
MIZUE TANI 5
Earl and Fairy
A Cursed Diamond Imbued with Love


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KELPIE
An old fairy friend of Lydia's. He is gentle with her alone, even though he is savage by nature. For the time being, he is reluctantly staying in London with the aim of bringing her home.
EDGAR
Originally born to a noble family, he was trafficked by a shady organization led by the Prince. After years of suffering, he obtained the title of Blue Knight Earl with Lydia's assistance. While half his time is spent plotting a ruthless revenge against his former captor, he spends the other half trying to whisper sweet nothings into Lydia's ear.
RAVEN
A mysterious boy, he is Edgar's servant. He is skilled with weapons, and his loyalty to his master is flawless.
ERMINE
Edgar's servant and Raven's older sister. After losing her life, she was reborn as a selkie and now serves her former master once more.
NICO
A fairy that takes on the form of a cat, he has been Lydia's friend and partner since she was a child. In spite of his coarse nature, he is fussy about his food and attire, and very much acts like a gentleman.
LYDIA
A girl who can see and talk to fairies. After helping Edgar to secure his earldom, she ended up as his fairy doctor, after which they entered into a false engagement to fool some fae. He constantly behaves as though their betrothal is legitimate, much to Lydia's chagrin, and yet she still finds herself wrapped around his little finger.
Earl and Fairy
CHARACTERS

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The Earl Who Courted Disaster

She didn’t have a name, so Edgar chose one for her. She had asked him a little impertinently to call her by the name of a woman he couldn’t forget. When he dubbed her “Jean,” she had seemed over the moon. She had been one of Edgar’s companions, part of a group of innocent boys and girls who had been enslaved. He had led the escape from their captor.

“Our black diamond,” Edgar murmured, gazing down at the shabby casket.

They had come to the outskirts of London. A bell resounded through the church cemetery, announcing the arrival of midnight.

“The fabled black diamond… Are you sure it is in this casket, my lord?”

With Edgar were his trusted servants, Raven and Ermine, and the members of Scarlet Moon, a secret society. The earl’s former captor, a man known as the Prince, had a firm grip on the underworld in America. Scarlet Moon held their own grudge against him, so Edgar had seen fit to join forces with them.

The question had come from Slade, one of the society’s senior members. He stood by the casket, looking just as perplexed as the other members. Edgar may have been their leader now, but they still didn’t have a clue as to what he was thinking.

“The Prince went to great pains to procure it. I understand you purloined it upon your escape, my lord.” This time, it was a painter, Paul, who spoke. A member himself, he and Edgar were close friends.

He spoke the truth. Edgar’s escape must have enraged the Prince enough, but the loss of the diamond would have only rubbed salt in the wound. Perhaps that was why all of the earl’s companions, bar Raven and Ermine, had been killed. If not anger, then perhaps their deaths could have been attributed to the black diamond’s curse. It was said that the gemstone had been passed from person to person ever since it was parted from its original owner, and that anyone who possessed it was bound to meet with misfortune.

“Your lordship hid the diamond in a casket?” Slade pressed. “We were in utter disbelief when we heard you had a corpse sent from across the Atlantic.”

“You need disbelieve it no longer, for I declare it is the truth.”

“Heavens!”

Edgar removed his top hat and bowed his head before the coffin. His golden hair, shining with the same illumination as the moon herself, stood out against the dark graveyard. Jean had loved his blond hair. She had watched intently as Ermine cut it when they hid in the back streets, claiming that she could have made a far better job of it.

“Jean willingly sacrificed her life to ensure the diamond was kept from the Prince. She hid it somewhere only I would ever find it.”

Raven carefully pulled out the coffin’s nails.

“The Prince launched a surprise attack on our hideout. Jean was guarding it at the time, which was when she hid the diamond and lost her life. I found her corpse and took it to the church, where I asked simply that she be buried.”

Edgar had omitted the detail that her death had been a suicide. As a result, the pastor had been highly sympathetic and promised to bury her in a corner of the cemetery. Once Edgar had settled in Britain, he had set about retrieving her body, a process he had started some time ago.

“My lord,” Raven said, “it would appear we are not the first to open this casket.”

“Does this mean that the Prince has already taken off with the diamond?” Slade asked.

More likely than not, Edgar’s adversary had searched every place he could think of to retrieve the treasure. And that would have included the graves of the earl’s lost companions. Nevertheless, Edgar was certain that the black diamond was still with Jean.

Before long, Raven succeeded in lifting the lid.

“The most beautiful of jewels has the power to twist one’s fate. Have you heard of the Regent Diamond? It is exceptionally large and, many, many years ago, was originally mined by a slave, who took it for himself and escaped. He sliced open his calf and hid the jewel in the wound. Upon finding Jean’s body, I immediately

recalled that I had relayed that tale to her on one occasion."

He had worked out the diamond's hiding place at once. It had struck him then that having her buried would be the most effective way to keep it safe.

"Here it is," Raven said simply.

The corpse was now nothing more than a skeleton and had lost its ability to hide the gem. But the Prince had been too hasty in digging through Jean's grave.

Edgar stooped down and gazed tenderly at the girl's remains. "Thank you, Jean. May you rest in peace. You have my word that I shan't disturb you further." He set down the lily in his grasp and got to his feet.

"Mr. Slade. Would it be possible to use this diamond to recreate the necklace it was once a part of?"

According to the records, the necklace had been a splendid item encrusted with several diamonds. With it having been passed around so often, this black diamond was all that remained.

"Our craftsman could make quick work of it," Slade said hastily, his eyes on the casket. As if he could stand it no longer, he burst out, "My lord, this skeleton belonged to a child, did it not?" Jean had only been ten years old. "You would sacrifice a child in your fight against the Prince?" he went on.

Raven, Ermine, and Edgar had all been children at the time, but he still recognized that ten was far too young an age to die.

"I doubt his lordship *wished* for her death," Paul answered for his friend.

"As a figurehead, your lordship leaves almost *too* striking an impression," Slade said. "You charm others with your words and appearance. An innocent child would be quick to trust you unconditionally, believing he or she ought to go to any lengths for you. This poor girl may well have been the same, and even within Scarlet Moon, I can think of one young member who idolizes you completely."

Indeed, Edgar recalled that there was a boy who had made frequent visits to his estate lately.

"Our younger members are motivated to follow you, my lord. Our older members, however, upon hearing that most of your former companions have passed on, have been far more cautious about what you might have them do. Of course, we were eagerly

awaiting the return of the Blue Knight Earl to these shores in the hopes that he would lead us, but you are he in name alone. I cannot guarantee the depth of our members' trust."

"I can do without trust, but obedience is vital to defeating the Prince." Edgar put his top hat back on as he watched Raven close the coffin. "It matters not if your men are disinclined to die for my sake. I no longer wish to fight in such an unrefined manner."

Slade fell silent, as though sensing the other man's pain. Earth was poured back over the casket. Jean had been just one of the many companions Edgar had survived. The answer as to why may have been hinted at by Slade: it was as though the earl's very presence were capable of influencing the fate of those around him. Perhaps it came from his noble birth. Since he was very young, he had been raised to consider his duty to those below him. But that alone wasn't enough to explain why those who flocked to him seemed to perceive him as an ideal leader. Was it his looks? His personality? Or an unconscious utilization of the manipulative tricks the Prince had instilled in him?

Since the moment Edgar had decided to escape his captor, he had worked to become a leader his companions could place their confidence in, something he had determined they needed. However, the powerful loyalty he commanded had more often than not led his followers to their deaths rather than freedom.

Why? I was never worth dying for.

His past aside, Edgar still persisted in his fight against the Prince. It was his hope to soothe the pain in the hearts of those lost; if the number of lives sacrificed continued to mount because of his actions, then surely he was being contradictory? And yet he seemed to move forward, as though led by fate itself, all while these questions tormented him. It was partly down to this diamond. Jean had given her life to protect it. Now he needed to make use of it.

***

Compared to other social gatherings favored by the upper class, tea parties were rather less formal, and even a young woman like Lydia found she could comfortably partake. Having said that, as a middle-class girl from rural Scotland, joining in with

these noble women's conversation was far from easy. Lydia had always struggled with social situations. She was adept at keeping company with fairies, but fae etiquette was a different beast to that expected by wealthy humans. Fairies didn't recoil when one spoke their mind; humans tended to couch their opinions in white lies. Quite apart from anything else, a lot of people considered fairies to exist only in tales, so Lydia was often regarded as a pigheaded eccentric. Nevertheless, she was one of several women joining this tea party today.

"You know, I haven't seen her at all recently."

"*I* heard she eloped."

Lydia had been seated at a table with other girls her own age, but she hadn't the faintest clue about whom they were gossiping. As such, there was no way for her to join in the conversation.

"However, on visiting the estate of her suitor, she found that he already had a wife!"

This tea party had been organized by Duchess Masefield, an older woman. Out of all the nobles Edgar had introduced Lydia to, she was the one who treated the fairy doctor most kindly. She believed in fairies herself and enjoyed discussing them. She admired Lydia's ability to not only see the elusive creatures but also speak with and form friendships with them. Although Lydia would find it disrespectful to call her a friend, given the duchess was old enough to be her grandmother, it was a relationship she held very dear. That was why she had accepted the invitation, but there were thirty women and girls at this private gathering, so naturally she couldn't expect to have one-on-one time with the hostess.

The tables were set out on the Masefields' terrace, which overlooked the spacious courtyard attached to their townhouse. As the girls around her gossiped, Lydia spread a generous portion of cream onto a scone.

"After that, the story goes that she escaped and returned home."

"I doubt anyone would have any respect for her ever again after she allowed herself to be deceived by a man like that."

"I daresay she won't be able to show her face in polite company again."

The brownies among the lavenders had been gazing hungrily in

her direction for some time. Lydia placed the scone on the grass by her feet.

"Have you any thoughts on the matter, Miss Carlton?"

"Oh! Um, I beg your pardon?" Lydia quickly righted her posture. The brownies had gathered around the scone and were now carrying it away from under her chair. An ordinary person would only see the cream-covered treat floating across the lawn, but even this seemed to escape her tablemates' notice.

"We are discussing gentlemen and courtship. Naturally, an expectation of marriage precludes such a relationship, but if all one has is her suitor's word, surely one is left vulnerable to deceit?"

Lydia hesitated. "Quite."

"I have to wonder whether a potential husband's suitability is best judged by the opinion of one's parents."

One of the other girls turned to Lydia then. "Miss Carlton, I understand your father is a university lecturer. Does he have especially high standards? I could well picture such a father insisting you keep your wits about you when it comes to noble gentlemen!"

Her father *was* a professor, but counter to the impression one might hold of a man in academia, he was far from the meddlesome type. These girls could have no interest in him. Instead, she was likely being asked how she felt about courtship between a nobleman and a commoner such as herself. One often heard tales of noblemen seducing naive young women only to abandon them on a whim. Said women were often commoners. No one would dare treat a lady from a respectable family that way.

The duchess had introduced Lydia as a "dear friend" and, as such, no one was being openly condescending toward her. It was probably the unusual color of her hair that had elicited the question.

"Is it true that his lordship is courting you?"

"I…beg your pardon?"

"Lord Ashenbert, I mean."

Lydia was fairy doctor to one Edgar Ashenbert. He was famous among London's upper class not only for his youth and good looks but also for his curious title: the Earl of Ibrazel. It was already midway through the nineteenth century, and most people likely

considered his realm in Fairyland to be entirely fictional. Britain's fairies, on the other hand, respected him as the descendant of one who used to rule their far-off home. In truth, Edgar did not carry the blood of the previous earl, nor did he have any knowledge about fairies. That was why he had hired Lydia, and because she was often seen with him, people formed the false impression that they got along. There had even been an article in one of the tabloids claiming that he was courting her in earnest. It was no wonder these girls wanted to know if the rumors were true.

"Perish the thought!" Lydia stuttered. "He is merely my employer."

Her tablemates visibly relaxed, but she also had the sense that her response had been the expected one. That wasn't to say that they were all interested in Edgar themselves; rather, they simply struggled to comprehend what he saw in a girl like her. Her dull, reddish hair was often unkindly compared to rust, and while she had tied it up, the style wasn't as intricate as the others on display around her. And there were her golden-green eyes, which made people uncomfortable on account of the fact that they looked like they belonged to a witch. Lydia herself couldn't fathom Edgar's interest in her. His proposal couldn't have been sincere.

One of the other girls spoke up. "Lord Ashenbert is awfully kind and skilled in the art of conversation. He's so wonderful, one would be hard-pressed to find any shortcomings. Somehow, it all gives me the slight sense that he is untrustworthy."

Precisely, Lydia agreed silently, *although it ought to be more than a "slight" sense.*

"Quite. He appears to show that same kindness to everyone. And yet when I speak to him, I begin to wonder whether he is interested in me."

"I hear he is quite the philanderer."

"Oh, yes! And there is that rumor that he is in possession of a harem."

"A *harem*?!" Outraged, Lydia leaned forward.

"Apparently, there exists an establishment in London that facilitates such an arrangement. A man may surround himself with several lovers, as though he is a pagan king."

Lydia had heard enough scandalous rumors about Edgar to last several lifetimes. Although many were obviously exaggerated,

they all involved women to some degree. If he had *wanted* to build a harem, it certainly wasn't beyond him.

"The rumor goes that a high-ranking daughter from a foreign land is so utterly in love with him that she cast aside her family and fiancé to come to London. His lordship cannot marry her, as she isn't a Christian woman. However, he cannot send her away either, so he is sheltering her within his harem."

"And why could he not send her away?" Lydia asked.

"He had taken things too far with her. You see, in these pagan countries, girls who lose their innocence before marriage are killed by their fathers."

Lydia wasn't sure how much to believe. While the Church wasn't *that* strict, the fact remained that purity lost prematurely left a stain on a woman that would last her entire life. Supposing it was true, Edgar was a far crueler man than she had ever imagined. He had thoughtlessly laid hands on a woman for whom such a thing was no mere frivolity.

Lydia's first instinct was to remind herself to be wary. Her second was to grow embarrassed that she'd had such a thought, which led to her third instinct: anger.

"As important as this girl was in her home country, his lordship would never give his heart to a heathen!"

"She certainly sounds imprudent. One must remember one's status at all times. Wouldn't you agree, Miss Carlton?"

It was a warning. If, as a commoner, Lydia fell under Edgar's spell, she was destined to be toyed with and nothing more. If she let him spoil her, she would only have her heart broken later. However, she was so shocked by the insinuation of a harem that these cautions fell on deaf ears.

"Miss Carlton, why don't you grace these older ladies with your company?" the duchess called to her. She must have sensed that Lydia was struggling to keep up with the conversation at her table.

Masefield was an elegant woman who spoke in gentle tones, and her amiability made her as endearing as a young child. She was very easy to talk to because Lydia was liable to forget their difference in status.

Lydia stood up, as requested. The tables on the terrace were alive with conversation, but the duchess led her away from all of it. She was taken to a separate room, where a lone man stood by the

window. He turned at her arrival. Atop his head was a shock of golden hair, and he was young and lithe. As his ash-mauve eyes caught hers, his face lit up with a smile. He was the very man the girls had been discussing.

He wore a dark-green evening coat with a violet necktie. His attire was as elegantly flawless as ever—Lydia was told that noblemen put particular thought into how they dressed for the evenings. His outfit and looks were beyond reproach, and even his smile wasn't enough to protect her from the shock of seeing him here, where she least expected it. She had to stop herself from turning round and going back the way she had come.

"How I missed you, my darling Lydia."

I am nobody's darling!

Due to the rumors surrounding him regarding his heathen mistress, she perceived him as more dangerous and flippant than ever. As much as she knew gossip tended to be grossly exaggerated, it unnerved her. Ignoring her scowl, he gracefully took her hand and made to kiss the tip of her fingers in greeting, as was his manner. She withdrew before he could.

Her open indisposition did not seem to affect him in the least.

"Edgar! What on earth are you doing here? This tea party is for ladies only!"

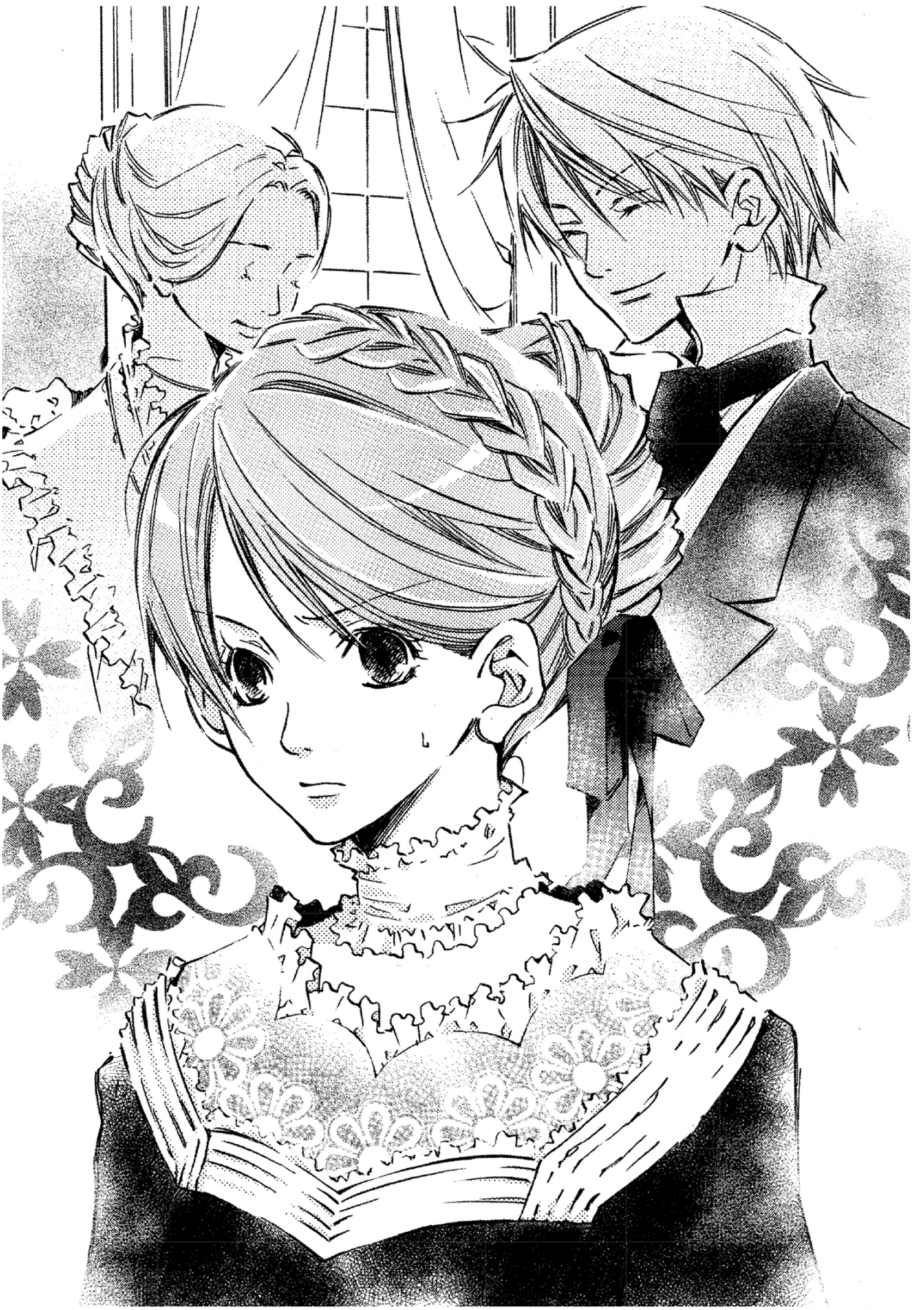
"I came to escort you home. That, and I made a request of the duchess some time ago. It is my hope that she may provide me with an answer today. She has been most accommodating of us, and I would ask that you express the appropriate gratitude."

