
3
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
A Gentle Proposal


3
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
A Gentle Proposal

Earl and Fairy: Volume 3 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8


3
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
A Gentle Proposal

The Fairy Queen's Bridegroom

"*Still* no sight of London? This is ridiculous," he grumbled and sighed. He had run himself to exhaustion, and now he threw himself down onto the river's grassy verge. It had been three days since he had left Scotland, and even his swiftness, of which he was so proud, was being challenged by the long journey to England's capital. "I cannae believe Lydia would do that, leaving without saying nothing."

Had she *really* been hired long-term as a fairy doctor in London? It sounded too farcical to be true. Apparently, it was a *human* who was keeping her there: the "Blue Knight Earl," who held territory in the fairies' realm. It was a familiar name, but if this earl truly had the power to rule over fairies, he should have no need for a fairy doctor in the first place.

Lydia's pursuer had come to England determined to bring her back. He was the first of his relatives ever to cross the border. "Ah'll find her no matter what."

Just then, there came a song that seemed to float down from the sky.

"*A pure-white moon, a moon for Her Majesty, a moon for Her Majesty's bridegroom...*"

Moon?

His curiosity piqued, he got to his feet and took on the form of a beautiful young man. A small fairy was flitting from branch to branch. He called out to it. "Hallo there, ma'am."

"Hello!"

"I'm headin' for London. Am I on the right path?"

"Yes, it's very close. I'm going there myself to meet Her Majesty's bridegroom!"

"Sounds like a wonderful occasion. What was that white moon ye were singing about?"

“The same moon that everybody knows, of course!”

“I don’t believe that. How’re ye s’posed to get the moon?”

“I already have it! Only the real moon waxes and wanes as it does!”

“That must be a fine treasure indeed. Would ye let me have a wee look?”

“All right, but after that I must be off!” Her high spirits seemed to have rid her of any wariness, and the little fairy produced a ring complete with a milky-white “moon” embedded in it.

“And ye say it waxes and wanes?”

“It certainly does!”

“How interestin’. Thank you for showing me.” He smiled as he returned the ring to her.

“You’re welcome! Now, as I said, I must be off!”

“Of course. Sorry for keeping ye.”

The fairy flitted away again. Once it had disappeared beyond the trees, he stuck his tongue out after it. “Foolish wee lassie.”

There in his open palm lay the moon ring.

***

Paul Firman arrived at the salon dressed in a borrowed suit. He had never been to an event like this. Several well-known names were in attendance at this exhibition, hosted at a high-class club. The majority of the paintings on display in the large hall took after the trend currently favored by the Royal Academy. Much was made of these early Renaissance style pieces, often inspired by tales of romance and painted with a care that gave them an almost spiritual quality. It was said that they perfectly complemented the lovely Queen of England and her reign over this realm.

Then there were paintings by young unknown artists. If any of those should catch the eye of the attending ladies and gentlemen, its artist might gain the opportunity to enter into the more prestigious painting circles. Paul was a novice himself, but it was for this reason that his own piece had joined the

others beneath the extravagant chandeliers, placed inside a gorgeous frame arranged for him by an art dealer. So far, however, no one had stopped to admire his artwork.

His work was often considered a little on the plain side. He was confident that he knew what styles were preferred by the aristocracy, but he still struggled to change his paintings. He hadn't expected his work to garner much attention here. Besides, there was something else that had caught his interest about midway through the gathering.

There was a young man with striking blond hair at the center of a circle that was lively with conversation. There was an artful beauty to him that outshone even that of the men and women depicted in the paintings. When he moved, the air itself seemed to move with him. His shadow danced behind him as though the light followed wherever he went. But it was not his looks that Paul was interested in. It was his resemblance to a young boy the painter had known. A young boy who was supposed to be dead.

"Look sharp, Mr. Firman. This is your chance!"

Only then did Paul realize that the blond man was now standing in front of his painting. The dealer hastily led him over and then took on the tone of a courteous salesman.

"A fine painting, wouldn't you say, my lord?"

The young lord's name was Edgar Ashenbert, an earl who was currently the subject of several rumors within high society. They said he had returned from abroad just this spring.

"Indeed it is. Might this be Titania?"

"Yes. It is inspired by the Fairy Queen from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*."

The fairy dozed in the shadows of primroses. The earl was staring at the painting, enraptured, as though he had fallen in love with her. The scene held little charm by itself, but Paul was surprised to see just how much more brilliant it seemed with the earl's gaze upon it. It was like the way in which the blond man seemed to transform his very attire into art: his soft, fitted mountain-goat-pelt gloves, the knot of his necktie, and even the elegant, glossy finish of his

evening jacket. Paul swore that he could even smell the sweet scent of the flowers depicted in the painting. In fact, it was not the flowers, but an approaching noblewoman; the illusion was so convincing that it took him a while to notice.

"That would make it perfect for your lordship, would it not?" asked the lady in the blue dress.

The dealer did not miss his opportunity to push. "I agree with our dear lady. Within London's high society, there are none better acquainted with fairies than you, my lord. I took the liberty of selecting this piece among many which also featured fairies." He turned to Paul and rushed through introducing the artist.

The earl, said to hold territory in Fairyland itself, smiled warmly at Paul. Apparently, he was only around the age of twenty—younger than the artist, and yet he looked at him with the generosity of a patron. It seemed a reckless pursuit for the dealer to be trying to garner interest from *this* earl in particular.

The dealer's elbow in his ribs pushed Paul past his timidity and allowed him to speak. "I am most flattered by your interest, my lord."

"Do you paint fairies often?"

"Ah, I do, yes. I am partial to the fairy-inspired works of Drayton and Spenser."

"Have you ever seen a fairy?"

"I'm sorry?" Unsure whether the question was in jest or not, Paul didn't know how to respond. The title, Earl of Ibrazel, had a romanticism about it that captured people's attention, but as far as he knew, it was nothing more than a name. This earl wouldn't be the first peer whose title included territories that didn't actually exist.

"My lord, you mustn't tease the gentleman. He is here to display his art."

"My dear lady, are you saying you do not believe in fairies?" the earl asked.

"If your lordship claims to be able to see them, I may be inclined to change my mind."

“I see one as we speak. A fairy who possesses beauty far beyond that of any mortal woman, and who is capable of captivating any heart. And to think that I am even conversing with her. This simply must be a dream.”

“Oh, you flatter me.”

The earl and the lady fell deeper into their conversation. It seemed they were at risk of forgetting about Paul and the art dealer altogether. The dealer stood behind him and pressed him to do more to promote his work, but he had never been the loquacious type. As he struggled to find the right words, the earl suddenly turned to him as though a thought had struck him.

“I should like to see your other works, Mr. Firman.”

“Sorry?” Paul froze.

The dealer brushed past the artist and leaned forward eagerly. “Your lordship has taken a liking to Mr. Firman’s work?”

“Indeed. This painting of Titania calls to mind my beloved.”

“Your beloved!” the lady exclaimed. “Your lordship has a lover?”

“Unfortunately, my feelings are unrequited.”

“Why, I cannot believe that!”

“It would seem that I do not understand the inner workings of the fairer sex at all. Anything I do leads her to anger.”

“It is unfathomable to me that you do not understand women!”

“Be that as it may, my lady, it is true. Enough that I would seek instruction.”

“I would be more than happy to offer my advice.”

Paul stood stock still as he watched them leave. He had no idea whether the earl was truly interested in his painting or whether it was a pretext to seduce the noblewoman. The earl *did* resemble the boy that Paul remembered, but the impression he gave off when he spoke was wholly different. But that was to be expected, as they couldn’t possibly be the same person.

***

Sleep under a grafted apple—a ymp-tree—and you would be taken by the

fairies. Young men and women blessed with beauty had to be especially careful when passing under the trees, for the fairies' powers would lull them into a slumber. If one were to give in to temptation and take a nap in the roots, it would be a nap from which they would never wake up. Those who disappeared in this way were said to become brides and grooms of the fairies.

"One of the Blue Knight Earl's forefathers was also said to have fallen asleep beneath a grafted apple," Tompkins explained. The butler sat in the Ashenbert estate, systematically sealing the mountains of invitations on the desk into envelopes.

Blue Knight Earl was the fairies' name for Lord Ashenbert. It came from the Blue Knight of old. Most modern Britons associated that title with the protagonist of a sixteenth-century fantasy novel, but there were those who knew that the knight was based on a real person who had passed the title down.

"What happened to him?" Lydia asked. She was enjoying the fairy talk with Tompkins as she assisted him in sealing the invitations.

"It is said that he was whisked away to a beautiful Fairy Queen."

Previous generations holding the Blue Knight's blood had possessed mysterious powers which aided them in ruling over their Fairyland territories, but that bloodline had long since come to an end. Tompkins's family, however, had served the lineage for generations, and these fairy-related tales of the earls had been passed down ever since.

"Did he marry her?"

"He very nearly had to. However, the earl knew of a certain spell. Using it set him free and allowed him to return to the mortal realm."

"Ah, yes, I know that spell myself."

"You do? But of course you do. I would expect nothing less of his lordship's fairy doctor."

Lydia had been hired by the earl as a fairy specialist who could see and speak to them. She knew, too, the traditional rules of communicating with the creatures, an art that had been fading away long before the turn into the

current nineteenth century. The basic nature of the job involved the fairy doctor sharing their knowledge to assist in relations between humans and fairies, as well as striking deals and bargaining with the fickle beings. Lydia followed after her late mother in the profession. Although she had only just started and still had much to learn, she liked to think she had as much motivation and pride as the most seasoned of doctors.

"Would you tell me more about that spell, Miss Carlton?"

"You do not know yourself, Mr. Tompkins?"

"The specifics were never included in the stories. I have always wondered about it."

"I would very much like to know too." Now it was Edgar—the current Blue Knight Earl—who had inserted himself into the conversation. He swept into the room and placed a piece of paper on the table. "Some additional invitees, Tompkins."

"Is that all of them?"

"Most likely. I do hope the food will be ready in time."

"I shall see that it is." Tompkins jumped on Edgar's unreasonable requests like a ruffian bated into fisticuffs. He saw it as his responsibility to do so. If the day ever came when he had to refuse his master, he would see it as a failure of his duties.

London's social season was underway, and it seemed like there was a dinner party, or a ball, or a gathering of some sort or another going on every single evening. It was no surprise that Edgar had announced a party of his own. However, he had selected a date that was a little close for comfort. Lydia was impressed that Tompkins was more than keeping up with his arrangements.

"Incidentally, Lydia, you are also invited. You can expect an invitation to arrive at your father's house in due course."

She froze, stopping her work. "I cannot attend a *ball*!"

"There is nothing to be concerned about. It won't just be aristocrats who are in attendance." His words did little to comfort her. Anyone from the middle

class who attended such gatherings would inevitably be wealthy. “You needn’t worry too much about social etiquette either. It isn’t as though Her Majesty will be in attendance. Say, do you remember the Duchess Masefield? We met her at the opera house. She has expressed an eagerness to hear you speak of the fairies once more. In fact, did you know that the Duke is the cousin to your father’s teacher?”

This was news to Lydia. Not to mention Edgar had negated any excuse she might have, and now she could no longer refuse his invitation. Never mind that her father was seen as an eccentric in his academic circles; her lack of attendance would be a slight to the nobleman with a connection to her family.

Edgar always operated like this.

“I do not know how to dance,” she pointed out.

“When is the instructor due, Tompkins?”

Lydia gawked.

“This afternoon,” replied the butler.

“So you see, Lydia, that won’t be a problem either.”

As far as she was concerned, it was a huge problem. She wanted to shout as much, but she seemed to lose the will to speak in the face of Edgar’s warm smile. She even forgot to close her mouth.

“For the time being, it will suffice that you *appear* to be able to dance. I shall be the only one to dance with you, in any case. Do be sure that you do not accept anyone else’s invitation.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“It would make me jealous.” Though he kept his eyes locked on Lydia’s and spoke without faltering, she knew he was only teasing her. This was how he always was.

Even as the Earl of Ibrazel, he didn’t possess any knowledge of fairies. It was only natural, given how he had obtained the title. That was why he had hired Lydia as his personal fairy doctor, and he had given her very little choice in the matter.

The seventeen-year-old had come from rural Scotland, and her employment had been approved by the Queen herself, giving her no room to refuse. She had her own office in the London mansion and, having worked there for three months, finally felt like she had grown into the role. However, as it was on this occasion, she often found herself wondering what on earth the earl was thinking.

Any female in his vicinity inevitably became enthralled by his sweet talk. Blessed with good looks and a calculating mind, he was capable of using his charm to its full power. Lydia knew she mustn't take any of his enticing words at face value. To Edgar, they were nothing more than tools to make other people act as he wanted them to. What she didn't understand was where the fun lay in dragging a country girl like herself to his party. If it amused him to show off his rare fairy doctor like she was an exotic parrot, then it was an amusement she wished he would soon grow tired of.

"If only the Moon's Spell would work on you too," Lydia muttered with a sigh.

"The Moon's Spell?" asked Edgar.

"It is a spell that drives away persistent fairies."

"Would that be the spell used in the story I told you?" Tompkins asked.

"Yes, that's it. In order to reject a fairy's proposal, one must utter the words '*Only if thou would grant me the moon that waxes and wanes.*' Such a thing is impossible, and so the fairy has no option but to leave."

"Ah." Tompkins nodded sagely. "They do say that fairies are faithful to their promises. So that is how our earl of old escaped his fate."

With nothing more than a glance at his butler, Edgar moved next to Lydia and leaned on her desk. He looked down at her, smiling suggestively. "I am persistent enough that those words wouldn't be enough to dissuade me. I *would* find a way to present you with the moon." Her use of the word "persistent" seemed to have offended him a little.

"You ought to save those words for the woman you are serious about."

"I *am* serious about you."

As you are about whichever woman happens to be standing before you.

"Which is why I must ask you this," he continued. "You have used that spell before, have you not?"

"Ah..." Her heart jolted at his perceptive words.

"If only it would work on me *too*. Who did you drive away?"

"A... A fairy."

"A fairy proposed to you?"

"I wouldn't say *proposed*..."

"So, there was someone before me. Or perhaps there still is. Someone who loves you in the same way that I do."

"That wasn't the case at all! He was just an eccentric fairy. A fairy, so it wasn't 'love,' it was closer to wishing to possess a human."

"But has there *ever* been another?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Another man who has fallen in love with you?"

"Of course not! They were all scared off because my only friends were fairies. I have only ever received one love letter in my life, and that was from a boy who had lost a wager with his friends." She quickly regained her senses once she had spoken the words and grew embarrassed to have shared all of that with Edgar. There had been no need to go into *quite* so much detail.



“Boys struggle to express themselves. Some only allow themselves to

approach their favored girl under the guise of a joke."

That may have been true, but it certainly wasn't in Lydia's case. Strangely enough, he hadn't laughed at her either. She had never shared the story with anyone else but always thought that if she had, they would surely find it amusing. After all, it would sound like a harmless prank to them. Why, then, was she relieved that Edgar *hadn't* made sport of her?

While gentle, there was something sensuous in the ash-mauve gaze that was fixed on her. When their eyes met, Lydia panicked, unsure of what to do. The rational part of her mind reminded her that this was one of his fool-proof methods for deceiving people. That some of her rationality remained was likely a result of the fact that she knew he used to be a thief and a villain. She wondered if he knew that his skillful tongue would never have an effect on her. That might explain why she felt as though the two of them were starting to form a friendship, if not a very conventional one. It may have been a one-sided sentiment.

She had only just realized that Tompkins had left the room at some point when Edgar slid his hand over hers on the desk. It was such a casual movement that she lacked the wherewithal to avoid it.

"You know, I am almost *grateful* that the men around you have never been adept at expressing their feelings." He held her hand tightly, hindering her attempt to pull away, yet somehow managing to keep his grip gentle at the same time. Perhaps that was why she let her own hand fall limp.

"My lord, a package has arrived from Mr. Slade." Raven's announcement interrupted them. The dark-skinned boy worked as Edgar's servant, and the earl trusted him more than any other. They had been together since they lived in America's underworld, and Raven was faithful to the point of doing unimaginable things to protect his master.

With a sigh, Edgar retracted his hand and turned to his servant. "Raven. I believe tact was the first thing I ever taught you."

If that were true, it seemed an odd thing to prioritize.

"It was, my lord. However, the other day you asked me to lend my assistance to Miss Carlton should she ever appear to require it."

Edgar's brows knitted together. "I see."

Raven was being completely serious. Before he had met Edgar, he had been taught to discard his emotions and had been used entirely as a tool. Tact could not have come easily to him.

"Which should I prioritize?"

"It depends entirely upon the time and place. One situation cannot be compared to... Well, no matter. You sensed that Lydia required your assistance and you acted accordingly. We shall leave it at that."

Raven was usually expressionless, but the subtle way in which he blinked now suggested he was relieved that Edgar hadn't reproved him.

"Now, Mr. Slade... Ah yes, that art dealer. Open the parcel for me. This is perfect timing; I was hoping for an opportunity to show it to Lydia."

Raven placed the fairy painting on the table. It was around one foot by one foot and painted in pale hues. She could not help but admire it.

"It's beautiful."

"Do you like it? The artist is relatively young," Edgar said.

"Oh. A woman painted this."

"I bought this for the subject, not the artist," he replied impatiently. "This Fairy Queen reminded me so much of you that I could not bear to do without it." He turned his passionate gaze to her once more.

"She does not resemble me in the slightest."

"Yes, she does. She is lovely, mysterious, and if she were to open her eyes, I am certain they would be the same golden-green as yours. Beautiful Titania. In my eyes, she is the spitting image of you."

There he goes again.

Lydia looked at Raven to request his assistance. However, it seemed he had decided to prioritize tact in this instance and averted his gaze.

"I know! Shall I commission a similar painting with you as the fairy's model? It would be the perfect piece to exhibit in this estate."

“I could never *model*.”

“You would simply need to seat yourself in a comfortable position. A wonderful idea indeed. Your portrait would not be angered if I kissed her.” Edgar brought his lips closer to the sleeping Titania.

Lydia found herself panicking in spite of the fact that they looked nothing alike. “Don’t!” she cried.

“Why?”

“Because, as you have stated, you believe her to resemble me, and your actions are serving to confuse me! I would rather you *not* toy with my portrait either.”

“It was never my intention to do anything that amounted to indecency.”

She gaped at him. “Who said anything about indecency?”

He looked back at her reddening face with an amused glint in his eye. “Pray tell, what is on your mind at this moment?”

A frivolous man through and through!

“Honestly! I am not your plaything! You may ask me to learn how to dance or to model for a portrait, but unless you give me the moon, I shan’t do any of it!” She made the vow on the off-chance that the Moon’s Spell may work to protect against his nonsense. How much more peaceful her days would be then!

Naturally, it had no effect on Edgar, whose smile only grew more gleeful. “For now, you should focus your undivided attention on your dance lessons. Raven, I ask that you fill in as Lydia’s partner.”

“I’m practicing with Raven?”

“The instructor was unable to arrange for his assistant to come, given the short notice. Be patient with her, Raven, even if she should tread on your toes.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Lydia cast a fearful glance at the boy. He was perfectly loyal to Edgar but merciless when it came to their enemies. The idea of dancing with someone who had apparently been raised as a cold-blooded killer was somewhat

alarming. It wasn't that she disliked him, but she would have preferred to avoid tempting the murderous impulses that he himself had admitted to finding hard to control.

"Unlike fairies, Lydia, you will soon learn that happiness comes more quickly to those who resign themselves to persistent human men rather than those who spurn them."

Apparently the Moon's Spell had had the opposite effect on Edgar. He was being just a touch nastier than usual, she noted with a sigh.

Quadrille, waltz, galop... It was a struggle to remember any of these new dances when their steps threw Lydia's mind into utter confusion. Raven performed his part with mechanical accuracy, meaning a single mistake from her threatened their balance. She had, of course, kicked and trodden on him several times.

"I'm sorry," she stuttered.

"It's all right."

He never complained that it hurt, and there was nothing in his face to suggest it, but Lydia could have sworn she sensed a flicker of anger from him as they paused in their movements.

I wonder who taught Raven to dance and when? The needless thought pushed her into another misstep.

"Oh, not like that, madame. The left foot goes first, and then you turn." The lanky man gave his instruction while playing the violin. He spoke at an excessively high pitch. "Might I suggest we take a break? It wouldn't do for excitement to lead to injury during your very first lesson."

Lydia would not have been surprised if Raven was even more relieved than she was to hear those words. The servant showed the instructor to the next room, where there were beverages waiting. Left alone, Lydia sat down in the chair by the window. Then there appeared a gray cat.

"What are you up to now, Lydia?" The fairy cat was her partner. He acted like a gentleman, even going so far as to wear a necktie, and he stood on two feet

on the windowsill with his paws on his hips. His appearance, however, was entirely that of a cat.

“Is it not obvious? I am dancing, Nico.”

“I was under the impression that you were giving that Raven chap a beating.”

She supposed she ought to be angry with him, but she could only agree with what he said. “Was I that awful?” she asked glumly.

“You seem more dangerous than him when you dance.”

“I wonder if he’s angry.”

“I wouldn’t let it concern you. I bet he’d allow himself to be brutally tortured should the good earl will it.”

Having her dancing compared to torture did nothing to lift her spirits.

“Um, I beg your pardon...” There came a voice like a bell’s chime, but when Lydia looked around, she couldn’t see anyone. It may well have been her imagination.

“Oh, that’s right. Is the earl at home, Lydia?” Nico asked.

“I believe so. Why?”

“This young lady has business with him.”

He lifted up his tufty tail, revealing the tiny fairy hidden within it. She was dressed in golden flower petals, and she pushed Nico’s fur aside to step forward to look at Lydia, then gave a tiny curtsey.

“It’s nice to meet you, fairy doctor.”

“Are you a fairy of the field?” Lydia asked.

“Yes! Please call me Marigold.”

The sprite of a marigold flower...

“What business have you with his lordship?”

“I have been entrusted by my mistress with a gift for the Blue Knight Earl. I ask that you pass it on to him.”

The fairy was exceedingly polite and not of a type that was known for its

trickery. Without putting much thought into the consequences, Lydia nodded.

“It would be best to call for the butler at the entrance...although Edgar likely won’t be able to see you. Are you able to take on human form?”

“I’m not especially good at it.” Marigold disappeared. In her place, there appeared a young girl in a dress the same color as her petals. “Unfortunately, I have never managed to take the form of an adult.” To hear an apparent five-year-old speak with such eloquence was a curious experience indeed, but that was fairies for you.

“That shouldn’t matter. I, um... I have more dance practice now so, Nico, could you show her to the entrance?”

Raven and the instructor had just come back into the room. Marigold took on her normal form again and held fast to Nico’s tail.

“Are you ready to continue our practice, madame?” the instructor asked, and Lydia went to stand in front of Raven. “Let us begin with the waltz.”

He began to clap out a rhythm. Beneath those claps, Lydia caught snatches of what the fairy was saying to Nico as the pair left.

“I am finally going to see the Blue Knight Earl, Her Majesty’s bridegroom!”

What?

Generations ago, there had been a Fairy Queen who had attempted to marry the Blue Knight Earl. Was Marigold *her* messenger? If so, did this mean she had the moon with her? It shouldn’t be possible, but supposing that was the case and Edgar accepted it...he would be forced to marry the Fairy Queen. The panic-inducing thoughts had her feet tripping over themselves again.

“Miss Carlton!”

Raven grabbed her arm to try and keep her steady, but her mind had been distracting her for too long. As she tried to push herself away from him, she tripped on her skirt and fell forward with a yelp. Crashing into him, they both tumbled to the floor, where he ended up pinned beneath her. Being of Asian descent, his frame was more delicate than that of an average British gentleman’s, which prevented him from keeping them upright.

“Ouch! Oh, I’m sorry, Raven! I need to get a grip on myself...” Though she tried to get off him, the crinoline in her skirt made it incredibly difficult.

“Are either of you hurt?!” The instructor finally made it to them, but apparently, it didn’t cross his mind to lend them a hand.

Still, Lydia struggled and, in doing so, she noticed the faintest lift of Raven’s eyebrows. The sudden, sharp bloodlust—and at such close range—made the hairs on her skin stand up.

He must *be angry after all of that!*

The thought came just as she felt a powerful shove on her shoulders. She caught only a glimmer of the knife Raven had pulled out from inside his jacket. Then came the instructor’s shout.

“I know you work for the Prince, you filthy dog!”

Lydia blinked. Why was their teacher talking about the Prince? She didn’t have time to give voice to the question before Raven shoved past her, grabbed the instructor, and flashed his knife. There was a scream, then the violent sounds of a struggle. Perhaps even louder was Lydia’s own shriek when she registered what had just dropped in front of her.

Edgar and Tompkins were on the scene in no time at all, but the instructor was already gone. He had fled from the window, leaving only the fingers that Raven had severed.

It’s becoming unbearable.

Since becoming acquainted with Edgar, Lydia had been no stranger to dangerous situations. Fairy-related dangers were something she had prepared herself for; the spilling of blood was not. The earl had escaped from a mysterious organization headed by the “Prince,” and was intent on starting a war with them. She wondered whether the incident with the instructor would be the last she would see if she stayed there. It briefly occurred to her that she might resign, but the promise of work was too much of a pull.

Though Edgar wasn’t descended from the Ashenberts, the territory he had acquired with his earldom was still home to both humans and fairies. Even an

inexperienced fairy doctor like Lydia could be of service to him. Returning to Scotland would mean being treated like an eccentric again and waiting indefinitely for work that may or may not come.

"The instructor was after you, Raven?"

"Yes, my lord. He accused me of working for the Prince."

Edgar paced in front of Lydia, deep in thought.

"What does this all mean?" she asked.

"Most likely, he belongs to a group that considers the Prince their adversary. They must believe that Raven is still under his control and has come to Britain on his orders."

"Then why not just let them know that you are also enemies of the Prince?"

"The attack came without warning. I doubt they would be willing to listen calmly. That being said, if they were truly dangerous, the Prince would have curbed them by now."

"If they knew who I was," Raven suggested, "then perhaps they also know who you are, my lord."

Edgar paused in his motions to consider it. "You may be right. We ought to take due care going forward."

The Prince and his organization, who had taken everything from Edgar and made him their slave, were in America, an entire ocean away. It would take time for them to locate him, time he had been using to become earl and establish his place within Britain's high society, with the aim of becoming untouchable. He had also been plotting revenge against those who had caused him and his companions to suffer, but for the moment, he was content just to enjoy the freedom he had earned. Lydia hoped that he and Raven would go on to forget about their traumatic past and notions of revenge, but she knew that might be asking too much. The idea that they were now being targeted by their enemy's enemy seemed like a cruel twist of fate.

Perhaps it was partly concern that kept Lydia there, despite knowing she might be drawn into the bloodshed to come. She wanted to see Edgar revive

the earldom that she had helped him to obtain, even if there was nothing she could contribute beyond her official duties. She wanted to support him too, not least for the fairies who inhabited his territories.

As she was mulling things over, she noticed the bandage wrapped around Raven's hand. "Did you get hurt, Raven?"

"It is only a graze."

She hesitated. "I'm sorry. If only I hadn't fallen on top of you..."

Under normal circumstances, the boy would never have sustained an injury against a single opponent.

Edgar shot her a glance. "You *fell on top* of him? Hm...perhaps I ought to take over as your partner from tomorrow."

She could only imagine the horrors that awaited should she have fallen on top of *Edgar*. "I couldn't practice with you. I would be too distracted!"

"Distracted by what?" He smirked.

"Ah...not what *you're* thinking! I wish you would devote your thoughts to more sensible matters!"

"I am sure that even Raven might have struggled to compose himself, given the circumstances. Well?"

Realizing a response was expected of him, the servant thought for a moment before offering a highly serious, "Perhaps."

"Elaborate."

"Oh, for goodness' sake! *Must* you ask him to?!" Lydia protested, her face red.

Edgar chuckled; Raven, as ever, remained expressionless.

"You will have to tell me later," the earl said, "when Lydia isn't around to be shy about it."

"Yes, my lord."

"Raven!" she cried, appalled. She could hardly believe how light their conversation had gotten, considering they had just learned that they were

being targeted. If only her employer could treat her with a bit more professionalism, she lamented—and not for the first time.

Tompkins interrupted them with a message. “My lord, it seems our *real* dance instructor was pushed down the outside steps on his way out and has sprained his ankle. His messenger has just informed me that he will be unable to dance for a while.”

Edgar sighed. “It was all planned, was it? Find me a new instructor at once, Tompkins—but be prudent in your selection.”

“Yes, my lord. Also, that young lady has been wondering whether you are still engaged.”

“Ah. I almost forgot.”

Lydia looked up suddenly. The reminder of work pushed her exasperation with Edgar from her mind. “Marigold! I forgot too! Have you already spoken to her, Edgar?”

“You are acquainted with her? I haven’t, as it happens. Tompkins came to inform me of her arrival just as you screamed.”

“Thank goodness I had the opportunity to warn you! She’s a fairy, Edgar. I shall go to meet her with you to make sure you don’t run into any trouble. And if she tries to give you something, you must *not* accept it. No matter what it is.”

Edgar seemed perplexed, but he nodded all the same. He took a seat on the sofa and addressed Tompkins. “Call her in.”

In the short time since Lydia last saw her, Marigold's spirits seemed to have been completely dashed; she looked utterly down in the dumps.

"Are you sure she's a fairy?" Edgar whispered to Lydia.

"Yes. She tells me she struggles to take on the form of an adult."

"What a pity. Even I wouldn't make any advances on her unless she was at least ten years older."

Lydia wasn't entirely sure she believed him. She could imagine him wanting to seem charming even to an infant. Her expectations were proven right after the girl plucked up her courage to give a proper greeting, and Edgar took her hand and graciously showed her to a seat.

"My lord, I have been entrusted with the item promised by my mistress. The item you requested upon her supplication for marriage."

"Marriage?" Edgar echoed.

"*You* were not the one proposed to," Lydia explained. "It was an ancestor of the Blue Knight Earl."

"Oh yes, the story Tompkins recounted for us. I never imagined it to be true. In that case, Miss Marigold, would your mistress happen to be the Fairy Queen?"

"Yes! She is Queen of the Lunar Fields."

"Is she beautiful?"

"She certainly is!"

Lydia wasn't sure he should be sounding so eager. That being said, if he did want to accept the Fairy Queen's proposal, she had no reason to stop him.

"Does she take the same form as you? I might struggle to stir up the appropriate passion, in that case."

"There is no need to worry about that, my lord! Passion will not be required."

"Simply put, there will be no occasion during my hypothetical wedlock to the Fairy Queen in which passion plays a part? Then what is there to look forward to?"

“I should think that there are greater concerns before that!” Lydia pinched his arm. If she let things continue as they were, he may forget that they were discussing a fairy altogether. “Marigold, I believe that the earl asked for the moon in exchange for the queen’s hand in marriage. Does this mean that you have the moon with you?”

