking could never fit a human being, but it was that which led him to the gray cat with the glass bottle. “Nico? That wasn’t you who spoke just now, was it?”

“What now, Lydia?” Nico muttered, sliding out from the crevice.

“He knows you’re here, so I might as well explain. It looks like he can hear me.”

Nico muttered something about whether Edgar would believe her as he stepped before Edgar on two legs and lifted the bottle overhead.

“I need your explanation first, Edgar! Tell me what you meant by ‘bait’!”

The earl frowned down at the bottle producing Lydia’s voice, blinking several times. “Do you see anything, Raven?” he asked, turning to his servant.

“Yes, my lord.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“I am used to seeing curious things.”

“I am *not* curious!” Lydia fumed.

“If you like, my lord, I can explain what I am seeing inside the bottle.”

“Please do. All I can see is a tiny Lydia.”

“Then I believe we are seeing the same thing.”

“Stop making sport of me, you two!”

“What happened to you, Lydia?” Edgar took the bottle and, with a face that suggested great intrigue, made to uncork it.

“Ah, stop! If you open it, I’ll die!”

“Really? How does that work?”

“Mr. Purcell has taken my body away. If you release my soul away from my body, it will have nowhere to go and vanish.”

Edgar hurriedly withdrew his hand from the cork. “So we need to retrieve your body and return your soul, which is in this bottle, to it?”

Lydia nodded.

“In that case, my lord, we ought to do whatever we can as quickly as we can,” said Raven.

“Indeed. Raven, I would like you to return to the hotel and keep an eye on Purcell. It won’t be long until he is updated on his credit situation. When he finds Miss Rosalie Walpole in that room, he will very likely bring her to the same boat as Lydia and Miss Doris. Then you will know which boat he is using for trafficking.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Miss Rosalie Walpole? What happened to her? Don’t tell me you’ve done something?”

Ignoring Lydia, Edgar continued. “After that, apply pressure. Do whatever you

can to prevent any of that man's ships from leaving port."

Bathed in the light of the parlor's lamp, Lydia stayed morosely silent atop Edgar's table.

"Angry?" The earl shot her a bemused glance from his gorgeous ebony chair, but she just pulled her knees up to her chest and pointedly averted her gaze.

How could she *not* be angry? All this time, Edgar had been using her in a revenge attempt against the man who had handed him to the Prince. He had known both that Purcell was behind Doris's disappearance and that he was likely after Lydia too. And yet the earl had still dangled her in front of the kidnapper as if to tempt him.

Edgar had explained that he had known that Purcell was involved in smuggling and human trafficking. But if his activities were for the benefit of the Prince, then he would recognize a fairy doctor as a high-value target. Their encounter with Purcell in Cremorne Gardens had been a part of the earl's calculations. He had used Rosalie's affections in his plan too, claiming they were "convenient."

In questioning Rosalie, Edgar had learned that Lydia was in the storehouse. It didn't sound as though the ginger girl had given him the information willingly, but when pressed about it, he didn't give a clear answer. From what he said, Lydia pieced together that he had anticipated Purcell selling Rosalie off too, and had possibly left her somewhere rather dangerous. If that was what he *was* willing to tell her, she didn't like to think about the information he was leaving out. He had always treated her with such kindness that Lydia couldn't believe he was just using her. It was appalling, like he saw people as nothing more than objects.

Even when Edgar claimed he wasn't lying or hiding anything, he was still manipulating. Buttering up his target with sweet words was just his method of doing so. This wasn't the first time he had tricked her either, which made Lydia all the more embarrassed by her naivety in giving him just a little of the benefit of the doubt.

"It wasn't my intention to put you in danger. I wasn't about to let them lay a finger on you."

“I don’t want to hear your excuses,” Lydia shot back, rendering him silent. Her empty stomach was pulling her mood even lower. Since her body was unconscious, it had missed its opportunity for supper.

“Are you cold?”

It was only then that Lydia realized she was hunched over and rubbing her shoulders. “Probably. If only I’d been wearing my shawl.”

“Shall I put you by the hearth?”

“I don’t think it would make a difference.”

“Perhaps not.” After a thoughtful pause, Edgar gently picked up the bottle in both hands. “I wonder if it is a universal thing that one’s soul appears as a miniature version of oneself?”

“I wouldn’t know. In my case, I cannot imagine my inner self being any bigger than this. Things may have been different had I been born more beautiful.”

“You are beautiful enough as you are, Lydia.”

“Flattering me won’t still my temper. Oh, *now* what are you doing?!”

Edgar had wrapped his arms around the bottle—and Lydia—to hold it to his chest. “I thought this might warm you up.”

“I thought I told you that it wouldn’t make a difference? My body has probably been left somewhere dark and cold.” As she spoke, Lydia realized that Edgar himself had gone through a similarly frightening experience. At least she didn’t have to go through the loneliness, anxiety, and despair that he had. Just the thought of being trapped by oneself in a dark, unknown location was terrifying enough. She hadn’t been alone long after Rosalie had locked her away, but even then she had been struggling to calm herself, anxious enough that she wanted to cry out.

“Just be patient. You will be freed soon enough.” He sounded earnest, though Lydia couldn’t see his expression. Any emotion was being held at bay, like he was making a heartfelt vow. Perhaps his words were fuelled by a similar determination to the one he had to exact his revenge.

Watching his delicate fingers stroke the glass, Lydia had the sense that he was

touching her directly. She was supposed to be angry at him, but the only image in her head was of him caressing her hair and soothing her like a child. There was little doubt in her mind that he was genuinely working to save her.

Edgar was ruthless when it came to his enemies and he manipulated strangers with deceptive words, but he would undergo great hardships to protect his trusted companions. The problem was that Lydia didn't fit nicely into any of those categories. She was enough of a stranger to be used, but also enough of a companion to be defended. There was precious little she could do about it. The earl's companions were essentially his family. They had been through the same unjustifiable suffering, an experience so dire that it couldn't be sugarcoated. And now Raven was the only one left. When that realization hit, it distressed her more than the fact that Edgar had used her as bait.

"Say, how do you intend to enact your revenge on Mr. Purcell?"

"That's a pertinent question." Edgar did not elaborate; his true answer would have shocked her far too much.

"Is revenge the only option available to you?" she pressed. "Is that the only thing you can think to do for your late friends?"

"What else is there?"

"You requested my assistance in saving the boy who was lost to the fog."

"I..." Edgar hesitated. "I may have gotten a tad emotional there. Fairy doctor or not, there is no rescuing the dead."

"I know that. But *you* are not dead. The boy you spoke of was no mere acquaintance, was he? Raven told me there were several of them: boys who went through the same thing. You were recounting your own experiences too, weren't you?"

"I wonder." His offhand response was tinged with just a little frustration, as though it disgusted him that he was the only survivor.



“There is no boy that needs saving. *You* are the one who needs help,” Lydia said, to no response. “You are still lost in the fog, and that is why you cannot accept the loss of your companions. I cannot see how enacting your revenge upon Mr. Purcell will change any of that.”

Edgar sighed quietly, though she didn’t know which emotion elicited it. “Would you consider staying this size? I could keep you by my side constantly then.”

“No, thank you! I shall get hungry, and cold, and God knows what will happen should I fall ill!” she protested; she could well imagine him trying to keep her as some sort of pet.

“That was in jest. I would much rather hold your real body rather than have to embrace you through a cold glass bottle. I want nothing more in this moment than to feel you and your warmth. Though you would doubtlessly strike me and run away should I try, hence why I don’t mind having you this small, either.”

She certainly would. Having said that, there was a part of her that didn’t mind being small and trapped in a bottle like this for the time being. The alternative was festering over Edgar’s using her as bait while being totally separated from him, and losing the opportunity to connect with his despair and sadness directly.

As he held the bottle to his chest, Lydia had the sense that he was somehow expressing the tears he could not shed. It was as though he were grieving in the stillness of his heart for the man who saw revenge as his only resource for his lost friends. She had always thought him arrogant, someone who would die before showing any weakness. That, when he seemed down, it was all part of a scheme to manipulate her. Even now, she couldn’t be sure what he was really thinking. And yet she felt glad that she was close enough to speak to him, even as he seemed to yearn for tears.

Perhaps it was all because Raven’s words had stuck with her. He had said that Edgar was capable only of standing alone without relying on anybody else. Maybe it was because Lydia wasn’t involved in his past that he was able to show her glimpses of the sorrow and weakness that he had locked up so he could fight. She had the sense that he was begging her not to hate him for those

hidden parts.

She couldn’t bring herself to hate him, even after he had used her as bait and put her in danger. Perhaps she was too soft. And yet she was genuinely happy. Because it seemed that Edgar found solace in her being with him. That he needed her to be there, even though she had slipped up in allowing the bogey-beast to trap her in a bottle. She pressed her cheek against the glass that was closest to his shirt, something she would never be able to do while in possession of her body. Though physically impossible, she swore she could feel his warmth through it.

It seemed that even a soul separated from its body could fall asleep. When Lydia awoke, the morning sun was streaming in through the glass around her. Somehow, the bottle had ended up on a cushion and was wrapped in a blanket. It was a considerate act but altogether meaningless, and he should have known as much. Ridiculous as it was, it warmed her heart—until she tried to sit up in her bottle and noticed that something was amiss: her body was as heavy as lead. It shouldn't have had any weight at all, but it took everything she had to sit up, and she almost didn't manage it. She braced herself against the glass wall in an attempt to endure the headache and dizziness that swept over her.

All of a sudden, she was anxious she might vanish into thin air. Souls were delicate things by themselves, and she feared that something may have been happening to hers. She looked around the room, but could see nobody.

"Edgar? Where are you?"

"Relying on *him* now, are we?" The face of a gray cat appeared in her vision.

"Nico!"

Last night, he had returned to the Carlton residence and skillfully explained to her father that Lydia had been dragged to an acquaintance's party, drunk herself into a stupor, and ended up staying the night. She hadn't wanted Carlton to worry, nor could she allow him to see her in this condition.

"Though I suppose not even our flirtatious earl could lay a finger on you when your body is in a completely different place," Nico remarked.

"You ought not to say such things. I was calling for him because I'm not feeling well and wasn't sure—"

"What? That isn't a good sign." Nico folded his front legs with a frown.

"What isn't a good sign?" Edgar stepped into the room. Noticing how haggard Lydia looked at the bottom of the bottle, he drew his anxious face closer to it. "What's the matter, Lydia?"

Nico answered in her stead. "A human cannot live as a soul without a body. Though the bottle acts as a barrier, a soul without a vessel gradually loses its lifeforce."

“What? Then we must hurry.” Panicked as he was, it seemed Edgar was unaware that he was talking to Nico.

“Do you know where that dastardly Purcell has her body?”

“Although we missed our opportunity to see him put her on it, we have a good idea of the ship she is on. Unfortunately, his shipping company is jointly owned by the Walpole barony, so we have no means by which to seize the boat.”

“Sorry, but I’ve better things to do with my time than study the intricacies of human society. If you would be so kind as to sum up the problem for me...”

“What I mean to say is that we cannot simply have the ship stopped or request an investigation of it.”

Nico gawked at him. “Aren’t you a former thief? Why not just arm yourself and board the thing?”

“Despite what you may think, I have never stooped to such crude methods.”

“To think thieves these days had standards!”

“Excuse me.” Lydia interrupted them. “But I’m sure that if we were to inform the police of Mr. Purcell’s misdeeds, something could be done.”

Edgar countered that it would take too much time. Lydia didn’t know how long she could hang on for, but she didn’t think it would be more than a day. Purcell was a man of high standing, and it would require concrete evidence to bring him down. The police would likely be in no hurry to investigate either.

“Give us a solution that’s quick, then,” Nico demanded.

It didn’t take Edgar long to come up with an answer. “I suppose all we really have is my last resort.”