Lydia did not like the sound of that one bit.

"My gratitude for what, exactly?"

"The duchess has very kindly promised to lend her assistance to ensure our engagement is made official."

Lydia's jaw dropped, and she struggled to pick it up again. Edgar had a habit of orchestrating things to prevent her from pushing back. Their engagement had been a ruse in the first place, and he knew she had no intention of following through with it. And yet he was forging ahead regardless.



“For goodness’ sake, Edgar, this is no time for your jokes!”

“Come, Miss Carlton. Please have a seat so we may discuss this at length,” Masefield offered. Her invitation meant that Lydia was forced to rein in her emotions.

The three of them sat down around a table, where they were served tea by a maid. The duchess smiled at Edgar and Lydia as though this were a private tea party of their own. There was a hint of amusement in her voice as she spoke.

“I see it is as Lord Ashenbert stated, Miss Carlton. You are not wearing your ring. Have you yet to accept his proposal?”

“Well, I…” Lydia faltered.

“His lordship tells me you have not come to a clear decision—that you have accepted the ring but refrain from wearing it.”

With the way Edgar toyed with women, she refused to believe that this engagement was an expression of genuine love. He needed her skills as a fairy doctor to facilitate his work as the Earl of Ibrazel, and marrying her would force her to stay by his side forever. That was where his motivations began and ended. One woman would never be enough for him anyway, so love should prove far from a strong enough incentive for marriage. For the most part, she had been trying to brush him off whenever he spoke seriously of their union. But, now that he had gotten the duchess involved, she could only express the anxiety and anger within her by glaring at the perfectly composed earl.

What has he said to her? What if he is planning something to prevent me from turning down his proposal?

“While I understand this is something you ought to decide for yourself, I hope you will permit me to say a few words on the matter,” Masefield continued. “His lordship cares for you to the extent that he divulged the following to me: the feelings behind his proposal are sincere, and by no means does he wish to damage your reputation. His lordship has asked that I act as a witness.”

Lydia raised her head. “A witness, madame?”

“You are under his lordship’s employ. As such, it is not strange to think that you would occasionally find yourselves alone together. There are those who would find his lordship’s fondness for you quite unsavory, but he assures me that his feelings are anything but impure. And, should you choose to turn down the

proposal, I can guarantee that it will have no ill effects on your future whatsoever."

It was not uncommon for an unmarried girl who spent time alone with a man to be considered just as damaged as one who had lost her virginity before marriage. Moreover, Lydia wasn't nobility, making her even more vulnerable to being viewed this way. Hence the reason Edgar had sought the duchess's backing. Masefield had always been fond of the earl, keeping a warm eye out for him. Her husband, the duke, was on good terms with Lydia's father too, making her an ideal choice as a mediator. In society's eyes, Edgar had sought the engagement via the duchess, signaling the courtship was very much intended to continue on to marriage. To get too close to Lydia before they were officially engaged now risked damaging Masefield's reputation. It did sound as though he was doing this for Lydia's sake.

"If you *do* decide to marry his lordship, I shall make all the arrangements necessary. You needn't worry about a thing," Masefield continued.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your father is a distinguished academic, and you are his distinguished daughter. I have no qualms at all about endorsing you as his lordship's bride. I understand that you might be anxious about entering into the peerage, so rest assured that I shall assist you in any way I can. It isn't all that difficult once one gets used to it."

Edgar has even sought Her Grace's assistance in teaching me to become a lady? It certainly sounded like it was all for her sake, but knowing him, that couldn't be the case.

"I appreciate it, madame. But marriage…"

"It is my hope that this has cleared one of the obstacles that may have left you hesitant to marry me. That was my sole intention in doing this," Edgar said.

Despite his claim, Lydia felt he was instead trying to trap her into acceptance. If nothing else, his proposal and her keeping the ring was no longer known to just the two of them.

"Of course, the proper thing to do would have been to seek your father's permission before disclosing this to anybody else," he said.

"Under no circumstances must you tell my father! Do so and

you will face the consequences!" Lydia cried before promptly returning to her senses. She couldn't allow herself to lose her temper as she might when they were alone.

"That sounds sensible to me." The duchess smiled kindly. "It is no use worrying your father when you still have your own feelings to contend with."

Lydia couldn't take her words at face value. *No doubt she thinks me uncouth now; unbefitting of a noble husband… Not that it matters when I have no inclination to marry him!*

If only Edgar would stop causing her such mental strain.

"Therein lies another reason I asked the duchess for her assistance first," Edgar said. "I wish for you to make this decision based on your feelings alone, lest your father think I employed cowardly methods to manipulate you."

Perish the thought. It was all Lydia could do to stop the scathing words from escaping her lips.

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"With this, I shall be able to seduce you to my heart's content." Edgar sidled up to Lydia without hesitation.

The pair was in his carriage. She sighed, wondering if she ought to have refused his ride home after all. On his face was a triumphant smile as he shamelessly reached for the ribbon in her hair and untied it. He then pulled out the single pin keeping her hair up, making it fall loose around her shoulders.

"What do you think you are doing?!" she demanded.

"Your hairstyle lacked any semblance of charm. I rather prefer it loose."

"And why should your opinion matter to me?" Lydia snatched the ribbon back from him and looked away pointedly as she combed her fingers through her disheveled hair.

"I am your fiancé. Lending an ear to my thoughts is the least you could do."

She didn't bother to point out they weren't really engaged; it wouldn't make a difference.

"Might I suggest a slight detour?" Edgar asked.

"I wish to go home."

"I have heard there is an air balloon show in Hyde Park this

evening.” The carriage just so happened to be running along the park now. “Besides, there is nothing quite like a walk at sunset. It ought to improve your disposition somewhat.” Edgar slid closer to Lydia, who had moved as far from him as she could in the narrow vehicle.

“Did you not promise Her Grace that you would keep me at arm’s length for the time being?”

“Mere lip service.”

“I beg your pardon?!”

“Whatever I might do, it will cease to matter once we are married.”

“Not once have I said I would ma—”

The carriage suddenly lurched. Lydia was thrown against Edgar, and she clung to him unconsciously. She had braced herself, afraid of biting her tongue, and now the coach stopped, still at its awkward angle.

“Why are we stopped?” she stuttered.

The driver flung open the door. “Are you hurt, my lord?”

“Not in the slightest. Lydia, are you all right?”

“Yes…” Embarrassed, she quickly shuffled out of his arms, though it had not escaped her notice that he had protected her head from any impact.

“So sorry, my lord. A black cat jumped out in front of us, and I drove into the ditch.”

“A black cat? That is bad luck.” Edgar stepped out of the leaning carriage to check the situation. Having done so, he turned to Lydia and shrugged. “The wheel has almost been pulled from its spoke. It may take some time for it to be repaired, so I suggest we walk.”

Though the coachman offered to call them a replacement cab, Edgar refused and offered Lydia a hand to help her down. After he retrieved his fallen hat and cane, he set off. Left with no other choice, she followed him. It seemed his desired sunset walk was to become reality after all. Still, she had to wonder which was more dangerous: going home unescorted as a young woman or taking a walk with a loose-moraled man such as Edgar.

He led her deeper into the park.

“I don’t see all that many people about through here,” she remarked.

“It’s a shortcut.” He turned to her and smiled in that dubious

way of his. “If you are worried I have an unsavory ulterior motive, don’t be.”

He ought to know that his word alone is not enough.

It didn’t help that, as they walked farther, she caught glimpses of couples hidden in the undergrowth a short distance from the path.

Not even Edgar would do something like that, surely?

Recently, she had gained confidence that, despite the outrageous things he suggested, he was no longer liable to force anything on her. For one, he had stopped trying to kiss her without her consent—although perhaps it was just that her stubbornness meant it wasn’t worth the effort. Having said that, he might have considered the duchess’s word and backing as a suitable cover to do whatever he liked. Lydia was reminded of his “lip service” comment.

Growing desperate, she tried to suppress the possibilities her mind was throwing at her. She increased her pace, wanting to get home as soon as possible. It was then that Edgar grabbed her arm and pulled her into the shadow of a tree, far from the light.

“What are—”

“Quiet. They’ll find us.”

Who?

At the end of Edgar’s gaze stood two figures. Lydia recognized one of them.

Ulysses…

A boy with light-blond hair who had tried to kill the earl. He could communicate with fairies just as she could. The Prince, the man who had killed Edgar’s family and enslaved him, had sent this assassin from America in order to torment Edgar. Ulysses was closer than ever to succeeding in his task, so no doubt Edgar had been keeping a careful eye on his movements all this time. Even if the accident in the carriage had been a complete coincidence, the earl had likely invited Lydia to Hyde Park because he knew his adversary would be making an appearance.

“Come closer,” Edgar said. “They won’t suspect us if we pretend to be lovers.”

When Lydia hesitated, he pulled her in.

“I should hope you have a convincing excuse!” the unfamiliar man was snapping at Ulysses. He was a well-dressed, middle-aged

gentleman without a hint of youth left.

Ulysses seemed to disapprove of the man's volume; he was looking around cautiously. Panicking, Lydia buried her face in Edgar's chest. He put his arms around her shoulders like he was embracing his beloved.

"While it is true that I was tardy in contacting you, I was following the wishes of His Royal Highness. I should thank you not to interfere."

His Royal Highness? He must be referring to the Prince. That gentleman must be his accomplice.

She tensed. However, while they were close enough to overhear, it seemed they were still managing to escape notice. The couples here were all wrapped up in their own little worlds; Ulysses and his companion probably thought no one was paying attention to their conversation.

"I am still rather displeased that you would ask me to relinquish the gem. I was to be the one passing it to His Royal Highness on his arrival in Britain."

"I had been asked to hold on to it for safekeeping."

As Lydia listened with bated breath, she suddenly felt Edgar's fingers playing with her hair. "Don't do that," she protested quietly.

"Did I not say we must act as if we were lovers?"

"They aren't even looking in our direction!"

Edgar pressed his finger to her lips as Ulysses continued.

"We cannot be too cautious. You are aware that the Blue Knight Earl has appeared in England, yes?"

The Blue Knight Earl was another name for the Earl of Ibrazel, Edgar's title.

"That young man who is causing a stir in London… Is it really him? I was under the impression that the earl's bloodline had ended long ago and that there would never be another."

Their conversation sounded important, yet Edgar was gazing at Lydia with eyes so passionate she had to wonder if he was even listening. His finger softly traced her lips, but she was growing anxious rather than embarrassed.

Are we truly on solid ground? she thought. Somehow, the surface beneath them felt unsteady. Much to her chagrin, she had to lean her entire weight on Edgar to support herself.

"Stop that for a moment," she breathed.

“Are you aware that whenever you ask me to stop, you hold this intense longing in your gaze? It is rather enticing.”

“I fail to see how that matters at this moment.”

Weren’t they supposed to be eavesdropping on Ulysses? Just then, there came a rustling from the thicket next to them, and a dark creature rushed past them. Lydia barely had time to wonder whether it was another black cat when she felt a pair of hands on her shoulders.

“She said to stop.” The speaker wrenched her away from Edgar.

“Kelpie!”

The man—or rather, fairy—who had interrupted them was a dark-haired, fierce-faced water horse. He was currently in human form. As Lydia recalled, he had mentioned settling in the Serpentine, Hyde Park’s lake. Originally, kelpies hailed from the Scottish Highlands and ate people. This one, however, had taken a liking to Lydia and was therefore staying in London. Her presence must have lured him from his lake.

“I do not appreciate your interrupting us, Kelpie. We are betrothed. Tell me what you like, but I shan’t be heeding your instructions.”

“That dinnae change the fact that she’s tellin’ ye to stop. So stop.”

“Keep your voices down!” Lydia warned, but it was too late. Ulysses was already looking in their direction.

“Run.” Edgar pulled on her arm.

“She dinnae need to go with ye, Blue Knight Earl!”

Kelpie’s shout elicited an immediate change in Ulysses’s expression. Lydia watched as he pulled out a pistol. The next thing she heard was a gunshot. The first of many.

“Eh?” said Kelpie.

Lydia rushed away into the gloom, shouting back at him over her shoulder. “This is entirely your fault!”

There came an echoing of screams, and it took a few seconds to become apparent that they hadn’t been caused by the gunshot.

“A balloon…” Edgar gasped.

“What?!”

There was a white balloon low in the sky, glowing in the light of the full moon. It must have belonged to the evening show. Now, however, it was tumbling through the air toward them. The

couples hiding in the trees scattered.

"This way, Lydia!"

She rushed after Edgar. For better or worse, they didn't have time to worry about Ulysses anymore, nor he them. He had stopped shooting. A flash of morbid curiosity had Lydia looking over her shoulder, only to see the balloon catching fire. The flames whooshed upward, engulfing the sky.

She couldn't help but feel that this was the bad luck preceded by the black cat. It was the second accident they had been caught up in that evening. She watched as Kelpie, now in horse form, leaped between her and the inferno behind her.

Edgar and Lydia returned to his townhouse in Mayfair. So much had happened that she was too shaken to go home immediately. His residence was closer than hers, and she had hoped to calm down for a spell with some tea. Unfortunately, the house wasn't in a peaceful state either.

"Whatever is the matter, Tompkins?"

"It isn't anything serious, my lord." Edgar's short, stout butler took his master's hat and cane with energetic movements. "We have had frequent visits from a number of black cats, so might I ask that your lordship use the north-facing rooms for the time being?"

The vase in the hall, the sculpture by the stairs, and the painting in the corridor had all fallen to the floor. It certainly *seemed* serious, but Edgar seemed to take solace in Tomkins's serenity and merely shrugged.

"The north-facing rooms are all right, are they?"

"I believe so, my lord."

"In that case, please bring our tea to the library."

"Whatever is going on?" Lydia fretted. "A black cat appeared before that balloon accident too. It isn't normal."

"The cats aren't at fault," came a voice. A cat—a *gray* one—was sitting on the banister. It was Nico, Lydia's fairy companion, a feliform creature who spoke and wore a necktie. "You brought something rather sinister home with you, didn't you, earl? That is the cause of these strange happenings. These illusory black cats are merely the harbingers of those events." Nico hopped down onto the floor. He strode along on two legs, his paws clasped

behind his back.

"Ah. So that's it," Edgar said.

"You'll get rid of it if you know what's good for you."

"If only I could. As things stand, I ask that you put up with everything for a while longer."

"What is it that you brought home, Edgar?" Lydia asked.

"A cursed diamond," he replied casually. Then, he indicated that she ought to go to the library before him.

A cursed diamond? Could he be scheming again? Lydia was anxious as she opened the door to the library. The room, with its wall filled with books and air with the scent of paper and ink, was indeed unscathed. Paul, a painter of fairies, was sitting on a chair in the corner. He looked up as Lydia entered.

"Why, if it isn't Miss Carlton. Good evening."

"Good evening, Mr. Firman. I hadn't realized you were here."

"Indeed. I finalized the composition for the painting and was hoping his lordship might take a look at it. Unfortunately, the entrance hall was flooded with water, and I slipped. My sketch is ruined..." The good-natured artist offered her a sad smile. There was a boy, who looked to be around ten, sitting next to him. "Oh, I ought to introduce you. Miss Carlton, this is Master Jimmy. He is Scarlet Moon's youngest member."

The skinny boy only glanced at Lydia. He seemed more interested in devouring the snacks in front of him.

"He wants to learn to paint. At my level, I have no business teaching anyone, but I was more than happy to have him observe me in my work."

"Do you think Lord Ashenbert is home yet?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes, his lordship ought to be home by now," Paul replied.

"He won't be long. He and I came together," said Lydia.

Jimmy frowned at her. "I thought his lordship went out to meet his lover."

"Miss Carlton is his lover," Paul explained.

Is there nobody *to whom Edgar will refrain from giving that impression?*

Jimmy looked far from satisfied at the painter's response. "I don't believe it. I thought his lordship's lover was that pretty, young woman we saw earlier."

"The charming one in gentleman's attire? I hear she is his

servant."

It appeared that Ermine had caught the boy's attention. She *was* Edgar's servant, but Lydia could understand why Jimmy was confused. Ermine was beautiful and had a seductive air about her.

"Impossible," Jimmy concluded.

Much as she knew she could not compare to Ermine, Lydia was starting to grow indignant.

"Mr. Firman, you said his lordship's lover was beautiful," the boy went on.

"Oh, well, I simply meant…" Paul tapered off.