“Yes. Well, I *did*, but...it was stolen!” Marigold suddenly burst into tears.

“A thief, was it? How despicable. Would you mind sharing the particulars with me? I may be able to offer my assistance,” Edgar said.

“Edgar, please.” Lydia turned back to the fairy. “You must return to your queen. Whatever was stolen from you cannot have been the moon, for it still hangs in the night sky. His lordship therefore cannot accept the proposal.”

“Her Majesty *did* find the moon,” Marigold insisted. “Who is to say that the moon in the sky is the real one? The one in our possession waxed and waned just as it should.”

“That sounds like a wonderful curiosity. I should very much like to see it.” Edgar continued to speak without thinking, even as Lydia tried to send Marigold home.

“As I would like for you to see it! I truly believe that you would adore it and consent to marry my mistress. Unfortunately, it was substituted for...this.” The fairy produced an ordinary pebble. “It was only a moment ago, in preparation for meeting your lordship, that I went to inspect it and found this in its place. But I know who stole the moon! It must have been that wicked fairy!”

“A fairy stole it? Then it would be impossible for humans such as ourselves to retrieve it.”

Though Marigold looked crestfallen, she nodded in agreement. No matter how knowledgeable the fairy doctor, even they could not intervene in matters that had never involved humans in the first place.

“He called out to me when I was on my way. I should never have shown him the moon!”

Lydia was sympathetic, but there was nothing more to be done. “Could you not simply return home, Marigold?”

“Her Majesty will scold me.”

“I am sure she will forgive you. It was stolen, not lost out of carelessness.”

“Is it possible to make a new moon?” Edgar suggested.

“*Make* one? My lord, it was born of a miracle of nature and is extremely rare...” As though realizing what she was saying, Marigold quickly shook her head. “It was the moon. And there exists only one moon in this world.”

“But Fairy Queens, such as Diana and Titania, are often described as goddesses of the moon. Would not such a goddess be able to produce a small moon at will?”

“It would be more accurate to describe Fairy Queens as fairies of moon*light*,” Lydia explained. “Groups of such tiny fairies are as the flowers, insects, and creatures around them given new form. The highest fairy among them, the one who represents the moon, becomes the Fairy Queen.”

“My, how wonderful. So, you are the charming marigold. I wonder if there are fairies of shamrock and daisies too. Or fairies of crickets and grasshoppers?” Delighted, Edgar continued, “If it would inconvenience you to leave so soon, you are welcome to stay a while. Isn’t it wonderful, Lydia? A fairy guest! It would grant Miss Marigold the excuse that she had done all she could to retrieve the moon.”

Marigold raised her tear-streaked face. She looked the tiniest bit relieved. The fairies of the field were good-natured creatures. Having her stay a while shouldn’t cause any problems.



It concerned Lydia a little that Edgar hadn’t stopped to consider that Marigold

might be dangerous. However, he wasn't at risk of being spirited away so long as he refused any "moon" offered to him. Besides, the fairy had lost whatever it was.

At some point, a gray cat had taken a seat at the table next to them. He pawed at his nose, whiskers twitching. "Nothing good can come of this." Nico shot a glance at the pebble on the table.

"Why do you say that? Because of the fairy that deceived Marigold?"

"I'm not sure. I just feel as though something bad will happen. That pebble has moss on it."

Moss, meaning it came from underwater. Now Lydia herself was beginning to feel uneasy. *It couldn't be...*

"My lord, what do you wish me to do with the instructor's belongings?" Tompkins's appearance only served to dishearten her further.

Said belongings were the four fingers that the intruder had left behind. The image that had been burned into Lydia's mind returned and overwhelmed her.

"I doubt he will return to fetch them. Why not feed them to some stray dogs?"

Catching that brief glimpse of Edgar's cruel side suddenly had Lydia believing that everything was about to take a turn for the worse and end up tangled together. She shook her head to eliminate the thought.

Quarrel at the Ball

Things suddenly became very hectic at the Carlton residence once it was decided that they would attend Edgar's ball. It was enough for Lydia to forget all about the Fairy Queen's missing moon and the organization opposing the Prince. Nothing of note had happened since that eventful day, and even her ominous premonition was starting to slip her mind. She needed to have her dress made, her shoes, gloves, and hair ornaments prepared, and everything to do with dancing and etiquette fixed firmly in her head.

In terms of the dress, she didn't own anything suitable for a formal event. On the occasions that Edgar had dragged her around opera houses and noble homes, she had worn gowns provided by his estate. He justified dressing her up by stating that these were work outings for the purpose of introducing her to society as his official fairy doctor. As far as she was concerned, the ball was a similar case, but her father had been uncharacteristically firm in declaring that she mustn't view an official invitation as work, and had been making every effort to ensure she would be suitably dressed.

As a university professor, her father had his fair share of interactions with the upper class. However, he wasn't fond of crowded places, and so wouldn't attend their events unless the invitation came from someone he could not refuse. This time, he would be accompanying Lydia, partly to save her the embarrassment of going alone. That they were both doing something neither of them were used to served to make the atmosphere in the Carlton residence even more chaotic.

It was amid this chaos that the day of the ball finally arrived. Professor Carlton had been to the barber's shop that afternoon, transforming his usual disheveled hair into something much more respectable. Now, the dressmaker was running late, and Carlton kept pulling his spectacles off restlessly and wiping them. Due to the short notice, the final arrangements for Lydia's gown had been scheduled for the day of the ball itself. In the end, it didn't arrive until the evening, but thanks to the housekeeper's excellent work, she was dressed and ready in time to leave.

The white dress was made from muslin and decorated with fetching ribbons in buttery-yellow hues. The neckline and skirt were adorned with fine embroidered lace. Though Lydia usually wore her red hair loose, it had been curled and pinned up for the occasion. The finishing touches were a freesia ornament in her hair and elbow-length gloves.

The housekeeper disappeared when Carlton called her from downstairs, and Lydia was left to study her completed outfit in the looking glass.

“How do I look, Nico?” she asked her fairy companion.

“I am not sure why you expect me to have an opinion.” He yawned and rose to his feet. He had watched the humans’ busywork over the past few days with a dismissive eye, but there was no hiding the new white silk tie around his neck. Apparently, he was intending to go to the ball as well.

“The dressmaker said white was the most appropriate color for a first ball. Personally, I find it a touch too bright for comfort.”

“Does the color matter when you still have your youth?”

“And she said I could dye it or replace the ribbon or lace for later occasions. As many times as I like.”

“Just how many balls are you planning to attend in your lifetime?”

“I didn’t realize how exposed my shoulders would be.”

“You aren’t listening, are you?”

Lydia turned to check the other side of her dress in the mirror. “You don’t think the back is too open, do you?”

“After all of that, you’re looking forward to it!”

She came to her senses then. “Looking *forward* to it?! Of course not. My attendance is obligatory, that’s all.”

“There’s nothing wrong with enjoying it. It’ll be nothing like the balls in the country, and you’ll be able to boast about it endlessly.”

Nico was right. There was barely a girl alive who didn’t dream about attending a ball, and Lydia was no exception. Such events were common in her rural

hometown too. They were closer to modest parties held by the middle class, but even then, the girls who had never been outside the town longed to be invited.

Lydia had never been to one. Everyone in her small town knew her as the loopy fairy doctor, and so she never thought she would be able to enjoy them. But now she was about to attend a full-scale ball hosted by a nobleman, something that was more suited to fairy tales and dreams than her reality. Her dancing ability left much to be desired, but she wouldn't even have had the opportunity *to* dance if not for Edgar. She wanted to make the most of what was sure to be a splendid evening.

"You are right," she said. "My attendance may be mandatory, but it would still be a shame not to enjoy it."

"Just be sure not to dance with any strangers lest you end up embarrassing them." Nico had been witness to all of her practice sessions. If that was the advice he had for her, her dancing may have been more dire than she'd thought. The instructor had assured her she would be all right, but she *had* detected something that looked like a grimace on his face.

"Perhaps I ought to refrain from dancing with Edgar as well, then," she said, hoping Nico would agree.

"No, you *should* dance with him. It would be the perfect opportunity to let out your pent-up frustrations." Standing on his hind legs, Nico swiped his front paws through the air.

Lydia wasn't sure what he meant.

Just then, her father called from downstairs. It seemed he was still struggling to select a suitable tie. She replied that she would be there at once and picked up her skirts. The crinoline required pushing down before she could fit through the door. This house, with its narrow staircases and doorways, hadn't been built with formal dresses in mind.

"At this rate you're bound to get caught on something and won't ever make it to the ball," Nico muttered with a sigh.

When the Carltons arrived in their box-shaped carriage, there were already several other carriages outside the Ashenbert estate, each marked by their owner's crest. The ladies and gentlemen alighting from them were clearly used to their evening attire. They poured into the earl's estate in elegant droves.

Lydia and her father were shown inside by a servant. She had been in this entrance hall countless times, but now it felt like she had wandered into a different world. The carpet and lamps were new, and the room was adorned by flowers and tapestries. She couldn't help but stare at everything in a way that was rather uncouth. The grand staircase curved around in an arc; ascending one of its twin end points led to a spacious hall. The doors leading from the hall had all been flung open, and the room was already alive with well-dressed guests enjoying each other's company.

Only when her father tapped her on the shoulder did Lydia realize that Edgar was standing in front of them.

"We humbly thank you for your most gracious invitation, my lord," Carlton said.

"It is a pleasure to have you, Professor Carlton. Miss Carlton."

Edgar had called her by her surname, making her conscious of the fact that she was not here as his fairy doctor, but as the daughter of the Carlton family. Perhaps that was why his familiar smile made her heart jolt in such an unfamiliar way.

"Good evening..." She faltered. "Lord Ashenbert."

When she realized she mustn't address him as she normally did, she suddenly felt strangely disconnected from him.

"Please enjoy yourselves to your hearts' content." With that, Edgar's gaze left them. The guests were still arriving, and he would need to greet them rather than give Lydia his full attention. She was surprised to find herself wishing he had the time to say something more to her.

As she made to leave, she felt a gentle touch on her arm. Edgar slipped a coral-colored rose into her hand like it was a secret love letter.

"Pin this to your dress," he whispered.

Feeling as though she ought to keep it hidden from her father, she quickly concealed it when he turned to her.

“What’s the matter, Lydia?”

“Oh, I was just thinking that I should like to fetch myself a drink.”

“Off you go. I shall be speaking to His Grace,” Carlton said, nodding toward Masefield.

Once she was away from her father and had slipped into the crowd, Lydia allowed herself a sigh of relief. “What on earth am I getting so worked up about?”

Edgar was behaving no more slyly than usual, although the rose might have been nothing more than a signal that she was underdressed. Lydia studied her surroundings; the women around her were dressed to the nines. Her own gown had seemed extravagant at home, but in this field of blooming flowers, it was almost plain.

Lydia pinned the flower to her dress, using the window as a mirror. Every last one of the rose’s thorns had been removed. Without any jewels adorning it, the neckline of her dress had seemed a little rough around the edges. Now that the rose was on it, it might even be considered lovely.

As she was smoothing down the frills of her dress’s neckline, she suddenly had the sense that she was being watched. As she looked up, it was as though a number of women were quickly averting their gazes—though perhaps it was her imagination.

Do I maybe look strange?

She began to search for her father, only to spot Raven serving drinks. He approached her and held out a glass.

“May I offer you a drink?”

“Thank you. Say, Raven, is there something wrong with my dress?”

“I don’t know,” he replied at once.

Apparently, she had asked the wrong person.

“Oh, my apologies.” He corrected himself. “What I meant to say was that you look very beautiful.”

“Did Edgar tell you to say that?”

“He did.”

She could hardly believe he would admit to it.

There was a nearby chuckle from a third party who had overheard their awkward exchange. “By no means is there anything amiss with your dress.” It was a young man who spoke. It seemed he had just so happened to be within earshot. “Although, I daresay my opinion on the matter might not count for much. This is my first time attending a ball.”

The man looked at her with kindly eyes. “Lord Ashenbert was ever so gracious in extending me an invitation, but I really cannot help feeling as though I am out of place.” He took the end of his slightly-worn evening coat between his fingers and held it out to show her.

Raven wasted no time in excusing himself; he had his duties to attend to. But Lydia felt a kinship with this man, for whom the ball was also a first experience, and she found herself smiling at him just moments into their conversation.

“I’ve never been to a ball either.”

Along with his kindness, the stranger gave off a genuine and earnest impression. His kinked, light-brown hair had been left to grow out. He didn’t seem like a member of the upper class, so if Edgar had invited him personally, the earl must have taken a liking to him.

“You *are*, however, attracting much attention, madame. You have promised a dance to his lordship, haven’t you?”

“I’m sorry?”

He gestured toward the rose on her dress. “His lordship is wearing the same flower.”

Only now that he mentioned it did Lydia remember Edgar’s buttonhole.

“The young ladies here must be envious, and the gentlemen nervous. Any who would invite you to dance would surely hesitate now, knowing that you

have eyes only for his lordship."

Was *that* what the rose meant? A small part of her was expecting to be asked to dance, but now that was unlikely to happen. She'd had this fantastical image in her mind of catching a man's eye and enchanting each other in conversation.

Perhaps I ought to discard it.

However, if she were to be asked to dance, chances were high that she would embarrass her partner. Edgar may well have accounted for that in his calculations. It was only natural that he should want his ball to be free of incident.

Lydia sighed. Reality was indeed crueler than her dreams. If nothing else, she now knew that the flower was the cause of people's staring.

"I am an acquaintance of his lordship, but our relationship is nothing deeper than that," she said quickly. "I believe he gave me this flower so that I needn't dance, for I am dreadfully poor at it."

"As am I. In fact, the only reason I am so confident in speaking to you is because I knew that it would not be uncouth to withhold an invitation to dance."

Lydia giggled, eliciting a smile from him.

"Oh, I haven't yet introduced myself. I am Paul Firman. I have recently begun a career in painting."

"Might you have painted that picture of Titania?"

"Have you seen it? Perhaps I shouldn't have given my name. Women often tell me that they expected the artist to be more sensitive. More of a perfectionist than I am."

"That is only the fault of their misplaced expectations. I was eager to meet you. Oh yes, my name is Lydia Carlton."

"Are you fond of fairies, Miss Carlton?"

Her abilities and communications with them on a daily basis went beyond fondness. But, though he may have painted one himself, she still didn't want to risk scaring him off.

She gave an inoffensive response. “I suppose I am, yes.”

“Fairies and mythical deities are the source of my inspiration. Since no one has ever seen them, my imagination runs completely unbridled.”

“How would mankind know of the existence of fairies if no one has seen them?”

“Yes, perhaps that is true. The mind’s eye allows one to see what cannot be seen with vision alone.”

“The mind’s eye... Yes. That is what one needs to see fairies.”

Although Paul had not gone in-depth on the subject, he had said enough for Lydia to feel understood, something that cheered her greatly. As someone who painted fairies because he liked them, he might even accept it if she told him about her abilities.

The orchestra had embarked on a quiet prelude. The crowd stirred. Couples started to gather in the center of the hall, ready to dance.

“There is his lordship. You cannot miss him, can you?” Paul said.

Lydia spotted him immediately, and she wasn’t the only guest looking his way. His was a blond that the light complemented more than any other, and it was all the more enhanced by the chandelier above. As the host, he was obligated to ask the daughters of his noble guests to dance, one after the other. He might not have the time to dance with Lydia after all. She knew that was for the best.

They hadn’t been watching for long when the orchestra began a quadrille. It was a dance performed in lines, in which the couples changed partners. Even as the young woman Edgar had lined up with linked arms with the man next to her, she continued to stare at the earl for the brief moment she was away from him.

Lydia found herself growing slightly envious. “It looks like a great deal of fun.”

“Would you care to dance?”

“Oh! Um...”

“The quadrille isn’t so difficult,” Paul said, “and one doesn’t tend to draw attention if one makes a mistake.”

That was what made it seem fun to her. It was waltzes and minuets that she still didn't trust herself with.

"Although I quite understand if you have decided to dance only with his lordship."

But Lydia nodded, feeling it would be a shame if she didn't enjoy herself. "I would be honored to dance with you, Mr. Firman."

"The pleasure is all mine."

***

Nico hummed to himself as he settled on the handrail of the stone steps that led to the courtyard. He held a glass of scotch in one paw. The orchestra's playing was fully audible from here, while the chattering of the guests was so quiet as to be a whisper. A new moon hung in the night sky, and to accompany his delicious scotch he had plates of caviar and smoked salmon. The only thing that would make him more content was if he had access to freshly caught fried fish, but he supposed the eggs and filets would do for now.

The music had lured out a number of fairies, who were now dancing around the fountain and in the roots of trees. Even the hobgoblins from the Carlton residence were there.

"Isn't the Blue Knight Earl's ball wonderful, Mr. Nico?" Her golden wings fluttering, Marigold danced around in the air above him. "His lordship himself is just as marvelous. What a blessing it will be for our country when he is reunited with Her Majesty!"

"You still hope to take him back with you? It's an impossible task."

"If only I hadn't lost sight of the moon, we could have been on our way by now."

"But he isn't even the same man your queen fell in love with. He just so happens to have inherited the title."

"They cannot be too different, given they share the same name. I have heard that humans take on the ancestry and names of those before them due to their short lifespans."

In Edgar's case, it hadn't been direct succession that granted him the title, but Nico kept that to himself. Long ago, there had been no closer human to the fairies than the Blue Knight Earl. It seemed that the title had not lost its splendor among them even now, so it was no wonder this Fairy Queen was so intent on marrying its successor. Part of Nico hoped that Marigold *would* whisk the villainous earl away and release Lydia from his clutches. As long as she remained his fairy doctor, it was quite possible that she would become involved in the shadowy struggle he partook in. The problem was that she felt compassion for Edgar to a certain degree. It didn't matter how many times he deceived and manipulated her; his tragic past would always pull at her heartstrings.

There was no helping it; that was just how she was. If Edgar was to be spirited away against his will, she would do everything in her power to save him. The lengths that girl would go to just because she had a "duty" as his fairy doctor...

"It seems we'll be in London for a while yet," Nico muttered.

Just then, the fairies in the courtyard began to chatter. A burst of water jetted out from the fountain, rising up around the bronze mermaid statue at its center like a dark mountain. At the same time, a sinister mood seeped out into the air around them. Marigold buried herself in Nico's tail, while the fairy cat dove into the bushes. From the waters of the fountain appeared a magnificent, gorgeous horse with a jet-black coat.

"Kelpie..." Realizing his mistake, Nico clamped his front paws over his mouth.

The fairies who had stumbled in their fear were kicked away by the horse's hooves. Kelpie shook the twinkling water droplets free of his mane and lifted his head to survey the building before him.

"That's him, Mr. Nico! He's the one who stole Her Majesty's moon!"

"Are you certain?"

"He was in human form at the time, but there is no mistaking those eyes! They're just like black pearls!"

Could things get any worse?

As tension rippled through his body, Nico realized his whiskers had stiffened

and were standing on end. There had been a sense of uneasiness within him ever since laying eyes on that moss-covered pebble. He had never expected the water horse to leave the rivers of its hometown to come all the way to London, and yet...

He should have known better. This kelpie was unlike most. The majority of them saw human beings as nothing more than food, but this one had taken an obsessive interest in Lydia. His younger brother was even stranger, having chosen a human as his bride, something that had inspired this one to make proposal after proposal to Lydia.

While Nico's thoughts were still muddled, Kelpie had slipped into human form and started climbing the steps to the hall, which was alive with guests.

"I must inform Lydia at once!"

His limbs finally unstuck, Nico clawed his way up a nearby tree and jumped through a second-story window, hoping to beat Kelpie to the dazzling lamplit hall.

The orchestra glided from one piece to the next. The violins sang, the clarinets pranced, and the cellos hummed. Lydia found that she was very much enjoying herself, even when she moved away from the dancers just to listen to the music and talk to other guests. She had introduced Paul to her father and was engaging in a lively conversation about folklore with the duchess when her gray cat appeared, weaving restlessly around the guests on his hind legs. She scolded him inwardly; he knew he needed to walk on all fours when around other people, lest he draw suspicion. Fortunately, no one was paying enough attention to the floor to notice, but even so she made haste to reprimand him.

"There you are, Lydia! You must listen—" he began in a hurry but was cut off when she scooped him up. "Oi! What are you playing at?"

"You ought not to speak in such a busy hall!"

Who knew what kind of commotion it would cause if the guests saw a cat on his hind legs *and* heard him speak? She took Nico by the scruff of his neck over to the balcony, where she stepped behind the curtain and dropped him onto the railing.

"Now, there was no need for that, was there?" Nico muttered, smoothing his ruffled fur. Nothing occupied his mind more than his appearance. While he was at it, he straightened his necktie.

"What is all this fuss about, Nico?"

"I *saw* him, Lydia!"

"Who?"

"The chap who stole Marigold's moon!"

"You saw the thief?"

"Yes, it was—"

"Lydia! I found ye!"

A man was leaning over the next balcony. The lamps illuminated the black waves of his hair. There was a mysticalness to his sharp, beautiful features that marked him as decidedly inhuman. He was tall with perfect proportions.

“Kelpie!” she gasped.

The fairy would often call on her home in Scotland. A water horse originally from the Highlands, he had settled in the rivers near Lydia’s hometown in the vicinity of Edinburgh. Water horses tended not to mix with humans unless they were luring one into the waters with their devilish beauty, where they would eat them. As such, they were members of the Unseelie Court. The worst that this kelpie did, however, was visit Lydia’s house on a whim. She mostly considered him a friend who was slightly too forward.

Kelpies weren’t much of a threat away from the water, and this one seemed to value his curiosity about the fairy doctor above whatever instinctual urge he may have had to eat her. While Lydia tolerated his visits, he had recently started asking her to come to the river, as if venturing onto land had become too much of a bother. Unbound by the chains of human etiquette, he had casually asked her to live with him, to which she had responded with the Moon’s Spell. She had not seen him since.

After that, Lydia had gone to London, and her days had been so hectic that she had forgotten all about Kelpie—only for him to return at a most inopportune moment.

“I’ve come to take ye back to Scotland.” He leaped lightly onto her balcony.

She stiffened. “How did you know where to find me?”

“The hobgoblin at yer house telt us. Said ye’d be workin’ for the Blue Knight Earl in London and wouldnae be back for a while. So I had to come and get ye.”

Lydia had heard that her father had sent a letter to an acquaintance to make sure someone was keeping an eye on the house. There were already several rumors about her in that town. No doubt her employment by an equally eccentric earl had been added to the list thanks to that letter. Hobgoblins loved to gossip even more than humans did. The one at her home would have been delighted to tell Kelpie where she was, doubly so since it would get rid of the unpleasant fairy.

“I ask that you return to Scotland by yourself,” Lydia said, “for I have my work to attend to.”

Instead of listening, Kelpie was brazenly scrutinizing her. “How are ye dressed so strangely?”

What he called strange, she—and society as a whole—called formal. Kelpie was the one who stuck out like a sore thumb. His tunic-like shirt and trousers gave him the appearance of a shepherd, and anybody would instantly realize he didn’t belong there. For the time being, Lydia was anxious to take him somewhere he wouldn’t be spotted. Kelpie, however, was occupying himself with lifting up her skirts.

“Have you taken leave of your senses?!” She slapped him reflexively. He let go but otherwise seemed unperturbed.

“Boisterous as ever, I see!”

“At least *I* am no savage water horse!”

“I was jist curious what ye were hidin’ under there.”

“Nothing! This is how formal dresses are!”

“Is something the matter, Miss Carlton?” Paul joined Lydia and Kelpie on the balcony and stepped between them. He must have seen their exchange and decided that the water horse was an unwelcome and unscrupulous intruder. “May I ask your name, sir? You do not appear to be a formal guest and, as such, I suggest you leave with haste, else I shall request that you be removed.”

A fierce crease appeared in Kelpie’s prominent brow. “Is *this* the Blue Knight Earl? Lydia, this is the puny lad who’s been pushin’ ye around?”

“No, this gentleman is someone else...and mind your manners!”

Paul turned to look at her, his eyes wide. “Are you acquainted with this gentleman, Miss Carlton?”

“Well, I...”

“If ye’re no the earl, away with ye.” Kelpie pushed him aside and grabbed Lydia’s arm. “Anyhows, Lydia, I found the moon. That means ye’re mine now.”



She gaped at him, which was when she felt Nico pulling on the back of her

skirt. The fairy cat was telling her that *Kelpie* was the one who had stolen Marigold's moon.

Knowing she musn't accept his gift under any circumstances, Lydia brushed his hand away. "Don't be ridiculous. The moon is just there, in the sky."

"Take a look for yerself. It even waxes and wanes." He opened his palm to reveal a ring embedded with a milk-white stone, which she averted her gaze from.

"No, thank you. It cannot possibly be the real thing."

"Jist take it."

"No!"

Kelpie took her hand and tried to force the ring onto it.

"I have already said that I don't want it!"

"Sir, please stop this," Paul stepped in front of her, and Kelpie tried to jostle him away.

"This has nothin' to do with ye!"

"It is clear that she does not wish to accept your gift!"

"Silence, ye—och." Kelpie froze.

With a puzzled "Oh," Paul lifted his hand. There was the ring, sitting snugly on his finger.

"Now what have ye done?! Give it back! It's no for ye!"

"It...won't come off."

"What?! Then ah'll have to bite yer finger off!"

"I beg your pardon?!" Paul cried.

"Stop this at once!" Lydia used all her strength to keep Kelpie away from the young man, though she knew things were too far gone for her to regain control. Other guests had started to pick up on the commotion and gather around the balcony.

"What is all this ruckus?" It was Edgar. He positioned himself next to Lydia,

where he first saw Kelpie grabbing Paul by the collar. “That gentleman is my honored guest. I would appreciate it if you were to let go of him.”

“My lord,” Paul murmured, his voice quivering.

Kelpie shoved him away, then turned to Edgar. “Are ye the Blue Knight Earl?”

“Who is this, Lydia?” the earl asked.

A nobleman would not deign to speak to a person who had not been properly introduced. The water horse didn’t seem to be aware of such etiquette.

“I strike fear in the hearts of demons! The name’s—”

Lydia elbowed him in the ribs as hard as she could and spoke for him while he was still choking. “This is...Mr. Kane!” Announcing himself as a kelpie in front of so many people was sure to cause havoc.

“Mr. Kane,” Edgar repeated. “What business have you with me?”

“Ah’m here to take this lassie back to Scotland. Ye cannae be keepin’ her in stinkin’ old England! It’s no right!”

“Perhaps the stench is only due to your unfamiliarity. It would astonish me if *your* home smelled of roses.”

Kelpie scowled. “Dare to say that again!” He reached out his solid arms, ready to throttle the earl’s neck.

Edgar didn’t even try to move out of the way. At the very last moment, Kelpie’s advance was cut off by Raven. Despite his small stature and youthful countenance, the boy glared at the water horse with eyes as sharp as a bird of prey’s. The kelpie was savage to the point that only an equal overbearance could hold him back.

“That’s an impressive servant ye got, earl. I’m no surprised, though.” He may well have seen the murderous spirits that dwelled within Raven. Black eyes narrowing, he backed away. “This is no a fight ah’m winnin’ on land. Ah’ll be back for ye later, Lydia.”

His body twisted and flexed as he leaped off the balcony and dove into the fountain to the astonished gasps of the crowd. His entire form seemed to sink into the shallow water, only to be replaced by a jet-black horse that floated up

from the surface. It neighed, then vanished, spraying water droplets in every direction like a vicious rain.

The guests fell into silence, unbelieving of what they had just witnessed. Lydia was glued to the balcony railing, too frightened of the situation unfolding before her to lift her head. Edgar's deep sigh from just beside her broke through her reverie.

"Edgar," she began.

"Just smile for the time being. That's all I ask." He turned to the guests. "Ladies and gentleman, please allow me to apologize for any alarm that may have been caused. It would appear that the ball has caught some fairies' attention. Should you find that your dance partner has horns or wings, I ask that you remain vigilant, lest you are whisked away to Fairyland."

His smile sent a stir through the crowd that preceded a round of applause. Lydia heard them murmuring about the "marvelous entertainment."

"I wonder how his lordship managed it."

"Say, did that dark-haired chap come from the circus, do you think?"

"Or perhaps he is a magician!"

"It could have been a real fairy. His lordship holds territory in Fairyland, you know."

The guests discussed the event among themselves as they returned to the music-filled hall. The evening resumed as though nothing had happened.

"Are you hurt, Mr. Firman?"

Edgar's question had Paul returning to his senses. He stood up tall, straightened the tie that Kelpie had disheveled, and shook his head. "No, my lord."

"I apologize that you had to go through something so disagreeable." Edgar turned to Lydia. "Let us dance." He extended a hand. "You promised that you would."

"Yes..."

He led her past Paul, who was still reeling with confusion and looked like he wanted to say something. Nico whispered a “good luck” as the pair continued into the hall. The orchestra was coming to the end of a polka when they reached the floor. Lydia didn’t have to look around to feel the stares that were settling on her, the girl whose rose matched the earl’s.

“It will be a waltz next.”

A waltz, with no prior warning.

“I’m not so sure that this is a good idea, Edgar.”

“You would dance with Mr. Firman, but not with me?”

“It isn’t that; I fear that I might cause you embarrassment. After you so gracefully explained away Mr. Kane’s arrival, I would hate to bring about any more trouble.”

Edgar studied her with his ash-mauve eyes. He seemed slightly irritated by her reasoning. “You are incapable of causing me embarrassment.”

Bringing their hands together, he curved an arm around her waist to wait for the waltz to begin. She couldn’t help but feel as though he was pulling her closer to him compared to the other couples. She tried to step back slightly, but his arm kept its grip.

“I shall tread on your foot if we dance this closely,” Lydia warned him.

“Tread away.”

“I might bump into you and knock you over.”

“I shall catch you before you do.”

“Did Raven neglect to inform you that dancing with me is akin to torture?”

“He said yours was a gentle, pleasing scent.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It would not inconvenience me in the slightest if you *were* to bump into me.”

“Raven would not speak of me in such a manner.”

“I must have imagined it, in that case. Perhaps it is because you smell of

freesias this evening."

Lydia would have expected to see Edgar's usual mischievous smile, but the eyes with which he gazed at her reddening face had an exceedingly passionate shine to them tonight. The way he held her hand and body close may not have been in preparation for the dance at all, but the first hint of a shared delight that was still beyond her wildest imaginations.

The hall fell into silence for the shortest of moments before the violins began to play. Taking his cue, Edgar pulled Lydia close to him, allowing them to slip easily into the first steps of the dance. She was taken aback by how naturally her body moved as she gave herself over to the violins' timbre. It was in no small part thanks to his skillful lead. They seemed to breathe in perfect harmony. Their bodies and the music came together to complete each other and move as one.

"You *are* a good dancer," Edgar said.