“That sounds suitably dramatic,” the cat muttered.

“It will only become apparent once we make a start whether it will work or not. And it will take a lot of thinking as we go.” Edgar called his butler to inform him that he was going out. He then handed Tompkins a hastily written note. “I’d also like you to send a message to Raven and have him come here.”

Lydia inhaled sharply as Edgar slid a pistol inside his frock coat. She was already struggling to draw breath, and the thought that her condition was pushing him to do something reckless only made it worse. Was he used to this? she wondered. Preparing to take someone's life in exchange for the greater good, and to shoulder that responsibility alone?

"Don't lose hope, Lydia. I promise I *will* save you."

Like a knight setting forth for battle, he took up the bottle in his hand and marched. His ash mauve eyes blazed with such an intense light that they looked more red than violet. Though he sounded confident, there was no guarantee that he could ensure the best possible outcome. He had already lost countless companions. How many times had he made the same promise and failed to keep it? And yet he made it regardless, compelled by his unshakeable determination to lead the charge.

Edgar's eyes reflected the beauty of his soul, and for a split second Lydia seemed to catch a glimpse of it. It was something altogether different from the charm that drove girls wild, the flawless looks, and the speechcraft. It was a power dwelling in the very depths of his heart that seemed to draw her in. He was a natural aristocrat. A ruthless villain. A shallow philanderer. A charismatic leader.

*Who are you really? Which one is the real Edgar Ashenbert? I haven't the faintest idea. So why are you working so hard for me?*

"Is there even the slightest chance of this going well?" Lydia asked once they were in the carriage, fighting through her shortness of breath.

"It's more than slight," Edgar answered at once.

"Liar..."

"You have nothing to worry about. Just leave it to me."

Another falsehood. He couldn't guarantee anything, but he refused to cause his companion anxiety.

"You've said such things in the past only for everything to go to pot, haven't you?"

“You’re losing heart, aren’t you, Lydia?”

“I...” she began, but had to restart. “I don’t trust you to the extent that leaving everything to you will put me at ease. Even if you do save me, don’t expect me to throw myself to my knees in gratitude. It is partly your fault that I have ended up this way.”

“It sounds as though you think me wretched enough not to lift a finger while you die a slow death.”

“I don’t know *what* you are. I haven’t the slightest clue about you. I’m not one of your companions, so I daresay you’d be willing to abandon me should it come to it. As you should. I don’t want... I mean, I would *much* rather that than to see you fail, regret, and suffer. I don’t want your half-hearted pity, not after you used me. I don’t want to become your future pain. I’m not interested in taking on such a heavy burden.”

Edgar cocked his head at first, seeming somewhat troubled by her declaration, but then he let out a quiet chuckle. “Thank you, Lydia. That makes me feel slightly better.”

“It shouldn’t. What I mean to say is that I despise you!” she lied.

Her actual intention was to tell him not to take on all the responsibility by himself. She had struggled to put it into words, but Edgar seemed to understand all the same.

“Despite what you say, I cannot afford to part with you. It is because we are together that the fairies of fortune will bless us. Don’t you think so?”

Lydia found it hard to agree. She could list countless examples of bad luck resulting from her involvement with Edgar. If there was one stroke of fortune she could name, it was perhaps that she had finally found someone who understood the widely spurned profession of fairy doctor.

“So I ask that you not abandon me either, Lydia. Let us fight together as long as we are able.”

*What a curious man.* It was as if he didn’t understand that she despaired of the way he did things. But although his using her as bait had *angered* her, it hadn’t hurt her in the slightest.

Eventually the carriage approached the street on which Purcell had his office. Edgar had them stop a short distance away, after which he waited for Raven. The two discussed something outside the carriage before the earl returned briefly to pick up Lydia's bottle. As he made his way down the street, he was followed by Nico. Upon entering the office, Edgar requested to speak with the person in charge and was seen by a man claiming to be the managing director.

"The business I have does not concern you," the earl said. "I wish to speak to Mr. Purcell."

"I am responsible for the running of this office. I shall be happy to hear what you have to say."

"Do you take me for a fool due to my age?" Edgar cast an intimidating glare down at the plump middle-aged man, painting the spitting image of an entitled noble.

"Perish the thought, sir. It is just that Mr. Purcell rarely has the opportunity to visit. Please accept my apologies, Mr...."

"You may tell him that Lord Ashenbert called."

"Ah! Forgive me, my lord."

"I suggest that he makes haste, else he may find he regrets it."

"Meaning...what exactly, my lord?"

"Meaning that I am well aware of the goods you trade in."

Flustered, the man showed Edgar to a separate room. Purcell showed up with little delay; the middle-aged man had been lying when he had claimed the owner was not here.

Edgar had bought up every last scrap of Purcell's debt to banks, casinos, and so forth. Everything he owed was overdue, and the man was now at risk of losing his entire fortune to his new creditor. However, Edgar had several false identities, so Purcell was unable to immediately grasp who was pursuing him and why. Nevertheless, he should have already been making contingencies to protect his assets, and having deduced that he would use this shipping company

as a front, Edgar had foreseen that its owner would come straight here.

“Good evening, my lord. To what do I owe the pleasure?” Purcell’s exhaustion as he came into the reception room was striking, despite what he did to hide it.

“There is much I would like to discuss with you, but I’m rather in a hurry, so you’ll have to forgive me for getting straight to the point. I’m here to ask for the return of my fairy doctor.” Edgar’s haughty request was marked by bluntness. Anxious, Lydia did her best to pay attention to the words they exchanged, but her fatigue was growing ever heavier. It was all she could do to put together a picture of the current situation, and she lacked the strength to think one way or another about it. Not that it mattered, as she had already planned to let Edgar handle it.

“I’m afraid I don’t quite follow. Trafficking, you say? These are serious allegations indeed, but you’ll find no basis for them. I wonder, has my niece done something to offend you?”

“I am here strictly to discuss business. Have I failed in piquing your interest?”

Edgar remained unmoved, sitting with one leg crossed over the other as though the place belonged to him. Purcell stayed standing. He was clearly eager to dismiss the other man, who was quite happy to ignore this fact.

“I am willing to pay,” Edgar continued.

“For what, pray tell?”

“Why, for my fairy doctor, of course.”

“As I said, I don’t follow. You *are* speaking about the fairy doctor under your lordship’s employ, yes? Even so, this talk of trafficking... You think I have sold her off? You understand that would be a crime?”

“I am in a hurry,” Edgar reiterated. “Hence why I am willing to strike a deal. Whatever accusations you feel I am making, and whether or not you have broken any laws, is entirely irrelevant. If a prize jewel of mine had been stolen, and the thief attempted to make a profit from selling it, I would certainly offer a suitable amount for the return of said jewel.”

“An intriguing analogy indeed, but unfortunately I wouldn’t know of any

‘jewel.’” Purcell needed a great deal of money as soon as possible and, while still cautious, he had changed his tune to something slightly less dismissive of Edgar’s proposal.

“You do not have it, then. Regardless, Mr. Purcell, I know that you have several acquaintances who deal in gemstones. I would be most grateful if you would act as an intermediary on my behalf.”

“Hmm...” Purcell made a great show of considering Edgar’s request. “I have, in my time, arranged for the delivery of precious rarities to close friends of mine. But it is no simple matter and is often risky. And even when one locates what one is looking for, one will find it is only available at an outrageous price.”

“I see.” Edgar bade him continue.

“The first step is to deal with a group whose activities fall foul of the law, and therefore it is imperative that you do not speak of this to anyone,” said the criminal.

“I quite understand. The company they keep must be influential indeed, and nothing good would come of me voicing any legal concerns. That is why I am asking to deal.”

“In that case, please pardon my rudeness, but I am going to have to ask you to make a payment, my lord.”

Not only was Purcell a kidnapper, but he greatly overcharged people for his “services.” It boiled Lydia’s blood to the extent that she forgot her pain, but unfortunately she didn’t have the strength to raise an objection.

“How much?” Edgar asked.

The amount Purcell came back with was beyond eye-watering. At the very least, she couldn’t imagine spending that much money in an entire lifetime, even one of excess extravagance.

“Very well. I shall pay on the condition that you lead me to Lydia posthaste.”

*He would really pay that much for me? I could never pay it back, even if I lived to be a hundred!*

“I’m afraid that would be rather difficult. Might I ask you to wait here

instead?”

“I cannot waste a single moment. I shan’t be able to pay a penny if I wait here and it transpires that we dawdled for too long.”

“What is the reason for your haste?”

“Lydia is sick. I believe she is unconscious, but I fear for the worst if she is left for much longer.”

“I see. Then, what if I were to show you to her immediately, but we find that it is already too late?”

Despite her anxieties, the men sounded almost absurdly unconcerned as they continued their negotiations.

“You would have done everything in your power. I would not hold it against you, and I would pay,” Edgar replied. His response ensured that he would be able to reach Lydia’s body as quickly as possible and return her soul to it.

Purcell should have been unwilling to guide Edgar to where he was hiding her because it meant putting his neck on the line. But by now his only choice was to agree if he wanted to complete this deal. He needed money badly and was weighing up that need against the risk of accepting Edgar’s conditions. In the end, he yielded.

Lydia’s heart sank as she listened to the earl scratch out his signature with a feather quill. She couldn’t understand why he would go to such lengths for her, and it felt like the answer was slipping farther and farther away from her. Even without her, and even now, he ought to be able to find another fairy doctor willing to work for him if he cast a net over the entire United Kingdom. His money would be better spent hiring them, and the danger would prove much less. She wasn’t even sure a fairy doctor was required at the earldom in the first place.

“I can show you where she is, my lord, but only you. Please ask your attendant to wait here.”

*He can’t even take Raven along?* Lydia started to panic as she realized the deal was even more dangerous than she had thought. When Purcell had Edgar alone, there was nothing stopping him from doing anything he wanted to the

earl.

“Very well. There is no time to lose.” Edgar readily agreed to the request, cradling Lydia’s bottle like a treasure.

“Please leave any weapons here.”

Obediently, the younger man pulled the pistol out from the inside of his frock coat and laid it on the table.

“What is that bottle, if I might ask?”

“Nothing. It’s empty,” Edgar responded with a vague smile. Purcell shot him a bemused look, but didn’t seem to feel the need to ask any more questions. Apparently, he couldn’t see Lydia.

Edgar was a curious sort. He operated mostly by logic and couldn’t see fairies, and yet he accepted the spirits that dwelled within Raven and never once doubted Lydia’s abilities. He didn’t believe that Nico could speak, but he understood the words that came from the fairy’s mouth. And though he could be flippant in his thoughtlessness toward his fairy doctor, sometimes he seemed to understand her better than anyone. She was adamant that she wasn’t about to die, and he seemed just as adamant that he wouldn’t let her.

When in the presence of a girl, Edgar donned the kindly mask of a gentleman. Perhaps what he was doing now was a part of that act. Lydia knew it wasn’t real—he had tried to use her as bait, after all—and yet she still found herself feeling like a princess defended by a knight. Deluded as she was, she did her best to keep hold of her consciousness for his sake. She feared that passing out would mean the dispersion of her soul. It might have been a conceited thought, but she didn’t want to add to Edgar’s suffering by dying on him.

The two men boarded the carriage while Raven saw them off. Lydia could feel Nico’s presence beside them as Edgar murmured to her, “Not long now.”

# The Earl’s Ruthless Revenge

The port acted as a gateway to the British Empire. It attracted goods and people from all around the world, and was crowded with ships going both ways along the River Thames. Under the still clouds, the black shadow of Greater London was like a demon emerging from the misty smog; a creature endlessly consuming the great quantities of wealth that flowed in from the colonies. As they passed the storehouses, carriages, and freight of the Docklands, Lydia found herself vaguely imagining the city as a giant Fogman, swallowing up everything that entered the clouds.