"You were being polite?"

"No, no! Ah, Miss Carlton, what I *meant* was…" The panicked painter struggled to finish his sentence.

Lydia was too irritated at this point to believe any excuses. As far as she was concerned, Paul hadn't meant the compliment. She turned to Jimmy. "You certainly are a saucy little boy, aren't you?"

"Did I make you angry? Noblewomen don't tend to have short tempers."

If I were Mr. Firman, I would want nothing to do with this child!

"I *do* get angry when people are rude to me, so I would advise you to watch your tongue."

"You're terrifying. Those green eyes make you look like a witch. Or perhaps a changeling."

Lydia would likely have struck him if only he hadn't been a child. She had faced such insults all throughout her life, so his words were particularly painful.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Carlton," Paul said. "Master Jimmy's manners leave a little to be desired."

"The other lady would have made a much better lover. I am sure your aim is to deceive his lordship in some way," the boy remarked.

Things were getting too long-winded for Lydia to keep hold of her rage. "Deceive him? What do you mean by that?"

"You're a witch. I bet you're seducing him all so that you can poison him. Still, seduction might be a bit of a struggle for—" Jimmy was cut off as Edgar placed a hand over his mouth.

"I cannot abide slander of my precious Lydia, Master Jimmy."

The earl's words weren't enough to stem the boy's cheek. "But my lord, what if Ulysses sends a spy into your estate? This woman

is obviously suspicious!”

It was Paul’s turn to put a hand over the boy’s mouth. “I’m very sorry, my lord. It is about time we took our leave.”

“Did you not have business with me?”

“Yes, but it has become impossible. I shall call on another occasion.”

Lydia was genuinely relieved to see Paul dragging Jimmy from the room. Her dashed spirits would be harder to lift, so for now she made do with a sigh.

Perhaps the diamond’s curse is afflicting me *this evening.*

“Are you upset, Lydia?”

“Not especially. Master Jimmy simply meant that I would not make a suitable wife for you.”

“Children know not of what they speak most of the time.”

Not wanting to talk about her appearance, Lydia changed the subject. “Edgar, I would like to discuss that diamond with you.”

It was at that moment that Raven entered with the tea. The dark-skinned boy was Edgar’s servant. While he spent most of his time catering to his master’s needs, he was a skilled and powerful fighter.

“It is no mere trinket,” she continued. “The consequences of keeping it are graver than you can imagine. The next accident you meet may not leave you unscathed.”

“The reality is that no harm has come to me.”

It might have done had Kelpie not protected them. Being a water spirit, he had been able to repel the flames. And he probably wouldn’t have bothered if Lydia hadn’t been there.

“Might I take a look at this diamond? There may be fairies involved.”

Edgar hummed thoughtfully as he took a seat beside her and beckoned to his servant. “Could you fetch it for us, Raven?”

“Yes, my lord.” The boy approached the mantelpiece in one corner of the library and took from it a black case.

“You keep it here?” asked Lydia.

“Tompkins very recently made the discovery that placing it by the merrows’ sword seems to calm its effects.”

“If only he had realized it earlier.”

That sword, stowed away in the cabinet, was imbued with merrow magic. It must have been suppressing the diamond’s

curse.

Lydia peered into the box Raven opened for them. “Is that it?” It was far bigger than any diamond she had ever seen.

“A hundred-carat black diamond known as the Nightmare.”

Rather than a typical colorless diamond, it was a deep shade of gray, as though someone had encased dusk within it. At the same time, it sparkled with every color of the rainbow. It was a mysterious thing indeed.

“Is it real?” Lydia stuttered.

“Yes.”

“What do you intend to do with it?”

“Well, first I wished to obtain it. I haven’t thought beyond that yet.”

Why go out of one’s way to obtain an item said to bring misfortune? Edgar was a man of strange tastes.

Lydia took the diamond in her hands, case and all. She picked it up by its intricate gold chain to get a better look. It caught the lights of the chandelier, its polished surface dancing with countless embers. The jewel held a charm and energy that made her worry it would absorb her soul. Whether it was an illusion borne by its beauty and extraordinary value or an innate power that had existed since its time deep within the Earth, she wasn’t sure. Her expertise lay in detecting if it had been in contact with fairies.

Fairies and gemstones had a deep, intrinsic connection. One legend claimed that fae were the descendants of gods from an underground land. If so, perhaps the creatures were linked to jewels by their very blood. Lydia could remember hearing such stories from her late mother, a fairy doctor herself. The fae were mysterious beings. Fairy doctors could perceive them, but being humans, they had no way of connecting with the mystical secrets that lay in the creatures’ parallel world.

“The curse doesn’t appear to be the work of fairies,” she concluded.

“It’s known as the Nightmare, is that right? That alone is a rather unfortunate name. It hasn’t been treated with due care either, so no wonder it attracts evil.” Nico was monopolizing the velvet sofa, lying down propped up on his elbow. Lydia hadn’t seen him come in. “The ill fortune that befalls the owner of a stone like that is nothing to sniff at.”

“Suppose I treat it with the care it deserves? More specifically, what might I do to rid the curse of its power?” Edgar asked.

“As long as you’re human, nothing.” Nico echoed Lydia’s thoughts.

“You ought to relinquish that diamond as soon as you can, Edgar,” Lydia warned him. “It still has the power to influence you, with or without the merrows’ sword.”

As though it were all a joke to him, he kissed the diamond. “Cursed this and cursed that. Poor thing. Does its beauty mean nothing to you?” The jewel’s dark shimmer reflected in his eyes, illuminating a small spark of loneliness.

That evening, Edgar arranged for a carriage to take Lydia home and for Ermine to accompany her. He must have taken the precaution because of Ulysses; normally, she would have been traveling alone.

“Would you mind telling Edgar that he ought to be rid of that diamond, Ermine?” Lydia asked, trying hard to forget how Jimmy had compared her to the servant.

“It is not my place to remark on it,” Ermine replied, her gaze immovable in its conviction. She sat beside Lydia, her brown hair cut short and neat, her body clad in her usual male attire. She seemed to prefer it; she served Edgar in the same way Raven did, and for that, ease of movement was a must.

Lydia found Ermine’s presence reassuring—the woman excelled in self-defense—but ever since her return, the fairy doctor couldn’t help but feel guilty. Ermine was in love with Edgar. However, she treated Lydia as she should her master’s fiancée; it seemed Edgar had already told her of their “engagement.” Lydia wasn’t sure that it was for the best. That was why Jimmy’s comparison particularly bothered her.

“I wonder what he intends to do with it. He must consider it more than a mere addition to his collection.”

It was hard to imagine a man wearing a diamond necklace in this day and age. It crossed her mind that he might want it as a present for a woman.

“I wouldn’t know.” Ermine’s response belied the fact that she knew more than she was letting on.

Lydia decided to probe. “I’ve heard rumors that Edgar has a

harem: several women whom he is housing without the knowledge of wider society."

Could it be true that he was concealing a runaway lady from a foreign land? If so, and if she were a member of his harem, it would make for a monumental scandal. But if her status really was as significant as the rumors said, a large diamond would certainly be a suitable gift. Though Lydia hoped it was mere hearsay, it played on her mind.

"I implore you to trust his lordship, Miss Carlton," was all Ermine said.

"I would like to, but you know his awful philandering habits as well as I do. Would *you* trust him?" It struck her that it wasn't a fair question. She quickly grew ashamed of herself, but Ermine seemed unconcerned.

"Not in the slightest."

"Oh…well, then."

"However, his lordship has ordered that I encourage you to have faith in him."

Tickled, Lydia let out a laugh. Ermine joined her. If possible, the fairy doctor wanted to ensure there were no hard feelings between the two of them. She just wasn't sure if the sentiment was mutual.

"Ermine," she began, "I say this because I am sure you know the truth by now. You do not need to treat me as Edgar's fiancée."

The carriage drew up to Lydia's house. Ermine opened the door and waited for her to alight, seemingly ignoring her words until she suddenly said, "Lord Ashenbert and I have never had a romantic relationship. Nor may we ever have one in the future. I hope you can believe me."

Her response left no room for interpretation. Lydia grew flustered, her face reddening. "I beg your pardon? Ah, no, that wasn't my concern! I have no cause for jealousy."

"I understand. However, I felt some clarification was necessary. Besides, I have long come to terms with my own feelings. If you have found it in your heart to forgive my past transgressions, then I ask that you now forget about them. I have every intention of serving you as faithfully as I do his lordship from now on."

Lydia's heart throbbed as she looked up at the taller girl and took her hand. "I shall forget them. That does not mean, however,

that I intend to marry Edgar.”

Edgar had long been aware of Ermine’s feelings. Why he had never accepted them, Lydia didn’t know. However, as flirtatious as he was, he was a man of sound judgment. Perhaps Ermine was so important to him that he had vowed never to cross that line… So important that he cherished her above every other woman in his life.

Daydreams and Nightmares

Lydia had not accepted Edgar's proposal out of a desire to actually marry him; she had wanted to stay with her father for a while longer and continue working as a fairy doctor in the mortal realm. Their engagement was merely meant to defer the promise she had made with Kelpie, who sought her as his bride. If she could have thought of a way to keep the water horse at arm's length while returning the ring, she would have been all for it. Unfortunately, a solution was not forthcoming.

Lydia opened the drawer in her bedroom and pulled out the box containing the offending moonstone ring before gazing at it. It was a mysterious stone whose inner sheen seemed to wax and wane like the celestial body itself. Tonight, it seemed to shine a brilliant milky white as it reflected the light of the full moon.

"How beautiful…"

Strangely enough, Lydia was extremely taken with the stone. She never tired of gazing at it, and it filled her with a mystical sense of calm. It might have been the source of Edgar's grip on her, but that wasn't the fault of the jewel itself. It felt more like a friend to her than an inanimate object.

"It resonates well with you, doesn't it?"

Startled by the sudden voice, Lydia looked around to seek its source.

"I am relieved to see that its light has not faded."

A fairy? She couldn't see one. Wondering whether it might be a very small creature, she peered under the table and her bed.

"Ah, sorry. I'll come out now."

A hand rose up through a tiny hole in the floor. Next came a hat, then what was presumably a head and a round body. The fairy that eventually emerged was much bigger than the hole; around the size of a hare. It seemed to be a variety that lived in mines, what with its miner's clothing, its red face, its snub nose, and its scraggly beard.

"Are you a coblynau?"

"That's right. That moonstone's been with me a long time, and I

was supposed to be taking care of it till I lost it. I've been searching for it since."

Coblynau were honest fairies well-versed in minerals and mined gems. They would often tell human miners where the richest veins of ore were located. This one, however, had mentioned something Lydia hadn't been aware of.

"Do coblynau take care of individual stones?"

"In rare cases, yes. Some of the stones are rather fussy. Those are the ones we are asked to look after."

Lydia had been stooping down to speak with the fairy, and now it clambered up to her knee to peer at the moonstone.

"How have you been faring, Bow? I'm so pleased to see you've found the bride."

"Bride?" Lydia echoed.

"This moonstone was a gift from the Blue Knight Earl to his bride, his countess...who, I gather, is you, seeing as the stone is content in your possession."

"Wait a moment. I was not aware that it held such a history."

"Of course it does. It belonged to Lady Gwendolen Ashenbert, the wife of the first Blue Knight."

Lydia stared at it blankly, absorbing the information. She knew from the tales that the first Blue Knight, the founder of the Ashenbert House, had taken a fairy bride. Supposing this was *that* ring...

She started to feel dizzy. Edgar may have had his claws in her deeper than she had anticipated.



At this rate, the fairies who lived in the earl's territory were sure to perceive her as his bride.

"I ought to make it clear that I am simply keeping the ring on his lordship's behalf. My possession of it holds no deeper meaning than that," she stated.

Unsurprisingly, the coblynau paid her words no heed. "Lady Ashenbert herself asked one of my forefathers to take care of it. It has the name Bow, and I know it as well as if it were a part of me. You may trust my judgment." It took the ring from her palm, held it up in both hands, and studied it from various angles. Then, it slid it onto her finger. "There, now it fits perfectly."

Lydia raised her hand in disbelief. The ring was no longer too big as it had once been, but fit snugly around her finger. And that wasn't all. "It isn't coming off!"

"No, it wouldn't do for you to lose it."

"Please remove it at once!"

"Only the earl may remove it now. He is the only man who would have need to take it off."

I don't believe this! Though she tried desperately to pull the ring off, it wouldn't shift. The coblynau was no help; it was sitting on the table and taking a contented puff from its pipe.

"If I may, countess, I should like to greet the Blue Knight Earl. Do you know where I might find him?"

"Certainly not in this house!"

"Oh? Do you mean to say he has you stay in this tiny little shack while he lives somewhere else?"

Lydia finally snapped. "I apologize if its size offends you. Ah, what I mean to say is that we do not live together because we are not married! To refer to me as a countess is completely inaccurate!"

"I see, so thus far you are only betrothed. I did think this dwelling less than suitable for the earl. Having said that, his treatment of you is disappointing. Where are the fine clothes, the fabulous jewels that he ought to bestow on his bride-to-be? Do you think he might be amenable to my counsel?"

"Not in the slightest!"

He just might! And therein lies the problem!

"Please, you needn't do anything. Should you try, I shall have no choice but to expel you from this house, regardless of your

stewardship of the moonstone! You *do* know that I am a fairy doctor, don't you?"

She picked up a hawthorn berry to throw at it, and the coblynau vanished at once.

Lydia could not allow the ring to be seen by others. That went doubly so for her father. Her intention was to take breakfast without using her left hand. However, it would have been impossible to hold her fork, so in the end, she made do with tea but no food.

Her father put down his napkin. He had finished breakfast rather speedily. "Are you under the weather, Lydia?" he asked, concerned.

"Not at all! I am just anxious to be at work today."

"I suppose you must have a great deal to get through."

"Yes, that's right." She made to stand up, ready to leave before he noticed her finger, but he wasn't finished.

"If I might ask about Lord Ashenbert…"

"Yes, father?"

"I… Well, I heard a certain rumor. One that suggested he is court—"

"One hears all manner of rumors relating to that gentleman! As far as society is concerned, he is courting every last lady he has ever laid eyes on. Such hearsay is not worth entertaining." Her words came out in a single flustered breath.

"I suppose not. I *did* think it was somewhat absurd."

"Exceedingly so."

"I am sure that there are any number of noblewomen perfectly suited to his lordship. But do remember that too intimate an association without a view to marriage brings disgrace upon a lady. Of course, you have a good head on your shoulders. I am confident you would not be taken in." Her father sighed, pushing his round spectacles farther up his nose. "If anything *does* transpire that concerns you, please do come and speak with me. As much as I wish for you to make your own judgments, and as undependable as I am, I am still your father."

It seemed the rumor really did have him concerned. But telling him that she and Edgar were engaged was the last thing she wanted to do. If she went on to explain that the engagement went

against her wishes, he would only be more worried that Edgar was toying with her.

“When the time comes for me to find a suitor, I should very much like a man who is earnest and sincere, just as you are,” Lydia said. She meant it too. It wasn’t that she disliked Edgar, but he was far from the type of man she wanted to marry.

With that, she hurried from the dining room. She needed to have him remove the ring as soon as possible.

Naturally, it would take more convincing than a simple request.

“Lydia! How wonderful to see that you are wearing your ring at last!”

That was how Edgar had responded when Lydia paid him an early visit in his morning room to give her account of the previous evening and ask for his assistance.

“Have you not been listening to a single word I’ve said?” Even though she knew losing her composure would be playing right into his hands, it wasn’t enough to stop her from scowling.

“Of course I have. A fairy—a coblynau—placed that ring on your finger, and now no one can remove it but me.”

“Precisely, and so I would like to ask—”

“A fairy of sound judgment indeed. If another man saw you without a ring, it might invite infidelity.”

The very notion of it made Lydia dizzy with rage. The rational part of her reminded her to look around to make sure Kelpie was nowhere to be seen. She lowered her voice so that only Edgar, who was next to her, would hear her.

“Our engagement isn’t real! You *know* that, so why should I have to carry the burden of this ring constantly?”

“There would be no burden if only you accepted my proposal.”

“That is completely unreasonable!”

“Does the countess wish to make a complaint against the earl?” The red-faced coblynau had returned.

Lydia turned around begrudgingly. It trotted over to stand by the chair that Edgar was relaxing in.

“I am no countess,” she reminded it.

“Ah, yes. Forgive me, my lady.”

She wasn’t nobility either, but by the time she realized that was the least of her concerns, the fairy was already at Edgar’s feet and

offering him a bow.

"A pleasure to meet you at last, Blue Knight Earl."

Edgar cleared his throat. "I understand you are steward to Gwendolen's ring, yes? I can hear you, but I cannot see you."

The majority of people struggled to see fairies clearly. The Blue Knight Earl, however, was a famous exception—or was supposed to be, at least. This did not seem to deter the coblynau, who climbed up onto the table and picked a cosmos from the vase upon it.

"Might this help?"

Edgar nodded, his eyes fixed on the floating flower.

"While I am here, I wanted to suggest that you are not treating this young lady in the correct manner. You ought to treat her as the Blue Knight of old did his fairy bride."

"There is no need for this," Lydia interjected.

Edgar ignored her outburst and leaned forward. "I understand. Might I ask what that would entail?"

"There is no more pressing need than the state of her attire. It is far too plain."

"I quite agree. While I have been making efforts in that regard, she is adamant that her work necessitates nothing more lavish than what she chooses to wear."

"You must double those efforts. Her attire should push the very limits of extravagance!"

As though roused by the coblynau's suggestion, Edgar got to his feet and went to stand in front of Lydia, who had been on the cusp of escaping from the room.

"You look utterly charming no matter what you wear, Lydia, but I have confidence that I can make you the most beautiful woman the world has ever seen. Take, for instance, a diamond. It shines because it has been cut in a manner to catch the light. You must discover within yourself a woman who is suited to shining brilliantly."

In Lydia's opinion, Edgar's efforts should have been *halved*, not doubled.

"I have no doubt that I understand the depths of your charm better than anyone. If only you would allow me to pick your attire, I can transform you into a countess who would be the envy of London. Ah, our engagement party would make for a fine

opportunity! Would you allow me to select some accessories for you?”