"No, I'm not. *You* are, and that is why I am managing."

His arm took much of her weight from her back as he led her in circles. The brilliant movements made the hem of her skirts swish, and the curious thought struck her that she might have been dancing *well*.

"We complement one another so well, Lydia. Do you not think it would be a shame to limit something so wonderful to this dance?" he whispered into her ear, his lips almost close enough to touch.

The sight of his silky blond hair at the very forefront of her vision made her pulse quicken. However, she knew very well that this had everything to do with Edgar's proficiency and nothing to do with her practice. He could turn any partner he wished into a breathtaking spectacle, and he knew that neither the crowd nor the girl in his arms would be able to take their eyes off him. She had learned by now that the temptations he whispered to her were partly meant to manipulate.

"What are you scheming this time?" Aside from that, it was simply in his nature to charm women.

Though she knew this about him, her question rendered him silent. He pulled

her in tightly, then led them in a series of sweeping, dizzying turns. His lead had grown high-handed compared to before. It was taking everything she had to keep up, and the very moment she felt she would stumble, he suddenly stopped.

They had started their dance in the hall, and now they were at the far end of the greenhouse. The music was still audible, but the thick vegetation blocked out the fervor and excitement of the dance hall, lending peace to their surroundings. There was almost something invigorating about the place. The pathways were sparsely dotted with lamps, allowing the moonlight to shine through the glass ceiling. It was a much calmer illumination than the sparkling of the chandelier.

“Shall we rest for a spell?”

Lydia’s breathing was rapid, as though she had just run a sprint. She inhaled the aroma of the southern lands to allow it to settle. Edgar had her sit on a bench and remained standing as he looked down at her. She couldn’t help but be conscious of how her chest looked in the unfamiliar garment.

“That dress suits you. You remind me of a sponge cake.”

“Are you paying me a compliment?”

“Indeed I am. You look good enough to eat.”

While she was working to come up with a retort to his ridiculous comment, he scooped up some strands of her russet hair (which only he referred to as caramel-colored) and put his lips to them.

“But while the eyes of the moon are upon us, I shall restrict myself to just a brief taste of caramel.” It must have been the sizeable ruby fastened to his necktie that made his ash-mauve eyes seem to gleam a passionate red. And yet it was as though she were seeing the true color of his heart, an illusion that made her feel dizzy. “You are beautiful, Lydia.”

She took a deep breath, an attempt to maintain her composure. “And how many others have heard those same words pass your lips this evening?”

“Twenty, if memory serves.” His answer did not surprise nor impress her. “However, *you* are the most beautiful of all. And that I have *not* said to anybody

else.”

That could not possibly be true.

She made it clear that she did not believe him. “Oh.”

Shrinking back slightly, Edgar leaned against a large tree. “Was that black-haired fellow just now truly a fairy?”

“He was.”

“He said something about taking you back.”

Lydia felt too uncomfortable to say anything. Perceptive as he was, Edgar would likely already have deduced the facts of the matter.

“He was the fairy who proposed to you.”

She wished she had never told him about Kelpie, regardless of the fact that she had never expected the water horse to follow her to London. The earl’s involvement in their quarrel would only serve to make things even more troublesome.

“What he seeks is not so much a union with me as my constant company,” she said.

“You mean to say that he is not in love with you?”

“Exactly.”

“That does not make his appearance any more agreeable to me.”

“Why? You are not in love with me either.”

“Why do you say so?”

“Because I believe so.”

An uncharacteristically thoughtful look took hold of Edgar’s features. “Mr. Kane, was it? His features were as handsome as a Greek statue. They may even compare closely to my own.” Apparently, he was in no mood to show modesty about his own looks. “In strength, he may exceed me. But there are certain things he lacks: intelligence, elegance, property, and status. Any woman, were she making her decision based on wisdom, would select me over him. As for you, I cannot say.”

“Must I entertain this nonsense?”

“It is nonsense indeed. However, I feel I must make these futile comparisons as a matter of determining who is superior. And yet you say I am not in love with you.”

She sought the words to refute him, even as his words sent a shock through her heart. “You cannot be. You simply wish to be the center of attention at all times.”

“My concerns do not stop there either. Mr. Firman seems very much the kind of man you would be interested in. His appearance, the manner in which he conducts himself, the impression he leaves on others—they are all very much mediocre. His good-naturedness is his only virtue. He lacks the worldly wisdom required to attract the eye of a woman, but lives honestly despite his clumsy leanings. Furthermore, he pursues his artistic ambitions. Though the reasoning behind it eludes me, women seem to favor a man who works toward his aspirations. He could not provide for you and would cause you countless worries, and yet you would support him and commit yourself to living frugally for the sake of his passions. Or am I wrong?”

“You suppose far too much and speak too poorly of your fellow man.”

“Be warned, Lydia, that artists may seem innocent but are in fact obstinate people. You would be committing yourself to a life of endless toil.”

“I am not committing myself to anything for a man I met but a few moments ago. Besides, I do not believe that falling in love requires the fulfillment of a list of ideals.”

“Indeed, love is not so logical. That is what causes me such anxiety. My heart has been in a state of turmoil the entire evening, ever since I saw you enjoying yourself with Mr. Firman. More so since that fairy appeared. This anxiety, could it not be love?”

When Lydia stayed silent, he pushed on.

“It is no wonder that you do not trust what I say. You would not let your guard down around a former thief, and yet I hope that you will precisely because love is so illogical. I am aware you might find me brazen, but even then,

do I not have the right to express my feelings?”

He was speaking so fluently that she wasn’t sure which part he *wanted* her to believe. It was like a game, she thought, and one that he was enjoying a great deal, though it didn’t seem borne of malice. She had heard that some married nobles liked to play at being in love with each other while their true hearts lay elsewhere. This must have been much the same thing; it was fun to try and seduce her because he knew she would withdraw from his advances. It was pleasant to feel loved, and if it allowed the participants to feel closer at the end of it all, what was the harm?

Though Lydia was unmarried, Edgar was likely confident that she wouldn’t truly fall for him, given that she knew a little of his past. Honestly, she wouldn’t mind him playing this flirtatious game with her from time to time, and it would make her work at his estate more enjoyable. She imagined she would feel a closer connection to Edgar as a result too. The problem came when he pushed it too far. She found it overwhelming as one who didn’t yet have a husband of her own, let alone a noble one. It only confused her.

“That’s enough for now,” Lydia said. “I do not wish to play this game with you.”

“Game?” Edgar knitted his brow, puzzled, but she was confident this was all part of the same act.

“I am asking you to stop this superficial charade.”

Her face cast downward, she was surprised by how forcefully the words came out. It was silly for her to take him so seriously. On the other hand, she was genuinely fearful about what might happen if he continued to speak freely on this particular subject. His professions of love reminded her of that first and only love letter she had received. It had asked her to attend the boy’s birthday party. He lived nearby, and their parents were close enough that she had been invited over for tea before. As long as it was just the two of them, she had enjoyed playing with that boy. He would share some of his smaller anxieties with her, although he wouldn’t talk to her if his other friends were about. No doubt he didn’t want to be made sport of for associating with the eccentric girl.

Their friendship had been an ambiguous thing, such that she found the

contents of his letter suspicious. Though hesitant, she eventually made the decision to attend the party. However, with so many of his friends in attendance, he did not make a single attempt to speak to her. For some reason, it irritated her that day that he wouldn't even look at her despite the fact that it was a recurring pattern. So much so that she had approached him and confronted him directly.

He looked both angry and awkward at her question. "It was all just a joke."

He had explained that he had lost a game with his friends, and had been made to write that letter as punishment. Lydia had accepted his response as the reason she had thought the letter strange, and she couldn't remember being especially hurt by it. Her only regret was that she hadn't trusted her intuition and had simply gone straight home without speaking to him. That was likely what she would have done had the letter been a simple invitation. She had been disappointed in herself for allowing a dubious confession to convince her that there might have been something more between them.

Why did the resurfacing of such an inoffensive memory suddenly scare her as much as it did?

"I apologize if I offended you, however..."

Edgar's voice pulled her from her thoughts, and she realized she had been staring at her lap. That was when she noticed a tiny drop of liquid on the back of her hand.

Oh? Why am I crying?

"Is something the matter, Lydia?"

Confused by her own reactions, she leaped to her feet. "No! But I have grown thirsty and so I am off to fetch a drink."

She wondered if he had noticed, but prayed that he had not as she hurried back to the lounge where her father was.

The White and Scarlet Moons

“You, sir, are an imposter, and no descendant of the Blue Knight Earl. You will *relinquish the sword with all due haste, else we shall have no choice but to take it, along with your life.”*

Naturally, the letter lacked a signature, but the envelope was marked with red ink in the shape of a crescent moon.

“What utter rubbish.” Tossing it to one side, Edgar reached for his teacup. The correspondence had put him in a foul mood, and he had only just risen from his bed.

Last evening’s ball had continued well into the night, and he hadn’t retired until dawn. It was close to noon by the time he woke up, but then that was a common occurrence for a nobleman who spent much of his time at evening parties. His butler had waited patiently for his master to waken, upon which he had presented Edgar with the letter, his face pale. Apparently, it had been tossed through a back entrance the previous evening. The staff had been so busy preparing for the ball that the letter had only been noticed that morning.

“What would you like me to do, my lord? Shall I contact the police?”

The sword described in the letter served as proof of Edgar’s title. The sender must have had some connection to the man who had accused Raven of working for the Prince the other day.

Edgar hummed thoughtfully. “They have yet to identify a single clue related to the instructor who left his fingers behind. I believe our only course of action at present is to strengthen our defenses.”

“I can certainly see to that, my lord,” Tompkins said hesitantly.

“I shall take care of the rest myself.”

“Yes, my lord.” The butler did not go on to ask exactly *what* Edgar would do against an adversary he knew nothing about. Nor would he ask about the unscrupulous organization with which he sensed his master had had dealings with in the past.

The Blue Knight Earl had fairies among his population, and it was said that a former holder of the title had protected his people with merrow blood from oppression by the Church. Tompkins was one of those mysterious people, and his loyalty to the earldom was unwavering.

When Edgar thought of how much faith the butler and his ancestors had in their masters, he couldn't help but feel slightly guilty. He had sought the title purely for the benefits it afforded him, although that did not mean that he intended to tarnish its reputation. He was aware of his responsibility to protect the earldom and believed that, as an imposter, the only way forward was to become more genuine than a legitimate descendant. It was therefore unthinkable that he should yield to such threats.

"My lord, if I may ask you to have some consideration for your own safety and not just that of the sword..."

"Are you worried about me, Tompkins?"

"You are without a successor, my lord."

The earldom had existed without a lord for hundreds of years and had not been abolished in case a successor was found. If something were to happen to Edgar, however, it may be determined that the lineage had died with him.

"Ah, yes. Another facet of my duties. I should very much like to reassure you, Tompkins, but I have reason to believe that the wife I had in mind dislikes me a great deal."

"I fail to see the problem, my lord. Many husbands are disliked by their wives."

"Your words offer me much encouragement."

There was only a slight hint of amusement in Edgar's sigh as his butler presented him with an ironed newspaper and left. Raven appeared in Tompkins's stead.

"Do you know, Raven, I believe we came across this 'Scarlet Moon' society during one of our prior investigations into sinister organizations."

"Indeed, my lord, although that is not a name that they use for themselves.

They are a group of gentleman thieves. They are well-known in the less affluent parts of the city, and there are rumors that they were behind the coin scatterings that occurred in St. Giles and Southwark. Indeed, there have also been many coins thrown into houses in the East End. A portion of them were found to bear a moon-shaped mark in red ink."

"But those coins would have been pilfered from somewhere, yes?"

"There have been no thieveries in which the perpetrators declared themselves as Scarlet Moon, and as such, it has been impossible to pinpoint which they might be responsible for. However, a number of wealthy persons have come forward to claim that the scattered coins were stolen from them." Reading from the note in his hand, Raven listed the aforementioned individuals and companies. Edgar recognised a few of them.

"Those are where the Prince sources his funding from."

"Indeed, my lord."

Swiping a meager amount of coinage from the foot of the Prince's mountain of wealth was unlikely to do him much damage, but that didn't preclude the possibility that this group was targeting him. It may also explain the recent attack on Edgar's estate.

"Have they killed anyone?" he asked.

"If they have, it has not been written about in the newspapers."

"I suppose murder isn't an especially gentlemanly deed."

That being said, they had seemed all too ready to kill when their man had infiltrated the estate, and the letter held the same threat. Then there was their demand for the sword. It wouldn't be an easy item to sell, and from that perspective, stealing it would be more trouble than it was worth. A more likely explanation was that they were fixated on the title of Blue Knight Earl itself. As if they didn't want an imposter or—in their view—the Prince's underling bearing the name.

"I wonder about the significance of their name. Scarlet Moon..."

Moon...

There was the Moon's Spell; the promise between the Blue Knight Earl and the Fairy Queen. Edgar was beginning to get the sense that the moon bore a grudge against him.

He was suddenly reminded of the previous evening, when Marigold had been upset about a moon-bearing ring or something of that description. If he recalled, he had told the fairy to consult Lydia on the matter. Had he not caught a glimpse of small, translucent wings sprouting from the young girl's back? And the girl herself, riding atop Nico's head... Nico, the cat, who had put his paws on his hips and scolded Edgar about something. About what he had done to Lydia. Only, he hadn't done anything to her.

He must have had too much to drink. Cats couldn't speak...although, Nico *did* give the impression that he understood human speech from time to time.

"Has Lydia arrived yet, Raven?"

"No, my lord."

"Perhaps she will not be joining us today..."

"I believe that she will. Mr. Nico was drinking tea in her office as usual."

Nico was indeed fond of tea. Both Raven and Tompkins served it to him as though he were human.

"Incidentally, Raven, why do you refer to Nico with the title of 'Mr.'? He's a cat."

"He's a cat?" the boy echoed, perplexed.

"Is he not?"

"I did not believe that he was, for I had seen you speak to him on several occasions."

Now that he pondered the matter further, Edgar found he was just as confused as his servant. "There *are* times at which it feels as though I am conversing with him. It might come from his propensity to sip his tea like a proper gentleman..."

He shook his head dismissively. Ever since meeting Lydia, the mysterious reality she lived in seemed to encroach on him. Just last night, he had witnessed

a black horse disappearing into his fountain. A horse who, he now remembered, was the fairy who had proposed to her.

I'll be damned if I am to lose to a horse!

"One more thing, my lord. Mr. Firman is here to see you."

"I do not recall him making an appointment."

"He said that he is willing to wait as long as need be. He has been here for two hours already."

Edgar sighed and rose to get dressed. "I suppose he can wait a little longer."

***

After finally arriving at the Mayfair mansion, Lydia exchanged a hurried greeting with the butler before rushing to her workroom. It was her intention to spend the entire day there, as she was not sure how she should face Edgar. Her memory of the events after dancing with him at the ball were not altogether clear. Desperation had led her to drink two, perhaps three, cups of punch, at which point their exchange had ceased to concern her. According to her father, she had chattered away and danced quite gleefully, but as the night wore on the alcohol set in, everyone had experienced a loosening of etiquette and formality, and become exuberant. As such, although no one was liable to notice her drunkenness, her father had taken her home before she could do anything too foolish.

Looking for a distraction, Lydia picked up the newly arrived letter addressed to the "Fairy Doctor." Before she could immerse herself in work, however, Marigold rushed into the room in human form.

"I have been waiting for your arrival, Miss Carlton! There is a matter that I must discuss with you urgently! His lordship told me that all fairy-related matters are to be deferred to you, but then Mr. Nico said that I ought to wait till today since you were intoxicated..."

"Whatever is the matter?"

"Her Majesty's moon will not come unstuck from that gentleman's finger! And yet it was a gift for his lordship, the man she has chosen as her

bridegroom!”

Lydia had almost completely forgotten about the incident that had taken place between her, Kelpie, and Paul. As the wearer of the moon, Paul was effectively bound by the Fairy Queen’s promise. If the queen decided she would take him instead of the Blue Knight Earl, it would likely be difficult to stop him from being spirited away so long as he remained in possession of the ring.

“If nothing is done, our only option will be to ask him to marry Her Majesty instead!”

“Let us not be too hasty, Marigold. If we remove the ring, then all will be well, correct?” Having said that, Lydia knew that retrieving the ring only meant that the fairy would badger Edgar to accept it instead. If that happened, he would need to stubbornly refuse it. Unlike Kelpie, Marigold was probably incapable of forcing it onto him. However, the earl had a vulnerability in his weakness for the opposite sex. Lydia could well see him accepting it by mistake.

She was so caught up in her thoughts that she automatically called in the knocker at the door.

“Good morning, Lydia.”

The moment she caught sight of Edgar’s face, her own burned, and she hurriedly directed her gaze to the floor. She then hid herself behind the letter she had just opened.

“I hope this is important. I am rather busy at the moment.”

“Busy reading letters upside down?” He plucked the inverted letter from her flustered hands and gazed down at her. “Mr. Firman is here. I believe it is your responsibility to find a solution to his woes.”

It was unusual for him to get straight to the point and without the familiar long-winded flattery. Through a mixture of relief and disappointment, Lydia was finally able to look him in the eye. She had been anxious about how she might have reacted if he had spoken about the events of the ball. That he hadn’t suggested he might not have noticed her discomposure.

“Oh, I see. Marigold and I were just discussing his situation.”

“He tells me he received an unwanted guest at his boarding house who demanded that he return the ring.”

“An unwanted guest?”

“More likely than not, it was Mr. Kane.”

Lydia had to suppress a grimace at the mention of the pushy kelpie.

“Mr. Firman apparently dreamt that Mr. Kane had taken on the form of a horse and was about to strike, and so he retaliated by throwing the Bible he keeps at his bedside. The horse vanished then.”

“That was probably no dream.”

“Nevertheless, Mr. Firman said that the horse claimed it would return as many times as it took, and he is now anxious that he will be subject to endless nightmares because of the ring. He believes it is cursed. Seeing as Mr. Kane was calling on you yesterday, Mr. Firman decided to come and seek your advice. May I call him in?”

“By all means. Mr. Firman would not be involved in all of this if not for me.”

At length, Raven showed in an exhausted Paul. Lydia stood up on his arrival.

“Please accept my apologies, Mr. Firman. After all you did to lend me a hand yesterday, it has done nothing but inconvenience you.”

“No harm came to you, and that is what matters. However, I must confess to my utter bewilderment. His lordship tells me it is fairies who have landed me in this predicament.” Though he was a painter of fairies, he seemed to find it hard to believe that he had actually encountered one.

Edgar offered him a seat, which he accepted. Sitting down again herself, Lydia asked that he show her the ring. It was bound tightly around the middle finger of his right hand. His skin was dyed with paint, and he had callouses from where he held his brushes. It was undoubtedly an artist’s hand and was surprisingly rugged.

“That’s a moonstone,” Edgar said upon seeing the large gem. It was a lustrous milk-white, and beyond its translucent surface, its inner light seemed to take the form of a crescent moon.

“You said that this stone waxes and wanes like the real moon, didn’t you, Marigold?” Lydia asked.

“It does! The light inside it grows and shrinks. It blooms into roundness on the night of the full moon and contracts to a tiny slither when she is barely visible in the sky.” The fairy’s golden wings fluttered, and she corrected herself: “That is because it *is* the moon.”

Although she was currently in human form, she had forgotten to hide her wings. Neither Edgar nor Paul said anything about it; their focus was solely on the ring. Either they hadn’t noticed or they didn’t feel it important enough to comment on.

“I daresay I could gaze upon this stone every day and never grow tired of it. Some may even think you fortunate for it having come into your possession, Mr. Firman.” Edgar spoke as though he was totally unconcerned.

“I fear that is an overly optimistic opinion, my lord.” Paul sighed.

“Why won’t it come off?” Edgar asked.

“Kelpie used excessive force when he placed it on Mr. Firman’s finger,” Lydia replied. “I believe the ring has warped and is indeed biting into the skin.”

“Kelpie?” The earl blinked.

“I refer to Mr. Kane. He is a kelpie—a water horse.”

Edgar hummed thoughtfully, apparently unfamiliar with such creatures.

“A *kelpie*?” exclaimed Paul. “The very same fairies that eat people?”

Lydia could forgive him for shrieking.



“A horse that eats people?” Edgar murmured, seemingly unaffected.

“They eat livestock too,” said Lydia, “but they leave the livers on the shore without exception.”

“What a terrible shame that they do not know the exquisite experience that is foie gras.”

“Excuse me, but what am I to do?” Paul jumped in, wary that the conversation was veering from its purpose.

“We ought to start by removing the ring,” Lydia said.

“I have made various attempts to do so, but remain unsuccessful. I have even tried soap and oil.”

“I suppose our only remaining option is to cut it off,” Edgar suggested. “As long as we proceed carefully, your valuable hands won’t come to any harm.”

“You mustn’t!” Marigold wailed. “Damage Her Majesty’s ring and I shall never be able to return home again!”

“That would certainly not do,” Edgar said gently, immediately taking her side. “Let us consider other methods.”

“*Are* there other methods?” Lydia questioned.

“Suppose, Mr. Firman, that your finger became narrower. The ring would slip right off. Yes, you will simply need to lose some weight.” He spoke as though Paul had weight to lose in the first place. “I would wager that it would come off if you refrain from eating for a week.”

“A *week*?!” Paul stared at him.

“And if that does not work, you should refrain for another week.”

“I daresay I shan’t survive that long!” The painter sounded like he was on the verge of tears.

“One would be surprised how easy it is to survive as skin and bones.” Edgar’s tone was matter-of-fact, void of any joviality.

Paul’s shoulders slumped as though he were a prisoner just sentenced to death.

“Let me speak with Kelpie,” Lydia offered. “I suggest that you keep a cross or

Bible with you for the foreseeable future. It won't offer you perfect protection, but it will be better than nothing."

"Thank you, Miss Carlton."

Just as calm seemed to return to the room, Nico appeared at the window. "You've got another visitor, Lydia."

She thought she caught a glimpse of transparent feathers on the fairy cat's back, which was when a small girl stepped down onto the windowsill.

"Lady Sweetpea!" Marigold cried, hurrying up to the newcomer.

"Here you are, Marigold! What on earth has been taking you so long to return? And you call yourself Her Majesty's messenger?"

"I'm awfully sorry! You see..."

True to her name, Sweetpea wore a dress of light pink. Although she appeared senior to Marigold, both fairies looked like young girls of a similar age, making their exchange a highly curious one for humans to behold.

"Good heavens! Her Majesty's ring is stuck on the finger of another man?"

Marigold rushed in to hold up the other fairy before she could collapse from shock.

Lydia shot Nico a surreptitious glare. "Why did you bring *another* fairy here? We are in enough of a fix as it is."

"It's hardly my fault. She asked me for directions."

"She and every creature for miles, it would seem."

"It isn't as though I invite it. I was napping on the roof when she approached me."

She could well imagine what his napping looked like: spread out on his side, propped up on one elbow with his legs crossed, and making no effort at all to appear like a normal cat. Any fairy flying through the sky would spot him immediately and recognize him as a fellow fae.

"There is nothing else for it. We shall have to ask Her Majesty to marry this gentleman instead." It took remarkably little time for Sweetpea to regain her

composure and make up her mind. She grabbed hold of Paul's jacket.

This was the one outcome that Lydia had wanted to avoid. "Wait a moment! Would your queen truly be content with just *anyone*?"

"We grow tired of waiting for Her Majesty's marriage. She was intent on marrying the earl, and we toiled endlessly in search of the moon. But we can wait no longer. Her Majesty *must* marry as soon as possible so that our people can flourish. We shall take this gentleman with us and tell her that he is the earl." Sweetpea's plan was beyond absurd, and yet she seemed entirely serious. She searched the room for Edgar, then moved toward him. "I apologize for disturbing you, my lord. My name is Sweetpea, and I am Her Majesty's lady-in-waiting."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Sweetpea." Edgar gave her a brilliant smile, though it was clear that the current situation confused him.

"It was our intention to escort you to our kingdom; however, my mistress has declared that she will only marry the man wearing the ring. I beg your forgiveness, my lord."

"Be assured that I am not the slightest bit inconvenienced."

"We shall instead come for you at a later date."

"I'm sorry?"

"Human beings do not live for very long, you see," Sweetpea explained. "In time, Her Majesty will require another bridegroom."

"Oh, I see. I might not be the earl anymore when that time comes. However, this gentleman here is a painter whose work I rather admire. I would prefer that he remained in London."

It seemed Edgar wasn't ready to sacrifice Paul to save himself. Lydia was surprised; the earl wasn't one for thinking of others. She had very much expected him to throw the painter to the fairies, regardless of the talent the latter displayed, if it meant peace would return to the estate. The two had only just met, Paul wasn't a woman, and Lydia couldn't see how the artist's skills would benefit Edgar in any way. Perhaps he had taken a great liking to the other man's personality.

“In that case, might I propose an exchange?” Sweetpea suggested.

“Absolutely *not*!” Lydia said hurriedly. Striking a deal with a fairy was *never* a good idea.

“Then I am sorry to tell you that you haven’t the right to stop us. We are taking him.” The pink fairy was much more stubborn than her colleague.

“I don’t think so! That moon is mine! I was gonna gift it to Lydia. Ye cannae jist take it!”

Oh, for goodness’ sake! Not again!

She turned with a sigh to see the kink-haired kelpie making his way through the window.

He snarled at the fairies. “Away with ye, weans! Or ah’ll have ye for supper!”

The girls screamed and clung to Paul from either side.

“You *must* come with us!” Sweetpea urged him, keeping a frightened eye on Kelpie. “Or would you rather we fall prey to this wicked beast?!”

“*Who* is a beast?! Ah’m a mighty kelpie!”

Things were already out of hand. Lydia snapped.

“Everyone *hold your tongues*! As the fairy doctor of this estate, I forbid you from taking Mr. Firman away. Neither kelpie nor fairy of the field shall lay a finger on him unless he or she wishes to answer to me!” Her shoulders heaved with each breath.

At last, everyone fell silent.

***

Though she had so far done very little worthy of her title, the fairy doctor’s firm words were highly effective against the fae. Sweetpea and Marigold promised to wait until the ring could be removed. Kelpie was far from afraid of Lydia, but he was also convinced to wait on condition that the fairies of the field would do the same. The flower fairies, she knew, could be trusted; she was more concerned that Kelpie would continue to harass Paul in the meantime. She had therefore asked Edgar that the painter be allowed to stay at the estate

until he could take the ring off. The merrows' sword was kept there, making it merrow territory—not somewhere a kelpie could run amok as he wished. Edgar was more than happy to agree and even commissioned Paul to paint a piece for the mansion while he was staying.

"Not over there, Mr. Firman. It is too close to the river."

His sketchbook under his arm, Paul had been about to follow a wayward path through the trees. Now he hurried back.

"Then how about that hill over there?" he suggested.

Kelpie's powers were enhanced the closer he was to the water, and it would be wise to be wary of that fact. The hill that Paul pointed out, however, should be sufficiently far, so Lydia followed him to it.

The artist had come to the outskirts of London to take a sketch for the painting that Edgar had commissioned. Although he was eating less in an attempt to remove the ring, he had been very eager to set about his work. However, these fields were much closer to fairy territory than the city center. Lydia had been worried about how much more powerful they would be around here and was accompanying him on Edgar's suggestion.

"He is a fortunate man to have you as his knight," Edgar had said in his usual frivolous way, but he had otherwise seemed highly enthusiastic that she should go with him. He had complained so profusely about her speaking to Paul at the ball that she was rather taken aback. Now that she thought about it, ever since that evening, Edgar hadn't been making as many advances on her as she was used to.

Does that mean he noticed my tears?

The resurfacing of the memory momentarily threatened her composure until she managed to get a grip on herself again. If Edgar *had* noticed, he would no doubt have teased her about it. A more likely explanation was that he was finally bored of her. With the number of parties he attended, he had his pick of noblewomen to flirt with, so much so that he probably didn't have time to bother with her anymore. It would certainly be advantageous to her work if he were to stop bothering her so often.

As soon as he had found a suitable spot on top of the hill, Paul became engrossed in his sketching. Lydia occupied herself by walking their surroundings and watching him work. There was a maid with them with whom she conversed a little, but she was comfortable enough just letting the wind dance through the frills of her brimless bonnet. It had been a long time since she had been surrounded by nature like this.

“Are you not bored?” Paul asked as she gazed over his shoulder at the sketch. He had just come to a natural stopping point.

“Not at all. But a short time ago, I was living in the countryside, and I would often spend entire days beneath a tree watching the clouds.”

“That sounds like a day well-spent indeed.”

Warmed by his words, Lydia smiled.

“I have always lived in squalor in the poorer parts of London,” he went on. “It is my ambition to one day purchase a house where the air is clean and spend my days painting the wildflowers.” He looked at her sheepishly. “Although I cannot hope to live such a life of luxury if society will not acknowledge my work.”

“I am sure that it will and that Edgar will help make it so.”

“I hope very much that you are right.” An anxious frown came over his face. “I fear that his lordship only treats me with such kindness because of you; that my painting of Titania only caught his eye because he thought it would please you. He himself does not seem the kind of man who would be interested in fairy-inspired works.”

“That cannot be the case. Edgar does not hold me in such high regard.”

“Are you quite sure? It seems to me that he very much has his heart set on you.”

“Certainly not! One need only observe him for five minutes to see how much of a philanderer he is.”

Paul scratched at his head, an awkward smile on his lips. “I cannot refute it. Nonetheless, I have the sense that he sees you somewhat differently.”

She thought briefly to ask for his reasoning before realizing that she was being foolish. No matter what Paul might think of him, she knew that Edgar was a frivolous flirt to the very end.

“I am certain that Edgar has recognized your talents, Mr. Firman. His standards are very high, particularly when it comes to men.”

While the earl was happy to spend time with any woman, he was much more selective with the male company he kept. High society was not just his playground, it was somewhere he built connections with those who held influence in the political and business spheres. There wasn’t a nobleman alive who would bother with one who had simply inherited his title, but when it came to someone who had worked his way up—even if he was ridiculed as a naive upstart behind his back—they swarmed to him in droves.

Lydia saw more and more prominent men visiting Edgar’s estate by the day. It was a simple matter for him to gain the trust of those who wished to earn his favor. Moreover, increasing his circle of associates and therefore his fame acted as a means of protection. The country would be up in arms if something were to happen to him, so it was difficult for his enemies to make a move. However, when Lydia thought that he might be planning to use these new allies to plot his revenge, she became anxious the more she saw of them.

“It seems to me as though there isn’t a soul alive who wouldn’t like Lord Ashenbert,” Paul said.

That was true enough. At least for those who knew him only on a surface level.

“The more I speak with him, the less it seems I understand him,” the painter continued. “I wonder if that is why I find myself ever more curious about him. What sort of person is he, really? You seem to know him better than anyone else.”