Before long, the carriage stopped beside a pier. From there, the men boarded a ship, which went on to weave its way between countless anchored vessels as it proceeded along the river.

Their final destination was a large sailing boat. They were escorted inside a ring of muscular mariners who showered them with hostile looks, and Lydia had the sense they had wandered into a den of hungry wolves. Edgar, however, remained perfectly composed. In fact, the wolves seemed to shrink back as they met his disgruntled gaze, as though they saw a lion lurking within his slender frame. It was a threat that lay at an instinctual level rather than that of a sagacious nobleman silencing an upper-class man like Purcell. Lydia started to grow anxious once more. This was the man attempting to save her, yet he was also the man who hid the other facets of himself away from her. Even then, she doubted she could hate his more dangerous side, and she felt she would forgive him should this all go to pot. This part of him made her more keenly aware of the tragedy that had befallen him.

Lydia’s mind came upon another vague realization then. There was yet another unseen side to Edgar that was currently scheming. He had marched directly into enemy territory in order to save her, but that alone wouldn’t satisfy him. He was a man who made use of every tool at his disposal, no matter the severity of the situation. Lydia had resigned herself to letting him do whatever he wanted. It might infuriate her, but it would never be enough to make her hate him.

Led by some men who seemed more like bodyguards than sailors, Purcell descended a flight of poorly lit stairs and proceeded deeper down a hallway of cabins. He stopped in front of a heavily-guarded door, which he unlocked, then entered with Edgar alone.

“Where is my jewel?” Edgar asked.

Exhausted as she was, Lydia’s face flushed as he kept up the awkward comparison.

“On the other side of that door.” Purcell pointed farther into the room.

Lydia had thought she would be in a decrepit warehouse of some kind, so it was a surprise to see she had been given a room that was relatively civilized.

Edgar approached the door and tried to open it. “The key?” He turned around cautiously, as though sensing that something was amiss behind him. Lydia only caught a glimpse of the pistol that Purcell was pointing at him. “Might I trouble you for an explanation, Mr. Purcell?” the earl asked, sounding deliberately confused, as though he had foreseen this.

“I am disappointed that you do not hold me in higher regard, my lord. I know it is you who is attempting to snatch away my fortune, despite your aliases.”

“Oh? Have you any basis for your assumptions?”

“Rosalie told me that you seized my hotel and have been investigating me besides. What are you scheming?”

“Rosalie? Ah, yes. I suppose she asked for your assistance, so you stowed her aboard your slave ship. Of course, it was always your intention to blame her for the misappropriation of the Walpole fortune and make it seem as though she had absconded with a man to whom she was providing that money.”

Lydia could hardly believe that anyone could do that to the nieces who had been entrusted to him, and all for the sake of money. Doris was probably locked away in the darkness as they spoke, crying for the umpteenth time. Even the tougher Rosalie must have been terrified. But there was nothing Lydia could do about it. It was taking all her strength to endure the anxiety of her tiny form ebbing away and make sure she was still breathing.

“It would seem you know too much, my lord. Perhaps I ought to have you drowned at the bottom of the Atlantic. No one shall ever find your body there.” Purcell placed his finger on the trigger.

“Forgive me, Lydia.” Edgar tossed the bottle through the air before she had time to work out what he was apologizing for.

It was one thing to have given him permission to abandon her, but she hadn’t expected *this*. She braced herself to crash into the wall, but instead landed in a mound of bushy fur.

“Nico...”

The sound of a gunshot paralyzed her before she could feel relief. A lamp shattered, and a split second later, Edgar was grappling with Purcell and trying to snatch the pistol away from him. Their struggle triggered another bullet from the weapon.

Hearing the commotion, the men from outside flooded into the room, and Nico slipped under the desk with the bottle in his paws.

“Edgar’s going to die!” Lydia cried.

“And what am I supposed to do about it?”

“Well...*something*...”

One of the muscular men tried to tear Edgar away from Purcell by wrapping a thick arm around his neck—before suddenly slumping backward onto the floor. A shadow slid past Lydia and Nico’s hiding place. The pistol was knocked from Purcell’s hand by a flying hatchet. The shadow—Raven—went on to attack the other men.

The boy was half the size of the brawny bodyguards, but he only had to skim them to have them collapse to the floor. He took care of them so quickly that they didn’t have time to make a single sound.

Purcell scooped up the knife from one of his underlings, then turned to Edgar, who was getting back on his feet.

“My lord!” While Raven was distracted by the threat, another man flew at his back. A swift roundhouse kick from the boy sent his massive body crashing

through the door at the room's far end.

"Nico, find Lydia! Quickly!" Edgar called, and the cat dove through the broken door.

They found Lydia's body lying on a simple bed. When Nico rushed up beside it and uncorked the bottle, she promptly lost consciousness.

It was likely only a matter of seconds before Lydia's soul rejoined her body. Everything around her was silent as she slowly opened her eyes.

She sat up. It felt a little strange for her body to be listening to her instructions at last. Broken objects littered the floor, as did the unmoving forms of the guards. There were just three men left standing. Raven had a pistol pressed into Purcell's back, while Edgar had him by the collar. He let go of his foe when he noticed that Lydia was awake.

"Are you back with us, Lydia?" The way he smiled at her so openly, without concern for his disheveled hair, cast her with a strange emotion that was partly painful.

Her insides squirming, she automatically turned her gaze away from him. She was relieved when she found Nico sitting on her lap. She picked the fairy cat up in her arms. "Thank you, Nico."

"What's all this? It's okay, Lydia; just put me down. You'll mess up my fur." Nico hated being touched like a cat, just as any fine gentleman would be averse to being stroked like a pet. Lydia knew this, but, unsure how to let go of him, she ended up holding on to her floundering companion.

"Don't I deserve to be embraced for all I've done?" Disgruntled, Edgar ran a hand through his golden locks.

She supposed that was what she had wanted to do just a moment ago, but embarrassment was keeping her indecisive. "To do so would be far too dangerous." She still couldn't trust all that Raven had said about Edgar, and at the moment she likely wouldn't have the strength to strike the earl if she needed to. Besides, if his servant had meant it all and Edgar was just making an empty, flirtatious remark, then he might not seriously consider her a romantic

interest at all. Not that it mattered to her.

*My thoughts are all over the place...*

"I appreciate your rescuing me, regardless. Thank you."

Edgar brought his face closer to peer at her. "Your cheeks are a little flushed. Are you unwell?"

"I'm fine!" Lydia lifted Nico up between them to defend herself against his gaze. Locking eyes with Edgar, the fairy cat let out a grumpy mewl.

With a small sigh, the earl moved away from them and turned back to Purcell.

"Don't think you'll be getting away with this!" the rogue spat.

Edgar ignored him. "How is the outside of the boat, Raven?"

"I removed the ladder. Though the escaped sailors may call for backup, it will certainly take time for any to appear. I have tossed the majority of men on the boat overboard." As he spoke, he handed a document to Edgar, who tore up and discarded it. Likely, it was the contract he had signed earlier, and Raven had filched it from Purcell's office.

"Our contract no longer exists. This seems like an excellent opportunity to speak calmly and at length, Mr. Purcell."

"About what exactly?"

"Your hidden assets."

Even from where she sat a short distance away, Lydia clearly saw the blood drain from Purcell's face.

"Mr. Purcell, you have claimed as your own several items among the stolen and smuggled goods that you have dealt in. They are currently hidden in a cellar belonging to a noblewoman with whom you are friendly. You had her believe that her underground store was suited to keeping rare wines, hence why she let you use it at your leisure."

"Balderdash."

"It does not inconvenience me in the least. The dear lady was herself indebted to the extent that she was forced to sell her estate, and I purchased it.

She informed me that the cheap wine in the cellar belonged to you, so it has been relocated, but aside from that, the house and everything in it has now come into my possession. That goes, too, for the items found in the cellar's hidden room—the one built behind the shelf without her knowledge. There is no proof of whom they belong to, but I just thought you ought to know."

The oppressive tension between the men had Lydia holding tight to Nico, and the fairy cat completely stilled.

"Those hidden goods were insurance for you, weren't they? Designed to protect you from your extravagant spending and squandering of the Walpole fortune. It was an ill-thought-out backup plan, as our dear lady had a similar need to sell her estate. You cannot treat a lover without the respect she deserves simply because you have grown tired of her. That is what leads to situations such as this, where she may decide to sell her house without so much as consulting you."

Edgar shot Purcell a devilish smile. This was a side to him that Lydia barely knew.

"I noticed you attempted to re-enter that cellar, confident that no one knew about those hidden assets, only to find that the wall concealing your secret room had been sealed up. You were panicking about how to dig it out when you learned that your mishandling of Miss Doris Walpole's fortune had been discovered. If you would like to correct anything that I have said, be my guest."

"What do you want?" Even Purcell was forced to yield in the face of Edgar's flawlessly-executed scheme.

"Your destruction."

"So, you plan to kill me?"

"No need." Edgar pressed the end of his cane into Purcell's chest. "The South African diamond that has been carefully hidden, and those gold bars, engraved so as to prevent their channel into the black market—the Prince oversaw the trade of both of those items. I wonder if you know how much he *loathes* betrayal? I cannot see you getting off scot-free once he learns of your thefts."

"You... You can't know the *Prince*! No, please. My lord, don't tell him

anything! Name your price! I'll give you everything I own!"

"My price is your destruction, as I believe I have said. Perhaps I ought to have you packed up and sent to him along with one of those gold bars. Just imagine the look on his face when he realizes it is a gift from yours truly. I do not doubt that he would take his anger out on you."

Such an act would likely be a declaration of war. Edgar's revenge on Purcell would merely be the first shot he fired at the man against whom he sought an even greater vengeance. A shiver raced down Lydia's spine.

"Who... Who *are* you?" Purcell demanded.

"I believe you already know the answer to that."

"It cannot be... You were never an earl!"

"Would you perhaps recall my true name, then? I remember when we met eight years ago, Mr. Purcell, and you proclaimed me a dying waif with a smile. I swore to myself that I would never forget your face, but unfortunately my vision was too blurred to get a good look at it."

Purcell's eyes widened. His knees were shaking. "No... Impossible! Are you..."

Perhaps he had uttered Edgar's true name after that, but it was so faint that Lydia didn't hear it.



“The Prince does not like it when his possessions are treated without due care. I am sure you have familiarized yourself with that fact, given how Lydia was laid down so carefully. I heard that you suffered quite the punishment when the Prince found I had arrived in such poor condition.”

Purcell suddenly screamed and lunged at Edgar. The earl struck him with a knee, and then again with his cane when he staggered.

Lydia let out a quiet cry and looked away. Though Edgar made no move to inflict further pain, the chilling absence of sympathy in his eyes said that he would not yield to any pleas or excuses. It would have been *less* terrifying if he had allowed his fury to take over. That freezing glare stayed on the struggling Purcell until Raven’s suppression forced him unconscious.

Edgar’s unrestrained hatred pierced right through Purcell to reach the Prince beyond. But, no matter the extent of his loathing or the severity of his revenge, those he had lost would never return. He would not find salvation. Though he had escaped the Prince’s clutches and earned his freedom, perhaps he was just running headfirst into another war. Alone, this time. The thought was too much to bear.

Edgar sighed and turned back to Lydia, shelving his ruthless side and returning to his gentlemanly self. “Forgive me, Lydia. That can’t have been a pleasant sight.” He walked toward her and offered her a hand to leave. She stood up by herself and stared up at him.

“Are you really going to pack him up into a box?”

“You would be better off not knowing, seeing as you are an innocent party.” A tiny, sad crease appeared between his brows.

Indeed, she was not one of his companions. He had worked to save her as though he treasured her as one, but she had no involvement in his revenge, and that mustn’t change at this point. It didn’t mean that she was going to let him do as he pleased, however.

“Why did you hire me as your fairy doctor, Edgar? Was it not to offer a lending hand to the *changed* you?”