“Engagement party?!”

“We shall have to announce and make our engagement official eventually, shan’t we? I should like you to wear the gifts I prepare for you for that occasion, and to ensure they are of the best quality, I ought to order them sooner rather than later.”

Lydia couldn’t tell if he was being serious or merely getting swept up by his own imagination. Even if it was the latter, she could well see him carrying out his plan. The coblynau was nodding approvingly as well. She was outnumbered.

“I would like the jewelry to feature your favorite gemstones. You must tell me what they are.”

The mention of gemstones reminded her of yesterday’s business with the diamond. She wanted to find out whether it really was a gift for that woman in his harem. It didn’t especially matter to her, but she was presently in the mood to cause trouble for Edgar.

“Might I ask for the black diamond, in that case?” She stuttered slightly. If he said yes, he was liable to announce their engagement immediately, but her mind was too full to consider the danger.

“That diamond is cursed. I cannot present you with something that would bring you misfortune.”

Edgar’s hesitation only increased her spiteful mood. It must have been an excuse so that he could give it to another woman. He was frivolous enough that the countless lovers he doubtlessly already had would not deter him from seducing another. He deserved to be backed into a corner.

“Our coblynau friend might be able to suppress the curse.” Only after speaking did Lydia realize it might be true. The fairy’s powers revolved around caring for gemstones, and Nico had said that it was a lack of such care that had given rise to the curse. Perhaps the coblynau could restore it to its original condition.

“Is that right?” Edgar turned back to the table.

The coblynau was still holding the cosmos above its head like an umbrella. It cocked its head thoughtfully. “Diamonds are not my speciality, unfortunately. They are the fussiest of all the jewels, so I would have to seek counsel from my acquaintances. I shall

certainly do what I can, though. It is, after all, a gift for her ladyship!"

I may *have made an error in judgment…*

It finally hit Lydia that there was no going back once she was given the diamond, and she was beginning to break out in a cold sweat.

Edgar sighed quietly. "I cannot give it to you, Lydia."

"I… I understand. It is far too valuable, isn't it? I doubt it would suit me in any case." Relieved as she was, she also felt a spark of self-loathing. She should have known that Edgar hadn't meant anything he'd said.

"That isn't the issue. If it is diamonds you want, I am willing to search for the biggest stones imaginable, all for you. That black diamond, however, is no longer in my possession."

"It isn't? What happened to it?"

"I relinquished it to someone immune to its curse."

Your heathen mistress?

Had she asked for it specifically? Perhaps she was capable of removing the curse.

"Now, there are some lovely jewelers on Bond Street. What say we pay them a visit?" He smiled as if to smooth over the awkwardness.

With that, Lydia—who hadn't wanted any gems in the first place—had her spirits dashed. She shook her head hurriedly. "I wasn't being sincere. I don't want any diamonds. You tease me constantly, so I thought I would have my own fun in return. No one would ever expect you to give away such a marvelous diamond without a second thought. I had hoped the request would put you in a fix."

"There is nothing I would not give you, Lydia, no matter how valuable it may be," Edgar said, though he *did* look a little troubled.

"Be that as it may, it does nothing to change the fact that I have no intention of marrying you." She turned on her heel and hurried from the room. Although she may have managed to put Edgar in a fix after all, it wasn't nearly as satisfying as she had anticipated.

Lydia entered her office to find Nico leisurely sipping a cup of tea. The fairy cat was so keen on the luxury offerings served at the

earl's estate that he no longer deigned to drink the tea served at the Carltons'. She envied him for it. Fairies were free to do as they pleased, and no one would fault them.

Slipping past him, she sat down at her desk. The ring was, of course, still on her finger. She slumped forward, supporting her chin with one hand.

"Now *these* are some rare stones indeed!" The coblynau's voice sounded in her ear again.

"Those are sweets. Who on earth might you be?" Nico stared dubiously at the bearded fairy, who had appeared on the table.

"I am steward to the moonstone." In other words, the coblynau would stick fast to Lydia as long as the ring stayed on her finger.

"Treat our guest with due respect, Nico," she cautioned the cat.

He narrowed his eyes as though he would rather not and, as if trying to appease a small child, opened the glass jar and offered the other fairy the candies. "Here. These aren't jewels. You eat them."

"Why, thank you. I trust you are a friend to her ladyship?" The coblynau scooped up as many amber-colored candies as it could carry, then tucked them gingerly away in the pouch on its hip. The bag's pocket was no bigger than a teaspoon, yet it somehow held several sweets with ease. Lydia wasn't familiar with the details of fairy pockets, but they always seemed to be carrying items much larger than they were.

"Not so much a friend but a protector of sorts."

"Of sorts" indeed.

The coblynau looked at Lydia. "Has something displeased you, my lady? The earl declared he would give you whatever your heart desires, whether that be diamonds or something else. He is clearly a very generous man."

Boundless gifts did not a good marriage partner make.

"It's diamonds ye're after, is it?"

Go away.

The black-haired Kelpie had climbed in through the window. He constantly appeared at his own leisure. Thinking about it, he was the root of her troubles.

"Diamonds don't suit ye. The grasses of Scotland were guid enough for ye afore. Aren't ye gettin' a wee bit ahead of yerself here in London?"

“There is hardly any grass here to speak of.”

Besides, she was too old for rolling around in the park. Such behavior would attract disapproving looks in the countryside too, of course, but Lydia tended to frolic with the fairies at the rath or the shamrock field beyond the wide plains. There was never anyone to witness her there.

“Ye really should reconsider marryin’ the earl. If ye’re wantin’ to stay in the human world a wee bit longer, ye should jist come back to Scotland. Then ye’ll realize ye’re better off comin’ back to the fairy world with us.”

He was being uncharacteristically compromising. The offer itself wasn’t that bad either. In Scotland, she could live in peace without fear of Edgar’s manipulation or getting dragged into the danger that shadowed the earl. But the threat of Ulysses weighed on her mind slightly. The assassin had all the abilities of a fairy doctor. Edgar was sure to struggle against him if left alone. Although Lydia doubted she was experienced enough to be of much use, Ulysses wouldn’t hesitate to misuse the fairies’ powers. Given her profession, she felt as though she had an obligation to stay for their sakes too. So why did it feel like she was making excuses?

It is no excuse. I wish to become a fairy doctor worthy of my mother. Lydia hadn’t noticed herself fiddling with her moonstone ring as she thought.

“How can you be so certain?” she asked. “What if I find a suitor back in Scotland?”

“It willnae take long to get yer heart broke.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Kelpie perched on the desk and peered down at her. “Ye’re a fairy doctor. They don’t get on with humans. Normal people think ye’re off yer head. Ye can forget about havin’ a happy life with a human man.” His eyes, like dull, black pearls, had the power to draw people in. Now, they had Lydia confused.

“My mother and father fell in love and married.”

“Yer da’s obsessed with rocks. He’s no normal.”

Professor Carlton was a mineralogist. Not that Kelpie would understand that.

Lydia sighed as she considered Edgar. She didn’t believe he was in love with her, but he *did* seem to have an understanding of her

abilities. Not that he had much choice; he had come into the inheritance of the Blue Knight Earl mostly by coincidence, and for that he needed a fairy doctor. But perhaps it was more than that, and he really was one of those rare people who looked favorably on those who straddled the two worlds. Even if it was all for his own benefit, he was eccentric enough to want to marry a fairy doctor. Lydia feared that if she left him, she might never again find someone so supportive. She couldn't imagine any other man trying to seduce her or treating her with any semblance of kindness. At that, she realized with some exasperation that she didn't especially mind his open affection.

Of course *it is pleasant to be treated kindly, even under false pretenses.* And that was the extent of it.

"Aren't human males prone to adultery as well? The earl said he gave his diamond to some other lass. Ye still gonna marry him?"

A lass? Lydia looked up.

"What do you know about that, Kelpie?"

"I was swimmin' in the courtyard fountain and I heard him and that fairy painter talkin'. Said somethin' about some lass in his harem. Whatever that is."

That talk of him keeping the daughter of a foreign dignitary in his harem… Could it be true?

"You don't even know what a harem is, Kelpie?" Nico stroked his whiskers importantly.

"Ye're sayin' ye do?"

"Naturally. I am incredibly well-informed. It is a recent culinary delight."

"Oh!" The coblynau perked up. "London has so many dishes that I've never even heard of!"

"Who's this wee fairy, anyhows? He looks like trouble," Kelpie grumbled.

The fairies continued their casual conversation about food, apparently not the least bit interested in Lydia's new troubles.

***

Madame Eve's Palace was rumored to be an establishment where noblemen could keep a number of mistresses, but only its patrons knew the truth behind it. An invitation was required to join

the list of said patrons. Edgar had already cleared this condition, and the moment he stepped out of his carriage, a servant practically fell over himself to show him through the gate.

The building kept its curtains closed, even in the daytime, making the chandeliers almost blinding in their brilliance. As Edgar walked the crimson carpet down the corridor, he was watched by the marble eyes of the female statues that lined it. The thin haze of smoke in the air seemed to numb the brain itself, inviting trances and hallucinations. No doubt there were already gentlemen on the other side of these quiet doors possessed by that sweet scent and immersed in the dreamlike company of their personal harems.

At some point, Edgar's escort had transformed from the bodyguard outside to a woman wearing a thin garment. At length, they reached the end of the corridor, where she opened a set of double doors with golden handles before respectfully bowing her head. Edgar stepped inside. The room's gold and silver ornaments were illuminated by nothing more than a lamp that let off a pleasantly gentle light. Beneath his feet lay a Persian carpet with vibrant patterns, and the ebony tables and chairs gave off a quiet air of quality. A chintz curtain cut across the farthest part of the room. A long, narrow sofa was visible through the thin material, as was the slender, long-haired silhouette of the person sitting on it.

Edgar approached the figure. Lifting up the curtain slightly, he stooped beneath it. "I trust you have been well, Jean-Mary." He kissed her hand. "You like that diamond, don't you? It suits you very much."

She was dressed in the exotic garments of a princess from *The Arabian Nights*, and on her face rested the subtlest of smiles as she gazed back at him tenderly.

Raven appeared at the door. "They will be arriving shortly, my lord."

Edgar gave a small nod to the woman in front of him before letting the curtain drop again. "I *will* avenge you, Jean. You have my word."

The earl and his servant slipped behind a large, nearby mirror, concealing themselves in the small room beyond it. "What about Firman, Raven? Did he succeed in persuading Lord Barkston?"

"I believe so, my lord."

“Well, he did practice a great deal. If only his lordship didn’t know my face, I would have done it myself.”

The two-way mirror meant they could observe what was happening on the other side. Edgar leaned in close as the door opened and two men entered.

“This way, my lord.”

The marquess was a middle-aged gentleman with an impressive mustache. With him was Paul, who—if he was following the script—was playing the part of a spoiled noble son. The problem was that acting was far from his forte.

“The lost diamond—the Nightmare—is it really here?” Barkston asked.

Paul cleared his throat awkwardly. “Please see for yourself, my lord.” He was acting much too humble for his role, but the marquess was likely too intoxicated with drink and drugs to notice.

“It would be a remarkable discovery indeed if so. The diamond’s whereabouts have remained unknown since it was taken from the royal family long ago. Where on earth did you find it?”

“In truth, it does not belong to me. This fine lady has been wearing it all this time.”

“I’m sorry?”

Paul nodded a greeting toward the closed curtain. “Thus far, I have failed to find anyone who might understand what I am about to say. I believe you are an exception, my lord, which is why I requested your company today. Yes, I first met this gentlelady in a dream. She disclosed to me that the black diamond she wore had imprisoned her within a nightmare, and that she had been unable to return to the waking world. Within that same dream, she told me where the diamond was hidden. I found it precisely where she said it would be, and I was able to pull her from her nightmare. Would you believe this tale, my lord?”

“I believe you wholeheartedly. Here, everything you have recounted is entirely plausible.” The pipe in the marquess’s mouth was already chipping away at his rational mind. Madame Eve’s Palace was a place of dreams. A place where anyone may forget outside realities and enter a world of delusions.

“Indeed. She told me of another diamond too. One that exists as a brother to the Nightmare.”

“Might that be the white diamond, the Daydream? They say it

vanished at the same time as the Nightmare."

"Do you know of the legend that states that he who holds both the black and white diamonds will become king of the Earth herself?"

"I do. It is for that reason the British royal family has been searching for these lost diamonds for generations, or so I am told. I have also heard that the diamonds once came into the possession of Napoleon. If so, they must have abandoned him too."

"I am confident the royal family is eager to retrieve the diamonds for the sake of our nation's development. However, this fine lady tells me that the Daydream is already in the possession of a king."

"A king? Not Her Majesty?"

"Precisely. She wishes to meet the Daydream's owner, the man to whom she may offer up the Nightmare and her fate itself. I have vowed to help her, trusting that such a man would have the means and willingness to reward even one such as myself. My lord, this lady believes that you might know who holds the Daydream. That is why I have recounted to you this tale at her request."

"Is that so?"

"Can your lordship think of anybody?"

As slowed as his mind must have been, the marquess seemed to consider the question. "Might I be shown the Nightmare? It may help to jog my memory."

Edgar was keeping a close eye on Barkston's expression. There would be no moment more important than this. Paul turned to the curtain and kneeled at the silhouette's feet. Unused to the gesture, he stumbled slightly.

"Might his lordship be allowed to see you, Lady Jean-Mary?"

The painter's wooden delivery didn't matter. As expected, the marquess's face stiffened. He mouthed her name. "Jean-Mary."

Paul pulled open the thin curtain, and Barkston's eyes widened. His pipe slipped through his frozen fingers, and he made no move to pick it up. Afraid the carpet might get burned, Paul hurried to retrieve it. It was, perhaps, not what a noble boy would do, but neither Edgar nor the marquess cared any longer.

"He took the bait," murmured the earl.

“If you would assist her, my lord,” Paul said.

The marquess made a vaguely affirmative sound. This was the woman who had captured his heart long ago, and he was finally meeting her again. There was no way he would refuse to help her now. He was in Madame Eve’s Palace. Here, his past dreams and the light of that black diamond should be more than enough to entice him. So far, Edgar’s plot to obtain the legendary Daydream was moving along smoothly. He was confident that the marquess was concealing it somewhere. What he didn’t know was how the man and the Prince were connected. He didn’t even know what the Prince’s present objective was or how it involved him. The royal family’s brother diamonds were one of the clues that might lead him to the answers he sought.

The black diamond was said to have become cursed after being passed improperly from person to person. What if it was not the jewel itself, but the machinations of those who had held it that was the real curse? What thoughts were running through Jean-Mary’s head as she gazed back at the marquess? She looked somewhat vacant, as though she had forgotten all about the man whom she ought to despise. Perhaps she had. This was no longer about Jean; Edgar was seeking revenge solely for himself. Supposing she was still capable of feeling, no doubt his scheme would have her lamenting. That didn’t mean that he was capable of stopping himself.

“His lordship will have no choice but to betray Ulysses now, Raven. I have every confidence that he will attempt to take the Daydream from its hiding place to deliver it to Jean-Mary. Tell Scarlet Moon not to let their eyes off him for a second.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Leaving Raven behind in that small room, Edgar exited into the corridor. Madame Eve’s Palace promised a supreme experience of private bliss. Behind its heavy doors lay a dreamland reserved for its customers. It was a place where a man could become a king like a sultan over his harem. The women waited only for their masters, whom they would never refuse, with a gentle sense of loyalty. Despite the rumors, this place was devoid of living women, and not one of them had a sense of self. They existed here simply to realize the dreams and ideals of the men who visited. Jean-Mary, too, was here not by choice, but to fulfill Edgar’s wishes. Still,

he liked to think it was better for her than the alternative: existing solely for Barkston's amusement.

Edgar had slipped into the marquess's room, one which catered to the man's peculiar tastes. There was a portrait that covered an entire wall. The very sight of it opened up a gaping black hole inside the earl. This room was unknown even to Ulysses. Not only had the assassin just returned from America, but he still looked like a child. Getting past the high walls of aristocratic society to gather information would be no mean feat for him. It was precisely why Edgar had chosen this place to unfurl his scheme.

The room was like something out of a dream, decorated with flowers and jewels. The marquess had just one woman in his "harem." One identical smile, captured within every portrait frame. She was, of course, Jean-Mary.

"You are obsessed with a dream, my lord. Allow me to turn it into a nightmare."



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Edgar had left his estate in the afternoon, and it was early evening by the time he returned. Lydia was determined to have him remove the ring before she left, and she burst into his reception room once again.

“Edgar, I…”

He was standing by the window, and when she caught sight of his grim expression in the glass’s reflection, she trailed off. It belonged to his ruthless side, the one she struggled to understand.

“If you’re busy, I can come back later.”

“No amount of busyness could push me to turn you away, Lydia.” He turned to her wearing the same haughty smile as always. “Have you come to bid your fiancé good evening before you leave?”

“You ought to know the answer to that by now. My concern is the ring, and—”

“May I embrace you?”

“I beg your pardon?”

He was already standing in front of her. There was longing, not amusement, in the ash-mauve eyes that looked down at her.

“Certainly not,” she responded reflexively.

“I shan’t take longer than a minute.”

“A minute is already too long.”

“Thirty seconds, then.” Mysteriously, he had the look of a needy child about him rather than that of the salacious man Lydia had come to expect. What she said next surprised even herself.

“Ten seconds. I shall be counting.”

Edgar pulled her toward him before she had time to change her mind.

Perhaps he has had a trying day. The thought made her want to be there for him. But she was unable to pry the tension from her limbs, and she ended up wondering if her presence was any comfort to him at all. Edgar made no move to let go of her, and she instead stepped away from him when she noticed the subtle scent of Asian incense. She had no idea if it had been ten seconds or perhaps even longer.

“Where have you been today?”

“Firman’s workroom.”

It was blatantly untrue. But Lydia was still insistent that she wouldn’t marry him, and her embrace couldn’t have done much to cheer him. She had no right to hound him about where he had gone like a lover might. Still, his answer disappointed her, and she let out an unconscious sigh.