Naturally, she couldn’t tell Paul that Edgar was a villain. Even if she could, she didn’t know all that much about that part of his life. All she really knew was that he was deeply unhappy, a result of having to fight constantly against his lot in life.

“When I look at him, I am reminded of a certain memory,” Paul said. “Of the

first time my father, a painter in his own right, took me to a noble house. It was a vast castle like something that, to my young eyes, belonged in a fairy tale. I almost convinced myself that the nobles who lived there must have been descended from the heroes who are sung of in ballads. Especially their son. He was a beautiful young man of twelve or thirteen, with brilliant blond hair and violet eyes, and he brought to mind the image of Adonis."

Lydia was immediately interested. "Did that boy resemble him? Edgar, I mean?"

"To the extent that I thought they were the very same person when I first laid eyes on his lordship. However, that boy was not named Ashenbert."

She hesitated before asking her next question. "Would you be so kind as to tell me more about the estate?"

"Certainly. It belonged to a duke by the name of Sylvanford."

A duke—the highest-ranking noble title in the United Kingdom.

"At his age, it would have been typical for a noble boy to enter into public school. However, he was plagued by a frail constitution and was therefore educated by a number of private tutors and governesses at the estate."

A frail constitution? Perhaps it was not Edgar after all.

"My father was commissioned by his grace to paint the castle, the gardens, and the family. I was sixteen years old then, and thoroughly disinclined to become an artist myself. However, my father would not hear my protests and had me assist him. I would prepare the paints and set up his canvases, for example. His grace's son would occasionally join me."

"And so the two of you become friends?"

"Indeed we did. We were there but for a few months, but my presence seemed a welcome one for him, for he did not have many playmates. He saw my paltry attempts at art and said that I was talented. He even offered to take me in once he inherited the dukedom. Even at his age, I was certain he must have seen all kinds of wonderful art, and so I was almost tempted to take him up on the offer. Being young myself, I made an impulsive promise to become an artist and began to work hard at it, although I knew I was far from talented. My

father was highly critical of my work, so I drew away from his eyes, which was where I discovered an unquenching love of painting within myself. The consideration and fairness that boy showed me was a perfect example of how a good upbringing should shape one's character."

Considerate and fair... Again, Lydia had her doubts.

"It was a frightful shock when I heard that his grace and his entire family had passed away."

However, that one utterance was enough to convince her that he *must* be speaking about Edgar. The earl always claimed that he was supposed to be dead. He had lost everything: his parents, his home, even his name.

"What were the circumstances of their passing?" Lydia asked quietly.

"It was believed to have been a fire. The family, that splendid castle, the grounds... All of it was lost. It had long been my ambition to become an established artist and have that boy be the first to see my paintings, but that was no longer to be."

Lydia realized she had curled her trembling fingers into fists.

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry! I did not mean to tell such a tragic tale."

"It is quite all right."

"I should point out that his lordship's hair and eye color is where the resemblances end."

Presumably, when Paul actually spoke to Edgar, he realized that his personality differed significantly from that of the duke's son. She wondered for how long the earl had been juggling multiple facades.

"Had your friend survived, do you suppose he would still remember you?" she asked.

Paul frowned at her. Certainly, it was a peculiar question, for nothing could bring back the dead. Still, he gave it some thought and then answered, "I certainly hope that he would."

Edgar must have remembered, else he would not have been giving Paul the

chance to make his art known. The painter was nostalgic for those days spent with the duke's son, and the earl was likely nostalgic in turn. Why else would he protect Paul from the fairies and allow Lydia to accompany him at the expense of her own work?

Lydia knew firsthand how cruel and unfeeling Edgar could be, but she suspected that he was also deeply sentimental. His cruelty had been fostered for the sake of the companions he had led through the fires of hell. It would not surprise her in the least if he treasured his memories of Paul's friendship.

"You are most welcome to continue staring at me, Lydia, but I would prefer it if you did so without the frown," Edgar said.

Apparently, she had been glaring at the earl sitting across the table from her. "Oh, um...I apologize. My thoughts were preoccupied."

"If there is something you wish to know about me, you need only ask."

The two were having lunch together at the estate; for once, Edgar was at home in the middle of the day. They were alone on the sunlit terrace. Paul was still endeavoring to lose weight and, perhaps fortunately, when he was especially engrossed in his art, he often forgot to take meals in any case. Lydia had asked whether he wanted to eat with them, and although he had replied yes, he hadn't come. So she had been left to have lunch with the earl, which, she now remembered, was the first time she had been alone with him since the ball. Restlessness immediately overcame her.

"Did you used to have a frail constitution?" she asked, so desperate to distract from her discomposure that she hadn't thought to ask something less insinuating.

"Yes," he answered readily. "I was asthmatic and never left the home. I no longer suffered from it by the time I was ten, but my mother was an awful worrier. I was not often permitted to see the visitors who came to the estate."

"That is why there is no one who still remembers you and your heritage?"

"I believe there might be one."

It had to have been Paul. Edgar seemed to have sensed that the artist had

spoken to her from her sudden question.

"What about the staff at the estate? Or your governesses?" she asked.

"The governesses and senior servants were relatives of my family. They also perished. I doubt those who survived would recognize me."

One household could employ hundreds of servants. The senior staff—that was, the butlers, housekeepers, lady's companions, wait staff, and coachmen—tended to deal with the family directly, but those below them would not lay eyes on the residents at all.

"If anyone *were* to remember that boy, I doubt he or she would believe that I am him. There exists a gravestone with his name on it, and it is occupied by a corpse. I do not know to whom that body belongs. I can only assume it is a child's corpse charred beyond all recognition, although I personally have not opened the casket to see what lies within." His words were deliberately spun to cast her into the webs of confusion, but he seemed perfectly unaffected as he brought a piece of roast chicken to his mouth.

Having suddenly lost her appetite, Lydia put her knife and fork down. For whatever reason, a competitive spark came over her. "Apparently, your wildly different personality makes it difficult to believe that you are the same boy. If I were to name the offending characteristics, they would be your aggressiveness, coerciveness, and tendency to tease over the most inappropriate things."

Edgar picked up his glass and gazed at it as though checking his reflection. "Yes, I quite agree. Much has happened over the years. When I ponder whether that boy was truly me, it only results in confusion."

His family had been killed out of nowhere, and then he had been taken abroad. Lydia didn't know why the Prince had kidnapped Edgar, or what he had done to the boy, but she did know that he had become a slave, stripped of his freedom and volition. In order to successfully escape with Raven, who had been similarly enslaved, and their other companions, Edgar would likely have needed to learn how to be two-faced, how to hide his true thoughts from the enemy. He would have had to learn how to make ruthless decisions and be cold-hearted, all for the sake of survival. Even after their escape, they had hidden from their pursuers in the lowest stratum of society, where strife and scheming

were the only ways to find one's footing. Lydia pictured it as a battlefield where death was lurking around every corner. It was far from an environment in which a naive noble boy could survive. No one was coming to save Edgar. He had needed to change himself to live and to protect Raven.

"I may not know who you used to be, but I can say for certain that I rather like who you are now," Lydia said.

"Lydia..." Edgar's mouth hung open a moment longer as though he wished to say something more, but in the end he decided against it. Instead, he smiled at her softly.

She never had the slightest clue what he was thinking, but she was relieved to see that his smile *seemed* genuine, at least. He may have changed; likewise, there were surely parts of him that were exactly the same. He could not have smiled at her like that had he not once known carefree happiness, no matter how skilled an actor he was. That was exactly why she couldn't believe that he was all bad, and why she wanted to help him to regain the peaceful life he had lost. She wanted him, as Lord Ashenbert, to be able to cut free from his resentment towards the Prince.

"Now, what do humans fry meat for?" Kelpie was suddenly sitting in Paul's seat and biting into a piece of roast chicken that he held in his bare hands. "It's much nicer raw, y'know."

"What are *you* doing here?" Lydia snapped.

"Ah'm come to see you. Have ye got my ring back yet?"

"Lydia would not give it to you even if we had retrieved it," said Edgar.

Kelpie glanced at him. "Don't be actin' so high and mighty. Ye might be the Blue Knight Earl, but these days ye cannae even *see* fairies properly. That's why ye hired Lydia. It's a huge joke."

"If you are that taken with her, I would be happy to employ you too. Have you any experience with pulling a carriage?"

The remark had its intended effect, and Kelpie tossed a chicken bone through the air out of anger. "Ah'm no a horse! Ah'm a mighty kelpie!" He leaned over the table and glared threateningly at Edgar.

The way the earl stared evenly back at him, Lydia feared that he didn't value his own life. He may have been unaware of the horrors the water horse was capable of, but the stare of a wicked fairy was highly unnerving to humans. It was not unusual for people to faint from terror.

"If ye're scared, earl, how about ye call on that wee servant boy of yers?" It seemed that Raven was the reason the short-tempered kelpie didn't have his hands around Edgar's neck yet.

"Raven is out," the earl said simply.

"So there's no one to stop us snappin' yer neck in two."

"*I* would stop you!" Lydia thrust a protective charm in front of his face. It was a crumpled page from a Bible.

Kelpie screwed up his face as though she had presented him with something particularly foul. Though he disliked anything holy, that was the most it could do to affect him. Still, he drew back. His threat hadn't been all that serious after all.

"Havin' a lassie come to yer protection! Now that's jist shameful!"

"On the contrary, I find it rather thrilling that she would drive away her would-be suitors for my sake."

On the face of it, Edgar's words were true, but Lydia worried that his interpretation of them differed from her own.

"Does this coward have himself a response for everythin'? What do ye even like about him, Lydia? Ah'm a better man no matter how ye look at it!"

"In no world can a horse make a better man than a human."

"I telt ye already, ah'm no a horse! Who do *you* like better, Lydia? Him or us?"

The man-eating fairy or the philanderous former thief. She wished she had a third option.

"I am not interested in *either* of you!" she declared.

"Indeed, I believe you would prefer a painter of fairies," Edgar muttered.

"I beg your pardon?"

“You agreed to model for him, did you not? And yet I recall you were quite disinclined when I first made the suggestion.”

“Well, it just...happened.”

It wasn’t as grand a thing as Edgar made it sound. Paul had asked to draw her when she had accompanied him to the fields, and all she had done was sit on the grass for him. It had been so easy that she had had no reason to refuse when he asked if he could do it again in the future. It wasn’t as though he were taking her portrait either; he just wanted her initial sketch to provide the foundation for one of his fairy paintings.

“I am not the man you ought to direct your anger toward, Mr. Kane,” Edgar said.

“No? Then it’s the man who stole the moon from us?”

The man whose finger you mistakenly forced the ring onto, Lydia wanted to correct him. “Please do not encourage his wrath further, Edgar.”

“If you are truly taken with Mr. Firman, then I shall be gracious in my defeat. It wouldn’t do to invite your displeasure.”

She didn’t know what she ought to say to that. If she refuted it, she would only seem overly desperate to dispel Edgar’s misapprehension. Allowing him to believe it might put an end to his insincere flirting with her, which would be a favorable outcome indeed. Besides, Paul was a lovely man. She might very well fall in love with him. At the same time, she was surprised to find that Edgar’s lack of envy disappointed her. And wouldn’t she *miss* his smooth talk?

Perish the thought!

He had acted contrary to her expectations, and the resulting surprise had unnerved her. That was all.

While she was making excuses in her head, she suddenly came to a realization. Perhaps Edgar was worried about upsetting *Paul* rather than her. The only reason he fought over her with Kelpie was because he enjoyed the banter. But he was not prepared to engage in the same argument with Paul. There was no reason to make his friend unhappy when he wasn’t serious about Lydia in the first place.

Exhausted, she slumped against the back of her chair. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised. She had known from the start that Edgar's flirtations were far from earnest.

"Och, so ye're no even interested in her?" Kelpie continued, showing no concern for her ennui.

She was too distracted to notice Edgar's quiet, growing sullenness. The earl watched as the water horse grabbed a fistful of bread. Then he pushed one of the other plates in the fairy's direction.

"Please, Mr. Kane. Help yourself."

Kelpie complained about the taste but, glutton that he was, scarfed down the carefully presented food in a single gulp. The sudden change in his complexion was visible as he shot to his feet.

"What... What did ye jist make us eat?!"

"Liver pâté."

The one food that kelpies avoided like the plague. Lydia felt the blood drain from her face. She could only begin to imagine the horrors that would ensue if Kelpie *really* lost his temper. His magic may not be as strong this far from the river, but should he go on a savage rampage...there would be nothing she could do to stop him.

The fairy's entire body shook with rage as his mane and tail sprouted from his back. Edgar sounded quite calm as he gave an admonition.

"One ought not to accept food so readily from a man one does not trust."

"Ye're a *sneak*! Next time we meet, ah'll tear ye limb from limb!" Kelpie jumped from the terrace with lightning-quick speed. The liver seemed to have shaken him so badly that he didn't have time to vent his anger.

Lydia was relieved and distressed all at once. "Have you taken leave of your senses?! Do you even *understand* the horrors a kelpie is capable of?!"

"He does not appear to understand what I am capable of either." Behind Edgar's thin smile was a flash of the darkness that he usually kept hidden. Perhaps he did know what Kelpie was capable of—it just didn't scare him in the

slightest. He wasn't afraid of anyone who might take his life. The only thing he was afraid of was his longstanding enemy, who wanted to take everything he had away from him without seeking to kill him.

"Excuse me, my lord."

When Paul stepped onto the terrace, Edgar's smile was that of a confidently composed earl once more.

"I am afraid Mr. Kane has eaten your share of lunch, Mr. Firman. Please allow me to have something new prepared."

"Oh, that's all right, thank you. I actually have a favor to ask of you."

"Oh yes?"

At first, Paul hesitated. But then he seemed to make up his mind. "I would very much like to see the Blue Knight Earl's fabled sword."

According to legend, the Blue Knight Earl had received the sword, along with his title, from King Edward I. It was a treasure whose possession proved one to be descended from the earl himself. Edgar was, in fact, unrelated to the Ashenberts, so it was his obtaining the sword that allowed him to be accepted as the Earl of Ibrazel.

"I was hoping to capture the legend of the Blue Knight Earl in the painting your lordship commissioned from me. I feel as though I must not neglect to include the sword in such a piece." Paul spoke at a rapid pace, as though he thought the request reckless. "I would dare not touch it, of course, nor do anything that could dirty it. I simply wish to see it, so that I can keep its image firmly in my mind's eye. Your lordship asked for a painting of fairies, but I wanted to create something that would have a meaningful place in this estate. After a long period of consideration, I struck upon the Blue Knight Earl."

Edgar's gaze seemed to sharpen for a heartbeat. It was such a quick change that Lydia might have imagined it. His answer, however, came as readily as ever.

"You are very welcome to see it, especially if it will result in an even more wonderful painting."

Paul smiled in relief and bowed his head gratefully. Edgar, for whatever reason, did not smile in return.

The Gentleman Spy

“You showed him the sword, my lord?”

“Indeed I did. He seemed very much struck with admiration for it, and that was the end of it.”

Raven stood stock still and considered this. Edgar leaned his elbow against the sofa’s armrest, propping up his chin with one hand.

“I wonder if it was mere coincidence.”

“Even so, the sword’s appearance, and that the real article is held in this estate, are both valuable pieces of information.”

The earl had been racking his brains trying to deduce whether Paul’s desire to see the sword might have had something to do with the threatening letter from Scarlet Moon.

“Exactly,” he agreed. “However, Mr. Firman is of a disposition unsuited to spying. His reaction to seeing the sword appeared to me to be one of perfectly innocent wonder.”

Paul had always been the naive type. He was quick to believe anything that he was told, and it was almost always possible to tell what he was thinking purely by looking at his face. Edgar could not see him being capable of putting on an act that would adequately dupe others. That was true of the boy he had known, and he believed it was still so. But things might have changed.

“I know, Raven, that it is *far* from uncommon for artists to be attached to secret organizations. I agree with you that this is a matter that requires prudence.”

The largest of such organizations included the Freemasons and the Rosicrucians. These groups attracted a large number of nobles and scholars. Shrouded in secrecy, they could seem extremely sinister from an outside perspective, and one sometimes heard rumors that these groups held machinations of monumental proportions. In reality, however, their goals were rarely anything so unscrupulous.

Meanwhile, there were truly dangerous organizations operating so deeply in the shadows that their names were hidden even from hearsay. If Scarlet Moon were gentlemen thieves, then to the proletariat, they were heroes. Moreover, they were targeting the Prince's dirty money. The members of the organization likely saw their work as a fight for their ideals rather than anything criminal. To a pure-hearted man like Paul, such an idea might be rather appealing.

"Paul Firman was born in Canada, and his parents divorced at a young age," Raven began. "He lived with his mother until her passing, which was when he returned to Britain to live with his father, artist Andrew Firman. His father retired while he was attending art school and now lives in Dover. Mr. Firman has been living alone in London ever since. No one has a bad word to say about him, including his former schoolmates and neighbors. He is known only for devoting himself fervently to his art."

Edgar was frowning intensely as he listened. Raven waited for him to voice the question that was on his mind.

"Andrew *Firman*? Not O'Neill? Did Mr. Firman's father adopt a pseudonym for his work?"

"This report suggests nothing of the sort. There were several paintings signed with the name 'Firman,' but none for O'Neill."

When Edgar had met Paul again and found him going by a different surname than the one he remembered, he had not thought too much of it. It was common for people to go by their mothers' name or, in the case of artists and actors, simply change their own because they could. However, the earl clearly remembered that Paul's father was a painter by the name of O'Neill.

"See if you can find out anything about an artist named O'Neill, Raven."

Supposing such an artist existed and he was the same man commissioned by Edgar's father, then Paul—his supposed son—was currently assuming a false identity. Following that lead might unearth a connection between the young painter and Scarlet Moon.

"Yes, my lord."

"And what of your investigation into our gentleman thief?"

“Your predictions were correct, my lord. One of the antique dealers I made inquiries of told me about a man who had called to sell a violin.”

The police had asked various physicians all over London whether they had seen a man who had lost some fingers, but they had found no success. This had been no surprise to Edgar. Most likely, the man had been treated by a back-alley doctor or a fellow member of his organization. The earl’s thinking had been that, having lost four full fingers, the intruder wouldn’t have been able to play his violin anymore.

“Did you manage to inspect the violin?”

“Yes, my lord. It retained the damage I did to it during our struggle. However, the gentleman who called to sell it was apparently plump and had a black beard. He must have gone to sell it on the violinist’s behalf.”

“Presumably nothing else is known about the seller?”

“Indeed. The only other thing the shopkeeper remembered was that he was well-dressed and wore a ring with a red stone.”

“A ring with a red stone,” Edgar murmured.

“Antique dealers have a certain level of knowledge about gemstones. He wondered whether it was a red moonstone.”

Or perhaps, a scarlet moon.

“Is there such a thing as a red moonstone?” Raven asked.

“There is. They can be red, white, blue...” As he spoke, Edgar had the nagging feeling that he had seen such a moonstone fairly recently. He just couldn’t remember where. He spent almost every day mingling with high society and meeting countless people. Many of those people were the type to wear eye-catching stones on their person. Several of them were probably larger black-bearded men too.

A knock interrupted his thoughts. Only, it didn’t come from the door, but the window. Raven opened it, allowing a gray cat to slink inside. It occurred to Edgar that cats didn’t usually knock.

“Hello, Nico. What can I do for you?”

The cat jumped up on the sofa and reclined on it as though claiming it as his own. It was one of the mannerisms that made it seem as though he wasn't a cat at all. "Could you *please* allow Lydia to go home? She should have left hours ago, but that painter is far too engrossed in his work."

Whatever the cat was meowing about, its presence could mean only one thing.

"Is Lydia still modeling for Mr. Firman, Raven?"

"I suppose she must be."

"At this hour? Please go and tell her that she may go home."

When Raven had left, Nico mewled once as though to catch Edgar's attention. The cat then stared at him accusingly.

"Did you say that the painter could be a spy? And that he might have had something to do with that dodgy dance instructor?"

"Have you been eavesdropping, Nico?"

"I don't think you should be letting a chap like that anywhere *near* Lydia."

"Yes, I understand that you are concerned about Lydia. However, we have no proof yet of any wrongdoing on his part, and my staff will ensure that they are never left alone together."

The cat moved its head in a way that seemed to express exasperation.

Edgar suddenly lifted his head, something occurring to him. "Say, Nico, are you communicating in human speech?"

"Meow." Nico's feline response sounded almost forced.

Edgar moved closer to him. "Do you think that Lydia trusts Mr. Firman more than she does me?"

"I think she would trust *anyone* more than you."

"Do you think she *prefers* him to me?"

"Search me."

"I wonder if she would be hurt if it was discovered that he was a spy."

Nico fell silent then, as though he shared Edgar’s concern.



“You ought to tell Lydia that it would behoove her to fall in love with me.

Perhaps it would also help to speak ill of Mr. Firman. A cunning plan, no?”

The cat hummed thoughtfully. “No, I still think she would be better with a spy than with you.”

Edgar’s hand snapped out to grab Nico by the scruff of his neck and lift him up. “You would do well not to disobey me.”

When Raven arrived to remind Paul how late it was, the artist hurriedly put down his brush. Focusing seemed to make him lose track of time. For her part, Lydia hadn't realized how late it was getting because she had been thinking so deeply. She had been mulling over what steps to take to satisfy the fairies once the moonstone ring had been removed from Paul's finger. She was hoping for a way to have both Kelpie and the fairies of the field leave.

She still didn't have any ideas as she knocked on the door to Edgar's study, ready to go home. Raven had told her Nico was there, so she had come to pick him up. Far from a voice welcoming her in, she heard an enormous clatter. Taken aback, she opened the door only for a ball of bushy gray fur to come hurtling her way.

"Nico! Why, whatever is the matter?"

"He is a *lunatic*, Lydia! He has trampled my pride underfoot!"

There were a number of chairs and lampstands on the floor, which the fairy cat must have knocked over in his panic. Beyond them on the sofa was Edgar, smiling complacently.

"What did you do to Nico, Edgar?!" Lydia said accusingly.

"We were merely playing." Brushing the gray fur from his clothes, the earl stood up.

"He treated me like a *cat*! Despite me telling him that I am anything but!"

"You seemed to enjoy it a great deal."

"*Seemed*, yes! This form gives me certain feline instincts, which may come to the forefront in the appropriate circumstances, but—"

"A fine excuse if I ever did hear one."

"Silence!" Nico hissed. "You will *not* touch me again, you will *not* stroke me, and you will *certainly* do nothing to incite purring!" The fairy cat leaped out of Lydia's arms and dashed away at incredible speed.

She could only imagine what Edgar must have done to make Nico quite *this* angry about letting his feline side take over.

“You must be good with cats,” she guessed.

“As good as I am with women.”

His comment took Lydia by surprise. She had thought he was tired of flirting with her. By the time she realized it would be best to leave sooner rather than later, he was already standing in her path. As he peered down at her, it was clear he had every intention of going on the offensive.

Where has this come from all of a sudden?

“You are not obligated to assist Mr. Firman till all hours. Arrive home too late and you will cause professor Carlton to worry.”

“That was not my intention. I simply did not realize how late it was getting today.”

“You enjoyed yourself that much?”

“I suppose I did. Mr. Firman entertained me with his conversation.”

“What did you talk about?” He didn’t miss a beat.

“For the most part, painting. Does it really concern you what we spoke about?”

“And what is that?” Edgar gestured to the card in Lydia’s hand.

She held it up for him; hiding it would only cause suspicion. “Mr. Firman gave it to me as thanks for modeling for him.”

On the card was a lightly colored drawing of some irises. The crisp lines of Paul’s pencil captured the flowers’ vibrant vitality in a way that captivated the eye, despite it being drawn on a card.

“The iris. A message of love in the language of flowers. Essentially, he has written you a love letter.”

“Perish the thought. There just so happened to be some irises next to me and so Mr. Firman drew them.”

“And if you are mistaken?”

If Paul *were* professing his love to her, how would she respond? She had accepted the card quite happily and readily; what if it *had* meant something?

“I suppose you do not cry when *he* attempts to seduce you.”

Lydia stared at him. She felt her face reddening before her mind had caught up and deduced what he was talking about. He *had* noticed her crying.

“I have been trying and trying to understand what I did to cause those tears, but to no avail. Did I say something to offend you? If so, what and why?”

If only *she* knew. She had suddenly been overcome with anguish, but the cause remained a mystery. She didn’t want Edgar to have the power to distress her on a whim, and now she found she was most irritated.

“Does it matter to whom I give my heart? Did you not say you would accept it if I chose Mr. Firman?”

“I lied.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I feigned confidence. That was not how I truly feel.”

“That you can tell lies with such ease is the very reason I am disinclined to trust you!”

“Yes...I wonder just how many lies I have fed you during our time together.”

“I am going home. Please allow me passage.”

He didn’t move. “I lie and lie to you, and yet you forgive me each and every time. You always have. You forgave me upon learning that I was a thief and you forgave me for attempting to deceive you. That is precisely why I long for you to remain by my side. Though my sins can never be undone, I have the sense that I may live freely as the Earl of Ibrazel if only you continue to provide me with your grace.”

It was rare for him to speak with such sincerity. Lydia’s heart was pounding against the wall of her chest.

“You know the full extent of my wretchedness. But you understand, too, the circumstances that forced me to become who I am. You expressed your fondness for me, the me who I am now. I am sure that, going forward, I shall be made to harbor many secrets that I cannot share with a single soul. However, I had always thought that no one but those who had experienced what I had

could understand my feelings, and yet you—and only you—took the time to try to do so. Is that not enough of a reason for me to see you in a different light? Do you still believe these feelings of mine to be frivolous or insincere?”

And yet, Lydia knew that he was perfectly capable of making such grand declarative speeches without meaning any of it.

“If not insincere, then certainly frivolous.”

“You wound me, Lydia.”

“You have no conception of a serious kind of love. Your mind is far more preoccupied with your arch-enemy than it is any woman. Suppose my presence does comfort you in some way, that is not love. It would merely mean that my being here is useful.”

She was confident that she was right, especially considering what she had learned about Edgar. He was endlessly talented at getting what he felt he needed through words alone. And even if he truly *felt* he needed her, that still was not love.

“Would you not be satisfied with simply being friends? I certainly do not mind being useful to you, for I am grateful to you for allowing me to work as your fairy doctor. As friends, we may show kindness to one another without requiring anything more. I am even willing to believe that you are capable of seeing me as a fellow human being and not a tool.”

Edgar stared at her intently, apparently dissatisfied with her response. “Such a settlement would fly in the face of my principles. The point at which one is told by a woman that she only desires friendship is the point at which things must come to an end.”

Lydia blinked at him. In that case, she had even less reason to believe his advances were genuine. Fed up, she made to slip past him, but it only served to irritate him; he placed his hands against the wall on either side of her to prevent her from leaving. More than a bad mood, she had the sense that he was *angry* with her.

However, when he spoke, his whisper took on a honeyed tone. “Is it that you are frightened?”

She wasn't experienced enough to realize that he had changed tactics, and was therefore a little flustered—just as he had hoped.

"What do you mean?"

"It seems to me that you are frightened of falling in love."

She suddenly felt as though she wanted to cry again.

"I thought as much at the ball," Edgar continued. "I feared that being too persistent would scare you further and that you would flee, so I restrained myself. That is why it wounds me to see you falling head-over-heels for Mr. Firman."

"As I have already told you, there is no love between him and me."

He was being incredibly persistent, as though making up for the respite he had given her over the past few days. If this was the result, she would rather he return to his usual flirtatious self instead of letting it build up. He had lulled her into a false sense of security, and now she had no hope of escape. Her embarrassment and burning anger were clashing together to leave nothing but confusion.

"Is it because of that boy who confessed to you in jest when you were a child? Is that why you are so reluctant to open your heart?"

Lydia felt as though she didn't know how to answer and yet the words came out in a flood. "I am not *frightened* of falling in love. I have been in love before, although my feelings were unrequited. However, it is quite unthinkable that I should ever fall in love with *you*. If such a thing were to happen, it would surely inconvenience you. Consider it for a moment. Would it not be a bother if I were to fall head-over-heels for you and follow after you wherever you went? Especially after you had found a lovely noble girl to propose to. No matter how serious my feelings became, you could not accept them, for they would come from a girl who would be utterly unsuitable for you. And if you were to distance yourself from me then, I would sell all your secrets to the scandal sheets in revenge. So you see, as far as you are concerned, there would be no advantage to my falling in love with you."

As she had expected, Edgar looked somewhat conflicted.

“I see,” he said.

“Then you may allow me passage now.”

“You *are* frightened. You are all too quick to presume that nothing good can come from loving me. And one cannot blame you for that, for it shields you from potential disappointment.”

But Lydia was not concerned about being disappointed. Even during the incident as a child, she had known from the very beginning that she had no business receiving love letters. She had already suspected it to be a practical joke. The boy himself had likely considered her not as a human friend, but a fairy playmate. Making friends with the girl who was rumored to be a changeling was like conspiring with a supernatural creature. She was like a being who appeared in his dreams, separate from reality, so it was no wonder he didn’t mind sharing some of his smaller worries with her. It could not have been pleasant to have his imaginary friend invade his real, everyday life, especially when he had let her in on his vulnerabilities. Of course he hadn’t wanted to talk to her. And yet, she had failed to realize any of that and put him in an awkward position. She should have known where she stood in his life. Instead, she had allowed herself to become enamored with the idea of being more like a *real* friend.

If she was scared of anything, it was being misled by lies. Misjudging the delicate distance between Edgar and herself would only make things awkward for him.

“I am not endeavoring to avoid disappointment,” she said. “I do not wish to misjudge the distance between us.”

“‘Distance’? Distance is something that changes perpetually, something that we have the *power* to change.”

She suddenly realized that he had drawn even closer to her.

“For instance, this level of proximity could become something that is quite natural for us, if only we would make it so,” he whispered, placing his hands on her shoulders and effectively pinning her to the wall.

“Release me,” she murmured. She lifted an arm to try and brush him away,

but he grabbed it and placed a kiss on her wrist. The unexpected touch against her bare skin had her trembling.

“Excuse me, my lord,” a hesitant voice called from the still-open doorway. It was Paul.

Lydia only had a split second to feel relieved before she realized that Edgar still had his eyes on her and had begun to play with her hair.

“I am busy. Kindly shut the door and leave,” he instructed.

Lydia froze.

“But my lord—”

“Lydia and I simply have something important to discuss.”

She hadn’t realized this was a discussion. She wanted to ask Paul to stay, but she hesitated to open her mouth with those ash-mauve eyes boring into her. Besides, what reason did the artist have to loiter after Edgar had already ordered him out? Her inability to say anything was starting to push her into a panic.

“But Miss Carlton is shaking,” Paul pointed out firmly.

A deep crevice appeared in Edgar’s brow. It looked more like a gesture borne of desperate loneliness and frustration than the irritation Lydia would have expected. He finally released her with a heavy reluctance.