“Let us discuss this later. We ought to make haste lest his henchmen find us

here."

"Really? Then we ought to seek out the Miss Walpoles at once and rescue them. Would they be on this ship too?"

"What obligation have we to save them?"

She must have misheard him. "Excuse me?"

"It would take too much time, and this vessel isn't going anywhere regardless. It will be searched in due time."

What did he mean by "in due time"? In days? Weeks? Who was to say the girls wouldn't have starved by then?

"But we *know* they've been captured. We cannot feign ignorance and abandon them..." Lydia suddenly realized the reason for Edgar's response. Eight years ago, the girls had done just that to *him*. "Do you resent them for stealing the Fairy's Egg from you and refusing to save you?"

There was a hint of discomfort in his eyes. "I can't say I remember all that clearly."

"Miss Rosalie Walpole told me that, eight years ago, she came across a boy confined in the storehouse along the river. Thinking him a thief, she took his agate from him and kept it. You were that boy, weren't you? The Miss Walpoles wandered into the storehouse where Mr. Purcell was keeping you to deliver to the Prince." She interpreted Edgar's long sigh not as one that lamented his past, but one that despaired over her meddling.

"Suppose that's true, why should I resent them? It is only natural that girls like them should have left a boy so covered in filth. Getting involved would have brought them no benefit, nor was he their responsibility. Likewise, I am sorry to disappoint you, but what their uncle has chosen to do to them is not my busi—"

Before he could finish, Lydia had swung her palm at him, creating a satisfying *smack* that resounded through the room.

"Heavens," Nico muttered, alerting her to what she had just done. But striking Edgar hadn't been enough to clear up the anxiety in her chest.

"You are *despicable*! You would take advantage of Miss Rosalie Walpole's

feelings and draw her in with encouraging words so you can use her, only to abandon her when she is no longer required? You *do* resent her! You really do wish that she had saved you all those years ago! Even if you weren't their responsibility, or getting involved would only have caused them trouble, if somebody had saved you then, you wouldn't know the suffering that you do now..."

She may have been incensed by his cruelty, but it still pained her when she thought of the cause of all his hopelessness. She let her emotions overflow, not even sure herself of the point she was trying to make.

"*I'm* going to save them in your place! It's human nature to want to help others, regardless of the benefits. Did you only try to save me because it was in your interests? That was not the impression I had, and I would dearly like to believe it is not so, which is why I am going in search of the Miss Walpoles!"

Lydia spun around as if to get Edgar out of her sight as quickly as possible. "Come, Nico!"

Despite looking as though he would rather stay, Nico leaped off the bed and followed her without bothering to drop to all four paws.

“Did you understand any of that, Raven?” Edgar murmured as he stared at the doorway through which Lydia and Nico had disappeared a short while ago. He had been left completely dumbfounded.

“Miss Carlton’s logic eluded me, but I do believe that she has gone out for your sake, my lord.”

“I thought as much.” He brought his hand up to his cheek. It burned more than it stung. Enough to make him think it may have been a passionate expression of love. Neither her words nor her actions had been expected, and he struggled to understand the reasoning behind either. One thing was certain: Lydia had pushed him onto an unplanned path. She had thrown a spanner in the works of his meticulous plan but, in doing so, opened up a new possibility. He wouldn’t be where he was had she not done that once before. And now she was doing it again.

“My lord,” Raven called.

Edgar had been halfway to leaving the room. “I cannot allow Lydia to wander the ship alone. Some of Purcell’s men may still be lurking about.”

“Speaking of Purcell...” Raven gestured to the unconscious man on the floor.

“Leave him be.”

Wherever Lydia was leading him, Edgar had the sense that he would find something far more precious than his revenge at their destination. Something she could see with those unusual-colored eyes that he could not.

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Lydia walked around the deserted ship. The scattering of areas Raven had passed through were marked by scenes reminiscent of a storm’s aftermath. Rather than evidence of violence, they seemed closer to evidence of his searching for Edgar. Anything that could be used as a door bore ax marks, a sign that the sailors had fled instead of trying to stop the boy. Lydia could easily picture him causing all this chaos with that impassive expression of his. He really was a living, breathing weapon.

Though Lydia was exploring the ship as thoroughly as she could, she was no

closer to locating the Walpole cousins.

“Do you sense anything, Nico?”

“What am I *supposed* to be sensing?”

“Smells, for example.”

“I’m not a dog.”

Just then, a girl’s scream reached their ears.

“This way!” She broke into a run, and Nico chased after her.

“Keep your wits about you! I doubt she screamed at nothing.”

Heeding her companion’s warning and taking care not to draw attention to herself, Lydia hurried in the direction of the scream. She halted at a turn in the hallway, where she heard the close sounds of a scuffle, and peered around the wall. That bright orange hair was obvious, even in the gloom.

A plump man had flung Rosalie over his shoulder and was taking her away.

“That’s the managing director from Mr. Purcell’s office,” Lydia whispered.

Nico hummed thoughtfully. “Raven’s shenanigans must have pushed them to move the girls elsewhere. What now, Lydia?” By the time he turned to look at her, she was already gripping a mop.

“Come on, Nico.”

“What?! Stop that! Are you stupid? That’s completely reck—”

She had already flung herself at the man. Aiming at the square of his back, she swung the mop handle down. He let out a cry and stumbled, letting go of Rosalie in the process.

“Filthy shrew!” It barely took any time at all for the angry man to snatch the mop from Lydia. He leaned forward to try to grab her.

At that moment, Rosalie seized his legs. Once he had lost his balance and fallen face-first to the floor, she bit him, then quickly retrieved the mop and started whacking him with it again. While trying to crawl away, the man ended up tumbling down the nearby stairs to the bilge.

“Close the hatch! Quickly!” Lydia shouted, pointing to the hatch in the floor, and the two girls rushed to lift up the wooden boards that would shut off the stairs, bringing them down with a crash. Once the latch was in place, they had nothing to fear from the trapped man no matter how much he shouted.

Lydia and Rosalie hurried away and found a quiet place where they could catch their breath. Finally able to face each other, they exchanged a smile.

“Were you confined in the bilge, Miss Walpole?”

“Yes, until that man burst in and tried to take me somewhere.” As though suddenly remembering what she had done to Lydia, Rosalie took an anxious step back. “What are you doing here, anyway? Lord...Ashenbert called to ask me where you were. Did he perhaps rescue you?”

“Well, yes, he did, but I’m here to rescue you now.”

Rosalie’s face flashed with anger and she turned her eyes away. “You have to be lying. You wouldn’t come to rescue me after what I did to you.”

“Yes, it was rather awful.”

“Lord Ashenbert nearly killed me because of it!”

“I’m sorry?”

“I am speaking the truth! He is an awful man! He smiled so sweetly the entire time, as though he is *used* to threatening people.”

The fact that Lydia could well believe it was a little disheartening. She would have liked to think that Edgar wouldn’t have actually killed Rosalie, but that would only be because it wasn’t in his interests to do so.

“He *is* awful, isn’t he? He has deceived me time and time again.”

“What, but aren’t you on his side? Are you truly here to rescue me or do you desire to enact some sort of revenge upon me?”

“Not at all. Miss Walpole, do you know what it is like to be locked up and afraid?”

Her shoulders trembling slightly, Rosalie looked up with a frightened gaze. “I do now. I thought it was my just deserts that I found myself here.”

“If you truly feel that way, I would like to ask that you believe me. I know precisely what it feels like, which is why I wanted to rescue you.” Lydia smiled at the other girl and offered her a hand. “Come. We must search for your cousin posthaste, then leave this ship as soon as possible. Else those scoundrels may return.”

Rosalie didn’t take her hand, perhaps because she still didn’t fully trust Lydia, but she did follow the fairy doctor down the passageway. She must have been anxious about Doris.

“Is she on this ship as well?”

“I believe so. She was confined in the same storehouse as I, so Mr. Purcell should have brought us aboard the ship together.”

Rosalie’s eyes widened upon hearing that Doris had been in the storehouse. She seemed less surprised that Purcell was the culprit, which was no wonder given what had happened to her.

“I had no idea that my dear uncle had Doris locked away. He’s family; I trusted him. And yet he would do such an abhorrent thing all to claim her fortune.” She stopped in her tracks, uneasy. “I cannot face her. I have been so awful to her, and I wish I had never told her that I wanted her to disappear. I thought she was recuperating in the countryside; I never imagined that something like *this* was happening. I never once thought to send her a letter, instead becoming irritated when she never sent *me* any correspondence.”

“Miss Doris wasn’t angry with you. If you wish to make things up to her, you need only to apologize.”

“Apologize?” Rosalie sounded utterly perplexed. “I have never once apologized in my life. Doing so would mean that I have failed in some way.”

“I don’t think—”

“Doris is at fault for keeping secrets. If only she had told me about our uncle’s misdeeds, none of this would have happened.”

“But you believe you have wronged her, don’t you?”

“Still, I cannot stand the thought of apologizing. I have protected Doris ever

since we lost our parents in an accident. I have been there for every one of her tears, and there were many. No one may be as close to her as I am. To apologize would be to say that I am an unpleasant person, and then she would only decide to go away from me."

"You are rather possessive of her, aren't you?"

"I lost my family when I was but seventeen. She is the only one to understand how much affliction that causes."

"Then let us continue our search for her."

"No! I do not wish to see her, and I certainly do not wish to apologize!" The fear of losing Doris's friendship, something Rosalie only knew how to maintain through selfish domination, must have scared her far more than the danger she and her cousin were currently in. That was where her stubbornness came from.

Lydia could no longer do anything to move the other girl, who was rooted to the spot. "I shall search for Miss Doris by myself. Keep yourself hidden in that room, all right? And ensure that Mr. Purcell's cronies don't find you."

Rosalie didn't give a response, and Lydia didn't have the time to wait for one. Leaving her behind, the fairy doctor made sure that Nico was following her (he was, and he looked exasperated), before checking the rooms she had not yet been in.

"Humans are such troublesome creatures," the fairy-cat murmured. "Why all this fuss over a simple apology?"

"If she's fond of Miss Doris, she ought to say as much," Lydia agreed, though a part of her understood where Rosalie was coming from. There was never a guarantee that one's fondness for somebody would be reciprocated, and the potential of that painful moment when one's trust and expectations were betrayed was terrifying.

As a girl who had proudly spoken of her ability to see fairies and been treated as an eccentric because of it, she had resigned herself to the fact that she would never be well-liked. Her gifts were one thing, but she had insisted on growing up to be like her mother. When she had offered her advice to those whom fairies had hurt or inconvenienced, she had been told that she was making

things up or pestering people, and was only seen as a nuisance. She had always seen it as unavoidable that her skills would be misunderstood, so if she ever fell in love, she was confident she would give up long before she considered confessing her feelings. Even if the man in question didn't outright think her eccentric, he would likely remain forever uncomfortable around her so long as he didn't believe in fairies himself.

*What about Edgar?* The earl came to mind because he was one of the rare people whom her gifts didn't seem to bother. In truth, however, she couldn't be sure that they didn't make him uncomfortable. Recognizing that accepting her as a fairy doctor and accepting her as a person might be two different things to him, she found herself raising her guard, knowing she would have to be cautious around him. On the other hand, the idea that he might think of her as a partner of sorts was appealing, and she did want to trust him if she could. That was why she wished he wouldn't act so irresponsibly, as he had in abandoning the Walpole cousins. She didn't just want him to understand her abilities, but her feelings. Unable to convey this to him, she had instead struck him and invited a quarrel. Rosalie wasn't the only one making a fuss over something needlessly.