“You are injured, my lord?” Ermine entered the reception room with a medicine box in her arms.

“Injured? Is that true?” Now that Lydia looked, she saw that the shoulder of Edgar’s jacket was torn and stained with blood.

“Yes, but it isn’t anything major. A gentleman attacked me with a knife as I was walking by. Whoever he was, he came out of it much worse off than I did.”

Raven must have come to his master’s rescue. Any attack on Edgar sent his aggressive instincts into overdrive.

“Does that mean the diamond’s curse lingers still?” Lydia asked.

“Now that you mention it, I believe I caught sight of a black cat.”

“You said you gave the diamond away, but might you be meeting with this…person often?”

“Would that cause the curse to remain?”

Meaning they are *meeting?* Despite it being none of her business, Lydia grew sullen.

“You are flirting with danger. *Real* danger.”

“If that is the sacrifice I must make to be blessed by your concern, so be it.” He clearly didn’t intend to take her seriously.

“Your shirt, my lord,” Ermine said briskly, sitting him down in a chair. “I need to disinfect your wound.”

“Might I ask for your assistance, Lydia?” he asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“My arm is in too much pain to move, let alone unfasten my buttons.”

“You moved it not two seconds ago!”

What business did an innocent girl like her have unfastening his buttons? Lydia turned on her heel indignantly.

“Any more of that, and I shall increase the dosage of the disinfectant,” Ermine warned him.

Lydia glanced at Edgar once to see him waving a dismissive hand at his servant before she stormed from the room.

Perhaps it didn't bother Ermine to see him in a state of undress. It wouldn't be surprising; she seemed used to treating Edgar's wounds. Though she was his servant, the way that she spoke her mind hinted at a more casual affection between them. It was an impression that had stuck with Lydia ever since their first meeting.

Raven had told her before of Edgar's solitude from leading his companions in their escape from the Prince. If there was one person before whom he could show the slightest weakness, it was probably Ermine. It was likely she who had supported him through his most trying times. For whatever reason, the thought discouraged Lydia. She had been too flippant when he had asked for her embrace. Ermine would probably have gone to hug him before the words were even out of his mouth. An image appeared in Lydia's mind of the pair holding each other in the room she had just left. It made her pace quicken as she escaped to her office. And then she sighed. Again, she had mistimed asking Edgar to take the ring off for her.

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"I am afraid I have some bad news, my lord," Ermine said as she wrapped bandages around his shoulder and arm. "Master Jimmy has gone missing."

The worst-case scenario flashed through Edgar's mind. "Elaborate."

"He was eavesdropping on a plan to infiltrate and investigate Lord Barkston's estate under the guise of a servant. Apparently he felt able to carry out this plan by himself. Not that he informed anybody."

"And he was captured as a result?"

"It would seem so. Ulysses—most likely, at least—sent a fingernail that appears to belong to the boy. Unfortunately there is no way to tell whether it belongs to him or not."

Edgar fell into thought for a short spell as he considered a number of things. There was something he wanted to confirm first and foremost. "Was there anything Master Jimmy overheard in addition to this plan?" No doubt Slade would have thought him heartless for asking that before anything else.

"He shouldn't have caught wind of your lordship's plot. No one

who knew anything important was present when he was eavesdropping."

Regardless, Jimmy might have known that Edgar had the Nightmare in his possession.

"Which begs the question: what does Ulysses plan to do with him?"

It was a situation liable to cause strife between Edgar and Scarlet Moon. Jimmy admired the earl to the extent that he would act rashly like this, something that had already been causing the older members concern. This could be enough to push the rebellion Slade had been hinting at to the surface. That may have been what Ulysses was counting on. He might even murder Jimmy to deepen the rift between Edgar and the society further.

"I would like to rescue Master Jimmy at all costs," the earl said.

"I shall investigate and unearth where he is being confined."

A corner of Edgar's mind was trying to convince him that it had been too late the moment Jimmy fell into Ulysses's clutches. If only he could loathe himself for the lack of disturbance the thought caused him. In fact, he had remained calm through any number of deaths: Jean's and even Ermine's. What was wrong with him?

After deftly wrapping him in bandages, Ermine held out a fresh shirt. As he took it from her, the memory of asking for Lydia's embrace jumped into his mind for seemingly no reason at all. It was far from where he would have liked to have been with her. She still had her guard up around him. He had never given much thought to her feelings, instead deciding that he would keep her by his side, and that was that. She would facilitate his role as the Blue Knight Earl.

That was, until Lydia had declared that his very genuine feelings could not be considered love. Personally, he failed to see how they could be anything else, so her claim had mystified him. Lydia seemed to interpret his high-handed advances as evidence of his insincerity, and he had therefore decided that even forcing a mere kiss on her was something he should refrain from doing. While it was true that he was losing his confidence in regard to her, it was not his intention to give up. Nor did he mean to rush things. Having said that, it frustrated him that they weren't any closer yet. It threatened his composure. And then he felt dispirited, as though everything in his life were destined to go

wrong.

The Legend of the Royal Family

As the moon rose high into the sky, it transformed the water's surface into a sparkling crystal, even illuminating that which lay underneath. To Kelpie, who rested on the lakebed, it looked like countless fragments of light were floating all around him. London's moonlit nights were one of the few good things about the place. The trees' shadows rippled as his face broke the surface to gaze quietly at the moon.

"That way, is it?"

"No, it's *that* way."

"I'm not sure either of you are right…"

The voices came from the grassy shore, bringing with them the rustling of shrubbery.

There goes the last of my peace. Kelpie clicked his tongue. One could find stinking, ugly goblins anywhere, but this was the first time he had seen them around here. The small, nasty fairies had brown, squashed faces. Some wore rags while others went naked, and it was never good news when they gathered in a group like this. They were members of the Unseelie Court, as was Kelpie, but as he was a fairy who took the form of a magnificent horse, they were no better than maggots in his eyes. While hobgoblins and brownies were similar in appearance, the latter was a much more welcome sight.

Kelpie watched them closely, ready to throttle them the moment they stepped into his territory.

"We'd better hurry up with the search. We don't want to get a scolding!"

Search? For what?

Just then, there was a big splash—something had fallen into the lake. It was a human child, and it was struggling to stay afloat.

"There!"

"The lake!"

Kelpie was damned if he was going to let a group of filthy goblins into his waters. Waves rippling behind him, he pushed the drowning boy onto the shore. He watched as the goblins dragged

the child away, punching and kicking him to curb his resistance. Perhaps it would have been kinder for Kelpie to eat him rather than let him be taken by such odious creatures. Unfortunately he was already covered in their fingermarks.

"Help me…" A small parcel dropped from the wailing boy's clothes. Something sparkly came loose from it and sank beneath the water.

Kelpie dove after it and picked it up. "A diamond?"

Back on the surface, he spotted a single man approaching the boy, who was still crying out for his life. On closer inspection, he couldn't have been much older than the boy himself. There was a horrifically cruel smile on his face. Surmising he was the goblins' master, Kelpie kept watching.

"Who sent you, young man?" As gentle as the older boy's question sounded, there was an undeniable threat in his tone.

"I… I don't…"

"Feign ignorance and there will be consequences. I trust this was the man who gave you that package and told you to deliver it somewhere?" He threw something at the boy. It looked like a human head. The boy froze, unable even to scream. "He was a friend of Lord Barkston's. That means it was his lordship who was trying to hide the diamond behind my back?"

"Diamond?" the boy stuttered. "I thought it was…a glass ornament…"

The young man let out an exasperated sigh. "I see as a mere lackey to his lordship, you were taken advantage of. Poor thing! Of course a boy as young as yourself would believe it to be nothing but a glass ornament! Consequently, you wouldn't try to make off with it. Naturally, I would be less likely to suspect a child as well." He turned to the goblins and ordered them to search the boy.

"He hasn't got anything, Master!" one of them said.

"Where did you hide the diamond?" the goblins' master asked at once. "Or have you passed it on to someone else already? If you value your life, you'll tell me anything you can." He kicked the boy as hard as he could.

The boy's response came through a series of choked breaths.

"Charing Cross station? And who do you suppose I shall meet there?" Shaking his head slightly, the blond turned around.

A black shaggy beast appeared beside him. "Whoever it is, I

doubt they'll be turning up now. They'll be too wary."

A black dog?! Kelpie watched as it immediately took on the form of a skinny child. There were any number of fairies that could shape-shift into a canine. Though usually all referred to as fairy dogs, their natures differed significantly. Many of these were nasty creatures that inspired fear in humans. And yet this man commanded one as well as his goblins.

"His lordship might well be hiding nearby. I suppose I ought to have the goblins look for him."

"What should I do?" asked the newcomer.

The blond considered the question. "It might be amusing to witness the earl floundering for a spell longer."

The earl? Kelpie shrugged it off. This country was full of earls.

"This boy looks to be around the same age as your human form, and he has the right stature. Why don't we burn his face, Jimmy? We shall send it to them and claim that it is your corpse."

"A fine idea, but it would leave me with no part to play."

"We cannot be too conspicuous in our approach lest the girl sees you for what you really are. Fortunately, they seem convinced you are still on their side for the moment."

The black dog's human face was devoid of color. It was as though he really were dead. He smirked. "She won't suspect a thing. I was nervous when I encountered her, but it transpired that invoking her anger is enough to distract her completely. She is no threat to us."

"In that case, I ask that you be Jimmy for a little longer. Ask one of the earl's men to 'rescue' you. I am sure he currently has his guard up, which might make it a fine opportunity to drive a wedge between him and his underlings. No doubt he will search for Lord Barkston too, so what better way to settle things with all our enemies at once than by dragging them into the same twisted labyrinth?"

"Very well. Might I make use of this boy?" When his master nodded, the black dog had some of the goblins carry the child away.

The young man cast his gaze toward the lake. He then went toward its shore, as though it had struck him that the diamond might have fallen into it. "Search the water," he commanded the remaining goblins.

Over my dead body. Kelpie, in the form of a dark horse, rose up to stand on the lake's surface. "Jist try and take a step into my territory. Ah'll trample those goblins and make a meal of ye. Yer brains'll make a guid appetizer."

The blond gasped. "A kelpie?"

The group of goblins ran away screaming.

"What are you doing in a place like this?"

"Ah'm here 'cause I wanna be. Away with ye." Though Kelpie's jet-black glare seemed to give the man pause, he made no move to leave.

"Did that boy happen to drop a stone into the water?"

"Ah was jist wantin' to enjoy the moon. Ye're disturbin' my evening."

"That stone should be of no value to a kelpie. Find it for me, and I shall bring you a delicious young girl every day."

Kelpie was almost tempted by the offer if not for the fact that Lydia would refuse to see him again if she found out about it. "Shut yer mouth. And don't be comin' near my territory again." He dove back into the water with a conspicuous splash.

The man was right. A diamond had the same worth to Kelpie as a pebble on the lakebed. He knew, however, that a large majority of humans were fantastically fond of them. The clear diamond drew the sparkling moonlight from the bubbles around it and reflected it from its countless surfaces. It was around the same size as the black one, so Lydia should appreciate it just the same. She had mentioned something about wanting a diamond, after all. For the first time, Kelpie was able to find a value in this jewel that went far beyond that of a mere rock.

***

Lydia slipped into Tompkins's office while he was out. The butler managed the earl's assets and the income and expenditures of his territories. If Edgar had sold or given the cursed diamond to someone else, there should have been a record of it in this room. Additionally, if he really was frequenting an establishment that specialized in harems, she might find a clue regarding its location.

She looked around. There seemed to be no system of organization at all. It took her far too long to identify where the

desk was due to the mountains of documents on top of it, and she was at a loss.

"Do you need something, Miss Carlton?" She spun around to find Raven standing behind her. "Mr. Tompkins won't be back until the afternoon. If it is an urgent matter, I might be able to assist."

As flustered as she was, she managed to come up with an excuse. "Oh, it isn't… Yes, you see, I requested a certain document from him. A petition from one of the territories begging permission for the construction of a road for the fairies…"

"When did you make this request?"

"Three days ago, by my count."

Raven approached the desk and pulled out a single sheet of paper. "Here you are." It was marked with the current date and Edgar's signature already.

"Thank you. I am surprised you were able to find it amongst all this clutter."

"This is not clutter. This is how Mr. Tompkins is able to work at his best."

"Is that right? Still, to think you are able to navigate it just as well…"

"I am currently under his mentorship."

"You are going to be a butler, Raven?"

"I shall study and become anything that might be of use to his lordship."

For much of his life, Raven had been taught only to kill whoever was in front of him. Lydia had only known him since he had become Edgar's servant, but he must only have learned his more peaceful skills after meeting the earl. Perhaps he felt his further education necessary because one day his master would settle the score with the Prince and his fighting abilities would no longer be called upon. He was working hard now so that he could take delight in the moment that Edgar finally vanquished their enemy. In that way, perhaps he had found freedom from their former captor in a way his master had yet to do.

"I see. Keep at it."

As usual, Raven's expression didn't appear to change, but Lydia could swear she sensed him smile a little.

When he opened the door for her, she made no move to leave. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

It would be unnatural for her to stay in Tompkins's office any longer, but she desperately wanted the answers to her questions. She hesitated before finally asking, "Where is Edgar's harem, Raven?"

The boy fell silent. Though she couldn't see it on his face, she was certain her question had troubled him. As she recalled, he was fully under the impression that she and Edgar were engaged. That meant he valued her highly, if not as much as his true master. Did that mean he couldn't dismiss her question? Recognizing it might be unfair of her, Lydia pushed forward.

"There's an establishment he frequents, isn't there?"

Was Raven worried that questioning her motives might be impudent?

"Madame Eve's Palace at Charing Cross." He vanished as soon as he gave his answer, as though worried she might ask more questions.

One hour later, Lydia was standing outside Madame Eve's Palace. Its magnificent gates and architecture gave it the same air as a nobleman's estate. It was still the afternoon, which went some way to explaining why no one was entering or leaving the building. Lydia followed the wall in search of its back entrance.

"You aren't planning on entering from the front, my lady?" asked the coblynau.

She had brought the fairy with her. She couldn't knowingly allow anyone to claim ownership over the cursed diamond. Edgar may not have been worried, but at this rate, it was going to cause someone irreversible harm. Her intention was for the coblynau to weaken the curse. She was *not* planning to pick a quarrel with Edgar's mistress. The young lady was in danger, and Lydia was confident she would listen to reason.

I wonder if she is especially beautiful...

Why was it that such thoughts seemed to threaten her motivation?

"You *do* know that it takes more than asking nicely to enter such an establishment, don't you?" Nico said. As patronizing as his tone was, he was right. That was why Lydia had borrowed a uniform from one of Edgar's maids.

There was little variation in such uniforms between estates and

establishments. Although she was unfamiliar with the workings of a place like this, she was confident it would hire a lot of servants and that posing as a maid would allow her to sneak in.

"Your ladyship is to be married to the *earl*! To think that you would use the servants' entrance!" the coblynau exclaimed.

"What is your business here, anyway?" Nico asked.

"Could you both be quiet? As for you," she turned to the coblynau, "you must *not* mention anything about the engagement to the lady I am about to speak to."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

Hopefully, the fae steward would be able to restore the diamond to its original, pure form. As a fairy doctor, she couldn't let the creature's timely appearance go to waste.

She peered around the building at the back entrance, swiftly putting on her apron and white cap. Fortunately, there was a maid just leaving who turned the corner toward the street. Lydia took the chance to slip through the door. The inside of the building was quiet. Now and then she would pass by another maid, but they all seemed to be in too much of a hurry to pay her any attention.

"I sense the gemstone's energy, my lady. This way." The coblynau walked ahead of her. She would have expected nothing less from a fairy so proficient in locating minerals beneath rock.

They passed through a door at the end of the corridor to find they had stepped into another world completely. A large chandelier blinded them from the ceiling, and marble statues lined the walls. They had come out into an atrium encircled by a spiral staircase. The vibrant mosaic tiles on the floor disrupted the hall's symmetry, and Lydia felt very much as though she had stumbled into a dream. As opulent as it was, it was highly artificial, with its ornaments chosen as if to confuse all five senses.

"What a lurid place." Nico had kept himself invisible when they entered the building but appeared now, seemingly just to offer his opinion. He staggered away on his hind paws, his nose twitching.

"Nico? Where are you going?"

"There is a sublime scent coming from this direction."

"Honestly! Is staying with me for five minutes too much to ask?"

"This way, my lady."

Leaving Nico behind, Lydia went after the coblynau. They

passed several doors before it halted in front of one.

"Is this it?" She pushed the door open gently. The room was brightly adorned with decorations of gold and silver. Sensing it was empty, she went on through. When she spotted a silhouette beyond a thin, translucent curtain, however, she almost darted away again. But whoever it was made no shout or mention of her entrance. She had heard that servants could be near invisible to aristocrats, so for the time being she decided to keep an eye on the shadow. It appeared to be that of a woman on a sofa, leaning against the armrest. She was peering into the birdcage next to her, which held a tiny bird figurine made of gold.

Blonde hair? It was the first thought that struck Lydia. She would have expected a woman from a pagan nation to have dark hair. From here, she couldn't make out any of the silhouette's facial features in great detail.

Lydia drew slightly closer as she feigned polishing a silver lion statue. Meanwhile, the coblynau made a beeline for the curtain before she had time to stop it. Most people wouldn't be able to see it, but the curtain swayed dramatically as the fairy ducked beneath the material. And that was before it clambered right up onto the woman's shoulder and started shouting.

"It's the cursed diamond, my lady! I've found it!"

Lydia could see the coblynau tugging at the woman's necklace. She hurried over at once.

"Stop that immediately! It is most uncouth!"

"I'll tell you what is uncouth! For the earl to abandon his future wife, preferring instead the company of this mockery of a noblewoman as his—"

Lydia grabbed the coblynau and placed a hand over its mouth. "I'm awfully sorry! This fairy is rather saucy! Oh, I am not suspicious, I just..." Only then did she realize that the woman hadn't moved a muscle. "A wax figure?" It was so well-made that she had to double-check by making sure it wasn't blinking. "Is she a part of Edgar's harem? How peculiar..."