“How fortunate for you that your knight in shining armor has arrived.”

“My lord, my intention was not to—”

Edgar ignored him. “You may go home, Lydia. I have said everything I wanted to.” Waving a dismissive hand in her direction, he disappeared through the door at the other side of the room.

Lydia was still in a daze when she arrived home. She went straight to her bedroom, where she planted herself on the bed without bothering to light the lamp. Her body was still shivering in fear, as if she could still feel Edgar’s heat on her wrist, her shoulders, and her hair.

“He *must* have taken leave of his senses!”

Even letting out an angry shout was not enough to quell her discomfort. She considered whether he might have gotten too ahead of himself and taken a joke too far. But this was far from one of his usual flirtations. They never struck so deeply, and she always had an opportunity for escape. Nor did his mood ever seem so foul. If it had been the drawing from Paul that had caused it, then she could only feel exasperation at his selfish desire to control her.

The only conclusion she could come to was that Edgar couldn’t abide it when other men got close to the women in his vicinity. However, the earl’s fury was misguided, for Paul did not hold such sentiments towards her. The artist had gone against Edgar’s wishes and stood up for Lydia for the younger man’s sake, not hers.

Paul had walked her outside to the carriage, and while she had trembled the entire way, he had struggled to hide his indignation. He had said that, while it was not his right to comment on Edgar’s flirtatious ways, what the earl had done to her was far too extreme to be dismissed as a joke. Especially when he should know that an ordinary girl like her was incapable of disobeying a noble.

Personally, Lydia could see no problem dodging Edgar whether or not he hung his status or his position as her employer above her. His suspicious behavior since the day they had met meant she had never regarded him as a nobleman of any kind. They spoke to each other as casually as if they were equals. Paul’s objections, therefore, made her inclined to believe that his actions were done less to protect Lydia and more because he wanted Edgar to behave as a proper, virtuous gentleman. Because he didn’t want the earl to be the sort of man who would forcefully lay a finger on a naive girl below his status, even through a misunderstanding. Even if Paul thought Edgar to be someone different from the noble boy in his past, perhaps a part of him did see them as the same person. In which case, he might only be showing such kindness to Lydia because he was under the misapprehension that she was special to the earl.

“In the end, it is all rather trifling,” she muttered with a sigh.

“Oi, Lydia. Aren’t you going to have supper?” Nico was peering in through the doorway. He had been glued to his reflection in the mirror, trying to smooth his

fur, ever since they had arrived home. However, his spirits seemed to have lifted as soon as supper was announced.

Lydia's spirits were in much worse shape. She sat on the bed, holding her knees, and replied, "No."

"Oh. All right." The fairy cat shrugged, indifferent.

She had been silent in the carriage on the way home, and he had told her to keep her spirits up since at least *she* hadn't been stroked like a cat. The comment had rubbed her the wrong way, so she had tied a knot in Nico's tail fur. That was likely why he was wary about keeping his distance just now. He trotted away down the stairs on his hind legs, his bushy tail swinging behind him.

Is he not even inclined to comfort me? Every last thing was getting on Lydia's nerves at the moment. With her fingers wrapped around her wrist, she could feel her own pulse, and the thought occurred to her that Edgar had felt the same rhythm against his lips. The idea irritated her further.

"Ye eat somethin' funny and give yerself a stomachache? Is that how ye're no eatin' supper?" Kelpie appeared at her second-story window. Perhaps he had not suffered at all from eating the liver Edgar gave him. If only it had given him food poisoning and forced him home.

Fed up, Lydia replied, "Is it not *you* who has eaten something 'funny'?"

"Took a while to get the poison outta us. Drinking the water in the Highlands'd have us right as rain in no time, but the water here is filthy."

It had done him some damage after all. Though he took on human form, he was still rather tall and well-built compared to the average man. Even then, he slipped through the narrow window with skillful ease. Sitting on the frame, he turned his bewitching eyes on Lydia. His gaze was a product of his fairy powers rather than an echo of his machinations. In that sense, it wasn't nearly as uncomfortable to look at as Edgar's.

"Were you hiding in the Thames?" Lydia asked.

"Are ye jokin'? Us, hide in *that* mire? I was in a lake down the park over there."

From the direction he pointed in, he was likely referring to Hyde Park, which did indeed have a lake.

“You ought to be aware that I am not in the best of moods this evening. I suggest you leave before I throw a Bible at you.”

“How are ye in a bad mood? Och, wait, I know. They say human females turn grumpy once a month when—”

She tossed a cushion at him, but he caught it easily.

“Now there’s no need for that. I got somethin’ that’ll cheer yer up.”

Knowing kelpies, it would be something along the lines of the fresh pig’s head or a goat’s heart, and, frankly, she would rather die than be presented with a gift like *that*.

Frowning, she watched as he opened up his palm in front of her to reveal a wiggling, yellow ball of fluff with two black, beady eyes.

“A chick? Why, it’s darling.” Lydia automatically broke into a smile.

“I found it.”

“Where?”

“In a coop in the suburbs.”

Perhaps “stole” would be a more appropriate word.

“Am I to infer you fed yourself at the same time?”

“I jist picked off a couple hens for a wee snack. Ah’m holdin’ off attacking any humans, ’cause I know it’d make ye angry.”

Kelpie had to eat. However, ever since meeting Lydia, he had done his best not to eat people. She supposed that was his way of showing his sincerity.

“You did not want this chick?” she asked.

“Look how wee it is. It’d be too much of a bother to get its liver out.” He set the chick on Lydia’s palm.

She gently curled her fingers around it to stop it falling. Its downy fluff calmed her.

“What’s it feel like?” Kelpie sat down beside her and watched her stroke the creature as though he found it curious. He likely found it difficult to understand having such affection for such a tiny creature.

“It is warm and soft and makes me feel ever so calm.”

“Ye don’t wanna eat it?”

“I want to *protect* it. To bond with it and spend time with it. And, when it is gone, I am sure that I shall feel sad and lonely.”

“Ye mean like this?” He began to ruffle her hair.

Am I akin to a chick in his eyes?

Perhaps that was true, and that was all she was. Humans had a short lifespan, and they were much weaker than kelpies, both physically and magically. Yet this water horse wanted such an insignificant creature by his side, something that made him an oddity among his kind.

“I wonder how it is that I don’t wanna eat ye. And how I get bored when ye’re no around.”

“Do not all kelpies speak as profusely as you?”

“There’s no one else to talk to underwater anyhows. But if I could take ye with us, I could talk as much as ah’d like.” Kelpie put an arm around her shoulder like it was nothing.

It wasn’t unpleasant enough for her to brush him off. When it came to Edgar, however, things were completely different. Perhaps it was because she had always spent more time around fairies than other humans that she was so comfortable with the kelpie’s touch. Where the hearts of men were difficult for her to understand; fairies’ were much more straightforward. At the very least, if Kelpie wanted to trick her into getting eaten, he’d simply use magic rather than mislead her with his words and behaviors.

“Did that earl say somethin’ nasty to ye?” The fact that there was nothing sinister lurking behind his forthright desire to cheer her up put her at ease. “Ye should give up workin’ for him and come marry us instead.” He outright said what was on his mind.

It wasn't unheard of for a human to fall in love with a fairy and leave the mortal realm, but there was still too much tying Lydia to this world. Her father, for one. Her dream of carrying on her mother's work as a fairy doctor. The wonderful things out there waiting for her that she had yet to experience.

"Am I bein' too persistent? Anyhows, are ye no even gonna come back to Scotland? Ye'd do much better skippin' about the fields full of fairies than dressin' up in this town with all its people."

Lydia agreed, but she shook her head. "I cannot. I wish to become a fairy doctor worthy of my title. That means I need to spend time with humans."

"But people are so *tirin'*. Most fairy doctors get fed up with them, as humans who're close to fairies. 'Asides, people cannae even see fairies, so they forget all about them and the fairy doctors unless somethin' really bad happens. Ah've heard there are a lot of fairy doctors livin' in the fairy realm who came from the human world a long time ago."

According to tradition, only changelings or those who had a lot of fae blood possessed the potential to become fairy doctors. Lydia didn't know what the case was for her. Could it be that her deep involvement in fairykind meant she was fated never to fit in with the human world? Had the same been true for her mother?

Perhaps not; her mother had had her father to support her in this realm. Lydia, meanwhile, had no idea which direction her future was heading in. She wondered if the time would come when she gave up on her birth world and went away to Fairyland.

"Ye humans die in the blink of an eye. So ye really ought to stop wastin' yer time in a filthy city like this."

While several decades may indeed pass "in the blink of an eye" from a fairy's perspective, it was a long time for a person. Still, his absentmindedly spoken words calmed her.

A water spirit, his touch was a little cool, and yet there was a comforting purity to it. It felt as though all the murkiness that was stored up within her was being cleansed. Though kelpies were savage by nature, it was said that they had the power to purify water, based on the fact that they only lived in clean

waters. The rivers and lakes they lived in were celebrated as rich sources of limpid water, something that came as a blessing to both animals and mankind.

When one was in contact with fairies, it was common to see the workings and beliefs of mankind to be one-sided. It was that kind of convenient thinking that had all kelpies categorized as bad fairies.

That being the case, none of the strife, worries, and failures Lydia experienced in the human world should ever push her to despair. If she grew tired of it, Fairyland would welcome her with open arms.

“You are a decent sort after all, aren’t you?”

Wicked or not, Kelpie was honest. And then there was Edgar, human, but a proficient liar. Rather, Lydia had the sense he lied *because* he was human. Compare the two and Edgar seemed much more evil.

But that was what humans were, creatures who fluctuated between good and evil. Edgar was difficult to understand because his fluctuations were far greater in size than most people’s. He recognized as much himself, and it seemed to cause him intense anguish from time to time. Those were the occasions on which the arrogant man made Lydia feel just like the chick in her palm did. If only she were able to embrace him and bring him warmth.

However, he had rejected her offer of friendship. Though he said he considered her indispensable, the truth might have been that he saw her as nothing more than someone to tease and distract him from tedium.

They heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Kelpie had already vanished by the time Lydia turned to him. There was a knock at the door, which opened to reveal her father, home from the university.

“Have we got company, Lydia? I thought I heard voices.”

“I was just speaking with a fairy, father, but he has gone now.”

“I heard you refused supper.”

“Yes, I...wasn’t particularly hungry. But I suppose I ought to have something. I shall join you for your supper now.” Lydia stood up and gently let the chick down onto the table. There was already milk and cookies on it for the

hobgoblins. The fairies gathered at once around the tiny creature. She said to them, “Look after this little one for me.”

***

Paul had stood up to Edgar when the earl had closed in on Lydia. If the artist had snuck into the estate in order to spy, it did not make sense for him to do anything to upset his host. Perhaps he had no connection to Scarlet Moon after all. Either that or his sense of justice had taken precedence over his task. As Edgar pondered the matter, he sighed, grappling with a nagging sense of self-loathing.

“Is something the matter, my lord?” Raven glanced at his master from the seat beside the carriage door.

Outside the window, the crowds of Oxford Street streamed past them. Edgar wanted desperately to come to a conclusion on the matter of Paul’s potential involvement with the gentlemen thieves. However, every time he started thinking, his mind invariably directed itself to thoughts of Lydia.

“Yes,” he replied. “Something is the matter.”

Edgar felt guilty about scaring Lydia, but he hadn’t stepped back from her on Paul’s arrival because he wanted to see how the painter would react. On the other hand, her constant resistance had irritated him, and he considered it a good thing that Paul had come before he could do something regrettable. His calculating side was perpetually conscious of Lydia’s value to him, while his emotional side simply *wanted* her. Suppose he needed her purely for practical purposes, there was no reason not to accept her friendship. If only the suggestion hadn’t angered him considerably.

“Could you explain something to me, Raven? It is undeniable that I am using Lydia. Why, then, do I wish her to avert her eyes from that truth?”

“Which truth would you rather she focus on?”

“That I am so deeply in love with her that I want to be with her always.”

“I believe that is wishful thinking at this point, my lord.”

Edgar folded his arms. That was exactly what was troubling him. No matter

how many times he conveyed his feelings to her, she never seemed to believe him.

“Is that *really* how you feel, my lord?”

“Indeed it is—I do not wish to part with her.”

“That isn’t the part I was referring to.”

“You mean, am I truly in love with her? I certainly could be if things were guaranteed to end well.”

Raven stared at him blankly.

“Unfortunately, I doubt that would suffice for Lydia. My feelings are unequivocally unrequited.” Edgar scowled.

“That doesnae sound like true love to me.”

It was impossible for the third party to have joined them in the moving carriage and yet, there he was.

“For goodness’ sake. If nothing else, I could never allow Lydia to choose *you*,” Edgar addressed the young, dark-haired man across from him. Raven made to move, but the earl stopped him with a look. “Mr. Kane, if you have business with me, I would very much appreciate it if you went through my butler.”

“Yer human rules don’t apply to us. ’Asides, Lydia doesnae care about ye. She only cares about becomin’ a proper fairy doctor. Ah’d remember that if I were ye.”

“Did she or did she not turn down your proposal? If nothing else, she has yet to reject me outright.”

“She’s no turned down nothin’, the way I see it. Humans grow old like that, and they’re no guid at nothin’. They hate and kill and deceive each other. At some point, a fairy doctor like her’ll realize she’d rather live with us fairies than people like *that*.”

“You are...a kelpie, correct? A creature who eats people. I am sure even Lydia is constantly wary around you lest you accidentally devour her.”

“I wouldnae eat her. Kelpies have guid self-control.”

“A pity. Personally, I would be more than happy to have a taste of her.”

Kelpie grimaced. “*Ye?* A human? Are ye a deviant or somethin’?”

Edgar chuckled and lifted his gaze. “Why are you so keen on Lydia? Does it not fly in the face of your nature to love a human?”

“It’s because she is no afraid of us. Kelpies are seen as dangerous creatures, but she sees us as *us* afore she sees us as a kelpie. I can talk to her and she’ll no run away. Ah’ve never met another human like her.”

“I daresay you must have been quite lonely before you met her.”

“Water horses are used to bein’ alone. We don’t even live with one another.”

“And yet, when you met Lydia, you encountered the comfort of being accepted by another. You then felt that you wanted to keep her to yourself.”

Kelpie was studying Edgar carefully, like he was searching the earl’s heart. His eyes were gorgeous black pearls. There was something within their inhuman glitter that reminded him of Lydia’s golden-green gaze. Something calming that suggested he was fully understood, and that he therefore didn’t have to lie.

“Yeah, that’s exactly right,” Kelpie said.

“I feel the same way, you see. Lydia is not frightened of the things I have done in the past. Rather than paying attention to the presumptions society would make about men like me, she listened and showed me compassion. She *helped* me. Reminded me of the part of myself that no human should lose sight of. Having Lydia by my side makes me think that I might be able to become a somewhat decent man after all.”

“Och, so ye’re one of those hellbound people.” Kelpie smirked.

Perhaps it was his magical energy that made Edgar feel dizzy. As he recalled, this creature would eat anyone, man or woman. In which case, his bewitching beauty would naturally have an equally mystifying effect on men. This fairy was like the finest work of art, but one that lay beyond an impenetrable, enticing trap.

“My lord!”

At Raven’s cry, Edgar felt the boy’s touch on his shoulder. His servant’s other

hand was pointing a knife at the center of Kelpie's brow.

"There's no need for that, lad. Oh, wait. Were ye a snake or a bird or somethin'?" Kelpie drew back, and Edgar's body suddenly felt light, as though it had been released from invisible binds.

"It's all right, Raven." When his servant withdrew the knife, Edgar continued in a murmur, "I suppose I *would* be hellbound, although I do not believe in the place. Nevertheless, Mr. Kane, you should believe me when I say that I have no intention of letting Lydia go."

Kelpie snorted. "Awright. I hear ye."

It wasn't long after the fairy vanished that the carriage came to a stop outside the University of London, University College. Edgar alighted and headed alone for the building where Lydia's father worked. Hearing that the earl had something to ask him, Carlton had made some time between his individual tutoring sessions.

Edgar was shown to the professor's research room by another staff member, where he was greeted by Carlton. As usual, the older man's unkempt hair and round spectacles made him seem more like administrative staff than a professor.

"Hello, my lord. Please excuse the mess." As Carlton tried to shuffle between his desk and a pile of books, the hem of his jacket caught on a chair, leading to the entire pile tumbling down. "Oh dear. That's what I get for stacking my books *there*, I suppose. Please pay it no mind, my lord, and take a seat."

Realizing the sofa he had just offered was covered in papers, Carlton hurried over to gather them up. His student, Langley, came over from the next room to lend a hand...which was just as well, because Carlton's clumsy movements put him in danger of scattering the papers all over again.

"You wanted to discuss something with me, my lord? Has Lydia been inconveniencing you?" Apparently, the professor's restlessness was caused by the anxiety that Edgar had come to complain about his daughter.

"Not at all. Your daughter is doing very well, in fact. I have come to ask for

your expertise regarding a certain gemstone."

Carlton immediately broke into a grin. Mineralogy was his specialism. According to Lydia, he went totally mad for it, so it was no wonder his expression quickly took on the refined look of a scholar.

"I would like to ask you about moonstones. I have heard there exist some that wax and wane like the moon herself."

Edgar had come to ask about the moonstones due to the link he suspected they had with his title. One of its previous holders had apparently promised his hand to the Fairy Queen in exchange for the moon. Hence the arrival of Marigold with her moonstone, which waxed and waned like the real thing. The earl had started to wonder whether the request for the moon had been genuine and not just a convenient rejection.

And then there was the other moon: Scarlet Moon, the band of gentleman thieves. Supposing their name was inspired by a red moonstone, it begged the question, why? What did the moon mean to them, a group that was outraged by his false claim to the Blue Knight Earl's title?

If only Edgar had more information, he might have been able to find the link by himself. But he didn't know where his territory, Ibrazel, was, or if it even existed, nor did he know anything about the relationship between his adopted ancestors and fairykind.

"The light inside a moonstone is a reflection created by thin strata of various minerals. It is an incredibly delicate construction, so I can well imagine how that reflection might appear different under the light of the moon's various phases," said Carlton.

"You mean to say that it is one's perception that changes rather than the light itself?"

"I wonder about that. However, take, for example, those diamonds that some say are cursed. As one who looks at them solely through the lens of their mineral structure, it becomes very difficult to believe that there is anything supernatural about them. And yet, as you say, there are those who have believed since time immemorial that moonstones can indeed wax and wane." Carlton paused for thought. "One famous example is the moonstone of Pope

Leo X, who lived during the Middle Ages. They say that it possessed such a property."

"Are there other similar anecdotes?"

"Indeed, *countless* others. People believe that these mysterious gemstones mimic the phases of their namesake, or that they themselves are fragments of the moon. As far as the spiritual side of mankind is concerned, the changing light has always been a central property of the moonstone to one degree or another."

If that was true, then the moonstone sought by the Blue Knight Earl and brought to Edgar was simply one which reflected light in an especially intricate way; there was nothing supernatural about it. He had been checking the ring on Paul's finger on a daily basis, but there was still some time before the next full moon. He had the sense that it had expanded, but it was so subtle a difference that it could easily be his imagination.

After taking some time to think, Edgar continued. "You are well-versed in legendary gemstones from a variety of eras and locations, are you not, professor? For example, you were able to broadly identify the gemstone hidden by the genie in the *Arabian Nights* using your mineralogical knowledge."

"Well, I did that more to entertain myself."

"Such endeavors still hold value when you are the only one to pursue them." Edgar decided it was time to bring up what he had come for. "The truth is, it was thought that one of the former bearers of my title was searching for such a moonstone. For what purpose, I do not know."

"Was it perhaps to aid in his search for a wife?" Carlton smiled a little sheepishly. "It is said that moonstones hold the power to maintain a loving relationship."

"I was not aware of that. Do such romantic topics fall into your field of research as well?"

"Oh, not at all. This is just something that I happen to have heard somewhere. From my wife, you see, and so our wedding ring—ah, sorry, you wouldn't be interested in that. Your question was..."

“On the contrary, it sounds like a lovely story, professor. I should very much like to give a moonstone to the woman I love one day.” Edgar smiled, and Carlton suddenly looked nervous.

“Your lordship is still young, and I daresay there is no need to rush lest you regret your choice. Especially when you could have any woman you desire.”

“I believe a couple’s love for each other to be more significant than their relative ages.” Much as he knew he ought not to, Edgar was rather enjoying the professor’s discomfort.

“Do you... Do you perhaps already have a woman in mind?”

“I was speaking in general terms.”

Carlton wiped the sweat from his brow, clearly relieved.

“Still, professor, I imagine it must be quite worrisome to have a daughter as lovely as yours. There may well come a day when a man arrives to exchange her heart for a romantic stone.”

Carlton froze and didn’t say anything for quite some time. When he finally regained his sentence, he forced the conversation back on track rather inelegantly. “Speaking of marriage, that reminds me. The bride who appears in the tale of your ancestor, the Blue Knight...I do wonder whether *she* is representative of the moonstone.”

Edgar hadn’t expected that. Naturally, he had read the tales of the Blue Knight Earl several times, but he couldn’t remember a moonstone ever being mentioned.

“Do you mean one of the Knight’s guardian fairies? One of the master archers?”

There were two fairies who fit that description, although only one of them had married the Knight.

Carlton nodded as he flipped through a book he had just retrieved from his shelf. The well-known book featured the Blue Knight as its protagonist and had been written during the Elizabethan era. It was filled with stories featuring fairies, a trend that was popular at the time, so most took it to be a work of

fiction despite its main character being a real person.

The Blue Knight, the original Lord Ashenbert, had been a knight of the King of England, who had conferred him the earldom. That much was true, but the abundant fae and magic that appeared in the work made it difficult to believe the rest, although Lydia, with all her knowledge of fairies, had said that it was quite plausible.

“Would you understand what I meant if I were to say that these archers represented the moon?” Carlton asked.

Edgar was reminded of the lunar goddess Diana, who was also the goddess of the hunt. Perhaps Carlton’s assertion came from the shape of a bow being reminiscent of a crescent moon. The moon and the bow had been used to invoke each other in literature and art since ancient times.

“And then there are fairies, for whom the moon represents something high ranking. It is thought that the guardian fairies’ names also relate to the moon.”

“Their names... The Knight’s bride was Gwendolen, and the other was Frandolen.”

“In Gaelic, they mean ‘white bow’ and ‘scarlet bow’ respectively.”

“Or, a white moon and a scarlet moon...”

“And both are possible colors for moonstones. Some say that Frandolen was the Blue Knight’s daughter, and both fairies are portrayed as wearing gemstones. I would say there is no stone that would suit them more than a moonstone that waxes and wanes.”

It struck Edgar then, that when one of his adopted ancestors had asked the Fairy Queen to bring him the moon, he must have had in mind the guardian fairies of the Blue Knight. What followed was the question of whether he was really looking for a wife, or whether he had had need of someone related to the fairies Gwendolen and Frandolen. But that was a long time ago. He didn’t know whether the moonstone on Paul’s finger had belonged to Gwendolen, but even if it had, she must have long passed on—else the Fairy Queen would have found her along with the ring.

The *scarlet* moon was far more relevant to Edgar at this point. Supposing the

group of gentleman thieves threatening him had taken their name from the tales of the Blue Knight, it would mean they considered themselves the true earl's guardian. It would explain why they couldn't abide an imposter like Edgar and why they felt a need to retrieve the sword. But then, what of their connection to the Prince? Why would an organization hostile to him take the name of the Blue Knight Earl's archer? That was something for Edgar to investigate by himself.

He stood up. "Thank you very much for your time, professor. That was most enlightening."

"It was my pleasure."

As they exchanged a handshake, Edgar suddenly thought of another question he would have liked to ask Lydia's father. "Might I ask one more thing, professor?"

"Certainly."

"Miss Carlton tells me your wife was a fairy doctor. I wonder whether it requires courage to fall in love with a woman who sees what most cannot?"

Specifically, one who could see his innermost thoughts and vulnerabilities, no matter how he tried to mask them.

"I selfishly took my wife away from the island on which she was born and the fairies she so loved. She had built the foundations of her destiny there, but I tore her away from them. I took so much from her, and yet I cannot help but feel that I gave her very little in return. Oh, sorry, there I go again... I confess, I am unsure whether courage is required to love anyone. It seems to me to be closer to an irresistible force that brings two people together rather than something we can control." A quiet smile rose to Carlton's lips.

Edgar was surprised to discover that the professor had essentially eloped. He certainly didn't seem capable of such passionate action.

"Love comes for all of us eventually, like a bolt from the blue. Courageous or not, one finds oneself setting forth on that difficult path without a second thought. As for myself, I found that I was utterly resolute. And, much like how I took my wife from her family, I am sure that one day, Lydia will find someone

more precious to her than I am. But only when it becomes a natural choice and not one that causes her to fret will I believe that she has found the right person."

Well played, sir, Edgar thought to himself.

Carlton may have been an absentminded man with too big a heart, but he was sharp and intelligent. His words to the earl served as a gentle warning: it was pointless to approach Lydia with feelings that were still vague and ambiguous. However, Edgar was the type to take that warning as a challenge. It was similar to when he had knocked heads with Kelpie.

Why, then, did he feel oddly depressed? He had an endless list of methods he could use to keep Lydia by his side. If his feelings for her wouldn't be acceptable unless they were serious, he would *make* them serious. And yet it felt as though that dishonest enthusiasm had just been completely trampled on, and he was quickly filled with a strangely straightforward desire to see Lydia.



As had become her habit, she had shut herself away in her office that day and

refused to open the door for him. He supposed he deserved it, but it did mean that he wouldn't have a chance to properly speak to her for a while.

Not that it mattered. Lydia valued her work highly and she may simply have been too busy to take breaks. That didn't mean she was rejecting him, and it wouldn't take much for Edgar to make her uncertain that yesterday's events had even happened. It did weigh on his mind that doing so wouldn't mean she would *want* to spend her time with him.

He had the sense that he quite liked her. Perhaps a lot. But there was still that conclusive something that was needed for his feelings to be reciprocated.

The Archer’s Loosed Arrow

The jet-black water horse awoke at the bottom of the park’s lake. It was early enough that the morning mist had not yet fully cleared, and the park was more or less deserted. The horse rose to the surface, the shaking of its elegant mane sending ripples through the water as it swam. When the waterfowl noticed its presence, the entire flock scattered into the air.

“I could do with some breakfast,” he muttered.

The squirrels darting about did little to whet his appetite, but the only satisfying meals he might find in London were humans or horses. Although he wouldn’t mind eating a horse, they tended to carry people on their backs, which made attacking them tricky.

“It might jist be easier swipin’ a pig from the docks.”

It was as he was making his way ashore that he heard human voices.

A wee bit early for a morning stroll, no?

Nonetheless, Kelpie made himself invisible against the grass and trees. No longer able to see him, the people approached unconcerned, stopping at a rather well-hidden part of the path.

If only he ate people, it would have been a perfect opportunity. As it was, Kelpie made to leave. He changed his mind when he realized that he knew one of the two figures. It was the painter who had prevented him from giving Lydia her ring—which remained on the finger of the man’s right hand.

“*Kill* his lordship?!” the artist gasped.

Kelpie wasn’t surprised to hear such talk coming from humans. He wouldn’t have cared to listen further, except that the mention of the upstart earl had caught his attention.

The other man put a finger to his lips.

“But that’s preposterous! That man is the Blue Knight Earl, the rightful leader of Scarlet Moon! Was I not tasked with approaching his lordship’s estate so that

he might acknowledge our organization?”

“He is an imposter. He is not the Blue Knight Earl we have been waiting for.”

“But he is in possession of the sword. I have seen it and have confirmed that it is the genuine article. It matches precisely the three-hundred-year-old painting of the earl and his sword that we hold.”

“I am well aware of that. The only bodies presently capable of recognizing the legitimacy of the sword are the royal family, the College of Arms, and us. As it turns out, your report on the sword was the deciding factor. Not only is the earl an imposter, but, in an act just as despicable, he stole the sword.”

“Where is the proof that he is an imposter? No one has seen any successor of the Blue Knight Earl since his disappearance three hundred years ago.”

“Surely you know of the Asian boy the ‘earl’ keeps at his estate? He was trained to kill as one of the Prince’s slaves. Some of our members who escaped from the Prince themselves even vaguely recognize him.”

“That boy? Really?”

“Yes. That is why we sent in that fake dance instructor—to find out for sure. Of course, his indiscretion led to the loss of a few fingers, but we were at least able to find out that the boy is no ordinary servant. Moreover, the Prince’s favored slave was apparently a good-looking boy with golden hair. The only conclusion is that he sent the pair of them from America to steal the Blue Knight Earl’s sword.”

Kelpie gleaned that Edgar was not descended from the Blue Knight Earl—however, this man’s reasoning for believing him to be an imposter was dubious. If Edgar held the sword, imbued with fairy magic, was that not enough to accept his claim to the title? Classifying humans was no more complicated than splitting them between those who could associate with fairies and those who couldn’t, after all.

It seemed there was something that had shocked the artist far more than Edgar’s fraudulence.

“His lordship is involved with the *Prince*?! Why on earth did you not inform me of this earlier?!”

“Had you known, your face would surely have given you away. The only reason you have been able to carry out your task without arousing suspicion is *because* you believed him to be the true Blue Knight Earl. It was precisely because of your good-naturedness that you earned his trust, and we were able to send him that letter to incite confusion within the estate.”

“But the Prince was the head of the organization that killed my father...”

“Which is precisely why, as a member of Scarlet Moon, you have been given this task.”

“Do you really expect me to commit murder?”

“He is a stooge of the Devil himself. You must not think of him as your fellow man. As you are well aware, the Prince does not choose his methods in obtaining whatever he desires. Whether his ambition is to rule society’s underbelly or something even more unthinkable is unclear—but we simply *must* put a stop to him.” The man’s speech was aflame with passion. “Fear not. Once the deed is done, you will be able to live abroad until things calm down. Did you not always say that you wanted to study in Italy? We have already set aside the money required for you to do so.”

The painter nodded vaguely. He seemed to be in a state of utter confusion.

“I understand that you have admired the earl up till now, believing him to be the legitimate heir. While he may have been hesitant to show you the sword, I do not believe that anything else in your behavior would have proved cause for suspicion.”

“But suppose they look into my background and *that* arouses suspicion?”

“They will find nothing, even if they do. Our organization has obscured your past and made it so that your father was Firman. No matter how much investigating they do, they will never discover anything that links you to your late father. Assuming, that is, that they have never met you before all of this.” The man patted Paul’s shoulder to console the anxious painter. “The Prince kills any and all who stand in his way. Mr. O’Neill was just one of his victims and he passed away eight years ago now. These stooges are too young to have known him.”

“But—”

“What is it now?”

“I seem to have incurred his lordship’s displeasure. At least, that is the sense I have, although I have not had the opportunity to speak with him since the incident happened. You see, he is a kind man the majority of the time, but then I saw him approach a common girl somewhat coercively...”