Perhaps telling the truth was more difficult than one might think. What if that was the sole reason Edgar told such outrageous lies? It couldn't have been easy to admit to a long history of horrendous acts, even if it was all to escape the Prince. And how could he have explained his desire to seek revenge for his companions to her, someone who had only ever known a peaceful world? No wonder he had kept her in the dark, using her despite knowing the danger he was putting her in. After all of that, he had expressed an unexpected level of concern and kindness in moving to rescue her.

His true intentions were imperceptible, yet the occasional glimpses Lydia caught of them—whether she had imagined them or not—were enough to draw her in. Enough to make her think that he had hooked her with his mention of the Fairy's Egg and the Fogman less to use her as bait, and more because he sought somebody to save him. Enough to make her think that, when he had asked her on the lake to pull his lost companion from the fog, that was what he *truly* wanted.

All this time, he had been waiting in the darkness for someone to come, thinking that, while on the verge of death, he had traded his rare agate to a pair of illusionary fairies. Lydia couldn't wipe the image from her mind, for she knew that fairies never broke their promises. Should that eight-year-old promise have been broken for reasons beyond the fairies' control, she felt she ought to do something about it, as though the responsibility for it had fallen to her. As a fairy doctor, she knew that an unkept vow brought nothing but misfortune to both fairies and humans.

"Do you hear footsteps, Nico?" Lydia froze. She waited for her companion's response, but there was none. "Nico? Where are you?"

His tendency to disappear on a whim made him most unreliable. Lydia braced herself and listened closely. The footsteps were definitely getting louder. It was just as she was making to hide herself in a dark room that she was suddenly pulled back by a pair of arms, and she nearly shrieked.

"Shh. It's me."

Realizing it was Edgar, she managed to cut off the sound before it escaped her throat. The owner of the approaching footsteps seemed to be a remaining sailor ignorant of what had befallen the ship. He was looking around and carrying a big knife, and as he passed them, the threat of discovery made Lydia's heart pound. They quietly closed the door to avoid being spotted, plunging them into total darkness. But even the lack of light wasn't anything to fear compared to the sound of those immediate footsteps.

Lydia's heart throbbed stubbornly even after the danger had passed—all thanks to Edgar's arms, which stayed wrapped around her.

"I think he's gone," she announced.

"Yes."

"So you may release me now."

He didn't comply. "If I were to do so in this darkness, I would lose my assurance that you are still here."

"Then open the door and let the light back in."

“If only it had been you...”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If only you were the fairy I had seen that day. Perhaps you would have pulled me out from that darkness.”

It was difficult to tell from his tone whether he truly meant it or was just being his usual smooth-tongued self. His expression, too, was hidden by the gloom. The only clue Lydia had was that his arms were holding her with just the right amount of strength to support her without suffocating her. She felt as though that gave her a precious glimpse into what he was really thinking.

“Then allow me to pull you from the darkness.” Making that beseechment took as much courage as jumping from London Bridge. She was certain he would make sport of her for it, but instead he fell into a thoughtful silence.

“You are eight years too late,” he finally murmured, his sigh tickling her hair.

She reasoned that the pounding of her heart was a manifestation of her desperation to save him. “I don’t believe that it’s too late. I shall fulfill the promise made to you all those years ago. It was beyond the abilities of the fairies you encountered, but such oaths cannot remain unrealized. Let us rescue those girls together. It is all right to forget about your revenge and lay your resentment to rest. You need no longer rely on hatred in order to survive.”

Growing restless, Lydia took a step toward the door, and Edgar gently let go of her. The lights of the ship were dim, and yet they seemed to dazzle her as they pierced the darkness through the crack of the open door.

“Why is it that you do not resent Miss Rosalie Walpole? Or me, for that matter?” Edgar squinted his eyes against the light.

Though a pertinent question, Lydia found her answer very quickly. “Because you rescued me and continued to reassure me as I was trapped within that glass bottle. I was never alone in my confinement, nor was there any darkness to frighten me, so I did not grow to resent anyone.”

The pair stepped out into the passageway. Edgar looked perturbed, and she wondered what he had taken from her response. At the very least, he seemed willing to assist her in searching for Doris. “Have you been this way yet?”

“No.”

“Come.”

In the end, he had made the choice to leave Purcell and come after Lydia. He might not have been ready to give up on his revenge entirely, but a compromise was better than nothing. It was curious how he was so quick to tease, yet still seemed able to perceive her feelings and thoughts, even when she couldn’t convey them properly. It was why she had been able to express the embarrassing sentiment that had been on her mind without a second thought. Perhaps it was naive of her to trust that Edgar had understood what she meant, when it was just as likely that she had bemused him.

“I fear that I am falling head over heels in love with you, Lydia.”

His profession came out of nowhere. Her words really had tickled him.

*Either that, or—*

She rejected the thought. She may have been naive, but she wasn’t stupid. “I know better than to believe you when you start talking like that,” she said flatly.

Edgar laughed. Meanwhile, so much had happened at once that something rather important had slipped Lydia’s mind.

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It had been a small annoyance that led Nico away from Lydia’s side. He had knocked the boisterous bogey-beast out just yesterday, but the creature was already visible once more. The fairy-cat had caught sight of him out of the corner of his eye and immediately gave chase.

“He’s *really* beginning to get on my nerves,” Nico muttered. The bogey-beast ahead of him seemed to be searching for something, probably that ginger-haired girl. He sniffed the air to catch her scent and started off toward the area where Lydia had left Rosalie. His sense of smell did little to help him. There was only the dankness of the Thames and the unpleasant smog that lingered in the city air, both stenches that were present all over London.

The humidity caught Nico’s attention more than the smells. The damp that clung to his fur and whiskers was more cloying than what he was used to. The

fog was enveloping the city as usual today, bringing with it a weighty, cold damp. It didn't help that there was no wind. Nico wondered when the spring breeze would finally arrive.

"Master calls for me! I must be quick so he doesn't scold me!" the bogey-beast muttered to himself.

Nico pricked up his ears as he followed.

"To think that *I*, of all creatures, was bested by a ball of fluff! Rotten cat!"

*I'm not a cat.*

"Never mind, for the fairy doctor is in that bottle. Her body has been carried away too, so there is no longer anything she can do to interfere. And the Blue Knight Earl is on board this boat! This is a golden opportunity to see him buried and have Master returned to full strength!"

*The Blue Knight Earl?* Was the beast talking about Edgar? He must have seen him while ferreting about the ship, but he seemed unaware that Lydia had been freed from the bottle and was here too. What business could the creature possibly have with the earl?

Nico continued to pursue the bogey-beast, his mind filled with unanswered questions, and eventually they came upon the room in which Rosalie was hiding.

"I hear it. Master's voice!"

*Voice?* Nico couldn't hear a thing. Supposing it was a matter of wavelengths, it would make this master of his a very disturbing creature indeed.

The bogey-beast slipped into the room through the miniscule crack between the door and its frame. Nico made himself less solid and passed through it. Rosalie was sitting by the round window. The wicked fairy approached her and called out for his master, making sure that it couldn't be detected by human eyes. It wasn't calling for the girl, but rather whatever was dwelling within the light-green stone in her hand.

"*That's* his master? Whichever foolish fellow it was that got himself stuck?" Nico could instinctively feel the stone's potent power to protect against evil

despite how incredibly pleasing it was to the eye. Anything wicked that touched it would be trapped inside, so such things stayed away.

“Please forgive my tardiness, Master. No, it won’t happen again. The wench can be put to work immediately. Oh, the vitality? Yes, I snared it in my trap. It isn’t exactly the brightest creature in the world—it was confined while sleeping in a bed of its favorite leaves. Have no fear, Master, for there is no one who can interfere now!”

Nico didn’t know what this “vitality” was, but it sounded like it was something hostile to the bogey-beast and his master, and that it was no longer in a position to oppose them. It was rather impressive that the dullard had managed to deal with both this threat and the earl’s fairy doctor. But this was no time to be taken in.

The bogey-beast hopped over to stand in front of Rosalie and made itself fully visible. “I’ve been looking for you, madame! What are you doing locked away in a place like this?”

The “wench” was now being treated with the utmost respect. Rosalie quickly raised her head from where it had been downcast. “You were looking for me? Well, where on earth have *you* been? My uncle deceived me, and I have been through such an awful ordeal. I called and called for you, but you never came to see me.”

“I am dreadfully sorry. I had a little accident and lost consciousness. Oh, but I am perfectly recovered. All you need to do now is follow my instructions and everything will turn out all right.”

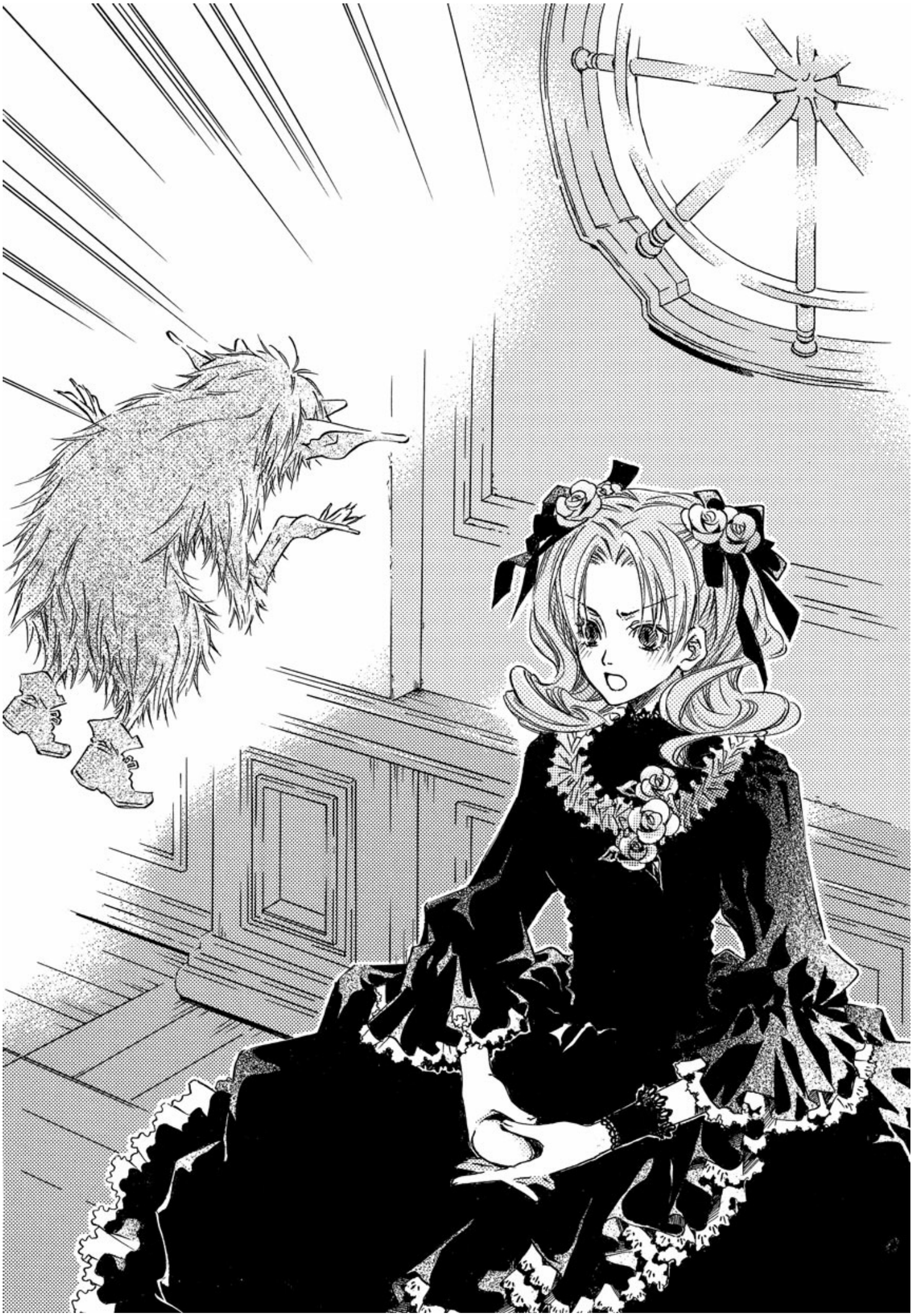
“And pray tell, what am I supposed to do? If uncle’s men find me, I shall only be imprisoned again. I cannot swim either, so there is no way for me to get off this ship. *You* must go and fetch help.”