It was beautiful waxwork. She had golden hair and blue eyes, but her clothing seemed exotic and reminded Lydia of an illustration she had seen from *The Arabian Nights*. Gold beads and tiny gemstones were woven into the thin fabric of her attire, glittering in the lamplight.

“Just look at this place and the dress that she wears! The earl cannot get away with treating his mistress like this while he neglects his bride! I must warn him not to have anything else to do with this woman!”

Lydia ignored the coblynau in favor of her own thoughts. The diamond’s curse likely wouldn’t have any power over its owner, if that owner was made of wax. In turn, Edgar was the owner of this wax figure, which was why there still seemed to be vestiges of the curse affecting him. Either way, it was difficult to imagine him preparing this figure for the sole purpose of distancing himself from the diamond’s ill effects. Could this be an image of his ideal woman?

Lydia studied the figure intently. Even the bold shimmer of the sizable black diamond seemed to cower at its wearer’s elegance. When Lydia first saw the gem, she had imagined there would be someone out there whom it would suit very much. When it came to this figure, however, it was as though the diamond had been made specially for it. She somehow had the sense that the diamond was satisfied where it was.

Edgar’s interest in me truly is as shallow as I suspected.

The figure was beautiful enough to conjure such a sentiment in Lydia’s mind. It wasn’t human; it had no desires and it couldn’t hurt anyone. Would that not make it perfectly suited to curing Edgar of his solitude? It wouldn’t try and escape if he embraced it. Not like her.

“This diamond is the Nightmare, isn’t it, my lady?”

“Do you know of it?”

“My grandfather told me about it. Long ago, the Blue Knight Earl asked him to carry out some work on His Majesty’s diamond. Gems like these require such care, else they attract evil and curses may build up within them. I believe there was another large diamond, a white one: Daydream.”

Could this diamond have belonged to the royal family?

“I see. Well, would you be able to restore it?” she asked.

“I would have to call on the assistance of a great number of my associates. My grandfather had to gather up the entire family to take it to the palace.”

Coblynau were Welsh fairies; it would take some time for this one’s companions to travel to London. At the same time, Lydia

could not simply sit back and do nothing.

"Would you inform them for me?"

"In the meantime, my lady, Bow should be able to defend against the curse's power. I would therefore recommend that your ladyship stays by the earl's side as much as possible."

"You mean the moonstone?"

Be that as it may, it wasn't as though she could spend every waking moment with Edgar.

Just then, she picked up on the sound of voices drawing closer. The doorknob turned. Someone was coming in. As Lydia panicked, her apron caught on a sculpture. She almost tripped but managed to regain her balance by leaning against the mirror on the wall—only for it to move. She fell into the small room behind it just as the door opened. The mirror moved back into its original position automatically. The back was made of a clear glass that allowed a perfect view through to the other side. Somehow, Lydia had stumbled into a secret room, one whose purposes could only include eavesdropping and collusion. With bated breath, she peered through the window to see Edgar and Raven.

"What do you mean Lord Barkston is missing?"

"It is highly likely, my lord. Ulysses has been searching high and low for him."

"So his lordship wasn't successful…"

"I am afraid so. His hiding from Ulysses is likely a result of failing to secure the Daydream."

The Daydream… The other diamond the coblynau mentioned. Lydia was surprised to hear them refer to Ulysses. Perhaps he was also seeking the black diamond.

"I wonder if that means the Daydream has fallen into Ulysses's hands."

"I cannot say, my lord."

Edgar closed his eyes and fell into thought. "We still have the black diamond."

What in Heaven's name is he scheming now?

"I would very much like to find Lord Barkston before Ulysses does. Our information gives us the advantage. Only we know about the existence of his lordship's harem: that is, his blind obsession with one particular woman."

"You expect his lordship to make an appearance here sooner or

later."

"Yes, to beg Jean to rescue him. Please keep a very close eye out." Edgar turned his gaze to the chintz curtain. Jean must have been the name of the wax figure.

Raven bowed and left, leaving the earl to sit down on an ebony chair. He propped his chin up on one hand and appeared to be thinking deeply.

"You really ought to have a stern word with him, my lady, especially now you even know *where* he is meeting his lover!"

Unfortunately, it seems I have more pressing matters to worry about.

"You must have him put an end to this relationship *before* you marry, lest it rears its ugly head later!"

"Keep your voice down! He'll hear you."

Edgar was already looking at the mirror. A moment later, the door opened before she even had time to think of escaping. She turned to run deeper into the room, only for her arm to be grabbed from behind.

"What are you doing here? Explain yourself."

If she admitted to donning a maid's uniform just to sneak into this establishment, he would immediately conclude that she was jealous of his mistress. Keeping her face hidden, she struggled against him to try and escape. As it happened, it was foolish to think he would let her go if she just resisted. If he had known it was her, he might have toyed with her a little. Now, however, he was dealing with a woman he believed to be an enemy spy. When she tried to shake him off, he twisted her arm so fiercely she feared it would snap. His other arm darted around her and grabbed her chin. Lydia's body had never felt as brittle as it did in that moment. It would only take a touch more force from Edgar for her arm and neck to snap.

She let out a pained cry. "Unhand me! It *hurts*!"

He must have recognized her voice, because he immediately let go of her in shock. She slumped to the floor.

"Lydia? What are you doing here?"

The pain and humiliation of his grasp had tears streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry, I never thought for a moment that it was you." Edgar hesitated. "Are you all right?"

“Of course I’m not all right! I cannot *believe* you would treat a woman so violently, you scoundrel!” She had just learned that, when it came to his enemies, there was no difference between man and woman. Fear washed over her. It didn’t help that her mind was a tangled mess of harems and waxworks and royal diamonds. Add to that the physical pain he had caused her, and she had never trusted him less.

While he may have been treating her kindly now that he considered her his fiancée, she was suddenly reminded that he had only made contact with her in the first place to use her. She had sympathized with him then, understanding that he had grown cruel as a means for survival and that he wasn’t a bad person at heart. That was why she had decided to use her expertise as a fairy doctor to help him. But it seemed no matter how much time passed, she would never be able to understand who he *truly* was.

He offered his hand. “Can you stand?”

Lydia ignored it and got to her feet by herself. “What is the purpose of that wax figure? You are aware of the rumors, aren’t you? That you possess a harem in which you are sheltering a heathen lady of high status? Do you consider that waxwork one of your lovers?”

“You misunderstand, Lydia.”

“She’s gorgeous. She never says a word against you, and she wears that diamond so naturally. She is perfect, in fact. Well, I am delighted for you. Society might think it strange, but nothing would suit a philanderer like you better than a harem of wax figures. You could even add to it without any of them getting vexed or hurt.” The pain in her arm had long since faded, but for some reason, she was struggling to stem her tears. She rubbed her eyes in an attempt to hide them. “And yet you still *insist* that I marry you? You *do* know that I am not made of wax, don’t you? Did you even stop to think that I might be upset by…”

Hold on a minute. Who says I ought to be upset? Just because he keeps a wax figure in a beautiful secret room as a make-believe lover?

When she realized there was her, in her plain maid’s uniform, and the wax figure in its elegant apparel, she only started feeling more wretched. And then there was Edgar and the violent way he had treated her. Was *that* why she was upset?

“That isn’t… That isn’t to say I came here to confirm those

rumors! I simply wanted to do something about that cursed diamond!"

"Let us discuss things calmly, Lydia."

"I am perfectly calm! Have you forgotten why you employed me? Ulysses has started plotting something again, yet you haven't said a single word to me! Do you think you can outmaneuver him without the help of a fairy doctor? Or is it due to my lack of experience? If that is the case, then I ask that you stop trying to use any means necessary just to keep me by your side!" She spun around and dashed away.

The fact that Edgar made no move to stop her only irritated her further. She knew she ought to stay with him or at least entrust him with the ring to protect him from the curse. However, her temper was such that she couldn't bring herself to worry about his safety.

Nico appeared next to her as she hurried into the hall. "This place is completely mad, Lydia! It's full of dolls! To think that the gentlemen in London play with dollies! I saw one, who by all rights looked perfectly respectable, trying to seduce a lifeless figure in that room over there. Then, in another room I saw one serving tea and cakes, despite his company being unable to eat! Fortunately I was there—I was invisible, of course—to ensure that no food would go to waste."

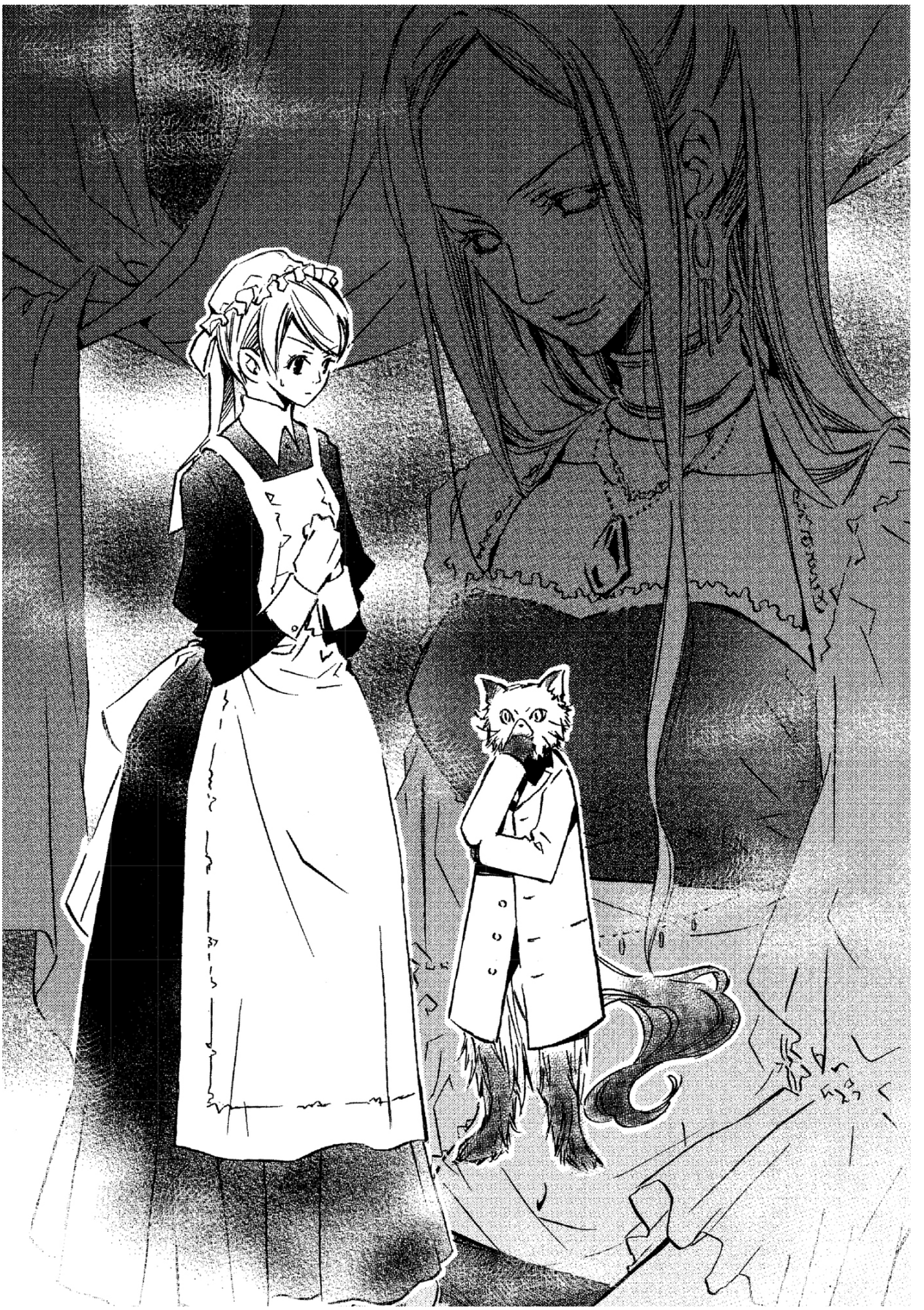
Lydia could only imagine how much of a fright that would have given the gentleman in question.

"Does this mean the earl engages in such disturbing hobbies himself?"

Now that she was a little calmer, Lydia could recall Edgar's conversation with Raven. Somehow, it seemed his business here differed to that of the other patrons. The wax figure in his room was called Jean, and it seemed that Edgar had prepared her to lure in a certain lord.

Who is "Jean," exactly?

Could the wax woman have been modeled after a real person?



“I could hear goblins chattering underground too. It sounded like they were digging holes. They might just be passing through, but whoever built this place chose an awful spot to do it. Oi, Lydia, are you crying?”

Could Edgar’s true lover—the one who looked just like his waxwork—be out there somewhere? The thought made her even angrier. If that was the case, why on earth would he waste his time trying to flirt with *her*?

I hope that cursed diamond teaches him a real lesson!

“I am *not* crying. I fell earlier, and it *hurt* for goodness’ sake!” Pulling off her apron and cap, Lydia dashed out through the servants’ entrance.

“Now, I advise you to refrain from making excuses when your fidelity comes into question.” The invisible fairy had taken a feather from the wax figure’s veil and was waving it around in front of Edgar to show its position.

“Forgive me, but to whom am I speaking?”

“The coblynau.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.” The earl had never expected Lydia to disguise herself as a maid and sneak in here. He was still standing dumbstruck in the doorway.

“A sincere apology would be the best course of action.”

“Did you give that same advice to any of the Blue Knight Earls of old?”

“I did, I did! He *knew* how his wife would react if she found out, and yet he did it anyway! The mind boggles!”

It sounded like Edgar’s adopted ancestors had the same penchant for choosing brides with short tempers.

“If I may, did Lydia come here seeking the cursed diamond? Or was she concerned about my faithfulness?” Supposing the latter, perhaps he could get his hopes up.

“It was the diamond. That is not to say that she would turn a blind eye to your transgression! Unless, that is, yours is one of those passionless engagements one hears of here and there.”

The coblynau’s last comment hit a little too close to home. Lydia’s kindness toward Edgar was born of her personality. It came from her compassionate heart and her inability to abandon those in need. He wasn’t sure that her feelings had evolved much

beyond that, although occasionally he had the sense that they had. Unfortunately, it seemed he only ever hurt her and made her cry. He had thought that establishing their engagement would have been easy. Lydia had shown no indication that it had soured her opinion of him, so he had been confident that he would see it through one way or another. The matter of the wax figure could be settled with a thorough explanation. Having said that, her flight had both shocked and puzzled him. The sensation of Lydia's frail bones yielding to him had been stuck at the forefront of his mind, pushing him into a pit of self-loathing that had left him unable to pursue her.

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"My, whatever have you done to yourself, Miss Carlton?" Masefield frowned at the thick layer of bandage wrapped around Lydia's left ring finger.

"It is the result of carelessness, but it is nothing too serious." Since Edgar wouldn't remove the ring, there had been nothing else for it. At least she would be able to dodge suspicion for the time being.

"Oh dear. You didn't break the bone, did you? And on your ring finger too… I do hope it doesn't swell too much, else you won't be able to wear your engagement ring."

"It isn't swollen," Lydia assured her hurriedly. "I do not intend to accept Lord Ashenbert's proposal in any case."

She and her father had been invited to the Masefield estate today. The duke's cousin was a former mentor to Professor Carlton and was visiting London from Cambridge. He was throwing a small gathering, and since Lydia had come straight from Edgar's estate, her father had made it here before her.

"I am so glad you were able to come, Miss Carlton. When academics gather like this, the conversation immediately takes on a technical nature. Personally, I find it rather uninspiring."

That would explain why Lydia had first been shown to the duchess's reception room. The older woman had been reading as she waited, and presently she closed the book in her hands. She led Lydia to the saloon and, as they walked, a smile of sudden realization rose to her lips.

“You are still reluctant to marry his lordship, yes?” She laughed. “It seems somewhat of a shame that I am the only one who sees how he flounders.”

“Ma’am—”

“I shan’t tell a soul, so don’t you fret. But I wonder whether you might permit me a question.” The duchess lowered her voice to a jovial whisper. “What is it about his lordship that displeases you, exactly?”

“I wish to marry a man who is capable of devoting all his love to a single woman.”

“I understand. I can see how that would prove difficult for him.”

“Do you suppose Lord Ashenbert proposed to me in jest? I would very much like to hear your perspective, ma’am.”

“I do not believe so, else he would not have called on my assistance.”

Lydia couldn’t argue with that. “I am beside myself trying to convince him to give up on marrying me.”

“I shouldn’t think it would be as difficult as all that. I cannot see him pursuing the engagement once you find someone you love sincerely.”

That sounds quite difficult to me.

“On the contrary,” Lydia replied, “I fear he will attempt to cause trouble for such a man instead. His lordship may well scheme some shenanigans to chase my suitor away from me.”

The duchess laughed like she thought Lydia was joking; she was unaware of Edgar’s true nature. Despite his noble birth, he was more than a pampered young man. He would go to any contemptible lengths if he deemed it necessary. It was that volatile side to him that prevented Lydia from rejecting him outright, and while she knew that, she was pointedly ignoring it. From time to time, she even sympathized with him, and had convinced herself that his personality was, at least, not unpleasant. She wondered now if she was wrong. Regardless, she had the sense that it would all be over the moment she let him have his way.

There were three men sitting around the saloon table, and they were already deep in conversation. Lydia greeted the duke and his cousin, who sat next to him.

“You are Carlton’s daughter? My, haven’t you grown!”

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Professor Browning.”

“One ought not to express surprise at how a young lady has grown, but rather at how *beautiful* she has become,” the tall, broad-shouldered duke interjected.

A friendly grin appeared on the professor’s round face. “Quite so. Well, Miss Carlton, I am happy to say that you do not resemble your father in the slightest.”

“Hear, hear,” her father said.

Personally, Lydia was jealous of children who resembled their parents. She resembled neither, and had spent much of her life accused of being a changeling.

“Why, I think you are rather similar,” the duchess said.

“Is that so, madame?” Lydia’s father asked.

“How do I put this? You both have the same air about you.” She smiled gently.

“Mind you do not disturb Miss Carlton,” Browning said. “I am sure that my daughter would be far from pleased if someone were to compare her to me, for example.”