“Honestly...he is already well-known among high society as a philanderer. His kindness the rest of the time is closer to apathy, for he is interested in nothing but women. Do be sure not to try and steal this girl away from him! Dueling may have been outlawed a long time ago, but for those who still practice it, women are one of the most commonly disputed topics.”

“It was not as though I was trying to *steal* her...nor do I believe I would be much use in a duel...”

“Are you an idiot?! A nobleman would never duel with a commoner. You would simply be shot on the spot.” The man shook his head at the painter, who was counting his blessings at not having been shot *yet* under his breath. But then he looked up again, apparently having thought of something. “Of course...that way, he will have even *less* reason to suspect that you are a spy. All right...you are to apologize to him and repair your friendship. He will lower his guard. Then, you must find an opportunity to be alone with him.”

The man produced a small vial from inside his jacket. He forced it into the perturbed painter’s hand and left him alone.

The artist stared at the object for a while. Eventually, he made to put it in his pocket, only for it to slip through his trembling hands.

“Ah.” He followed it with his eyes as it rolled straight into the lake with a splash, then turned on his heel at once to run away. Though he wouldn’t have had the courage to dispose of the vial himself, it was as though he were planning to use his good fortune to escape the task.

So he’s no *gonna kill the earl?*

The threat of losing the chance to witness something so entertaining disappointed Kelpie, and so he picked up the vial and appeared in front of the

painter.

“Ye dropped this.”

The artist looked terrified. Whether that was because of the water horse’s sudden appearance or the fact that he was being presented with his task again was unclear.

“Don’t be lettin’ that chap down now.” The water horse imbued his gaze with magic, knowing that the painter’s hatred and desire for vengeance would be swelling up inside him.

The human took the vial back from Kelpie tentatively and dragged his footsteps as he left. His grip, however, was firm, ensuring that he would not drop it a second time.

Now that the painter was on his way to kill the earl, Kelpie’s remaining concern was how Lydia would be affected. She was likely to witness something, and it wouldn’t do for her to be put in danger. Knowing her, if the two men argued, she would try to come between them.

“Tch. Ah’ve got more important things to do than eat. Why’ve humans gotta be so much trouble, anyhows?” Kelpie muttered, ignoring the fact that it was him who had spurred the artist on.

***

Edgar closed his eyes as he finished reading the report in his hand. It contained findings he had requested about the artist, O’Neill, and had come from the detective early this morning.

The artist was very much real. First name Patrick, specialty painting manor houses in picturesque settings. His paintings were hung in the houses of the nobles who requested them and had therefore never been sold publicly. Nevertheless, his was a well-known name among many of the lords and ladies who hailed from the country and were currently in London for the social season.

O’Neill had just one son. His name was Paul, and his age matched that of the artist Edgar was commissioning. However, it was unknown where that son was or what he had been doing after his father’s death. It was quite common, when

their last family member died, for sixteen-or seventeen-year-olds to become lost in London's sprawl, never to be heard from again.

O'Neill had died from gas poisoning in his home in Bath. Although his death had been ruled an accident, his son, who had not been poisoned so severely, insisted it was murder.

"Murder..." Edgar muttered.

Regardless, it seemed that Paul had been living as the son of a different artist—Firman—after his father's death. It was a rather ingenious move, one that Paul would have struggled to pull off by himself. Most likely, he had the support of an organization of some kind.

Could it be Scarlet Moon?

O'Neill had painted both Edgar's family and his childhood home. Although the finished piece had burned up in the house fire, there was a chance the artist had saved a sketch or a practice piece somewhere.

The existence of anyone who might see Edgar and remember the dukedom he came from would mean nothing but trouble for the Prince. Or perhaps O'Neill had learned something that he shouldn't have during his time with the family and had been chased down and killed because of it—after which Paul, who had survived through luck alone, had been taken in and hidden by Scarlet Moon...

It was impossible for Edgar to think of Paul as the boy he used to know anymore. And yet he found himself sliding the report between two books as though he wished to hide it.

Raven entered the study just moments afterward.

"Do you think the Prince and I are alike, Raven?" Edgar asked, watching his servant brew the tea.

"My lord?"

"I am not referring to physical appearance. He attempted to mold me into a copy of himself. He instilled in me knowledge, sophistication, mannerisms...how to choose one's words, how to think, and how to *feel*. I wonder whether the man I am now is a closer approximation to the Prince than to the person I used

to be. I know how to control and manipulate others. I can be as cruel as I need to be without letting it trouble me. I am shameless, conceited, never satisfied unless things transpire how I want them to. I find myself wishing to destroy those who defy me. Not to mention I am a philanderer."

"I disagree, my lord. The Prince was certainly *fond* of women, but he lacked your talent for seduction," Raven replied, quite serious.

"*That* is the only part you take fault with, is it?"

His servant looked troubled. "You and the Prince share nothing in common, my lord. Otherwise, why would we have chosen to trust in and fight with you?"

The sentiment warmed Edgar's heart, but it wasn't enough to clear his doubts. He was sure that he would become more and more like the Prince the longer he lived. Allowing his enemy to occupy his mind while he fought against him would mean distancing himself further and further from the person he used to be. For example, if he needed to kill Paul for having known him when he was happy, he would not hesitate.

"That is why it concerns me, my lord, when you show such kindness to someone with whom you share even a slight connection."

Raven must have been talking about Paul. He was likely worried that Edgar would not be able to deal with the painter appropriately should he indeed turn out to be a spy.

"You have grown, Raven."

Edgar had always done his best to protect the boy, who had never known a life beyond killing. In truth, he felt that Raven had done much more for him than he could ever offer in return. As long as Edgar had someone to protect, perhaps he would not transform into the Prince after all—even if he did end up having to hurt someone with whom he shared a connection.

***

"Have you taken leave of your senses?!" Lydia exclaimed. She was seeing red.

Kelpie had been in her room when she woke up that morning, and she had been outraged. After shooing him out and getting dressed, she had come to the

drawing room ready for breakfast, only to find that he was still there.

Presumably, Nico had told her father that this large, arrogant man was, in fact, a fairy. Carlton was sitting across from Kelpie now, watching nervously as the water horse tossed raw eggs into his mouth—shell and all. As Lydia entered the room, she passed Nico, who was on his way out and sniffing disgruntledly. He probably hadn't wanted to share the breakfast table with a savage kelpie.

The water horse had remained in her sight ever since then. He sat next to her in the carriage to Edgar's mansion. At this rate, she was expecting him to spend the entire day in her office until she went home again. It didn't seem as if he actually wanted anything—he was just *there*—and it was starting to make Lydia feel awfully uncomfortable.

"Jist pay us no mind," was all he would say.

They arrived at the estate, and the coachman opened the door. Just as Lydia made to alight, she was pushed back in by Edgar, who was boarding.

"Good morning, Lydia."

She had managed to avoid him for the past three days, so she now found herself fumbling for a response. "Good... Wait a moment. What are you doing?"

It should have been obvious that this was an unwelcome development, but that did not deter him. "Let us have a little chat. Mr. Kane, I am afraid this carriage is only big enough for two. Kindly leave."

"Why should I?"

"Because this horse and carriage belong to me, and the coachman is under my employ."

Kelpie snorted. "Awright. I s'pose I can do this one last thing for ye."

His phrasing stuck out to Lydia, but before she could ask, Kelpie had already vanished. Then she realized she was now occupying a rather narrow space with Edgar. Fear sprouted up inside her all over again.

"I am getting out!" she announced.

"Stay here. I promise I shan't lay a finger on you."

He sounded more sincere than usual, and she doubted he would let her out in any case. Not wanting to provoke him, she resigned herself to sitting back down for the moment.

Once Edgar had given the coachman the instruction to go nowhere in particular, and they were underway, he seemed much more relaxed.

“Fine weather we’re having.”

“It is completely overcast.”

“It is fine as far as London is concerned.”

“I suppose so.”

“Are you still angry about the other day?”

Lydia wasn’t sure if she was *angry*. Thinking deeply about it, she had the sense that anger might be an overreaction. He *had* kissed her wrist, but then, Edgar probably kissed the hand of every woman he came across. Greeting noblewomen in such a fashion was very common, and he had probably just meant it as a playful gesture. The greeting normally involved kissing the *back* of the hand, but the wrist wasn’t all that different.

The fear had come from Lydia’s inability to escape a situation that was all new to her. She wasn’t used to the suggestive atmosphere, to the way he was treating her or looking at her. That anxiety was a result of her childishness; her lack of socialization and especially her lack of experience with men. Could Edgar really be blamed for that?

Even if he couldn’t, she was loath to forgive him just to end up wrapped around his little finger again.

“Would it matter if I *were* angry? As far as you are concerned, it was nothing but a gentle joke.”

“What might I do to earn your forgiveness?”

“If you left it alone, I am sure I would forget all about it in time.”

“‘In time’ meaning how long exactly? It would become my life’s regret should things be this uncomfortable between us for an extended length of time.”

“Your *life’s* regret?”

“Ah, that isn’t the phrasing I intended to use. I meant to say that I would be deeply *anxious*.”

It seemed a strange correction to make, and yet Lydia found herself letting it slide.

“That you forget is not enough,” he continued. “I want you to *forgive* me. I certainly do not want to forget that it happened. I realize I may have upset you, but I have never felt such closeness to you.”

Though Edgar was keeping his promise of not touching her, it was like she could feel his gentle caresses on her skin—which was exactly why she was even less inclined to forgive him. She wouldn’t just be forgiving him for what he had done, she would be permitting him to do the same again. Confusion had her casting her gaze downward.

Edgar changed the subject then, as though he had given up on coaxing a pardon from her. “Has Mr. Firman made any attempt to seduce you?”

It was a perplexing choice of theme.

“I can only assume he has, given how willing he was to charge like a knight and ‘rescue’ you.”

And his assumption was outrageous.

“You are quite mistaken,” Lydia said. “Mr. Firman stopped you for your sake, not mine. He was afraid you might do something that would damage his respect for you.”

“Is that what he said?”

“It is close to what he said.”

“He is a naive fool. There you were, taken by his act of courage, and he proceeds to squander the opportunity with such a remark.”

Lydia had to admit that she had been slightly disappointed at the revelation, but far from the extent that Edgar was implying.

“Perhaps the root of your fear of love stems from feeble men such as him

showing interest in you only to inadvertently deny it after the fact."

"That would be an act of *kindness*. It would show that they have no interest in me before I make the mistake of falling in love. It is preferable to having my emotions toyed with by..." She cut herself off when he threatened to frown, worried that she had offended him, though she knew it was most likely an act.

"Indeed, Mr. Firman is not the type to deceive. Nevertheless, he may well have his secrets. Secrets that hold a lot of weight, as far as I am concerned." The severity of Edgar's tone made it sound as though his friendship with the painter was at risk. "I should like to ask him directly. To discuss it with him in the hope that we can reconcile things amicably. Unfortunately, I fear that we may become embroiled in a quarrel. Suppose we came to blows, Lydia; whose side would you take?"

"To blows? Should that happen, I daresay Mr. Firman won't have a fighting chance."

"I see. So you would feel a need to defend him. In which case, perhaps you would do the same for me if *I* seemed to be at a disadvantage. That may well be worth taking a heavy beating."

For the life of her, Lydia could not see what point he was trying to make, although it definitely sounded like a troublesome one.

"I dearly hope you will not get into such a fight in the first place. Mr. Firman treasures the promise he made to you all those years ago. You are the reason he became an artist, and he said that he wished for you to see his professional work before anyone else. Although he believes his friend to be dead, he very much sees that boy in you. You may try and enter into a fight with him if you wish, but I cannot see him having the heart to hit back."

Edgar lowered his head, a strand of his blond hair settling on his nose. His handsome features gave no clues as to what he might be holding in his heart. Was it really his intention to fight with Paul? Whatever for?

When he lifted his head again, he bade the coachman to stop.

"Thank you for your time, Lydia."

"Where are you going?"

“You needn’t worry about that.”

Lydia was left feeling as though she hadn’t said everything she needed to, as though she should have made more of an effort to listen to him.

“Even if I do not take sides, Edgar, I have no doubt that you would win. You know how to turn the odds in your favor. But if you wish to settle things amicably, I am sure that Mr. Firman would be more than happy to do so.”

Stepping onto the street, Edgar turned to her and smiled. “You are too kind, Lydia. It raises my hopes. I begin to wonder whether you might really be in love with me after all.”

She felt herself turning red as she tried to come up with a response. But before she could, the door closed and the carriage set off again. Donning his tophat, Edgar was quickly lost to the sea of people.

***

It had been a long time since Paul had returned to his boarding house on Fleet Street. He let out a deep sigh; he still held that vial in his grip. All this time he had been blind to Scarlet Moon’s plot against Edgar, instead believing the younger man to be the true Blue Knight Earl. The earl had shown a genuine fondness for Paul’s art and was utterly charming, possessing both the pride befitting a noble and a pleasant amicability. All Paul had wanted was to paint him a piece that would delight him. The artist had the sense that, in doing so, he would be able to fulfill the promise he had made to the late duke’s son. However, now that he had learned that Edgar Ashenbert was in fact connected to the leader of the organization who had killed his father, his infiltration of the estate took on a whole new meaning. Sentimentality was no longer a luxury he could afford.

There was a knock at the door. It was the middle-aged housekeeper who managed the boarding house. “Mr. Firman? You have a visitor.”

The person who appeared made Paul stiffen and nearly drop the vial all over again.

“My lord...”

“Is something the matter? You look as sorrowful as though you have seen a

vision of Armageddon."

"No, I am perfectly all right! My lord, you did not have to go out of your way to visit me at these filthy lodgings..."

"I was interested in seeing your studio."

Realizing it would be rude to remain seated, Paul shot to his feet. "It is simply an ordinary room—although there are paint stains in certain places..."

He wanted very much to offer Edgar a seat, but every chair was stained with oil or paint to the extent that he worried about ruining the earl's expensive frock coat. Apparently, Edgar was in no mood to sit on such a filthy chair either, as he went to stand by the window.

"Are you moving?" the earl inquired.

"I'm sorry?"

Edgar had taken note of the pile of trunks in the corner. Paul certainly wasn't about to admit to preparing for his escape abroad.

"Oh, those! No, I am keeping those for an acquaintance of mine." It was far from a convincing excuse, especially as some of those trunks were open and filled with items that had been hastily tossed inside.

"I see. Incidentally, I came here not only to see your studio, but because there is something I wish to ask you."

Paul froze under the earl's thin smile and sharp stare. The sweat beading his palm threatened to make the vial slip through it. "What might that be?"

"Why do you continue to keep up the pretense that the ring will not come free of your finger?"

Paul dropped his gaze to his right hand, which was free of any jewelry. He had been switching the ring over to his left now and then to avoid it getting in the way of his paintbrush. He had always been careful to make sure no one would notice, but that care ended when he stepped into his own home.

"You have been able to remove it for quite some time now. But doing so would rid you of an excuse to reside at my estate. I was under the impression that you kept your silence in hopes of remaining close to Lydia. However, when

you recently ‘saved’ her from me, you had her go straight home. *That* I found rather odd. What sort of a man would overlook such a golden opportunity? Either you are totally witless, or your intention in lying about the ring lies elsewhere.”

Regardless of whether taking that “golden opportunity” would have been the most natural course of action or not, Edgar was completely correct. In fact, Paul was both witless *and* had another reason for keeping the ring on.

“You needed to stay at my estate for some reason that wasn’t Lydia.”

Paul wondered how much Edgar knew. “Miss Carlton suggested it would be safer for me to stay, and so you commissioned that painting from me. However, the ring came off surprisingly soon, and I worried that you would withdraw the commission if I no longer had a reason to stay.”

That much was true. While Paul had been instructed to keep an eye on Edgar’s movements, he had felt the opportunity to paint for the Blue Knight Earl was more important than his duty.

“‘Surprisingly soon,’ was it? I did not take you for a liar, Mr. Firman.”

“I am no liar.”

“I see. So your name really is Firman and not O’Neill.”

Panic fluttered in Paul’s chest. His accomplice had promised that looking into the name “Firman” couldn’t possibly lead anyone to “O’Neill.”

“Assuming, that is, that they have never met you before all of this.”

The housekeeper knocked on the door to serve them tea. Paul immediately went to take the tray from her, saying that he would serve it himself.

“O’Neill was a painter too, but he was killed eight years ago. That is what you believe, at least, which was why you feared for your own safety at the time,” Edgar continued, not letting up the pressure.

Like frost across a lake, Paul’s resolve was slowly beginning to harden. This handsome young man in front of him was a part of the organization that had killed his father. He knew now what he had to do.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. My name is and always has been

Firman. Although my father is retired, he is in perfect health." Taking pains not to let his voice wobble, Paul removed the cap from the vial in his grip. He sprinkled the off-white powder into one of the cups of tea, watching Edgar out of the corner of his vision to ensure his action went unnoticed.

If only he had stopped to think, he would have realized that the earl would not accept a beverage from a man he did not trust. But he was so highly strung that such details eluded him.

"Where did your lordship hear the name 'O'Neill' from?" Paul asked, placing the cup down beside Edgar.

"I already knew of him. He was quite the talented artist. Do you know of that manor house beside the lake, Whitelily Hall? I had always wondered why it was so named, until I saw his painting and its depiction of the splendid lilies that bloom on the water's edge."

The image of his father's painting sprang to Paul's mind as clear as day. Edgar was talking about the manor that had belonged to the Sylvanfords. A castle that the painter had thought could only have existed in fantasy, surrounded by abundant countryside and mystical forests. The noble family who lived there had been endlessly kind and beautiful people...

Paul was beginning to feel dizzy. Why would one of the Prince's stooges be telling him about Whitelily Hall? Unless he had known Paul long ago...but surely that was impossible?

"I see the same sensitivity in your works as was present in O'Neill's. It is my genuine opinion that you were born to be a painter."

How many men could there be who were so blessed with beauty as to charm anybody in an instant? There were his striking ash-mauve eyes, his hair as golden as though it were woven from sunlight, the perfectly straight bridge of his nose, and his fine lips that were presently smiling softly.

Edgar took the teacup in his hand, a gesture that looked entirely innocent. It almost seemed as though he had come here to uncover a desperately precious secret rather than to accuse Paul of anything.

And then he suddenly had the sense he was being tested. As though, despite

realizing that Paul had snuck into the estate to harm him, Edgar was trying to sound out whether their former friendship still held strong. That was why he didn't hesitate in picking up the tea, though he ought to have been cautious.

Our former friendship?

What if it *was* him?

"I do not know if I would have become a painter if not for the encouragement of someone I once knew," Paul said.

"Poetry was your original ambition, was it not?"

That settled it. Paul had only ever expressed his dream of becoming a poet to one person. Now that he was free of doubt, he knocked the teacup from Edgar's hand. It smashed, spraying its contents everywhere. The hot tea splashed over Paul's hand, and likely Edgar's too, but neither of them paid it any attention. They also ignored the housekeeper, who had been summoned by the noise and came rushing in to make sure the obviously noble man hadn't burned himself.

Paul stood stock still. It was all he could do not to put a hand to his chest.

"You haven't changed a bit, O'Neill."

"Forgive me, my lord. I mean—"

He was about to correct himself—"your grace"—when the housekeeper made an unnatural move toward Edgar. A knife flashed in her hand. The earl twisted away immediately, but it wasn't enough to stop the thin blade from stabbing into his arm. As the housekeeper made her retreat, he doubled over and collapsed.

As soon as Paul realized the knife must have been poisoned, he tried to rush to Edgar's side—but the housekeeper grabbed his arm.

"Get away, quickly. Inform the others. They can come and fetch the body." She spoke as though he were already dead.



“Are you from Scarlet Moon?” Paul gasped.

“Yes, I am. We were fortunate that this young man decided to pay you a visit. But what were you thinking? You essentially told him you were attempting to poison him! Had I not intervened, he would have killed *you*.”

That wasn’t true. Edgar did not want him dead.

“Give me the antidote! This man is not affiliated with the Prince!”

“What? Are you trying to betray us?!” With a quick, suspicious glance in his direction, the housekeeper turned on her heel. If he wouldn’t call for back-up, it seemed she would.

Without thinking, Paul grabbed her shoulder. Scarlet Moon had taught him the fundamentals of self-defense, though they amounted to little more than boorish violence, and although he should have been ashamed to use them against a woman, he could think of no other way out.

Once she was unconscious, he rifled through her possessions but found no antidote. He considered calling for a doctor, but that had the potential to cause Scarlet Moon to collapse. The organization had protected him, his late father having been a member, and he had sworn loyalty to them in order to fight against his father’s murderer.

At a loss, Paul sank to the floor.

***

Lydia could feel a headache coming on. When was it that her office had become a playground for fairies?

Kelpie was the main culprit. His large frame added most to the cramped atmosphere. Then there was Nico, who had been pacing aimlessly around the room for some time now. He was constantly trying to smooth down the bushy fur on his chest. Marigold and Sweetpea were flitting this way and that, their tiny wings fluttering, while swarms of the estate’s hobgoblins were crowding into the room’s corners.

Unable to ignore the fact that something was so obviously *wrong* any longer, Lydia put down her pen. “What is going on, Nico?”

“I’m not sure. I just feel strangely restless.”

“It is as though the air is trembling!” Marigold added.

“Magic is billowing like waves!” Sweetpea cried.

“This house has the merrows’ sword in it, right? It’s cryin’ out or somethin’,” Kelpie said.

“Crying out? Why?” asked Lydia.

“Dunno.”

“And what is everyone doing in this room?” she pressed.

“Times like these, it’s safer to be by the fairy doctor,” Kelpie explained.

So, the fairies were in a state of unease. Lydia hadn’t known that the sword was capable of “crying.” Thinking things through, she stood up, concluding that it would be a good idea to let the butler know.

Just then, Raven appeared in front of her. “Miss Carlton, would you happen to know where Lord Ashenbert is?” Though he seemed unconcerned for the most part, his tone was a little strained.

“He was with me in the carriage for a while, but then he got out and walked somewhere alone. I’ve no idea where.”

Could Raven’s discomposure be related to the change in the sword? In his fist was a crumpled piece of paper that appeared to be a letter.

“Where is Firman?” he muttered, turning to leave without an answer. The omission of an honorific felt odd to Lydia.

“Mr. Firman is not here today,” Tompkins informed him. “He told me that he was returning home to air out his room. Otherwise the paintings there might grow moldy. Why? Is something the matter?”

“He’s no even here? Ah’m wastin’ my time, then,” Kelpie muttered.

Lydia turned to him. “What do you mean, wasting your time?”

“Look, ah’m jist tryin’ to protect ye.”

“Protect me? From what?”

“Och, it doesnae matter. If he’s no here, there’s no point us bein’ here either.

It’s too loud here anyhows. Ah’m goin’ home.”

“Wait, Kelpie! Tell me what’s happening!” Lydia stood in his way. “Tell me or I shall never speak to you again!”

“Fine. Won’t stop us hangin’ around ye.”

“I am *serious*. Not a single word. And I shan’t listen to anything *you* try to say to me either!”

Kelpie fell into a troubled silence, then sighed and ran a hand through his bangs. “I overheard that painter bein’ telt to kill the earl.”

“Wh... *What*?! What reason would Mr. Firman have for wanting Edgar dead?”

“’Cause he’s no the real earl.”

“There is a chance that Firman is a member of the same organization as the dance instructor who attacked me,” Raven explained through gritted teeth. “We had been looking into it. It seems now as though it was true.”

He turned to Tompkins. “I am going to Firman’s boarding house.”

Without missing a beat, he dashed away. Tompkins followed, apparently feeling as though he ought to do what he could.

“Why didn’t you say anything, Kelpie?!” Lydia snapped. “Edgar’s *life* is in danger!”

“It’s no my business. ’Asides, with him gone, ye can come back to Scotland. That painter, though, he doesnae seem brave enough to kill a man. So I used my magic to give him a wee bit of courage.”

“Leave. Leave *immediately*. I never want to see you again!”

“Lydia?”

She stormed out of the room; she had no time for his excuses. As she neared the entrance, she picked up on a commotion. She could hear Raven calling for Edgar. Servants were bustling this way and that, following the instructions given to them by Tompkins.

From her spot on the landing, she caught sight of the butler struggling to carry Edgar into the house. The earl had his eyes shut tightly.

Lydia froze.

The cab driver said he had been asked by a young man to take the fallen earl to the Ashenbert estate in Mayfair as a matter of urgency. The description he gave of the man matched Paul's perfectly. But why would Paul, the man who was supposedly plotting to kill Edgar, have sent him back home?

The doctor spent a long time in the earl's room. He left when the evening came, and a strange quiet fell over the estate. The merrows' sword was apparently still crying in fear of its master's life, but it was inaudible to humans. It was only at that late hour that Lydia was able to ask Raven how Edgar was doing, and heard that the earl was barely conscious.

"The paralysis is spreading," he said. "The assailant must have used a neurotoxin."

"A neuro...?"

"They are similar to the venom found in snakes." It seemed Raven's background as a killer had afforded him a deep knowledge of poison.

"Is there an antidote?"

"No. It appears the poison was a composite of some kind."

Lydia held back her distressed cry. Raven looked as composed as ever, but his familial bond with Edgar must have meant he was suffering the worst out of all of them. She, Tompkins, and everyone else working at the estate had known the earl for a mere three months. Though she wanted to comfort Raven, she couldn't find the words. It wasn't just that. She could hardly believe what he was telling her.

"I was deeply worried," he murmured. "I feared that, even if his lordship was able to determine that Firman really *was* a member of Scarlet Moon, he would not allow me to do him harm."

"Scarlet Moon?"

"An organization hostile to the Prince. They principally carry out activities befitting 'gentleman thieves' but believe his lordship to be one of the Prince's stooges. Refusing to acknowledge him as the true Blue Knight Earl, they threatened his life if he did not relinquish the sword."

I had no idea.

But why should Edgar and Raven feel the need to tell her anything that wasn't related to her work? She had been hired as a fairy doctor; she had no business fighting beside them. And yet, she felt as though she had been excluded. She had always seemed to be something more to them than just another employee, if only to a small degree. Although she barely believed a word that came out of Edgar's mouth, there was a part of her that reveled in the familiar way in which he treated her. She had thought that she could be there to support him when he was weary from his past suffering precisely because she had never known it for herself.

Despite these complex feelings, the simple fact of the matter was that she wished he had said something. If he had, there might have been something she could have done to help. She would have been able to spare a thought for Edgar during their carriage ride, rather than speaking at length about how she sympathized with Paul.

"Perhaps his lordship foresaw all of this," Raven said. "Why else would he have gone to see Firman without a word to me?"

"Do you mean to say he meant to abandon you? I cannot believe that."

"Firman is the only one who knew his lordship when he was young."

Which was why Raven couldn't lay a finger on him. Paul must have been Edgar's only remaining connection to his younger self, something he couldn't bear to lose. The earl grieved the fact that he had changed. That was the root of his fixation on Paul, the only person to have known him before he had.

"I was wrong too, Raven," Lydia said. "I encouraged Edgar to try and reconcile with Mr. Firman. Thinking back, I wonder if Edgar was considering whether or not he ought to cut Mr. Firman off, knowing what he did. I *did* think he was acting peculiarly. Perhaps if I hadn't said anything, he would have done more to keep his wits about him, even if he did go to see Mr. Firman." She buried her face in her hands.

"It isn't your fault. I am certain that his lordship came to his decision alone."

Edgar had alluded to his "life's regret" in the carriage. As though he had the

sense that it would be over soon. That meant he had already made his decision.

But she doubted that anyone could be truly confident in such a position. Even the most determined of men couldn't be free of hesitation.

Lydia had lived a life free from strife. When Edgar had been prepared to fight, her words must have lowered his guard. Perhaps he had sought her out because that was precisely what he wanted, but what if she had dulled his ability to scent danger?

"Will you see him, Miss Carlton?" Raven offered.

"I wouldn't want to get in the way."

"I am sure he would want to see you."

It sounded like he was giving her a chance to say her goodbyes.

When she entered Edgar's room and approached his bedside, the housekeeper, who had been attending to him, left to give them some space. His face was pale, and it was impossible to observe his breathing without being overbearingly close to him. She picked up his hand gently. It was far colder than she was used to, enough to make her want to break down in tears. She cupped it in both hands. If nothing else, maybe she could keep it warm.

Lydia wouldn't be able to bear not having the chance to speak with him again. Not when their relationship was yet to be repaired. She never did tell him that she had forgiven him. She hadn't even been especially angry with him. It was only because Edgar had shown a rare moment of remorse that she had dug her heels in, wanting him to humble himself a little further. She had wanted to teach him a lesson for manipulating her all the time.

There was no telling how serious he had been about their broken relationship being his "life's regret," but if he didn't recover, it would certainly be hers. And she wasn't sure how she would bear that burden. All because of her pettiness.

Then there was Kelpie. If only he hadn't interfered, Paul may well have abandoned the idea of murdering Edgar. As a fairy doctor, Lydia couldn't help but feel partially responsible.

"Pull yourself together," she said. "You are not the kind of man who dies of

simple poisoning.”

His usual teasing, flirtatious response did not come.

I must do something.

Stirred by that powerful thought, Lydia rose to her feet. She had been thinking intently about how she might save him. A single possibility had sprung to mind. Normally, she would have expected to be behest by doubt, but not this time. Armed with that one remaining hope, she hurried out of the room.

The Blue Knight Earl's Blood

Having left the estate behind, Lydia trotted down the street. When she arrived at Hyde Park, she made for the lake at its center. Late though it was, the season meant that it was still light outside, and there were couples here and there taking a walk down the promenade. Lydia slipped into the shrubbery to avoid being seen and called out towards the lake.

"I know you're there, Kelpie. I require your assistance."

The water didn't so much as stir.

Now what?

"Perhaps he has left after all. He might already be on his way back to Scotland..." What if her shouting at him had driven him away?

"I came here to bring ye back. Ah'm no about to leave without ye."

Lydia turned around. There stood Kelpie, in human form, beside a tree.

"Didnae ye say ye never wanted to see us again?"

She had changed her mind because she needed him—an act of pure selfishness—but she didn't feel she had another choice.

Here by the waterside, Kelpie posed an extreme threat. Lydia had always spent her time with him on land, where his powers were significantly weakened, and had been careful not to get too close to any body of water with him if she could help it. It was one of the reasons she had been able to associate with him in the first place.

Now, however, she had come to the water purposely. She stepped up to him, close enough that he could easily drag her to the depths of the lake if the mood struck him, and looked up into his gorgeously devilish eyes. "I want you to save Edgar. Please."

"He's no dead yet, then?"

Lydia let her silence speak for itself.

“Look, we’re better off without him. When I telt ye that before, ye lost yer temper with us. I don’t get it. How come ye’re askin’ for my help now?”