“Oh, that’s right! That earl is on the ship; I spotted him earlier. I’m certain he is here to rescue you.”

“Whyever would he do that?! What is he *doing* here? Unbelievable! I am not inclined to see him ever again!”

“Why... Why not? I thought you said he was your ideal suitor?”

“He tried to kill me! It was as though he had turned into a completely different man. My uncle, too—I had thought he was so kind, and yet... I shall never trust another man as long as I live!”



The bogey-beast looked panicked. It appeared that he had wanted to bring Rosalie—and probably the stone containing his master—in contact with Edgar in order to "see him buried." Perhaps part of the girl's infatuation and clinginess to the earl was due to the stone's occupier working his dark magic upon hearing the title "Blue Knight Earl." That Edgar welcomed the company of any girl could only have been a boon to the plot. Using love to intoxicate the redhead would have been the easiest way for the bogey-beast and his master to make her bring harm to their target, as it left Rosalie highly manipulable.

"Oh, how...how terrible for you, madame! Now, are you just going to let him strut around as he pleases after that?" The bogey-beast tried another angle. "You ought to teach him a lesson! That gemstone of yours has a magical power, you see. You could use it to punish the man who slighted you."

"Punish him?"

"Yes! Leave it to me. Just pay heed that you do not drop the Fairy's Egg. Aside from that, you merely require courage, of which you have plenty."

Whatever lay within the stone was trying to infiltrate the gaps in Rosalie's heart again and manipulate her. The monster within it may have been confined, but it still leaked enough power to influence her after being in her possession for so long. It should have rather been kept by somebody with a greater resistance to such evil. In the past, these were noble-and clergymen, and though not everyone in those classes would have been suitable nowadays, at the very least the stone should have been in the hands of somebody more difficult to influence than a young girl. And yet, she had it.

At the bogey-beast's urging, and ensnared by the evil powers of the stone, Rosalie got to her feet. Initially, Edgar's betrayal and treatment of her despite her affections had terrified her, but that fear was now shifting into hatred.

"Uh-oh," Nico muttered. "Not that I care about what happens to that philanderer. But I just bet Lydia's going to get pulled into this again."

He slipped from the room ahead of Rosalie and the bogey-beast, and dashed away on two legs. Lydia needed to be warned as soon as possible.

# The Blessings of the Spring Breeze

A silent shadow slipped past Edgar and Lydia as they walked the gloomy passageways. The fairy doctor let out a surprised shriek as they found a third person blocking their path and instinctively grabbed on to a nearby pillar.

“Pardon me.”

Only then did she realize it was Raven. “I nearly jumped out of my skin!”

“You ought to have clung to me, not a pillar,” Edgar remarked. How he could come up with such lines in the most dire of situations remained a mystery.

“My instincts prevented me from doing so.” Lydia turned her face away in embarrassment, though she supposed Raven’s sudden appearance meant that something other than teasing her required Edgar’s attention.

The earl turned to his servant receptively.

“My lord, several vessels have been tied up alongside this one. I believe Purcell’s men will be boarding at any moment.”

“Understood. Let us make haste.”

“Miss Doris Walpole is this way,” Raven said, starting to lead them.

“How do you know?” asked Lydia.

“I asked one of Purcell’s underlings—a man I found screaming in the bilge. Apparently Miss Walpole was put to sleep and moved so that she would not be discovered by ‘outsiders.’” It must have been the same man Lydia and Rosalie fought off. He had likely finished hiding Doris when she came across him trying to do the same to the girl’s cousin.

As they walked, Raven handed Edgar a pistol, presumably the same one the earl had left at Purcell’s place. He then turned to Lydia. “You left this behind, Miss Carlton.” He presented her with the tinned fish.

“You know, I don’t actually use that as a weapon.”

Still, Raven waited for her to take it, as though he truly felt she ought to do so.

“If it would inconvenience you to take it, then I shall hold on to it,” Edgar said.

Raven seemed to accept this compromise and gave him the can. They set off after the servant once more, keeping a quick pace. Suddenly, there came the sounds of a commotion.

“Are you able to run, Lydia?”

“Yes,” she replied, and Edgar pulled her by the arm. Despite their hurry, the clamorous voices were beginning to close in on them.

“There they are! This way!” someone shouted.

“I shall divert them, my lord,” Raven said.

“Thank you. Where is Miss Doris?”

“In the storeroom at the end of this passageway. There is a door hidden behind cargo at the far end.”

Edgar nodded, and the boy turned on his heel, leaving Lydia and the earl to hurry on ahead. The shouts grew slightly more distant—Raven must have succeeded in luring their pursuers away. Lydia hoped he would be all right. They had no idea how many of Purcell’s men were currently onboard.

Presently, she realized how extraordinarily reckless she had been. All that bluster of rescuing the Miss Walpoles, and the only thing she had done was put both Edgar and Raven in danger. She still couldn’t approve of the earl’s selfishness, but his plan consisted of nothing except rescuing her, enacting his revenge, and making their escape; she had dragged him into unknown territory.

“Is something the matter, Lydia? Are you afraid?”

However, she couldn’t forget that abandoning the girls would have resulted in an unbearable burden of regret. It may still have been possible to save them after leaving the ship, but Lydia wouldn’t have wanted to draw out their suffering. She wouldn’t have wanted Edgar to get away without doubting, even a little bit, whether he was doing the right thing in leaving them. She shook her head, not realizing that her feelings were borne not of her sense of justice, but of a desire to prove that Edgar was more than just a villain.

“I’m not afraid. It is my disposition that has led us here.”

“Your propensity to think positively.”

“No, my recklessness. I recognize it as such, but I am loath to regret it.”

“For my part, I can do little but regret. That I continue to escape death is the greatest sin I could ever commit.” He made the admission quite casually, but the weight of it caught Lydia off guard.

“That cannot possibly be true.”

“Were it not for me, the majority of my companions would still be alive. Including Ermine.” He honored her with a short pause. “And Raven would not have devoted his murderous instincts to being in service to me, instead having perhaps found some way to control them for his own purposes.”

“You released them from the Prince’s dominion,” Lydia pointed out.

“And straight into death. Only Raven remains.”

“Do you suppose they would have wished to live the remainder of their days in slavery? They would not have followed you were that the case. You granted them freedom. If nothing else, you taught them that their minds were their own and could not be taken from them.”

Edgar’s gaze remained focused on their path. These words that had come to Lydia’s mind had surely crossed his own countless times before. As they advanced through the packed storeroom, he spoke again, as though to himself. “I have always endeavored to see things that way. Yet sometimes it strikes me that I may just be protecting my pride.”

Just as Raven had promised, they found a door hidden behind some of the cargo.

“This must be it. The door is locked.”

He cut off their conversation there, and all Lydia could do was nod. Taking a single pin from his inner pocket, he used it to unlock the door. It was not a skill that a noble raised in a respectable family would ever have the need to acquire.

They peered through the door. The space beyond it was closer to a closet than a full size room, and they spotted a cramped Doris at once.

“Miss Walpole! Are you all right?” Lydia stooped down and shook the girl, but

she showed no sign of regaining consciousness.

“She has been drugged. I shall carry her.”

“We’ve got trouble, Lydia!” Suddenly, Nico rushed into the room.

“Nico! Where have you been?”

“It doesn’t matter! Just leave this ship at once! Things are worse than we thought,” Nico said in a single breath.

“All right. It’s Purcell’s men, isn’t it?”

The fairy-cat gawked at her. “Nothing so harmless! The bogey-beast returned, and he and his master have taken control of Rosalie. She’s coming to murder the earl as we speak!”

The memory dropped back into Lydia’s mind like a stone. “Edgar! I’d completely forgotten but the Fogman is after you!”

“The Fogman?” Edgar turned his head to frown at her from where he was leaning over Doris. It was no wonder he didn’t immediately take her words to heart. The Fogman was a fairytale villain as far as he was concerned. “I do not recall offending any such creature.”

“The thing in the stone is the *Fogman*?!” Nico yowled.

“That is what the bogey-beast said. Say, Nico, do you happen to know the Fogman’s weakness?”

“Any weakness a wicked spirit like that possesses would not be one that *we* could take advantage of! Oh, but the bogey-beast did mention an enemy. Something trapped with a bed of leaves.”

“What enemy? What leaves?”

“I haven’t a clue. But it does sound awfully familiar...”

“Why is this brute after me, Lydia?”

The conversation was flying in too many different directions, and it was tripping her up.

“Essentially, the Fogman holds a grudge against the Blue Knight Earl. One of the earl’s ancestors trapped it within the Fairy’s Egg. As the man currently in

possession of the title, it plans to eat you and release itself into the world once more."

"The Fogman is in the Fairy's Egg?" Edgar frowned.

"You are descended from ancient nobility, are you not? That blood prevented the Fogman from making any contact with anything outside the agate while it was at your estate. However, in the hands of Miss Rosalie Walpole, the power sealing it away weakened and it was able to call upon the bogey-beast. I believe it has been searching for the Blue Knight Earl for all these years."

"Which was when I made Miss Walpole's acquaintance."

"Quite so. It learned that you were the Blue Knight Earl, and so now it seeks to destroy you."

"Suppose it attacks me. How ought I to respond?"

Lydia hadn't the faintest idea how to answer his question, and it panicked her. Her lacking knowledge only stretched as far as ignoring and avoiding such wicked fairies by any means available. She knew she had to do something, but she was angry with herself for claiming to be a fairy doctor when she could offer no help.

Nico clicked his tongue. "What a nuisance. The *real* Blue Knight Earl ought to be able to fight the Fogman on equal terms."

"Yes, but Edgar does not have such powers."

"Would it still attempt to eat me if it knew I was a fraud?" Edgar asked. "Surely doing so would not be enough to bring back its full strength."

"It is most desperate. I am sure it will try and eat you regardless."

"I see."

"Besides, you may not possess the Blue Knight Earl's gifts, but there may still be value in the title itself."

It was Lydia's mistake that she hadn't thought of a way to repel the Fogman earlier. She had been too distracted by her painful stint in the bogey-beast's bottle, by her anger at Edgar for using her as bait, and by her desire to persuade him that rescuing Doris and Rosalie was the right thing to do. She had also been

careless in thinking that the bogey-beast would not return so soon. In short, she had failed massively in her duties as a fairy doctor.

Suddenly, Nico gasped. “Rosemary, Lydia!”

“I’m sorry?”

“Rosemary leaves! Ack, how could I have been so foolish?”

She cocked her head at him, confused, but there was no time to listen to his garbled explanation.

“It seems we presently have a more pressing problem,” Edgar said.

A scattering of footsteps was approaching them. A crowd of men surged into the storeroom and surrounded them before Purcell stepped out from their midst.

“It would seem that the tables have turned, my lord.” He smirked, the presence of his men restoring his confidence. “Your scheme to corner me was so meticulous, and yet you failed to deal the final blow.”

“It may appear as such to you.”

“And tell me, what do you think you can do against me alone, when your murderous servant is trapped at the bottom of the ship?”

Lydia spotted the chubby man they had locked in the bilge earlier among Purcell’s men.

“You would do well not to underestimate him,” Edgar replied lightly.

The ship began to sway—or rather, the piles of cargo in the storeroom did. There was no gap between the moment it tipped and the moment it had come tumbling down over their enemies’ heads.