“Thank you, Professor Browning, but I am very pleased to hear it.” For some reason, her response elicited hearty laughter from everyone present.

“Now, what were you speaking about before we interrupted you?” asked the duchess.

“Naturally, madame, we were discussing minerals,” Carlton replied.

“That sounds like a rather dense subject.”

“Then why not move our discussion to jewels, now that there are ladies present?”

“What kind of jewels?” the duchess asked.

“We are graced by the presence of two mineralogists,” the duke said. “I am sure they would be happy to answer your questions on any type of jewel.”

“What gemstones do you like, Miss Carlton?” The duchess turned to her.

Lydia said the first thing that came to mind. “I would like to know more about diamonds.” Perhaps these experts would know something about the brother diamonds that belonged to the royal family.

“Ah.” The duke chuckled. “Nothing quite holds a woman’s

attention like a beautiful diamond."

"Miss Carlton, if you have received a diamond from a potential suitor, I would be happy to judge whether it is genuine or not. I daresay you would find it difficult to ask for your father's assistance in that regard," Browning teased.

Noticing her father's anxious glance, Lydia grew flustered. "Oh, that isn't where my interest lies! I have heard of two diamonds, the Nightmare and the Daydream, which belonged to the royal family. They have me curious."

The guests exchanged looks with one another.

"Where did you hear about those, Lydia?" her father asked.

"Oh, at some point when I had some business regarding fairies."

"Those are the legendary pear-shaped diamonds, if I'm not mistaken," said the duke. "I believe there is a folktale that states he who has both the black and white diamonds in his possession gains the potential to become a magnificent king."

Carlton nodded. "It is unclear for how long the royal family had them, but it is said that they obtained each from a separate lord. King James VI of the Stuarts was said to have cut both diamonds into the same shape when he became King of England as James I. I suppose it was a symbol to mark his newfound sovereignty over both Scotland and England."

"Does that mean, father, that King James created the legend surrounding the diamonds when he ascended his second throne?"

"Diamonds do not require a human touch to become the stuff of legends, madame. They are the queens of all gems, so naturally, the most valuable, rarest, and sizable among them will fall into the hands of powerful rulers as the ages pass. Legends form by themselves as the diamonds' power is credited for their owner's successes and failures."

"The royal family is no longer in possession of the brother diamonds, is it?"

One of them was affixed to the wax figure in Edgar's harem, and Raven had said that the other was likely in Ulysses's hands.

"I can only surmise that they were lost during the tumultuous Revolution," the duke said.

"The most convincing theory is that James II took them with him when he fled to France," Browning added.

“Wasn’t there an article in the papers some years ago stating that one of them had been found?” Carlton asked. “It was discovered in Rome, in a hideout belonging to a group of thieves who got themselves caught.”

“That was the Daydream,” the duke said. “But not long after that, it was stolen once again.”

“Is that right?”

Browning nodded. “The rumors were abundant. Some claimed Her Majesty’s dignity had been damaged, while others remained unconvinced that it was even the Daydream itself.”

“I remember, there was a duke whose family came under suspicion at the time. All because of a mere diamond!” the duchess commented.

The scholars looked at her in surprise, inviting her to elaborate.

“You see, the rumors went that the king had taken the diamonds with him to act as proof of his bloodline’s sovereignty when he or his successors returned to England.”

“In other words, if someone were to appear today with both diamonds in hand, he may claim to be descended from James II and contest the royal family for the right to the throne,” Browning said.

“But James II has no direct descendants anymore,” the duke pointed out.

“Yes, which is why it all amounts to hearsay,” the duchess said.

“So the duke in question is suspected to have stolen the diamond in a conspiracy against the royal family?” Lydia asked. The mention of a dukedom had unnerved her.

“Yes,” the duchess replied. “He just so happened to be in Rome and agreed to take the diamond back to Britain. Sylvanford, his name was.”

Lydia swallowed upon hearing the familiar name. She had only recently learned that the Prince had conspired to murder Edgar’s entire family. The earl, too, was believed to be dead and had lost his name and heritage. Before the tragedy, he had been the eldest child of the House of Sylvanford.

“The diamond was stolen during the duke’s return journey, and the extent of his responsibility for the theft was called into question.”

“While he may have had a duty to protect the diamond, that

doesn’t equate to him having stolen it,” Lydia said.

“I quite agree. However, there was a total lack of evidence, which no doubt led many to believe it was an inside job. In truth, the duke was never charged with anything, and the majority of rumors were centered around his perceived carelessness. Some time later, the duke’s manor house was burned to the ground, with both him and his family passing in the incident. While it may have been a simple accident, the rumors of treason and conspiracy persisted amongst the aristocracy. The only thing that is known for certain is that the duke met a tragic end.”

Lydia let out a small sigh, balling the hands that rested on her lap into fists. Edgar was currently searching for the white diamond that had vanished around the same time. In all likelihood, that meant the Prince was responsible for the gemstone’s disappearance too. If he had sought the Daydream all those years ago, he was probably after the Nightmare as well. Lydia wondered if Edgar was currently engaged in a challenge with the man who had framed his father. If he could trap the man in return, he might be able to retrieve the stolen diamond. But if that was the case, where did the gorgeous wax figure fit into his machinations?

An Inch between Feelings

When they left the party that evening, Lydia told her father that she had forgotten something at Edgar's estate and boarded a cab by herself. However, she was heading not for the earl's mansion, but for Paul's abode. The painter had recently moved into a new boarding house.

When she arrived, she was greeted by an elderly housekeeper, who told her that he rented the corner room on the second floor. Though Lydia knocked after reaching his room, there was no response.

The housekeeper said he was in. No doubt he is so engrossed in his art that he hasn't heard me. She kept knocking.

Eventually, Paul emerged, wiping the paint from his hands with a sponge. He raised his eyebrows in surprise when he saw her. "Miss Carlton? To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"There is something I wish to discuss with you. Might I be allowed inside?"

"I beg your pardon?" He hesitated. "I live alone, you understand. And for a young woman such as yourself to be alone with a man, well…"

"Are you suggesting that to be alone with you would put me in danger?"

"Perish the thought!" Paul stuttered, smiling sheepishly and scratching the back of his head.

As guilty as she felt for pushing it, Lydia could not leave her questions unasked, and they were questions that ought to be shielded from outside ears. Besides, Paul was the last person who would take advantage of her.

"Forgive me." She dodged past him and into his room. "Now, please tell me what Edgar is planning this time. You know, do you not?"

Paul was gazing at the door, clearly wondering whether he ought to leave it open. Eventually, he seemed to decide that this was a discussion best held in private and closed it quietly. "I suggest you ask his lordship directly."

“I shan’t be satisfied with an answer like that. Besides, I am presently disinclined to speak with him.”

“What has he done now?”

“Ulysses is scheming something, yes? He is a man capable of controlling fairy magic. Edgar employed me as his fairy doctor. One would think this is just the sort of matter I ought to have a say in.”

“Ulysses has not *done* anything as of yet. Should the time come that he requires your skills, I am confident that his lordship will confide in you. It is my understanding that he wishes to keep you out of harm’s way if he can help it.”

Why on earth does everyone *seem to side with Edgar?* Having said that, Lydia had come here precisely because she expected Paul to sympathize more with her than Raven or Ermine would, as their loyalties lay firmly with Edgar. But the matter of her safety wasn’t enough of a reason to convince her that the earl was in the right.

“I visited the establishment where Edgar keeps his harem.”

Paul looked visibly shocked.

“I found the wax figure wearing the black diamond. Actually, no, the figure isn’t important. What *is* important is that the Prince is seeking both that diamond and the white one that is paired with it. Am I right?”

The painter was growing noticeably more flustered.

“Several years ago, the white diamond was discovered in Rome. It was stolen on its return to the United Kingdom, and Edgar’s father came under suspicion. And now, Edgar is attempting to trap the real thief, whose alliance lies with the Prince, correct? Said thief is a lord and a regular patron at the establishment.”

Paul sighed. Her impressive knowledge of the situation left him resigned to speaking. “Everything you say is correct. When the diamond was stolen, the marquess, Lord Barkston, was part of a delegation that went to Rome under the leadership of his lordship’s father. His lordship had already tempted Lord Barkston with the black diamond, hoping that he might thereby discover the location of its brother, which he presumes the marquess is keeping safe on behalf of the Prince. The aim was for Lord Barkston to see this as his opportunity to outwit the Prince and obtain both diamonds for himself.”

“But Ulysses foiled the plan?”

“By holding Master Jimmy hostage.”

“Really?!”

“Lord Ashenbert is unable to make any decisive moves anymore. He has instead resigned himself to keeping an eye on his adversaries whilst carefully planning what to do next.”

It was no wonder Edgar was trying to keep Lydia away from all of this.

“I have just one more question,” she said. “Who is Jean? What is she to Edgar?”

“Jean? Ah, I believe she was one of his lordship’s companions from long ago. She gave her life to protect the black diamond.”

“Her life?” Lydia hesitated. “Were they lovers?” She could only imagine how beseechingly she was looking up at Paul in that moment, for the painter made a hurried, dismissive motion with his hands.

“No, I have every confidence that it was nothing of the sort. She was Black, you see, and besides, they were too young.”

Black? Lydia frowned. That meant the wax figure was another woman entirely.

“I must be confusing her with somebody else,” she said.

After a pause, Paul’s eyes lit up. “Ah, yes, there was another Jean, wasn’t there?”

“Does Edgar have two Jeans who are precious to him?”

“The woman you are thinking of is Jean-Mary. The young girl asked his lordship to give her a name that he held dear. That is how they came to share the same name.”

“A name he held dear? So Jean-Mary was his lover?”

“Miss Carlton, there is nothing for you to—”

“I don’t understand.” Lydia was utterly confused. She hated herself for how little she knew about Edgar. She had wanted to know who “Jean” was, only to find out that there were *two*, and that both were important to him. Before she knew it, she was taking her emotions out on Paul. “Why hasn’t Edgar told me about any of this?”

“As I said, it is out of concern for you.”

“Claptrap! No doubt he intends to use me the moment it becomes convenient to do so. When not, he would rather keep his silence to prevent me from interfering.”

“That isn’t true.”

“He has yet to heed any of my numerous warnings! It is far too dangerous for him to maintain possession of that cursed diamond, regardless of how it may assist in his revenge. Why on earth does Edgar feel the need for a fairy doctor when he doesn’t listen to me anyway?”

“There is nothing to be done about the diamond. It won’t be long before it fulfills its purpose, in any case.”

“There is no guarantee that disaster won’t befall him in the meantime.” Though she knew it would be Edgar’s own fault, she couldn’t deny the concern she felt. The earl never showed any fear of dying. He had no feelings for Lydia either and would continue to leap into danger regardless of her concerns. But as much as she wanted to help him, her anger meant she was prone to acting out of selfishness. She was quick to become emotional, which had resulted in her forgetting the coblynau’s warning and leaving Edgar by himself. Her moonstone ring had the power to protect him from the curse, and yet she had abandoned him.

Lydia was hit by a sudden wave of anxiety. What if he was in trouble right this very second? She jumped to her feet, only to trip and stumble on one of the paint boxes that were scattered around the floor. Paul grabbed the arm that she had flung out to keep her balance.

“Are you all right?”

She caught from him the soft scent of turpentine. *He doesn’t smell like Edgar at all…*

That was to be expected, as Paul did not spend his time surrounded by noblewomen who doused themselves in perfume. As for her father, who spent his time breaking rocks, he often smelled of mineral dust and chemicals. If a man’s true nature could be ascertained by scent alone, then Edgar was rotten indeed. And yet, sometimes he smelled of nothing but his freshly washed shirt; he spent enough time encroaching on her space that she couldn’t help but notice. But *why* did he seem so keen on being that close to her?

“I lack any sort of charm in the slightest, wouldn’t you agree?” she asked. Whenever she got this close to Edgar, she invariably glared at him.

“I’m sorry? Oh, well, I wouldn’t say that…”

“Please spare no thought for my feelings. Master Jimmy

certainly didn't."

"Miss Carlton, you ought to know that the remark I made to Master Jimmy was not made out of pure politeness."

"How anyone could find me charming is beyond me. I am far too stubborn and quick to give voice to thoughts that would be better left unspoken. I concede that I am far from beautiful, but that I may have the slight chance to be considered charming if only I were to smile and keep my mouth shut. It is precisely because I am incapable of that that I started to try and prioritize what I *am* capable of. But I must wonder whether Edgar finds my concern and my endeavoring to do what is right a nuisance! If he doesn't require my skill as a fairy doctor, then why in heaven's name is he so obsessed with the idea of marrying me?! Does it amuse him to parade me around as his fiancée? Isn't that rather cruel, considering he isn't even in love with me? And yet he expects me to drop my guard and develop feelings for him?!"

Paul looked utterly bewildered. Lydia made no move to shake off his supporting arm as she went on.

"You know, you really ought to have locked this door, Firman," came a voice from the hallway.

"My lord!" Paul stuttered, hastily distancing himself from Lydia. "This isn't… You see…"

Lydia, too, skittered back from him, only for her feet to knock against another paint box.

Did Edgar hear all of that? Knowing her face was bright red from pain and embarrassment, she turned it away from the earl at the door.

"Please do not misunderstand, my lord. Miss Carlton tripped, and I was simply helping her to her feet…"

Surely he doesn't have to sound so desperate? It made her feel wretched.

"But of course." Edgar approached Lydia and tried to peer at her face, which only made her retreat farther into the shadows. "You *are* charming, Lydia. Exceptionally so."

"That's neither here nor there!"

"What I mean to say is that there should be nothing preventing you from dropping your guard and developing feelings for me."

"I was speaking out of passion! I meant none of it literally!" Now that she had been driven to the corner of the room, Lydia's only

remaining recourse was to nail her gaze to the floor.

"May we discuss this properly, Lydia?"

"You cannot let a single thing go, can you? My presence can offer you no merit, so I fail to understand why you covet it so. Surely you have a lover whom you truly cherish? Why not ask for *her* hand in marriage instead?"

"I have no lovers but you."

How utterly unconvincing.

"Then who is Jean-Mary?!"

For whatever reason, the sigh that Edgar gave sounded exasperated, which only served to irritate Lydia further. "There are indeed a number of rumors surrounding that establishment which make me reluctant to discuss it with you. Primarily because you seem to see me as a philanderer of sorts and I wouldn't want you to come away with the wrong impression."

"Does my opinion of you especially matter?"

"Of course it does. I apologize for hiding these things from you. I am willing to tell you everything, so—"

"Oh, I wouldn't want to inconvenience you! If you've time to discuss such matters with me, perhaps you've also time to remove this ring?" Lydia pulled the bandages away from her finger and thrust her fist out toward him. "The coblynau told me that keeping this ring in your proximity should protect you from the black diamond's curse. So take it, and we shan't say a word to Kelpie."

She wondered if her refusal to listen to him had angered him. He crossed his arms, looked down at her, and responded with an emphatic, "No. It would be better for the ring to stay on your finger, and you to remain in my proximity."

"Nothing would displease me more!"

"If I have to force you, I will." Until he planted a kiss on her outstretched fist, she had thought he was just being defiant.

Why must he be like this?

He was always perfectly content to take the action that would most ruffle her nerves. Ignoring the fact that her obstinance was partly to blame, she struggled to pin down a reason for her intense irritation as she yanked her hand away from his.

"I vow never to spare a single concern for you ever again!" She raced from the room before he could make good on his promise and force her to stay with him.

***

Lydia hadn't seen the coblynau since she had taken it to investigate Edgar's harem. She suspected it had returned home to call on its companions for help tending to the black diamond. Nico was nowhere to be seen either. She didn't know where he was or what he was doing, but it didn't concern her. It wasn't unusual for him to disappear for periods of time when he found something that amused him.

A drizzle had started to fall over the courtyard where she was collecting hawthorn berries to ward off wicked fairies.

"You are getting wet, Miss Carlton." Raven offered her a shawl.

"Did Edgar send you?"

The boy's silence seemed to confirm her suspicions. She hadn't been subtle about avoiding Edgar all day, and no doubt Raven had been sent to mediate. If the earl thought it would do anything to lift her spirits, he was sorely mistaken.

"Please take it."

"You may tell Edgar that I can do without it. I must ask, Raven, did he lose his temper with you for telling me about Madame Eve's Palace?"

The servant was unable to hide anything from his master. If he had been asked about it, he would have answered honestly.

"His lordship said he would forgive me only if you were to take this shawl."

How conniving can one be? Still, she was no match for Raven's brooding gaze. He looked ready to do whatever it took for her to accept it.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that for my sake," she said.

"It was not as arduous as all that. Occasionally, his lordship will do something absolutely absurd. However, I know that the purpose of such actions is to encourage me to think for myself, lest I spend the rest of my days trapped by the bounds of what I have been taught."

At least he is able to take a favorable view of his master's irrationality. As far as Lydia was concerned, Edgar took such action simply because he was twisted by nature. She didn't express this view out of consideration for Raven's faith and loyalty. A part of her could see that the earl's eccentricity, irresponsibility, and

frivolity were key to cultivating his servant's free will. And so she gave in, taking the shawl and throwing it over her shoulders.

"It's a little nippy today," she said.

"It gets cold very quickly at this time of year. I shall put the fire on." Having delivered the shawl, Raven soon made his excuse to leave. Perhaps he feared she might ask him another inconvenient question.

Deciding she ought to go herself, Lydia crossed the courtyard and passed through the wooden door to go back inside. It was there that she heard Edgar and Ermine speaking through the entrance to the terrace.

"He was Lord Barkston's manservant?"

Lydia hastily hid herself.

"Yes, my lord. He was found collapsed at the servant's entrance of Mr. Slade's club. One of the Scarlet Moon members who had been investigating Lord Barkston's estate recognized the boy as a young manservant to his lordship. However, he was clutching a letter from Master Jimmy begging for help."

"Has it been determined where Master Jimmy is being held?"

"In the vicinity of Whitechapel, my lord, or so it would seem."

"And what of the manservant?"

"His injuries are severe, my lord. He is presently in no fit state to be sharing any information with us."