“Because I do not know any other water horses.” She could feel her face screwing up as it threatened tears.

Kelpie let out a hefty, resigned sigh and asked, “And ye need a water horse to help him?”

“Edgar was poisoned. You have the power to purify water. You *must* know of a way to remove the poison from his body.”

“It’ll do us no guid to share that knowledge with a human. Wasn’t long ago that people used to hunt kelpies to try and get a ‘perfect antidote.’”

So he *could* do it if he wanted to. Lydia took another step toward him.

“Tell me. And I shan’t tell anyone else.”

“I s’pose I can trust ye there, seein’ as ye’re a fairy doctor. But ah’m no tellin’ ye for free.”

She had expected as much, even going so far as to predict what he might ask for in return. She nodded without a word.

“So much for never seein’ us again. Ye no gonna forgive us for what I did to the painter, are ye? But ye’re still willin’ to make us a promise?”

He was an eccentric kelpie indeed. There was nothing stopping him from whisking her away with him, and yet he was being considerate in bargaining with her.

“It would displease you if I were never to speak to you again, wouldn’t it? You would not ask anything of me that would scare me or cause me to suffer.”

“Naw, nothin’ like that. I jist wanna marry ye.” Kelpie spoke of marriage so casually that it was absurd—and a little endearing.

Lydia had always held a closer relationship with fairies than she had humans. There was little a fairy doctor could offer the mortal world these days, and the possibility of her leaving for Fairyland had always been there. All this meant was that she would be going there earlier than expected.

“We already have an agreement in place regarding marriage. I will marry you if you bring me the moon. However, I would be happy to live with you in Fairyland instead. Is that acceptable?”

“I s’pose.” Kelpie looked at her dubiously. “But ye’d never see the earl again.” He was unusually sympathetic for a water horse.

“I wish to repair my relationship with him. It will be enough for me to tell him I am no longer angry upon his awakening. Regardless of Edgar’s opinion on the matter, I truly felt as though the two of us could become friends. And that is coming from someone whose only friends have been fairies.”

Finally, Kelpie agreed. He pierced his finger with a fang, letting the red blood trickle from the wound. Lydia gazed at it, surprised that his blood ran red. However, it might have been an illusion based on the color she expected it to be.

He gently held her jaw in his other hand. Lydia closed her eyes, as though preparing to receive a kiss. But it was Kelpie’s fingertip that touched her lips. His flowing blood was cold and tasted as fresh as the spring water produced by snowmelt. It was as pure as the awakening from a deep sleep.

“Off ye go now, then.”

When Kelpie’s hand was free of her mouth, Lydia looked up at him. “What am I to do with this blood?”

“Make him drink it.”

“Oh, but...does that mean I have to put my mouth on his? I couldn’t—why couldn’t *you* have made him drink it?”

“Ah’m no pokin’ my finger in *his* mouth,” he said, as though he hadn’t considered that *Lydia* might not want to make a similar sacrifice either.

Didn’t he mind the thought of his desired bride kissing another man? A human would have, but Kelpie was altogether different.

“Ye don’t have to go for his mouth, then. Jist lick as close to the blood flow as ye can. A kelpie’s blood loses its effectiveness when it makes contact with air. Ye’re the only one who can get it to him anyhows.”

Even if she didn't have to *kiss* Edgar, licking him wasn't much better. But this wasn't the time to throw a tantrum.

With a nod, Lydia rushed from the park.

She returned to the silent mansion to find Nico standing in the entrance hall. His whiskers were twitching irritability, as if he *knew* where Lydia had been.

"You stink of kelpie," he accused, standing in front of her. "Whatever you're thinking of doing, *don't*. Only a nincompoop would make a deal with a water horse!"

"*That* water horse is perfectly reasonable. He promised he wouldn't do anything to bring me harm."

"You are missing the point. Besides, what is it to us if Edgar dies? We shall simply return to Scotland and live our lives as we always have."

"I would regret it for the rest of my life if I had a means to help but did nothing."

"The man is a scoundrel, even by human standards. He only shows you kindness because he stands to gain from it. You would abandon your dream of becoming a fairy doctor for a man like that? There is such a thing as being too kind, you know!"

"He may be a scoundrel, but I know well that he is not *all* scoundrel. Fairy doctors are supposed to help people, Nico. Would I really be deserving of my title if I rested on my laurels and did nothing?" Crouching down, Lydia extended a hand to Nico. He was a perfect gentleman; she wouldn't hold and pet him like a normal cat without a very good reason. Their friendship had always been one of equals. "Thank you for your companionship all these years, Nico."

He was still sulking, so she picked up his paw for herself. The small, tufty thing may have looked like it belonged on any cat, but it could hold a teacup with more elegance than a human, and handle a knife and fork like no other. She gave it a squeeze before letting go again.

"What about the professor?" Nico asked.

“I shall write him a letter later. I hope you will drink with him after I am gone, Nico, if only for a little while.”

The fairy cat didn’t reply. Clearly he was still dissatisfied with her decision.

Lydia got to her feet and hurried to Edgar’s room. Marigold and Sweetpea were sitting on a vase set on a stand in the hallway. They watched her anxiously. She walked right past them, not having the wherewithal to greet them. When Raven opened the door for her, she rushed right past him, asking that he leave her and Edgar alone again. He merely nodded and fulfilled her request.

Lydia made straight for the bedside and knelt down beside it. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she considered her immediate course of action. Kelpie had told her that she didn’t need to kiss him on the mouth, but the very *thought* of kissing a man without being invited would have been totally unthinkable to her even a few hours ago. It was enough to make her tense. At least Edgar wouldn’t be conscious for it.



She needed a spot that was close to his blood flow. His heart was out of the

question; it would require undressing him. The image had Lydia burning with embarrassment and longing to get away. She was suddenly aware of her own pounding hard, which reminded her that blood flowed throughout the entire body.

What about his hand?

Swept up with determination, she took her hand in his. Then, she pressed her lips to his wrist, where she could sense the tiniest pulse of blood.

The minutes passed, and Lydia wasn't sure whether Kelpie's blood had had any effect on Edgar at all. She started to worry that she hadn't brought him enough blood, or that she really *should* have delivered it by mouth. It was then that his body began to stir.

His eyelids slid open. His ash-mauve gaze wandered the empty space in front of them for a moment before they finally found Lydia.

"Edgar..." Her relief was so strong that she'd forgotten how tightly she was gripping his hand.

"Lydia...what are you doing here?" Edgar frowned like he was trying to put together the pieces.

"Everything is fine. You are going to be all right."

"I dreamt of you."

Lydia panicked, wondering whether his dream had been an awareness of everything she had just done.

"I was old and on my deathbed. There were people gathered around me, and I attempted to seek you out. But I could not find you and I grew anxious. I could not understand it. I felt very much as though you *had* to be there, as though we had spent the last several decades together."

As he spoke, she finally realized she was still holding his hand. It would be unnatural to let go too suddenly, and she was confident that he wasn't aware of her touch yet. Deciding she would try to let go without him noticing, she loosened her grip slightly—only for him to tighten his with a strength that was

at odds with his slow, spiritless speech.

“I cast my mind back in earnest, trying to remember why and when I had lost you. It came to me then: you took a great disliking to me after I made too high-handed an approach.”

“I have taken no such disliking to you. I was only pretending to be angry, as you tease me constantly. I wished to tell you that I do not hold it against you any longer.”

When she stopped trying to pull her hand back, he relaxed and loosened his grip slightly. She decided it wouldn’t be so bad to leave it after all.

“I wonder if that was what you were telling me in my dream. You came to me just as I was despairing that I would never see you again. You had not aged a day. And then you spoke to me, but I could not hear your voice.”

The warmth was returning to his gentle fingers. Kelpie’s blood must have been gradually dissipating the poison.

“Even then, I felt nothing but relief. Your presence alone is enough to calm me. I was no doubt facing a villain’s death, and yet you took my hand and kissed it as though you had forgiven me.”

Lydia was glad she had only kissed his wrist now. “It was only a dream,” she assured him.

Edgar’s eyes softened, and he smiled at her. It was a smile of pure innocence, free from implication or cunning. She had never seen him look like that, and it reminded her of the happy boy Paul had spoken of.

“I would not be inconvenienced, Lydia.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I would not be inconvenienced if you were to fall in love with me. Even if you were head-over-heels and would follow me wherever I may go. You said that you do not wish to misjudge the distance between us, but even if you were to misjudge it so severely that you fell within my reach—that you jumped straight into my arms—I would not be inconvenienced in the least.”

Lydia had always been so sure that any romantic intention from a girl as

eccentric as her was bound to cause problems for anyone. She had been under the impression that Edgar simply enjoyed chasing her because of how she rejected him, so for her to fall in love with him would surely be an inconvenience. But now he had told her it was not so.

"Why not try it? Why not try and fall in love with me?"

Lydia trembled. It was as though he were caressing the very depths of her heart. She forced herself to stay calm. Edgar was feeling better. That was all. Flirting was almost instinctual to him. It would be foolish of her to be taken in by every last line. But she knew that the real reason she was telling herself that was because it wouldn't matter anymore, even if she *did* find her heart was stirring.

"I shall think on it," she said.

"So it isn't an outright refusal. How uncharacteristically optimistic."

"You were close to death but five minutes ago. That made an impact on my response."

"You are being lenient because of my poor health. Is that right?"

"You ought to get some rest. I shall see you tomorrow."

Edgar nodded and closed his eyes as though peace had overcome him. It pained Lydia slightly to think that she had most likely misled him, but she couldn't believe she was as important to him as he made out. It wouldn't take long for him to forget about her and forge ahead. He had survived much more strenuous hardships than losing her.

"Sleep well."

With that final whisper, Lydia stood up.

***

The morning sun roused Edgar from his sleep, and he awoke as he would any other day. He would have struggled to determine whether the events of yesterday had truly happened, if not for the wound on his leg. Pulling on his gown, he left the bedroom and made for the dressing room, where he sat on the large sofa and found his perfectly polished shoes waiting for him as usual.

The morning was proceeding with such normality that Edgar began to question whether he had truly survived.

Why had he survived?

He had taken a chance and gone to see Paul, hoping that an open discussion would reveal that there was no need for hostility between them. Paul had seemed receptive, and from the moment he swiped the poison cup from Edgar's hand, it was clear that he had chosen to believe in his old friend over Scarlet Moon.

It must have been that moment—the moment of relief—that the housekeeper had been waiting for. It seemed that Paul was unaware that she was a member of the organization too.

Edgar's body had seized up as soon as the knife stabbed him. Realizing it had been poisoned, he had tried to remove the weapon, but his body was already failing to listen to his commands. He had seen countless people die in front of him and been intuitively aware that what was happening to him was a precursor to death. And yet now, it was like the poison had completely left his body.

"Are you certain you ought to be up and about, my lord?" Edgar's butler had joined him.

"Ah, good morning, Tompkins."

"Shall I call for the doctor? He can examine you, just in case."

"That's all right. I feel perfectly fine. Might I ask for some tea?"

"Certainly." Tompkins was as composed as though he had known Edgar would survive all along.

"Who was the doctor who saved my life, Tompkins? I would hardly think it was that bald man."

"It was the *fairy* doctor, my lord."

So it hadn't been a dream. Edgar rested a finger on his wrist and thought of Lydia. She was like a magical fairy of good fortune. Completely irreplaceable.

A short while after Tompkins left the room, Raven appeared carrying the tea.

“Good morning, my lord.” He gave his usual greeting as impassively as ever.

Edgar let out a bemused sigh. He supposed he should have expected nothing different. “I must have worried you, Raven.”

“Not at all,” the boy murmured, otherwise silent as he set the cup on the table.

“It took great pains to decide I ought to go without saying anything to you.”

“I understand, my lord. I would likely have killed Mr. Firman had I been with you. Although he may have ultimately chosen not to harm you, given that he brought you home, I would surely have turned on him when I killed the woman who stabbed you.”

Edgar had remained conscious as Paul had helped him up and put him in the cab, but he couldn’t recall anything beyond that point. Naturally, he would have been in no position to relay to Raven the events that had transpired at the boarding house.

“How do you know about the woman?”

His servant placed a cloth-wrapped object on the table: the knife that had wounded Edgar. It was congealed with blood and discolored poison. It was the type of thin folding knife that a maid would typically carry for her duties.

“Mr. Firman tucked this into your clothing. Most likely he was hoping we could identify the poison.”

“And could you?”

“It was obvious from a single glance that it would be an impossible task.” A frown flashed across Raven’s face. How much despair must he have felt at the realization?

And yet, his servant made no attempt to reprimand Edgar for his actions. In that sense, he was coddled by Raven’s loyalty. The earl grabbed the boy’s arm, which elicited an expression of mild surprise.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to settle this matter with Mr. Firman on my own strength. In doing so, I only confirmed your fears that I would fail to keep my guard up.”

In a rare show of discomposure, Raven kneeled clumsily before him. “Please do not apologize to me, my lord. It is my intention to abide by your decisions, no matter what they might be. While you do not always prioritize your own safety, it is that which sets you apart from the Prince and makes *you* my master.”

Raven’s master, and the master of the murderous spirits that dwelled within him. The Prince had taken possession of Raven with the intention of controlling those spirits, but they had never accepted him. The boy became their bloodthirsty puppet. His emotions were locked away deep within his heart, and he became incapable of speaking or even smiling.

In his home country, children like Raven were said to be born of spirits and destined to become soldiers of the king. Their birth was a relatively common occurrence. It was a part of the culture borne of the native people’s beliefs and the superior combat abilities passed down through certain bloodlines. Whether it was the existence of spirits that gave birth to the tradition, or the tradition that claimed the existence of spirits was unclear. Either way, there had to be something there that was beyond mankind’s perception, and Edgar had recently begun to wonder whether it was similar to the fairies Lydia could see.

A question occurred to him then. What *was* the Prince’s secret organization after, especially when it came to their research into black magic? The Prince had sought the mysterious power to make the impossible possible, something Edgar had considered overly fantastical. What if, in naming themselves after one of the Blue Knight Earl’s guardian fairies, the members of Scarlet Moon were also in search of the same power—all in the name of opposing the Prince? Were they after the Blue Knight Earl himself? The *real* one? That being the case, what ought Edgar to do?

“Are you still willing to work for me, Raven?”

“Whatever you need, my lord, I shall not fail you.”

Edgar started to ponder the matter, which was when Tompkins returned.

“Professor Carlton is here to see you, my lord.”

Calling without prior notice and at such an early hour was quite unreasonable, but Edgar was strangely fond of Lydia’s father, so it didn’t especially bother him.

He asked Raven to prepare him a change of clothes, then took a sip of his tea, which he took with just a splash of milk. He never once paid thought to *why* Carlton might be coming to see him first thing in the morning.

"Miss Carlton is resigning?"

"Yes, my lord. I understand that this is asking much of you, and I can only apologize, but Lydia will not be able to work for you any longer. If at all possible, I ask that the official version of events be that your lordship dismissed her." Though Carlton stuck to entirely practical matters, he looked severely depressed.

"Might I ask why? This all seems very sudden."

"I am afraid that I am not entirely sure myself. The only thing I can say for certain is that it seems Lydia has chosen a life in the other world."

When Edgar responded with confusion, Carlton's lips turned down at the corners.

"Recall if you will, my lord, that I spoke of accepting Lydia's 'natural choice.' That choice presented itself rather suddenly yesterday."

"I am afraid I do not quite understand," Edgar pressed. Although he had offered Carlton a seat, the professor remained standing.

"Lydia, much like her mother, has always struggled to fit in in this world. As such, she has never developed much of an attachment to it. In some ways, it is only because they have no roots here that those who straddle the boundary between our world and that of the fairies are able to do so. But without attachments to the human world, it becomes difficult to continue living here when it cannot offer anything that one wants. As I am sure your lordship understands, this world is home both to those who gain and those who lose. Lydia is a carefree girl who trusts all she comes across. The other world is predictable, monotonous. I am sure she will find it much more peaceful than this one."

"Are you saying she has chosen to live in the world of the fairies? Has she grown tired of this world?"

Lydia had seen Edgar on the brink of death and learned that Paul, a man whom she rather liked, was the one behind it. Perhaps the pain had been too much for her and she wished to turn her back on this world of perpetual conflict.

“But Professor Carlton, did you not say that you took your wife away from the fairies? Could you not have prevented Miss Carlton from leaving?”

“Not I, no. And nor can you. I am sure that it was no man, but a fairy who influenced Lydia’s decision.”

Could it have been that black horse? He was the only candidate for a fairy who had shown such interest in Lydia.

“What about taking her back—or, at the very least, going to speak with her?”

“There is nothing for us to do but to come to terms with her decision.” With those decisive words, Carlton hurried home. His haste seemed to come from an inability to accept the situation himself, and a fear of showing his emotions in front of others.

Edgar collapsed into a chair and buried his fingers in his blond locks. To think that the love of Lydia’s father was not enough to keep her in this world. Just as her mother had, she needed to find someone with whom she could form a bond stronger than blood in *this* world. Otherwise, she would have no desire to stay. Carlton’s declaration that it could not be him had felt like a stab to his chest.

And yet, he was struggling to understand Lydia’s decision. If she had lost all hope for the mortal world, why had she taken pains to save his life? Why had she bothered to repair their relationship? Why had she wanted him to know that she wasn’t angry?

Edgar’s eyes flickered upward as they caught a glimpse of Nico’s gray tail passing by the window.

“Nico!” He rushed to throw it wide open.

The cat turned around. Edgar seemed to have caught him about to jump from one balcony railing to another.

“Tell me, Nico. You *must* know why Lydia has left.”

“I have no obligation to this place anymore. I’m simply here to have another cup of Mr. Tompkins’s tea.”

“I shall have him prepare you some posthaste. Come inside. I have chocolate for you too.”

“The round type?”

“Yes. With liquor.”

Nico gingerly entered through the window, then plodded toward the table on two legs before taking a seat. Edgar no longer doubted that this cat was of the other world.

After being presented with some hot milky tea and chocolate, Nico was more than happy to talk. His words simultaneously surprised Edgar and filled him with an unbearable despair.

“Do you mean to say that Lydia accepted Kelpie’s proposal in exchange for saving my life?”

“Yes, but I believe her main motivations were her obligation as your fairy doctor and her natural tendencies towards compassion.”

“To think she eloped with that savage fae when *I* was the man who had captured her heart.”

“You need not think it, for it is untrue.”

“Who would marry another to save a life if not for love?”

“Lydia would. She doesn’t think in the same way that most people do and she had an unusual fondness for Kelpie. I doubt she was as reluctant as all that.”

Edgar wished that this cat would take him more seriously. Nico was probably right in saying that Lydia possessed a heart of gold, but was that really enough for her to bargain with a kelpie for his life? Then again, if she really thought that a life with Kelpie could offer her such tranquility, perhaps she would have chosen him eventually anyway and saving Edgar was little more than an added bonus.

Still, it was a horrendously giant leap to make. It hadn't been Paul who had stabbed Edgar. And even if Kelpie's interference *had* pushed the painter to poison him, Lydia should have no need to feel responsible.

Quite apart from anything else, Edgar was damned if he was going to let her be stolen from him by a *horse*.

"You will miss Lydia too, won't you, Nico? And that water horse... Unlike you and me, he is no gentleman."

Nico stroked his whiskers, struggling to hide the fact that being called a gentleman brought him great joy. Edgar was trying to get the cat on his side. If he wanted to contest a fairy, he would need the assistance of one himself.

"Is there any method by which we can bring Lydia back?"

"Listen, earl, Lydia went to the other world of her own volition. What right have we to drag her back?"

"I cannot accept that this is what she truly desires. If this was a decision she made due to her compassionate nature, then I shall also follow *my* nature in deciding what to do about it."

"Your nature? You're nothing but a fiend whose only focus is seducing women."

"Precisely. I have failed to seduce Lydia and I am not prepared to see her go without changing that."

The look on Nico's face said that he had no idea what Edgar was babbling about.

The earl leaned forward resolutely. "You are capable of traveling between this world and the fairy's domain, are you not? If you wish to have no part in this, I shan't insist. Please just tell me how one can get there."

"Lydia is the only human I am capable of leading to the fairy world. We fairies are not as free as one might assume."

"How about I purchase you a top hat and a pair of boots?"

Nico crossed his arms and hummed thoughtfully. But then he shook his head, as though trying to free himself from temptation's clutches. "I cannot do the

impossible, although I can offer my assistance on condition that you do not force Lydia to do anything."

This time, it was Edgar's turn to consider.

"Besides, even if you were to find Lydia in the fairy world, there is still the matter of the promise she has made with Kelpie."

Nico made a good point. However, that was a problem that he could surely solve once he had found her. It was an optimistic thought, but Edgar was confident that momentum was the key to bringing her back. Thinking too hard at this stage would paralyze him.

A realization struck him then, and he got to his feet. "Are Marigold and Sweetpea still at the estate?"

Nico turned his head to the window. "The earl wants you."

Edgar looked in the same direction, expecting the fairies to appear before him. Instead, he heard a voice at his feet.

"How may we be of assistance?" The two fairies kneeled before him, each taking on the form of a young girl.

"I would like you to bring me to your queen."

"Have you taken leave of your senses?! You aren't *really* planning to accept a fairy's proposal, are you?" Nico cried, leaping up onto Edgar's shoulder.

There was nothing the earl could do without first gaining access to the fairy world. Though outrageously reckless, pretending to accept the Fairy Queen's proposal was a means of getting there.

The cat whispered into his ear. "You may be an excellent swindler, but the same tricks that deceive humans will not work on fairies. This will not help Lydia in the slightest; you will only end up the Fairy Queen's captive!"

"Please do not interfere, Mr. Nico! His lordship is finally ready to marry Her Majesty!" Marigold took hold of the fairy cat's tail and tried to pull him away from Edgar.

"He is ready for no such thing—"

The earl grabbed Nico and slapped a hand over his mouth. “Would you fine ladies be able to take me there at once?”

“Ah! You will need the ring, my lord. The previous Blue Knight Earl said that the vows for his marriage had to be exchanged with the moon. Please, you must wear the moon gifted by Her Majesty as a show of faithfulness to that promise.”

Edgar considered this as he continued to hold Nico fast in his arms. His vows exchanged with the moon... It reminded him of the Blue Knight’s marriage to Gwendolen. Perhaps the Ashenbert line had always used the moonstone as a symbol of faithfulness in marriage.

Either way, Paul was in possession of the ring. In all likelihood, Scarlet Moon was currently safeguarding him. As it happened, that presented the perfect opportunity for Edgar to challenge them. He smirked.

“Very well. I shall retrieve the ring. You will help me, won’t you?” He addressed the fairies. “And you, Nico.”

“Certainly, my lord!” Marigold squeaked.

“Whatever you’re scheming, I know I shan’t like it!”

“My ‘scheme’ revolves purely around bringing Lydia back,” Edgar whispered to the cat, then called for Raven. His servant appeared at once. “I am going out. Bring me my things and the Blue Knight Earl’s sword.”

***

Having belched out the last of its patrons that morning, the club had firmly shut its doors, waiting for the evening when it would be heaving with activity again. Edgar stood before it, accompanied by Raven.

“Are you certain this is where Scarlet Moon has its headquarters, my lord?”

“Certain enough.”

This club had held the exhibition at which Edgar had first met Paul. It was owned by a picture dealer named Slade. The majority of its members were said to be rich painting enthusiasts and artists who wanted to sell the products of their talents. Paul’s father, O’Neill, and his other “father,” Firman, were both painters for the noble classes, so the likelihood that they had both been members here was high. It had also been the club owner who had introduced Paul to Edgar and recommended the young painter’s work. That was yet another connection that led the earl to suspect that this club was linked to Scarlet Moon.

“We have them in checkmate, Raven.” Holding his long sword in place of a cane, Edgar knocked on the clubhouse door.

The face that emerged after a while belonged to a man who was likely an errand boy. “My apologies, sir, but we are not open yet. Please return in the evening, if you would.”

“I have business with Mr. Slade.”

“Might I ask what kind of business?”

“A woman under his employ tried to murder me. Please inform him that it would behoove him to speak with me, lest I make his murder attempt public.”

The errand boy studied Edgar curiously. He might have thought the earl’s declaration some kind of password. “Begging your pardon, sir, but might I have your name?”

“Ashenbert.”

The man’s eyes widened. Visibly shaking, he tore away back inside the clubhouse.

It was a most unpleasant reaction, as though Edgar were some kind of ghost.

Nevertheless, he let himself inside. Raven followed as he made his way up the stairs in the entrance hall. At the top, they were presented with a lavishly carpeted hallway and a man charging in their direction. It was Slade: a plump man with a black beard. Edgar glanced at his right hand. Sure enough, there was a red moonstone on it.

"I'm awfully sorry, my lord, but only members are permitted to enter the club. Could I ask you to wait for me in the waiting room?"

Slade's request suggested that Edgar's roaming about the place would present a problem.

"I would gladly become a member, in that case. I believe I meet all the qualifications."

Slade hemmed and hawed, trying to peer into the shadow of the blond's tophat as though he didn't believe this man was the real earl.

"Dead men aren't welcome in your club?" Edgar removed his hat and smiled amicably.

The art dealer took a few panicked steps backward, but then stopped and stood his ground. "You certainly don't *look* dead, my lord."

"Oh, but I would, if not for your incompetence."

"I am afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Where is Mr. Firman?"

"I am sure I do not know. You would do better to try his home."

"He is not at his boarding house. The landlord tells me he is in quite a fix after the sudden abscondment of the housekeeper."

"I would not know anything about—"

"Raven, it would seem that Mr. Slade is suffering from poor circulation after a sleepless night. Would you be so kind as to wake him up?"

Raven stepped forward, grabbed Slade by the collar, and pointed a knife at the center of the bearded man's brow. The art dealer seemed to recognize the weapon as the housekeeper's poisoned knife; a cold sweat was erupting from

his forehead.

Edgar made a sadistic show of peering at Slade, whose every limb was locked in place. “Feeling more awake now, are we?”

The older man didn’t reply.

“I didn’t quite catch that. Perhaps it will take a little more pressure.”

“No, my lord, I’m awake!”

“Good.”

The club’s employees had gathered and were surrounding them at a distance. The way they were murmuring to one another, they couldn’t all have been members of Scarlet Moon. Those who were urging the workers to return to their stations were more likely candidates, but they were rather few and far between.

“Please, my lord, let us discuss this in private.” Slade had raised his voice, a clear signal that he didn’t want Edgar to spill too much information here.

The earl dropped his volume to a whisper and brought his lips to Slade’s ear. “I am not here to discuss anything with *you*. While I would love nothing more than to crush Scarlet Moon underfoot, I could be convinced not to if you bring me to Mr. Firman. I would dearly hope that you are not planning to throw him into the Thames under the pretense that he is guilty of my murder.”

“We are not the sort to kill a fellow member for making a mistake,” Slate said snidely, both admitting to knowledge of the murderous plot and denouncing the Prince’s methods at the same time. The comment had no effect on Edgar, who would much rather Scarlet Moon *not* follow the Prince’s example.

Slade slipped away from Raven, who had lowered the knife. He began to lead them down a labyrinth of corridors. The majority of the club’s employees had probably never seen this part of the building. At some point, the hallways had fallen into total silence. But then, Edgar spotted movement in the corner of his eye. Before he could turn around, he felt Raven’s push on his shoulders. The gunshot that came next was instantly joined by the sound of the lamp next to them shattering.

Slade broke into a run. “Get them!”

The order drew out countless members of Scarlet Moon from the hallway’s hidden doors.

“Come, Raven!” Edgar shouted, and the pair raced away. He was confident that the organization was keeping Paul hidden somewhere deep in this very building. He checked the rooms they passed haphazardly as they ran, but none of them seemed to be in use.

Eventually, they came to a large double door at the end of a hallway. They rushed into it and locked it behind them. There was a decorative spear by the wall, which Raven used to jam the door shut and buy them some more time.

The room they had entered was a spacious hall that Edgar could see being Scarlet Moon’s meeting room. A single Gothic-style chandelier hung from the high ceiling. The floor immediately below it was decorated by a mosaic of a red crescent moon. On closer inspection, it was made up of red moonstones, each marked with a letter of the alphabet the color of dried blood. The stones must have been used as part of an initiation meant to strengthen solidarity, and each letter was the first of a member’s name. The mosaic was overlooked by an impressive throne sitting on an altar-like arrangement. Behind the throne hung a single painting, which Edgar approached, raising his gaze so he could study it.

“The Blue Knight Earl?”

It was a portrait of a man with chestnut hair and blue eyes, holding a sword embedded with a star sapphire. From his attire, Edgar guessed he was Julius Ashenbert of Elizabeth I’s court. As far as he had been aware, no portraits of anyone from the Ashenbert line existed. Tompkins had said much the same thing and he had a good understanding of the family’s property. His theory was that, considering their connection to fairies, paintings depicting their likeness would be vulnerable to black magic, hence the lack of them. Edgar wasn’t well-versed in such things, but he had heard of magic that could harm people by casting a spell on their portraits. That being the case, why had *this* earl modeled for such a painting? And what was said painting doing here?

In any case, this was proof that Scarlet Moon idolized the Blue Knight Earl and took their name from his guardian fairy and archer, Frandolen.

There came a violent knocking at the door. No doubt they would have the key to unlock it, and the spear wouldn't hold much longer either.

"Shall we escape through the skylight, my lord?" Raven suggested.

"No. We settle things here."

The door broke, letting in a flood of men. Slade stood behind them. Raven, standing beside Edgar, readied his pistol. The art dealer stopped in his tracks as he realized the weapon was aimed right at his forehead. Raven fired a deliberate shot to graze his ear. When he screamed, the other men froze in place.

"That's right. I suggest you stay where you are. Those who move will have the pleasure of dying sooner." Edgar swept his gaze over the group as slowly as he could. "Do you fine gentlemen *all* belong to Scarlet Moon? Anyone who has taken a blood oath to the Blue Knight Earl should rightfully answer to me." He shot a deliberate glance at the portrait on the wall.

"You're nothing but an imposter."

Edgar did not miss Slade's murmur and moved toward him. "*You* are the imposters. You have no right naming yourselves after Frandolen." Grabbing him by the arm, the earl yanked the ring from his finger. "This may be a red moonstone, but it is hardly special. Look how dull it is. It is absurd to think this might have once belonged to a fairy."

Edgar thrust the ring back into Slade's hand. "And yet you fancy yourselves the Blue Knight's guardian fairies and swear allegiance to the earl in this portrait. Well, I suppose every secret society requires a founder of great renown, whether it be Paracelsus or Rosenkreuz. It's little more than a game to you, isn't it? The outlandish ceremony, the air of mystery that cloaks you from outsiders, and the bonds between your members that must feel ever so scared."

"It is far from a game. The society exists to protect its members and to fight."

"Then, do you truly wish to become the Blue Knight Earl's right hand? Naturally, I would want to ensure you wouldn't let me down first."