A dark shadow swooped down to join them. Purcell had only just managed to avoid being hit by the boxes and barrels, and now Raven leaped forward and restrained him. The last of his men had no recourse once his knife was pressed into Purcell’s throat. But their problems weren’t over yet.

“They’re here, Lydia!” Nico called, scrambling up a pile of fallen cargo.

Rosalie came dashing into the room, out of breath and with a sneering bogey-

beast on her shoulder.

“Stop this, Miss Walpole! You are being controlled by the fairy!” Lydia called.

The ginger girl didn’t seem to hear her. The power exuded by the agate’s wicked beast had completely enveloped her. Alone, it was a frail thing, but it drew strength from her adoration and hatred of Edgar to usurp her free will. Rosalie likely had no idea what she was doing at present.

“There is the earl! Slay him!” the bogey-beast shouted.

Without the slightest hesitation, Rosalie struck her precious agate against the floor. The crack it created was tiny—but it was enough for the holy water within to make contact with the outside air for the first time in tens of thousands of years. It evaporated at once and was then lost forever. Simultaneously, a foul-smelling fog jetted out from the agate to fill the entire room. It was so thick that one could not see more than a few paces in front, though the cries of Purcell and his men were audible to everyone. Lydia could only just make out Edgar’s silhouette from where he stood immediately next to her.

“Get away from the earl, Lydia!” Nico’s voice came through the fog.

“Yes, go,” Edgar pressed, his eyes fixed on a squirming presence deep in the haze.

“Where are you, my lord?”

“Stay back, Raven!”

Lydia couldn’t tear her gaze away from the Fogman. It was a thick, black shadow condensing in the fog. It wasn’t alone either. There were grotesque silhouettes gathered around it: the fairy dogs the Fogman kept. They growled as they surrounded the humans. The largest shadow swayed this way and that as it focused Edgar in its sights. Then, it swelled up to an even greater size and attacked.

“Run, Lydia!”

“I shan’t!”

Edgar tried to push her away, but she resisted and ended up clinging to him. The viscous darkness came down on them with a pressure that squeezed their

lungs. The floor beneath their feet seemed to disappear, as though they had been completely swallowed up. Then came a chill as freezing as the midwinter air.

“Has the Fogman eaten us?” Edgar asked.

Lydia wasn’t sure herself. It was too dark to see anything, and her fingertips were numb from the cold. She was overcome by an intense languidness, as though her lifeforce were gradually being sucked away.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, the disappointment in herself too much to bear. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. This wouldn’t have happened if not for my lack of experience. I’m sorry for being such a useless fairy doctor. I’m sorry that all I ever did was complain and that I was never able to save you.”

“It isn’t bad, you know. The fact that you have embraced me of your own volition. You rarely ever smile before me either. Perhaps I ought to consider seeing your tears as even more of a luxury.”

He was gently stroking her hair, and it was only then that Lydia realized she was holding on to him. But the darkness was too terrifying for her to let go. It didn’t matter if he was dangerous or a philanderer. Nothing could separate their fates at this point.

“May I ask something rather improper?” he continued. “Are you here with me now because you felt duty-bound as my fairy doctor? Or might I indulge myself and believe there is something more?”

“Do you ever think about anything else?” Lydia was struggling to think straight through her tears and the hopelessness of their situation. She didn’t know why she had decided to hold on to him. She just didn’t want him to be alone.

Though Edgar would have seen his countless supporters when he looked over his shoulder, he had to face forward in order to lead them. And he was lonely. Leaders had no one they could look to in front of them. He had continued to forge a path regardless, only to look back one day and see that Raven was the only one still following him. Even if he wanted to believe he had offered some form of hope or redemption to his companions, there was no way to know for sure anymore. Their sacrifices weighed heavy on his heart, as did the fact that

he was the lone survivor. Lydia felt as though he had offered her a glimpse of that pain, and perhaps she was just imagining it or perhaps he was deceiving her again. Either way, she didn't want to leave him alone.

She finally gave her answer. "You seemed lonely."

"So it was compassion, was it?"

"I wouldn't get your hopes up." Even with their bodies huddled together, it felt cold enough for them to freeze.

"You're warm."

"I certainly don't *feel* warm."

"I didn't mean in a physical sense. Oh, but perhaps it is this. I feel as though it has been growing warmer." Edgar pulled the familiar tin can out from his inside pocket. It had a very faint glow to it. And faint though it was, it easily pushed through the Fogman's wide-reaching darkness.

"What is that?"

"A tin."

"Yes, I know, but..."

"Now I remember. Raven mentioned that this thing was eager to meet the 'fairy doctor.'"

"The tin spoke to him?"

"Well, the spiritual blood that apparently runs through his veins gives him certain mysterious attributes."

Perhaps that was why Raven was so insistent on the tin being Lydia's weapon. He must have noticed that there was something akin to a fairy residing within it. The can—or more likely, whatever was in it—wanted something from her. It wasn't marinated fish, but rather something with the power to repel the Fogman. It couldn't have been all that strong or it wouldn't have been so easy to trap like this. But it must have possessed a certain quality that the dark spirit itself was weak to.

It hit her then. This was why Nico had mentioned rosemary. Inside this tin was

the Fogman's enemy, the creature that had been tricked into sleeping on a herby bed by the bogey-beast. A fairy that carried the scent of fresh grass.

"Edgar! I do believe we are saved—or shall be, if we can open this tin."

"I have nothing to open it with."

"Oh. No, I suppose you wouldn't." Lydia's face fell. If only she had paid more attention to her surroundings and picked up on enough clues to think up a plan. Then she could have driven away the Fogman. As it was, she had stumbled on her solutions by chance. She should have had ample opportunity to prepare for this, and yet inexperience had let her down again. "Oh, I'm such a fool! I'm beyond helping!"

"Does the can require opening so that its contents may be eaten?"

"No, even the smallest hole would suffice. I do not believe there is any fish in there."

"How about this?" Edger pulled out his pistol. "Although there is a chance it will be sent flying."

Lydia was hesitant, worried about the safety of the being inside, but then she remembered that it was a fairy. "I think it is worth attempting."

"Step back."

She placed the tin at his feet, covered her ears, and moved behind Edgar. Then, she held her breath. At the sound of the gunshot, the can burst open, and something came flying out of it as a powerful wind broke out around them. That wind cleared the thick fog surrounding them, forced it upward, and drove it away completely.



There was a groaning that sounded like rumbling earth: the Fogman's screams. The gigantic shadow looked like it was struggling against the wind. The black fog was swallowing up and dissolving everything in its path, but it stayed clear of Lydia and Edgar, who were protected by the wind. Touching that wind would mean dispersal—such were the laws that governed these spirits of nature.

And yet the possessed fog continued to fight back against its adversary, creating a dark vortex as it struggled to maintain its form and attacking everything within reach out of desperation. What seemed to be the screams of Purcell and his men reached their ears. Lydia caught glimpses of their bodies; the fog must have engulfed them when it was blown in their direction. Even then it was mercilessly torn apart and forced upward by the wind, which seemed to dissolve not just the clouds, but people and objects, making it a terrifying sight to behold.

Before long, the bilge became half-visible through the havoc around them. Lydia searched through the gales for Nico and was relieved to find him leading Rosalie, Doris, and Raven toward the wind and away from the fog's tendrils. The gust grew even more powerful then, forcing her to keep her eyes closed and making her feel as though she may stumble. Edgar kept her steady in his arms as she listened to the bogey-beast's curses being devoured by the winds.

When she was just about able to raise her head again, she could vaguely make out the blue of the sky. They had burst through the storeroom roof long ago. The wind raced ever higher, forcing the fog up along with it. A pair of thin, sky-blue wings, as translucent as the air itself, flashed by in Lydia's vision.

"A sylph," she murmured.

As the vitality once trapped within the can flew through the air, it was joined by several of its brethren. It was the arrival of the spring breeze. The fairies became a powerful gust of wind that blew over the entire stretch of the River Thames. The large ship around them shivered, but Lydia knew the sylphs would protect them. To her it was no more frightening than the rocking of a cradle. The final traces of the Fogman were scattered by the wind, and the sylphs disappeared into the sky.

“It’s all right now, Edgar! We are free of the Fogman!” The relief of returning to their own world after being taken in by the fairy’s darkness was so great that she couldn’t help but shout.

“It would appear so.”

Edgar was safe and sound, and she was infinitely glad that she had not left him. Perhaps it was a careless thought, but she wondered whether it was her heartfelt desire to save him that had brought about the sylph’s miracle, even though she had recklessly approached the problem with no plan whatsoever.

Relief drained the tension from her limbs, leaving it to Edgar’s arms to hold her up. She realized he had been embracing her this whole time, but even when he placed a hand on her cheek, she didn’t feel the usual threat that urged her to get away. It might have been the uncharacteristically tranquil smile that graced his lips. The sun transformed his hair into fine gold, and there was a suggestive sheen to his ash-mauve gaze. Combined with their proximity, Lydia couldn’t take her eyes off him.

She knew it was dangerous to be this close to him. Especially with this...feeling in the air. But far from striking him, she allowed that hand on her cheek to guide her face upward.

*It should be all right,* she told herself. Raven had said that she didn’t need to keep her guard up around Edgar. Unless... *Raven was lying when he said Edgar wouldn’t do anything?*

Edgar pressed his lips against Lydia’s forehead gently. And then he smiled. “I suppose I do prefer caramel. So much so that I don’t deserve to eat it.”

***

The winds that blew through foggy London even cleared out the smog that was besetting the city and brought out the soft sunlight of spring. The disappearance of Graham Purcell and his co-conspirators invited many rumors, but the truth itself had been lost to the fog. They had likely been taken away to a realm of darkness along with the Fogman itself, but even Lydia couldn’t imagine the reality of what that meant. The fairy had left this world without completing its revival. No doubt it would return once it had built up enough power, but that was bound to take a long time.

With Purcell gone, Edgar had lost his chance to pick a fight with the Prince. This didn't appear to bother him as much as Lydia had expected. She wasn't sure if that meant he had given up on revenge or not, but she could imagine that he would be satisfied with his trafficker's fate for the time being. At the same time, she was aware that his desire to avenge his lost companions went further than Purcell, who was merely a pawn at the bottom of the hierarchy. So she clung to the belief that he had realized that revenge was not what his friends would have wanted for him.

Edgar was quick to deal with the fallout of the whole ordeal. The public was made aware of Purcell's misappropriation of the Walpole's fortune, his kidnapping of Doris, and his intention to frame Rosalie. Lydia had then gone in search of Doris as her friend, and just so happened to find Purcell's ship suspicious. Edgar had escorted her there, at which point they got into a fight with the mariners, and so forth. That was the official version of events. In this story, the only survivors were hired sailors who weren't aware of the truth, or those who refused to confess to smuggling and would keep their silence indefinitely. It was the ease with which he made things so that gave Edgar the air of a true villain.

He had suggested Lydia take some time off in order to recover from the stress of the event. So it was three days later that she was returning to the earl's estate, ready for another shift that likely would not consist of actual work. Rosalie and Doris came to see her that day. Neither of them had any recollection of the Fogman's attack. Doris had been unconscious and Rosalie had been under its spell. Once the evil fairies had gone and the ginger girl had regained her senses, she had rushed to her sleeping cousin and clung to her, crying. She had apologized with an earnestness that made Lydia roll her eyes, and although Doris hadn't heard her, the two were now thick as thieves once more.

"Doris and I will be spending some time in the country for a while," Rosalie explained, entirely composed.

Doris gave a small smile. "London is a tad too lively for us."

"That sounds like a fine idea," Lydia replied.

“Personally, I find the countryside ever so dull, but Doris tells me she’d be lonely going by herself. I fear she will never grow out of being spoiled.” There was a pause as Doris elbowed Rosalie in the ribs. “Yes, I know!” The ginger girl rearranged her features into a subdued expression. “I apologize. For everything. And I wish to thank you for rescuing us. That is what we have come here for.”