There was movement in the corner of the hall. Raven shot, knocking a gun

from another man's hand. Nevertheless, it was enough to break the tension in the room, and someone else made to grab Edgar. Dodging out of his grip, the earl moved back and climbed onto the altar before removing the Blue Knight Earl's sword from its sheath. He held the silver blade high overhead, standing right in front of the portrait that captured its image.

"*I* am the Blue Knight Earl and this sword's master. Should that displease you, you are free to challenge me. I would only hope that you possess courage enough to risk damaging this treasured weapon."

The men cowered, as Edgar knew they would. He felt no fear in acting the dauntless warrior while surrounded by enemies. He knew well the impression his handsome features imparted on others and did not hesitate to use them.



Slade broke the silence. “Why are you hesitating?! Take the sword from this

imposter!”

His stubbornness knew no bounds. Perhaps it was time to silence him. It was just then that a familiar young man rushed into the room.

“Wait! Please, *wait*!” Paul ran up to the base of the altar where Edgar was standing and turned to the group. “No more of this! This man does not work for the Prince! He is a victim, just as we all are!”

“That may be true, but you cannot deny that he and that Asian boy were once at the Prince’s side. Who is to say they haven’t been brainwashed? Besides, it is unfathomable that anyone—with the exception of the most petty of stooges—could escape from the Prince and earn his freedom. He would have been hunted down and killed.”

What Slade said was true. The only reason Edgar hadn’t been killed was because the Prince needed to capture him alive. Why that was the case, he didn’t know. His companions had been killed and several traps laid to aid in his capture, and it was only because he had been allowed to survive that he had managed to stay out of the Prince’s grip.

“Would the Prince really allow one of his stooges to lay claim to the Blue Knight Earl’s title? Regardless of our opinions on the matter, Her Majesty herself has officially recognized this gentleman’s heritage. Is that what the Prince would want for one of his underlings?”

Slade frowned and fell silent as though he were seeking a rebuttal.

“I wonder the same thing. Does there exist a connection between the Prince and the Blue Knight Earl?” Edgar asked.

Paul glanced behind him. It seemed he wasn’t sure whether he was permitted to speak to an outsider.

Slade simply glared at the earl, still silent.

“If I may...” It was a new voice that spoke. An older man had come in through the door. From the way the society members parted to let him through, Edgar deduced he was their leader. He had perfect posture but walked slowly and with a cane, as though his eyes were failing him.

“Mr. Firman...” Slade sounded anxious.

So, this was the man who had taken Paul in as his son. And here he was in London, not Dover.

“I shall take care of this, Slade.” It seemed that their relationship ran deeper than painter and dealer. “You will have to forgive what we have put you through, my lord. Or perhaps I should say ‘your grace.’”

“That title no longer belongs to me,” said Edgar.

“My lord, then. We too are uncertain about the link between the Prince and the Blue Knight Earl. All we know is that the Prince seems to *fear* the Earl, to the extent that he has slain every last one of the latter’s descendants.”

“But there has been no successor to the earldom for three hundred years.”

“Indeed. However, there were those who carried the earl’s blood, even if they had no claim to his title.” Firman looked up at the portrait. “It is believed that this is the only depiction that exists of a member of the Ashenbert lineage. It was painted by the earl’s lover and mother of his child.”

“I see. He allowed his portrait to be taken for the sake of his lover and child. How very romantic. If I understand correctly, then, both this painting and the earl’s blood were passed down through his lover’s family?”

“That is correct. Hers was a line of art teachers to whom both Mr. Slade and I were pupils.”

That implied that Slade originally had his sights set on becoming an artist. Edgar could only imagine that his talent had failed to materialize and that his current social position had come about due to a generous inheritance.

“Am I to take it that the Prince murdered your teacher?” he asked.

Firman bowed his head mournfully. “The majority of us here were close to that family. We are not all painters; some of our predecessors had deep roots in finer arts, such as murals and sculpting. The work they took on often made them privy to certain secrets surrounding lords and their estates. The organization grew out of a necessity to protect themselves, and our teacher’s family was at its center.”

“That organization being Scarlet Moon?”

“It was our generation that decided on the name. It was tradition in our teacher’s family to pass down Frandolen as a middle name, the same name the Blue Knight Earl gave his daughter. The organization scattered after the entire family was murdered. We are the members who have come back together.”

“And you do not know precisely why the family was targeted?”

“We do not. That information may have been known to our teacher, but the tragedy occurred before it was passed on to us. We who remain are united in our hatred for the Prince and the dear hope that the Blue Knight Earl will one day return to these British Isles. His reappearance is our only means of defying the Prince, who so despises his blood.”

“When the Blue Knight Earl you were so eagerly waiting for emerged only to be an imposter, I suppose you were disappointed?”

Firman smiled wanly. “Several years ago, when Mr. O’Neill was murdered, we suspected the duke’s estate where he was staying at the time and investigated it. We learned nothing but that there had been a fire, and never did we expect that his grace’s son would have been alive and by the Prince’s side. If the Prince was responsible for the death of Mr. O’Neill and the destruction of your family and their estate, then I should very much like to know why. Perhaps Mr. O’Neill learned something during his time there that he would have been safer not knowing.”

Edgar had long pondered the question of why his family had been targeted and had never come to a precise answer. However, he had the sense that the Prince’s main motivation was to kidnap him rather than to cause harm to his family.

“I am as uncertain as you,” he said, “but I cannot think that there is any relation to the Blue Knight Earl’s blood. The details of my family tree were instilled in me as a young child, but I cannot recall anything about an earl who had not been seen in hundreds of years.”

Firman let out a deep sigh, for neither of them were any closer to learning the truth. The Prince’s organization was filled with ardent researchers of the occult, so perhaps they felt threatened by the Blue Knight Earl’s mysterious powers. It

was certainly a possibility, but Edgar himself did not possess such powers. Despite this, he was officially the Blue Knight Earl and he was very conscious of the fact that he carried not just the name of Ashenbert, but the lineage attached to it. Whatever else the future might hold for him, a confrontation with the Prince was inevitable.

"There is nothing else I can tell you, my lord," Firman said. "I can, however, give you my word that we shall cause you no further inconvenience. I only ask that, after you leave, you do not speak of our society to anyone."

"I see that you do not wish to associate with me. Is it because I possess neither the blood nor the powers of the man you consider capable of opposing the Prince?" Edgar had no intention of leaving quite yet. Scarlet Moon could be of use to him; therefore, he coveted it. "I have no scruples about claiming that I have more intimate knowledge of the Prince than anyone in his organization. I know how he operates, how he thinks, and how he *schemes*. Such knowledge should allow me to outmaneuver him. Do you not wish for me to share this information with you? From what I gather, you have done nothing to even warrant the Prince's attention. Certainly, that has allowed you to survive thus far, but are you really satisfied with that?"

Slade scrunched up his face. It seemed that Edgar had hit a nerve. Firman's expression, however, did not change.

"Your lordship wishes to join us?" he asked impassively.

"No. Gentlemen, I wish to *lead* you." A composed smile on his face, Edgar strode across the altar and sat on the throne reserved for the Blue Knight Earl. A stir rippled through the group's members, but no one said a word in protest. "In order to fight, I require both Frandolen and Gwendolen by my side. A fraudulent earl requires fraudulent archers. And your society has no association with the fairy whose name you forcibly claimed as your own. Think now. Can you see the victorious future that lies ahead?"

There was no response. But they were listening. It would take one more push. They were as fraudulent as he was, armed with nothing but ardor and a name. That was why they wanted the true Blue Knight Earl to complete them. But their desire was meaningless, for the true earl would doubtlessly reject a

society based on lies. Though they may mimic the brilliance of Frandolen herself, it would do little to authenticate them. Any imposter who wished to gain authenticity would need to shine even brighter than the original.

Edgar turned his attention to Paul. “Incidentally, I came here to retrieve the moonstone ring.”

Flustered, the painter pulled the ring from his finger. Raven took it from him, then handed it over to Edgar. He passed his servant the sword in return, then stood up with the ring in hand.

“Take care of the rest for me, Raven.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I shall now depart to find my Gwendolen. Gentlemen, I suggest you think about my proposal in the meantime.” After looking over the confused huddle in front of him, Edgar called for Marigold and Sweetpea. The members of Scarlet Moon gasped in shock as the pair of young girls appeared from thin air, which was just as he had planned.

“Come, my lord!” The fairies took him by the hand.

The Liar’s Promise

The white moon hung in a light blue sky reminiscent of the summer solstice. The wind crossed the river’s surface to gently rustle the leaves of the forest beyond. The fairy world was quiet, neither too hot nor too cold.

As Lydia looked up at the moon, she found herself wondering how her father was doing. No doubt he had already told Edgar that she would not be returning to work. The flow of time differed between this world and that of the mortals. While it was still night here, she was sure that more time had passed over there.

Her stomach felt empty, and she dropped her gaze to the fruit in her lap. It was perfectly ripe and gave off a sweet scent, just like all fruit in this world. She knew that it would only take a single bite for her to be introduced to a wondrous flavor like nothing she had tasted before. The reason she didn’t was because eating the food here would mean she could never return to the human world.

Lydia would need to cut off her connection to her homeworld in order to live here with Kelpie. However, everything was moving so quickly that she still didn’t feel ready to do so. Closing her eyes, she threw the fruit Kelpie had found for her as far as she could. It was then that she spotted him returning from the river.

He was carrying a bundle of grass on his back, which he lay on the ground. It was soft with a pleasant smell, and he had Lydia sit on it with a contented smile.

“Ye should sleep here tonight. Once we’re back in Scotland, ah’ll show ye the most comfortable life ye could hope for.”

“Thank you.”

His tenderness in caring for her came as a surprise.

“Lydia, don’t ye think it’s about time we forget that daft auld promise about the moon?”

She had promised to live with him in exchange for his antidotal blood. She

had *not* promised her hand in marriage, but if they were to be together forevermore anyway, why not marry? Lydia could see the logic in Kelpie's desire to do away with their original vow.

"Let us return to the matter once we are back in Scotland. I am too tired for this now," she said.

"Awright. I s'pose ye're still tryin' to come to terms with leaving the human world behind."

Kelpie was being genuinely sympathetic. He wasn't sneaky or devious. And that was why a life with him would be peaceful.

When Lydia looked up, she found that he was staring at her. He wasn't wicked, but he *was* a member of the Unseelie Court and a fairy who ate people. His eyes lacked the seductive charm of Edgar's and instead possessed something akin to a subtle hunger. Out of nowhere, he grabbed her by the shoulders and pinned her down on the grass.

"What on earth are you doing?!"

"I wanna mate with ye."

"I beg your pardon?!"

Kelpie was a beast. It was no wonder that he was an entirely practical creature. A quiet irritation was building up inside Lydia, and she thrust her fist right into his nose.

"Ow! I thought humans weren't s'posed to be violent like our mares?"

"We aren't even married!"

Kelpie clicked his tongue and moved away from her. Just then, a strange wave developed on the river's surface. The water horse stood up, wary. The river and the land around it was his territory, at least while he was here. Kelpies especially hated it when something invaded their waters.

"Ah'm gonna go have a look."

Once he was under the surface, Lydia let out a deep sigh. She was starting to worry that a life with Kelpie might not be as easy as she had anticipated.

“Lydia.”

She really must have been tired, for she could have sworn she just heard Edgar’s voice. Perhaps she would feel more optimistic in the morning after she had gotten some sleep.

“Come, Lydia. Let us flee while we have the chance.”

When she felt a weight on the grass beside her, she finally looked up. Edgar was smiling down at her.

“What are you doing here?!”

“I am here to escort you home.”

“But—”

“It was rather excessive for you to leave without a word, don’t you think?”

“Quickly now! He’s coming back!” Nico beckoned to them from the shrubbery.

Edgar pulled on her arm, and while she wasn’t sure she should be doing this, Lydia found herself hurrying away with him.

“I cannot flee! I promised Kelpie—”

“And yet you struck him—impressively so—when he threatened your innocence.”

“You *saw* that?”

“It drew me from the shadows. Had Nico not tossed a frog into the lake, Kelpie would have noticed me.”

Edgar hurried on through the forest, apparently eager to lead them away from the water horse’s territory. The way he was still gripping Lydia’s arm so tightly suggested he was scared she might try and turn back.

“It is clear to me that he has no understanding of female sensibilities. You cannot convince me that you would be happily betrothed to that fairy.”

Lydia’s happiness was no longer part of the equation. The promise had been made. What Edgar was attempting to do now was at once reckless and meaningless.

“This is the fairy world. Your lies and bluffs won’t work here. The promise I made with Kelpie is unalterable.”

“You thought you could save my life, and I would react with impassiveness and go on as before? Such a presumption would demonstrate a tremendous error of judgment.” There was a hint of anger to his tone. “Besides, in coming here, you have broken your promise to me: that you would fall in love with me.”

“I merely said that I would think on it!”

“Then at least do so before you go away from me.”

Even if Lydia *had* thought about it, she had already made her promise to Kelpie. She gazed at Edgar’s face, wondering how on earth he had managed to come to this world in the first place. Nico didn’t have the ability to bring him here. It wasn’t just that; Edgar’s usual look of pure conviction was set in his features as they advanced, and it was impossible to tell how aware he was of his cluelessness about this realm.

“Fiddlesticks, it’s them! Quick, hide!” Nico hissed.

Edgar bundled Lydia behind a tree. She caught sight of two fleeting lights floating through the woods. They were calling Edgar’s name.

“You had Marigold and Sweetpea escort you here?!”

The earl pressed a finger to his lips.

“I would certainly hope this doesn’t mean you accepted the Fairy Queen’s proposal.”

“They may have interpreted it as such.”

“The promise exchanged with them has no room for interpretation! You retrieved the moonstone ring from Mr. Firman, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Take a look.” He produced the ring from his jacket’s handkerchief pocket.

The sight of it made Lydia dizzy. He must have taken the ring, had the fairies of the field lead him here, run away from them, and then relied on Nico to help him find her. It was beyond absurd and completely obliterated any chance they

might have to pacify Kelpie and send Edgar back to the human world.

“All after I saved your life... You are not the type of person who could thrive in this world. Is it not proving your worth in the mortal world that gives you purpose? The fairy world would feel like death itself to one with such a defiant spirit!”

“Hush, Lydia! They’ll spot us!” Nico tugged on her hair, but she could not stop.

“Do you understand what you have done?! Accepting the ring means you are fated to marry the Fairy Queen no matter what! Not even I can do anything to help you!”

The fairies must have heard her; the floating lights flickered in place.

“Is someone there?”

The urgency of their situation finally clicked in place. Lydia lowered her voice. “How can we solve this? Have you got any ideas, Nico?”

“As I told the earl many times, it is out of my hands!”

“There is a way you can save me, Lydia,” Edgar said, brimming with confidence. “Marry me.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I dreamt that I was searching for you as I traversed the boundary between life and death. And I know that I shall be searching for you again when death eventually comes for me. That is why I want you by my side, always.” He took both of her hands in his and looked at her earnestly.

She knew, however, that his proposal could not be in earnest. Yet she found herself taken in by it, for she knew Edgar *could* be sincere on the rarest of occasions. If only he were as uncomplicated as Kelpie, she could dispatch him with a punch, but as it was, she had no idea how to react.

“But you are nobility, and I am...” Status meant little in this world, but she made the excuse all the same.

“At least in marrying you, I would be marrying a human being.”

“Enough. You ought not to make light of marriage.”

“*Am* I making light of it? What if I were to offer you the moon?”

“Then I would happily marry you. *If* you could find me the real moon.”

“Did you catch that, Nico?”

“Um, yes...”

“Here you are, Lydia. The moon. The *real* moon.” He offered her the moonstone ring.

“That isn’t the real moon,” she protested.

“It is if you accept it as such.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The Blue Knight Earl of old did not require a *gift* of the moon, but for the vows to be exchanged with it in order to fulfill an engagement. One cannot just accept the ring; one must wear it as proof of one’s promise. Allow me to make this clear, Lydia. Not once have I placed this ring on my finger.”

Edgar seemed to be saying that this meant he and the Fairy Queen were not yet officially engaged. Therefore, if Lydia accepted his proposal and wore the ring, it would mean that she had exchanged her vow to marry him for the moon. It was the *exchange* of the two that would make her Edgar’s true fiancée. Kelpie, with whom she still had an open promise, would be unable to marry her then. Both he and the Queen of the Lunar Fields considered this moonstone to be the moon that would fulfill their respective engagements. That also gave it the power to annul those engagements.

“We’ve found you, my lord!” The fairies of the field floated over to them.

“Please, Lydia. Say yes,” Edgar urged her.

Lydia finally understood the significance of his sudden proposal. It was the means by which he could retrieve his fairy doctor and leave this place in one fell swoop. But that only made her more hesitant to accept. Was marriage so meaningless to this man that he would use it simply to retain a girl he considered useful? She knew Edgar well enough to know that it wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility. And she wouldn’t marry for those reasons.

“I cannot marry you. You don’t even love me.”

“Do you really have so little faith in me?”

She was exasperated by her own stubbornness. She had been prepared to marry a wicked water horse. Surely, as a human, Edgar was a much better match for her, whether he loved her or not? Still, she could not bring herself to accept.

Lydia knew that Kelpie was not capable of the same love as a human, but she had faith that, whatever his feelings, they would remain unchanged. Edgar’s heart, on the other hand, was something she struggled to understand no matter what she did. There had to be countless women out there better suited to him. He was a liar, and as far as he was concerned, it didn’t matter what he *did* as long as he said the right things.

“Yes. I have very little faith in you.”

Edgar fell into a thoughtful silence. Her rejection didn’t seem to have hurt him in the least, confirming her belief that it was all a scheme.

“Very well. I see you are disinclined to accept my proposal. In which case, would you accept it on a temporary basis as a means to get out of this fix?”

“I see. That was your intention all along.”

“I assure you it was not. I am offering you a compromise on the basis that I do not have enough time to persuade you of my sincerity.”

“Come, my lord! We must go to Her Majesty!” The fairies clung to him, but he would not let go of Lydia.

“What do ye think ye’re doin’?!”

Marigold and Sweetpea scattered with a cry. “It’s the savage water horse!”

Lydia turned around, fright hindering her movements. There was Kelpie in his majestic horse form, his sharp gaze, imbued with dark magic, focused solely on Edgar.

“This way, my lord!” the fairies squealed, but they couldn’t approach the earl when Kelpie was nearby.

Edgar pulled Lydia even closer under the water horse’s glare.

“Ye’re a stubborn one, Blue Knight Earl. That’s my bride ye’ve got there.”

“I’m afraid you are mistaken, for it is Lydia’s intention to marry *me*.”

“And it sounds like *your* intention is to end up in my stomach.”

While inching the pair of them backwards, Edgar whispered into Lydia’s ear. “Let us return home, Lydia. That is all I ask. We are both human. Our promises can be easily forgotten.”

While she didn’t approve of *that*, she did recognize that pretending to accept Edgar’s proposal meant she could go back to the human world. It would also mean saving him from the Fairy Queen. Besides, there was still someone there who it had pained her to leave behind.

“Professor Carlton was exceedingly depressed after you left.”

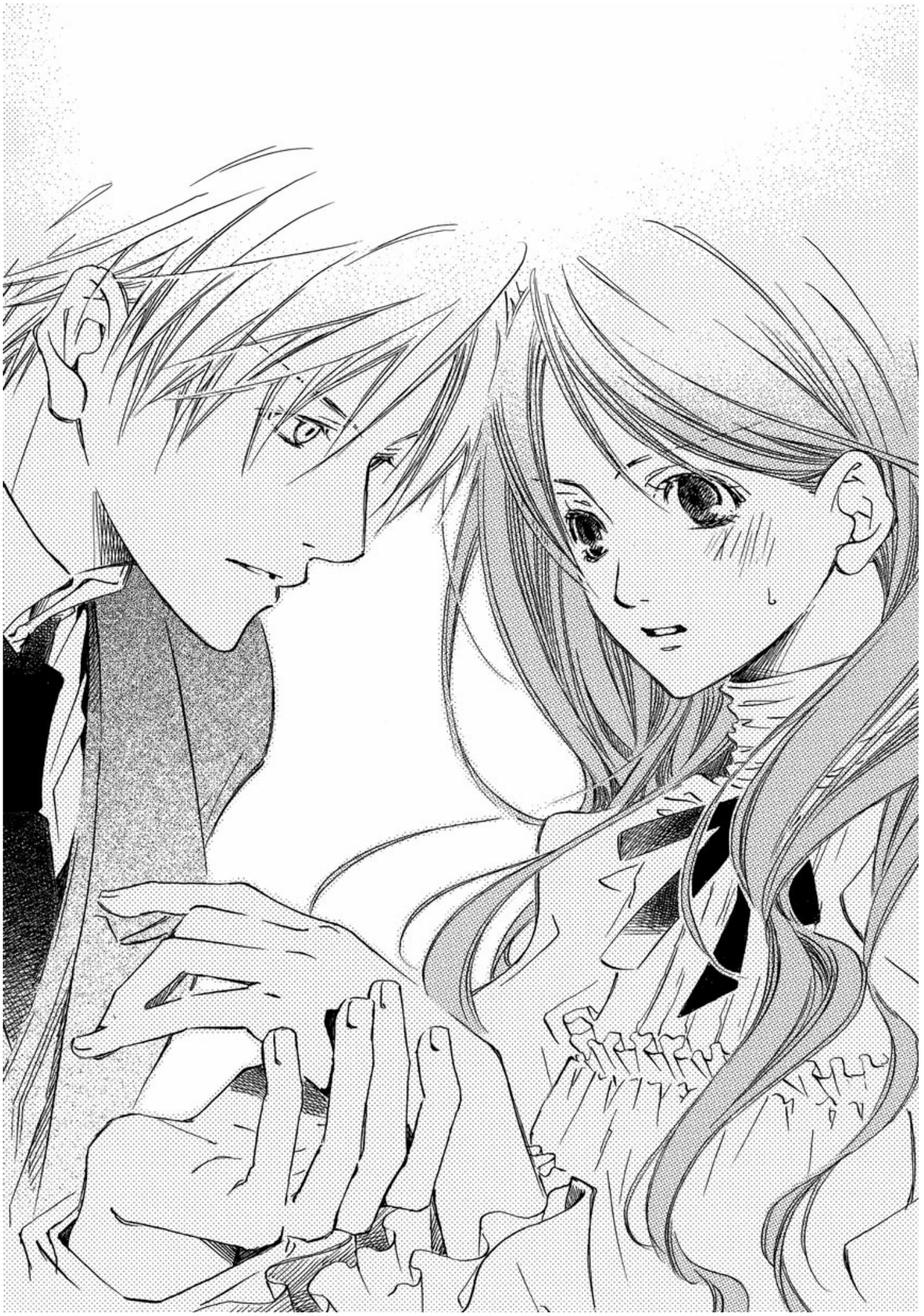
Edgar’s remark forced her to think about the person she had been trying so very hard not to. No doubt he knew the effect this would have on her. Knowing that it was a calculated move on the earl’s part did nothing to prevent the lurching of her heart. She hadn’t expected to marry for many years, and truthfully, she wanted to remain her father’s daughter for a while longer. It wasn’t fair.

Edgar’s triumphant smile showed that he *knew* she wouldn’t let go of him, not now it was clear that he was her one connection to her father.

“Very well, Edgar. Give me the moon.”

“Thank you. I shall treasure you always.”

Lydia’s promise would mean nothing the moment they left. And yet, Edgar’s sincere response made her heart thump out a curious rhythm. In a flash, he took up her left hand. The sight of the moonstone on her ring finger was oddly stirring.



“*Lydia!*” Kelpie cried.

She turned to him. “Forgive me, Kelpie. I am not ready to sever my ties to the mortal world quite yet.”

The water horse furrowed his brow in a gesture that proclaimed more sorrow than anger. If nothing else, he showed no sign of attacking Edgar or attempting to take her back by force.

Marigold and Sweetpea were keeping their distance from the pair, completely bewildered.

“I’m sorry,” Edgar said. “I’m afraid you will have to forget about me.”

“If you are unavailable, my lord, you need only produce a son! The sooner the better!”

“For that, I shall require your assistance, Lydia.”

“I shan’t give it!”

Nico jumped up on his companion’s shoulders. “I’ll open us a path back.”

For a split second, their surroundings seemed to twist. They must have been traversing the tiny crevice between worlds. It was in that space that Lydia heard the faint echo of Kelpie’s voice.

“Ah’ll be waitin’ till ye *are* ready to cut those ties. It willnae take long anyhows.”

Indeed, a period of a few years, or even twenty or thirty, was not all that much to a fairy.

***

The Ashenbert estate quickly reclaimed its peaceful routine. With one small difference.

“Explain yourself, Edgar!” Lydia burst into his gentleman’s room to confront him. For once, he was actually doing paperwork related to managing his territories.

“Oh, Lydia. I was just longing to see you.”

“Is it *really* your intention to join the gang of thieves that plotted to kill you? Nico divulged everything! They believe salvation will come in the form of the

Blue Knight Earl's powers, and so you used Marigold and Sweetpea's magic to convince them to accept you!"

"I should have some time this evening. I was considering inviting you to dinner."

"Answer my questions! Is it revenge against the Prince you seek in joining forces with them? Do you intend to commit further crimes?"

With a small shrug, Edgar put down his pen and returned her serious gaze. "I am not joining anything."

"Oh. Good, I suppose."

"I have become their leader."

"I beg your pardon?!"

"They have been waiting for the Blue Knight Earl to guide them since their inception. Both they and I are vulnerable to the Prince. That is why I decided to offer my cooperation."

Though he claimed they were vulnerable, the orders Lydia could see him giving to his new organization would make them anything but.

Edgar smiled gently at her. "Thanks to your actions, I am still in contact with Mr. Firman. Though I have changed, he treated me with the same kindness he has always shown. I am not sure whether I would have attempted to reason with him had you not told me that he still treasured the promise he made to me."

"Mr. Firman made that promise because you recognized his talent. That was where your bond began. I had nothing to do with it."

"It was nothing as extravagant as recognizing his talent."

"I was under the impression that you encouraged him to paint."

"Indeed I did. It was his ambition to become a poet, you see, but the works he showed me were simply dreadful. His paintings weren't much better, mind you, but I thought it might be amusing to purchase and hang up those awful works to befuddle my guests. Poems, on the other hand, require the acceptance of society at large to earn their writers any money."

Lydia was rendered speechless.

“I was honestly shocked by how far his skills had progressed.”

It was then that she came upon the possibility that Edgar hadn’t actually changed one bit in all these years. Having said that, perhaps there was some kindness to be found in the earl’s apparent willingness to purchase such dreadful paintings. As usual, Lydia was faced with the fact that she couldn’t make heads or tails of him. Nor did it matter what she thought about him becoming leader of a secret organization or taking revenge against the Prince. The decisions he had come to were firm, and he wouldn’t be satisfied until everything had gone exactly as he wanted it to. That, at least, she could be sure of.

“I trust you will join me for dinner?” he asked.

“I am afraid I must decline. Father will be home early this evening.”

“The professor is welcome to join us.”

Her father would no doubt turn down the invitation, knowing that he was only offered it because Lydia was worried about him. Edgar knew this too, and now she was in a position where she could no longer refuse him. After having seen him so close to death, she had forgotten what he was like. Now she wondered whether she truly was better off here or in fairy world.

“You aren’t wearing your ring?” Edgar asked suddenly, his gaze dropping to her hand.

“It doesn’t fit me,” she replied after a pause. *Besides*, she thought, *it would be strange to wear it* all *the time.*

“We can have it resized.”

“That won’t be necessary. Simply having it with me should deter any fairies.”

Her response did not seem to satisfy Edgar, who dropped his chin into his hand as he studied her. All at once, she felt ill at ease. Now that she had time to consider her actions, she realized that charging in here and hounding him about this secret society wouldn’t have achieved anything in any case. She wasn’t quite sure what she had been thinking.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she said.

“Will your father be home this weekend?” Edgar asked. “I am considering dropping in.”

“What for?”

“I require his permission in order to marry you.”

Lydia stared at him. “I’m... I’m sorry? I only agreed to marry you so that we could return to this world.”

Edgar cocked his head in a show of thoughtfulness. “Yes, you agreed to marry me. You even accepted the ring.”

“Yes, but only because you said it was *temporary* and that it could be forgotten because we are both human.”

“I do not recall saying any of that.”

“*That* wasn’t the part you were supposed to forget!” Lydia was so enraged that she was beginning to feel dizzy.

“Shall I see you on the weekend?” he continued calmly.

“You will *not*! I do not wish to see you anywhere *near* my house!”

“It is vital that I make this call.”

“Please, you mustn’t tell father about any of this!”

She could well see her father collapsing the moment Edgar uttered the word “marriage.” He had been overjoyed to see her again after thinking he had lost her forever. He had been drinking—evidently for a while—when she returned, presumably in an attempt to drown his sorrows. Despite his age and somber profession, he had burst into tears and begged her never to marry. She had reassured him that she wouldn’t be going anywhere.

“Keeping our relationship a secret would be most unwise.”

“We *have* no relationship!”

“Lydia, there are those who can sense the intimacy between two parties at the drop of a hat. The difference in our status, too, will only invite unwanted speculation. Unless we preempt the rumors and make our relationship public,

people might think I am merely toying with you."

"Even better, we do not become 'intimate' in the first place!"

"Such rumors would not offend me, but they would surely put *your* reputation at risk."

Clearly, his tactic was to pay no heed to any of her objections. Naturally, if they *were* in a relationship, hiding it would offer Lydia no advantage. She was from a respectable family, so such a relationship would necessitate a view to marriage. By the same token, making that relationship public would make marriage an inevitability.

"You have jumped far too quickly to far too many conclusions," Lydia said. "I believe I have made it quite clear that I have no intention of marry—"

Edgar quickly stood up and placed his hand over her mouth. "Are you sure you ought to be saying that?"

Lydia followed his gaze to the courtyard fountain outside the window, where a black horse was lying.

What is Kelpie doing here?

"Mr. Kane tells me he intends to remain in London until you change your mind."

Meaning that she was effectively at Edgar's mercy and could not risk being too loud about her disinclination to marry him.

"I cannot believe that you are all too serious about marrying me either," she said.

Placing a finger under her chin, he lifted her face and smiled broadly at her. "That old chestnut? If you are still unconvinced, then clearly I need to double my efforts."

Lydia was now even more indispensable to him. Thanks to Marigold and Sweetpea, Scarlet Moon regarded him as the true Blue Knight Earl, and he would need to retain his connection to fairies if the society was to continue placing its faith in him. He would do whatever it took to keep her by his side. Indeed, Edgar was a scoundrel to the very end. But then, she knew that.

“I must return to my work.” It was all she could do to make her excuse and leave the room.

Lydia had no way out of Edgar’s dinner invitation, and naturally, he spent the entire evening dousing her in sweet nothings.