In some ways, Doris was more mature than her older cousin.

“I’m not the only one you have to thank for that. However, Miss Walpole, I suggest that you avoid any involvement with fairies from now on.”

“I know. Neither that fairy nor the Fairy’s Egg did anything to protect me. Such creatures cannot be trusted!”

Though a sweeping statement, it was enough to satisfy Lydia. It was the Fairy’s Egg that had led the bogey-beast to Rosalie. She didn’t possess the innate ability to see fairies, so it was unlikely that any wicked ones would seek her out anymore.

“Would you like to come with us, Miss Carlton?” Rosalie asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“I believe we could become firm friends, and I wouldn’t mind if you were a friend to Doris either. The country is boring indeed, but it might not be so dull if we were to go together.” There was a light in Rosalie’s eyes that suggested she was quite serious.

“I’m afraid I have duties I must attend to here, although I agree that we could be friends.”

“You may be honest with me.” Rosalie leaned forward to whisper conspiratorially into Lydia’s ear. “Is Lord Ashenbert threatening you? If he is *forcing* you to work here, then we simply must assist your escape!”

“There is no cause for concern,” Lydia said quickly. “That isn’t the case at all.”

“As I said, you may be honest. I shan’t tell a soul.”

“I *am* being honest. He isn’t threatening me.”

“You mustn’t be overly forceful, Rosalie.” Doris’s warning made Rosalie withdraw, though she didn’t look entirely pleased about it.

“You’ll come and visit at least, won’t you?” Rosalie asked.

“Of course I will.”

“Don’t I get an invitation?” came a voice from the doorway.

The visitors stiffened.

“Welcome home, Edgar,” Lydia said. “The Miss Walpoles have most kindly called on us.”

“And a very warm welcome to the both of you. Please make yourselves at home.” Edgar’s bright smile elicited a grimace from Rosalie.

“Actually, we were just about to excuse ourselves.”

“But you’ve not long arrived!” Lydia protested.

“Please accept our apologies, Miss Carlton, but we are in a hurry. I shall be sure to write to you soon.” Rosalie dragged Doris toward the door, taking a roundabout route so as to avoid Edgar. Even once she was out of the room, she didn’t look back as she rushed away.

“Miss Walpole’s wariness of me is most unnecessary,” Edgar muttered.

“I’m not sure that it is.”

“And why did Miss Doris flee with her?”

“Because I am sure her cousin has informed her just how much of a heinous villain you truly are.”

He drew back slightly but didn’t seem overly perturbed at the thought of being hated by the girls. He turned to Lydia as though he were observing a curiosity. “But you are not afraid of me. Despite what I did to Miss Rosalie Walpole, which she has no doubt shared with you.”

She felt a jolt in her stomach as he shared with her the same doubt that she herself had been worrying about. Rosalie hadn’t gone into detail, but she did know that the girl’s image of the gentle Edgar had been totally upended, hence her reluctance to be in his presence. There was no telling when the same thing might happen to Lydia herself—save for one small detail.

“I have long known your treachery,” she explained.

“And yet you still clung to me and wept into my chest.”

“Fear does strange things to a person!”

“Would you listen to what I have to say first, before jumping to such extreme reactions? I have been thinking of you a great deal since then.”

“What about me?”

“About your curious nature. Every soul was saved thanks to you. I was concerned only with my revenge, and so I used you. Yet you saved not only me, but the Miss Walpoles, who would otherwise have fallen victim to Purcell’s machinations. Their salvation made me feel as though I had been twice saved. I truly believe that you are a fairy who brings good fortune.”

She was nothing so wonderful. It was not Lydia but the sylph who had rescued them, and only by coincidence. Whether fortune was at play or not, the fact remained that she was inexperienced and entirely unhelpful.

“Did I say something to dishearten you?” Edgar asked suddenly.

“I confess that I have been pondering the events of that day myself.”

“Oh yes?”

“It has become clear to me that I barely fulfill the requirements of a fairy doctor.” At the stiffness in her tone, Edgar raised an eyebrow. “And so I am afraid that I cannot remain under your employ—”

“Am I understanding you correctly, Lydia? Surely you do not wish to leave?”

“I must return to Scotland in order to further my studies.”

“With what are you dissatisfied? If it is something to do with me, then I shall endeavor to improve myself. Please do not leave me.”

“There is no need for you to take it so personally.”

“Is there another man? If so, you ought to inform him that I am prepared to duel for the right to keep you. Should he not be willing to die for you, then I shan’t be willing to let you go.”

“Can you *please* just take me seriously?!”

Seeing that making sport of the matter would do nothing to dissuade her,

Edgar sat down on the sofa next to her with a weary sigh. “I *am* taking you seriously. It seems that you are unaware of just how much I need you.”

“As your fairy doctor, I have done very little to assist you.”

“Does saving me from the Fogman constitute ‘very little’?”

“That was pure coincidence.”

“Perhaps it is not so much your skills as a fairy doctor that I require, but the honesty and innocence that you possess. Who could have consoled me in the same manner you did when you told me that I need not rely on hatred anymore for my survival?”

“I wish to become a fairy doctor worthy of the title. I do not wish to become your lover to whom you turn for comfort.”

“Lover... What a wonderful resonance. I am sure you will start to change your mind the longer you stay by my side.”

He was looking at her with the most charming eyes he could muster. If only he had equipped that gaze sincerely. As usual, Lydia was not the least bit inclined to be taken in by him. The kiss he had planted on her forehead still confused her, and she had decided that she would stop trying to work out whether it had been in jest, an expression of friendship, or something else. It would be childish to dwell too much on it, so she was pretending to have forgotten all about it.

Her pretense did nothing to quell the embarrassment that surfaced when she looked at his face, however. She dearly wanted to know what he had meant by it, but that desire in itself had frustrated her, and she had forced herself to think solely of her position as a fairy doctor.

“I am trying to hold a serious discussion with you, Edgar.”

“If your desire is to improve yourself so that you feel worthy of your title, surely that is something you can do here?”

“The varieties and population of fairies in London is limited. There is no work for me to do here either. I hardly consider accompanying you on your whimsical excursions work, after all.”

“You want to work?” he asked, sounding totally surprised.

She was instantly dubious. What did he think she was there for? “Of course I do. It is through work that I may gain experience, and *that* is how I would become worthy of my position.”

“If only you had said as much sooner.”

As Lydia frowned at him, Edgar called for Tompkins, who brought in an armful of boxes and placed them in front of her.

“What are these?” she asked, studying the bundles of envelopes inside them.

“Letters of petition. When news spread to the minor territories that I inherited with the earldom, I was inundated with correspondence expressing their authors’ discontent at having to endure years of poor relations with fairies without the support of their earl. Even the Blue Knight Earl’s territories that do not fall within Fairyland are still home to countless fairies.”

Fairies were making off with crops and making a racket on people’s roofs in the middle of the night. They were chasing people away from springs, setting loose livestock, leaving footprints on washing...

The letters were filled with the kinds of complaints that fairy doctors had been resolving since time immemorial.

“Why on earth didn’t you share these with me before?”

“I feared that you would resign upon being presented with so much work so soon after your employment started.”

“I fail to see how amassing these letters for weeks on end is a preferable alternative!”

Not wanting to waste her time complaining, Lydia picked up the box and took it to the table by the window. Taking a seat where there was plenty of light, she began to pore over the letters.

“There is something I have learned from our recent experience, Lydia. Taking on the title of Blue Knight Earl necessitates bearing the resentments built up against its previous holders, who possessed mysterious and unique abilities. You tell me that fairies live for hundreds of years, and it seems that the previous

generations of earls have consistently punished wicked fairies. Some of them may indeed carry grudges against me, much like the Fogman, irrespective of the fact that I am not the same man who incurred their wrath."

"Could we discuss this later?" She wanted to focus on her reading. That she might finally have real work to do excited her, and she was determined to reply to these letters with solutions as quickly as possible.

"Certainly. We have all the time in the world, you and I. I cannot afford to let you go, not so long as I hold the title of Earl of Ibrazel."

But of course, she wasn't listening to a word he said.

Raven arrived with tea. Edgar watched him carefully lining the cups up on the table, smiling most cheerfully. "She is not leaving me after all."

"I see."

"Incidentally, Raven, which of you won that wager over the kiss?"

The boy shot a wary glance at Lydia, who was still by the window.

"She isn't listening," Edgar assured him.

"Your indecisiveness, my lord, left it at a draw."

"Does that anger you?"

"Not at all. It is my intention to see your orders through, whatever they may be. However, I fail to see the necessity of arranging for such a wager in order to lower her defenses. I would have thought that you were perfectly capable of stealing a kiss from her regardless."

"She becomes ever warier of me the closer our proximity. Under such circumstances, I would feel incredibly guilty taking a high-handed approach."

"The circumstances should have nothing to do with it," came a voice from the doorway. There, on two legs, stood Lydia's cat.

Edgar couldn't be sure it had really spoken, but he replied anyway. "Do you think so? I simply wish for us to become more familiar with one another. Surely sharing a single kiss would prove more effective than sharing a hundred words?

Is that not a well-established principle between man and woman?”

“Yet you squandered the opportunity when you had it,” Raven remarked.

So he *was* somewhat irritated. He had worked hard to follow Edgar’s orders and draw Lydia into the wager, only for his master to kiss her as he might a small child. It may have been a positive sign that the young man was getting slightly better at expressing his emotions.

Resting his chin in his palm, Edgar smiled. “I apologize for asking you to exert yourself in an area in which you struggle. At the time, however, Lydia seemed almost *too* vulnerable, such that it didn’t feel right to take advantage of her.”

Admittedly, that sentiment had pushed him to throw away the opportunity before him. One’s favored bottle of wine had to be reserved for a situation that called for it, after all.

“So you *do* know how to exercise restraint. I had you down as far more impulsive than that.” Nico jumped up onto one of the chairs surrounding the table, as if he was insisting on joining them for their tea break.

Raven placed a cup in front of the necktie-wearing cat as though he were just another gentleman. Edgar was gradually getting more accepting of Nico’s behaviors, whether drinking elegantly from a teacup or making what sounded like snide remarks.

“I am more than an animal, Nico,” the earl responded.

“I know. Animals are only in heat for a portion of the year.”

There was a light exhale that seemed to come from Raven. When it came to Lydia, the extraordinary was very much ordinary. Edgar had not seen the Fogman himself, but the fog and winds he had witnessed that day seemed too peculiar to attribute to a natural phenomenon. Being with her was bound to open his eyes to worlds unknown. Her perception, so far removed from the savage reality he knew, was like the sylph’s refreshing spring breeze. And that breeze had pulled him out from the deep fog he had been lost in for eight years.

While countless others who had been in the same hell had died, Edgar had lived. That fact had caused him untold suffering, but the moment that Lydia had chosen to stay with him, even as he was swallowed up by the Fogman, was the

moment he had found salvation. She'd had no involvement in his past and no obligation to do anything for him, but when she had clung to him so desperately with those delicate arms of hers, crying and apologizing, his brittle heart had felt whole. Perhaps there was no sin in his survival—not if he had found someone who wouldn't abandon him even at death's door. Her warm hand of salvation had offered him something other than the regret and resentment he had always known. The peaceful days of spring could not last forever, but for a while, he was willing to enjoy the finer weather.

Edgar watched as Raven silently placed a teacup beside Lydia. "It seems she won't be available to keep me company for quite a while."

"That's why you hid those letters from her, is it?" the gray cat remarked, drinking his milky tea with a silver spoon in one paw.

"It's enough for me that she remains here."

It was then that he noticed the other teacup and saucer at the place beside Nico. A pleasant breeze blew in from the open window, dancing through Lydia's caramel hair and the light-blue curtains. The sylph brought with it a flurry of petals, one of which fluttered down to land in the tea.