"One has to wonder whether Master Jimmy is faring similarly." Edgar looked as pained as though he were the one physically hurting. And yet the words that followed sounded exceedingly calm. "It is quite possible that the letter is a trap set by Ulysses. What reason would a manservant have to risk his life rescuing Master Jimmy? To him, the young boy should have been nothing more than a petty thief caught red-handed in his lord's estate."

Lydia thought that Edgar would have felt the need to rescue Jimmy straightaway, but emotion was not enough to force his hand. That was why he sometimes came across as an uncaring liar. What could he *really* be thinking at present?

"Mr. Slade is aware of the risks. He has mobilized the men of Scarlet Moon to rescue the boy regardless," Ermine said.

"Ah, Mr. Slade. The fine leader of the faction that disapproves of my methods." Edgar fell into thought, a conflicted frown on his face. "Now that I think of it, Master Jimmy is an orphan and used

to steal regularly. He had heard of Scarlet Moon's reputation as chivalrous thieves and was eager to offer them his skills. That was what led Mr. Slade to taking him in."

"Yes, I was aware of that too."

Edgar left another pause to think.

"Has something caught your attention, my lord?"

"Nothing that I can put my finger on, but something doesn't feel quite right. Ermine, while I am well aware it might be a dangerous trap, might I ask you to accompany Scarlet Moon?"

Ermine nodded and made to leave, but then paused as though struck by a thought. "Will you discuss this with Miss Carlton?"

"To what end?"

"If this truly is Ulysses's trap, he may be using fairies. Therefore, whatever comes to pass might be beyond our expectations."

"You can now perceive the fairies that ordinary people cannot, can't you, Ermine?"

She frowned, hesitating. "Yes, but I lack any sort of knowledge regarding them."

Edgar paused. "Quite." He eventually seemed to come to the conclusion that he would not consult Lydia at all.

At some point, Lydia must have left the earl's estate, for she now found herself walking the streets of London. The drizzle was still falling from the streaks of gray cloud above, and though it wasn't heavy enough to take much notice of, she soon found that her hair and clothes had grown uncomfortably damp; she had left her shawl behind. She arrived at the park and sat down on a bench.

"What on earth am I doing?"

Edgar had promised yesterday to tell her everything, but she had refused to listen. Now she found herself feeling spurned by him once more. She was certain that he wouldn't consult her. Why else would he have insinuated that Ermine, now a fairy herself, would be able to take her place? As Lydia dropped her gaze, she caught sight of the vexing ring on her finger again. She tugged at it, wishing it would just come off. It didn't.

Lately, it had seemed that nothing she did made any difference at all. At the same time, she still wasn't sure what she wanted from either Edgar or herself.

“What’re ye doin’ there?” A tall figure was peering down from directly above her.

Her head snapped up and she tensed. “Kelpie…”

“That’s quite the sour look ye’ve got.” He cupped her cheeks in both hands and tried to force the corners of her mouth up into a smile.

“What do you think you are doing?!”

“Thought ah’d make ye smile.”

“Unhand me.”

“Look what ah’ve got here.” Kelpie pulled her to her feet by both hands. Whatever he wanted to show her, his eyes were sparkling with amusement. “Ye were after one of these, right?” A smug grin on his face, he dangled a necklace in front of her. There was a gem embedded in it. “It’s a diamond. A *real* one.”

Shocked, Lydia stilled Kelpie’s hand and stared at it. It was a large, pear-shaped diamond without a single imperfection to be seen. It shone clear, sparkling with every color of the rainbow.

“Kelpie!” It was the same size and cut in the same way as the Nightmare. Even the necklace had the same design. Could it really be the Daydream? “Where on earth did you get this?!”

Her sudden burst of energy had him frowning. “Found it.”

“One doesn’t just ‘*find*’ a diamond! Especially not one like this!”

“A bunch of goblins dropped it.”

Goblins: small, nasty fairies. They liked to cause trouble for people, even going so far as to put them in danger, but the ones Kelpie had seen had to be far from ordinary. Else they wouldn’t have had this diamond. Lydia could only guess that they were being used by Ulysses.



“Did the goblins have a master?” she asked.

“Aye. He was young, but he didnae even look afraid of us.”

That is definitely Ulysses!

“Don’t be askin’ us to give this back to him now, Lydia. I don’t think the lad was even its proper owner. Probably stole it from somewhere.”

Kelpie had hit the nail on the head. Lydia looked from him to the gemstone and back thoughtfully. The water horse was under the impression that she wanted a diamond. Having found one by coincidence, he likely thought it would make her happy. But she had only expressed a desire for one to test Edgar; she didn’t *really* want one. Besides, this one was especially unsuitable for a commoner like her. Having said that, the earl could use it to prove his father’s innocence. And if it was returned to the royal family along with its brother, both gems would forever be out of reach of the Prince and Ulysses. The question was whether Kelpie was willing to give it to her.

Lydia looked up at him to search his expression. He hung the necklace around her neck, then gazed at her thoughtfully. “I dunno. I think a necklace of clovers suits ye better.”

Is that how little a diamond suits me?

“Doesnae matter, I s’pose. If ye like it, ye can have it.”

“Do you mean that?”

“So how’s about ye cancel yer engagement to the earl and come back to Scotland with us?” He grinned at her.

Naturally, she hadn’t expected him to give it to her for free.

Now what?

Edgar was desperate for the Daydream. Desperate enough that he might even be willing to break off the engagement. Kelpie probably thought Lydia was likely to accept his condition too. Had he asked her to leave the human world to come and marry him, things would be different, but he was only asking her to return to Scotland. All that meant was resuming her previous life. Perhaps Kelpie would be satisfied spending his time with her in the laid-back countryside like he always had.

“Ye don’t *actually* wanna marry him, do ye? I get that ye wanna stay in the human world so ye can work as a fairy doctor. Look, if ye only agreed to marry him to get out of havin’ to live with us, ah’ll forget about that promise. Whatever’s goin’ on cannae be

normal.”

Kelpie was probably right. Maybe it would be for the best. It would be like she had never come to London, and she would be able to give some serious consideration to her future. She had no idea what Edgar was truly thinking, but he made her anxious and manipulated her to the point she didn’t understand anything anymore, let alone her own feelings. It *wasn’t* normal.

“I shall talk to Edgar.”

“Have at him.” Kelpie ruffled her hair encouragingly, though she wasn’t sure why he made it sound like she and Edgar would be engaging in fisticuffs. The water horse treated her roughly, and sometimes he made her feel like a child or even a pet, but she didn’t mind it; he had no ulterior motives. “The rain’s gotten worse. It’s no guid for humans to be wet for too long, right? Ye should go.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Kelpie looked up at the sky, his eyes narrowing. “London’s rain is dirty too.” He grinned, wiping at Lydia’s face roughly with his palms before vanishing. The diamond around her neck disappeared when he did.

“You are soaking wet, Lydia. Where have you been?”

When Lydia had returned to the estate, she had immediately sought Edgar out.

“Ah, but it is nice to have you coming to see me for a change. I was beginning to grow concerned that you were going to refuse to speak to me again.” He got to his feet and approached her. She seemed to have interrupted a serious conversation between him and Raven; his smile looked forced.

“There is something I wish to discuss with you, Edgar.” She knew she sounded unintentionally angry. Edgar had already been reaching out for her, but now he hesitated before withdrawing his hand.

“If it concerns something unpleasant, then might we discuss it another time?” He turned to Raven. “Bring Lydia something to dry herself off with. Or perhaps she ought to have a change of clothes.”

“I shall make do without either. Besides, it will not be an unpleasant discussion at all.”

“Then why have you been frowning at me from the moment you walked through the door?”

Lydia ran a frantic finger over her brow, hastily throwing together a smile. “I have every confidence that you will welcome this discussion.”

“Are we to decide on a date for our wedding?”

She froze.

“Come now, don’t look so tense.”

“Might I ask that you stop being presumptuous and simply listen to me?” She wanted to get everything off her chest as soon as possible. She would feel much better once Edgar had agreed to cancel their engagement and taken the ring off her finger. Should it turn out that he was quite willing to let her go in exchange for the diamond, she would be forced to confront the fact that he considered her useless after all. As such, she was unconsciously trying to hurry things up.

“The fireplace in the parlor is lit,” Raven said, passing Lydia some dry linen.

“Then let us speak there.” Though Edgar seemed to be bracing himself for something, he was very casual in the way he put a hand on the small of her back to lead her down the hallway.

It was highly unlikely that she would ever be treated like a lady again after she returned to the countryside. Perhaps she ought to consider it a valuable experience. As the thought crossed her mind, Lydia gave a small sneeze.

“I am not convinced you have been keeping yourself warm enough. Your hand is frigid.”

Edgar had taken advantage of the lapse in her guard to hold it. As warm and comforting as his grip was, she shook him off. When they entered the parlor, he sat her down on the sofa near the hearth and seated himself next to her.

“I daresay there is no need for you to sit that close to be able to hear me,” she said.

“Perhaps not, but I wish to sit here.”

Not wanting to waste her time arguing with him, Lydia pretended to dry her hair. Placing the linen towel over her head blocked Edgar’s view of her face and put her at ease. “I found the Daydream you are seeking. That isn’t the unpleasant news you were expecting, now is it?” She forced a smile.

Lydia hadn't a single qualm about going back to Scotland; the stakes for this trade off were low. Although it proved to be somewhat difficult to keep her tone light, she just needed to remind herself that she would soon be free of her unwanted engagement and that she ought to take heart from that.

Edgar responded with a noncommittal hum. It wasn't clear whether she had caught him off guard or whether he simply didn't believe her.

"You were endeavoring to lure Lord Barkston into producing it, correct? Mr. Firman informed me yesterday that Ulysses had foiled your plans. You mentioned that he might even have the diamond already, but in fact it would seem that he was using goblins to search for it."

"Goblins? As in fairies?"

"Precisely. He has goblins under his command. They are nasty creatures, and I believe he has quite the number working for him. I suggest you keep your wits about you."

Edgar nodded. "What of the diamond?"

"It was taken before the goblins could find it."

"By whom?"

"By Kelpie."

"I see. I'd rather it had been anyone else."

"I ask that you refrain from complaining until I finish. For you see, there is just one simple step you must take to obtain the diamond, and that is to call off our engagement." Lydia hoped she sounded sufficiently nonchalant. She had certainly tried to.

Edgar did not reply immediately. In truth, he was taking a lot longer to respond than she had anticipated, and she couldn't understand why.

"The sole motivation for our engagement was to prevent Kelpie from whisking me away to the fairy world, yes? However, he has agreed to consider that promise void. Instead, he will be satisfied with my return to Scotland for the time being."

Edgar was simply sitting there without moving a muscle, and his silence was becoming daunting. She was overcome by an urge to get away from his presence as soon as possible.

At last, the earl spoke. "That is his condition for relinquishing the diamond?"

"Yes."

“And you are of the opinion that it is a favorable one?”

“I should think you would also find it favorable. Should you ever require a fairy doctor’s advice, you need only to write me. That white diamond will enable you to clear the suspicion surrounding your father. Then you will be able to foil the Prince’s scheme.”

The towel was pulled softly from her head, and she found herself confronted with a pair of ash-mauve eyes. She immediately panicked. She had never seen Edgar look so displeased.

“Are you aware of how atrocious you are being?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Did you truly think I would accept such a condition, and be more than happy to do so? I should dearly hope not, because the insinuation would be too disparaging to bear.” He leaned in closer to her. “I believe I have repeated myself ad nauseam. I love you. I wish to be married to you. I am aware that you remain disinclined and that we have had our misunderstandings; however, I have recently had the sense that our hearts have gradually been drawing closer to one another. And yet you still believe I would choose a diamond over you.”

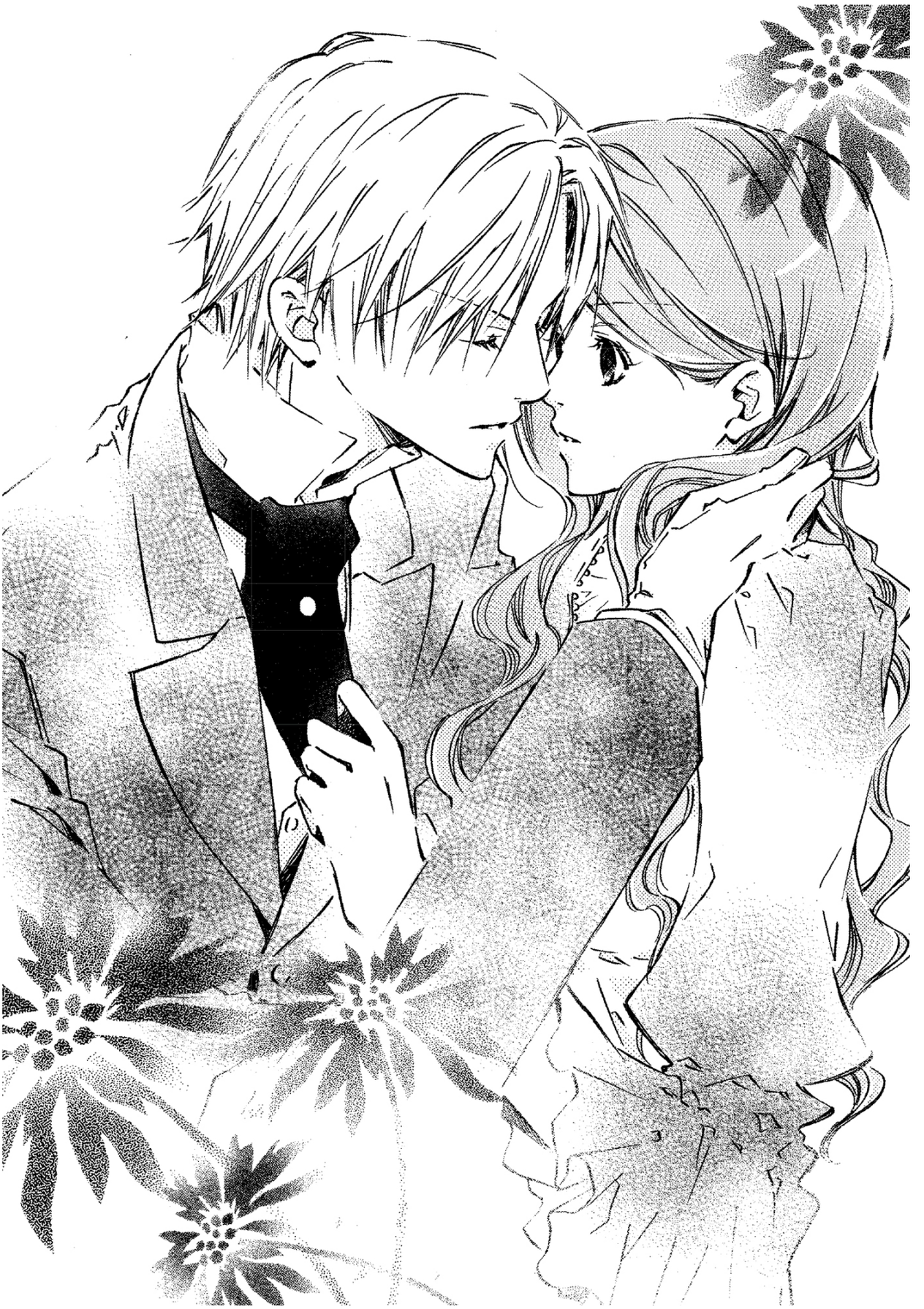
“Of course,” she stuttered. “That is, the diamond is far more valuable than—”

“You cannot bring yourself to believe a single word that passes through my lips, can you?”

Lydia tried to insert herself between the back of the sofa and the armrest, but beyond that she had no recourse for escape. As Edgar moved closer, she was at a loss for what to do.

“If a simple exchange is all it takes to fulfill one’s wishes, then tell me, what must I exchange to obtain your heart?”

Lydia could feel his fingers in her damp hair. It was as she was growing aware of his warm touch against her cool skin that the same warmth met her lips. The next second, it was gone, but the sensation lingered. Left dumbstruck, she could only stare at the man in front of her. He looked back at her for a while, frowning at her lack of response before tilting his head slightly and moving in to kiss her again. It was at that moment that she returned to her senses and hurriedly pushed him away.



“What in blazes are you doing?!”

“I haven’t done anything yet.”

“You kissed me!” she stuttered.

“One cannot call that a kiss. *This*, however—”

She clawed at him. “I *know* you are thinking of another woman.”

“I beg your pardon? What has given you that impression?”

“If you truly wish to know, you might find the answer within your conscience!” Leaping to her feet, Lydia rushed for the door.

“Is there nothing I can do to change your opinion of me? I would prefer that the diamond be destroyed rather than you be stolen away from me! Kelpie can have it for all I care!”

Lydia heard his words as she left. However, at that moment, she could think of nothing to do but flee.

After Lydia was gone, Edgar found himself unable to depart from the room in which she had left him. He sank down onto the sofa.

At length, Raven appeared to tell him that Lydia had gone home early for the day. “I sense it was indeed an unpleasant discussion after all,” the servant said.

“I could imagine no worse.” Edgar slumped, propping his chin up with his hand. “It would seem Kelpie has come into possession of the Daydream. Lydia says he is willing to part with it if we annul our engagement.”

“And did you, my lord?”

“Are you too, Raven, of the opinion that I would favor a diamond over her?”

“Forgive me, my lord.” Apparently, he was.

Edgar had thought that he had made his affections quite clear, but perhaps that hadn’t been the case. No wonder Lydia had presented Kelpie’s condition as favorable, much as it dispirited the earl to accept it. He sighed. “What do you suppose it is that she dislikes about me?”

“But my lord, *would* you choose Miss Carlton over the diamond?”

“You can be rather relentless at times, can’t you?”

As far as Edgar was concerned, it was an impossible choice. He needed Lydia. However, the diamond was also essential, and Ulysses could not be allowed to obtain it. He ought to have known

how to solve such a conundrum by now.

"I cannot think of a solution that would allow me to have them both."

"Then I must wonder what led Miss Carlton to flee."

You and I both. Edgar still wanted to believe there was a way to keep Lydia by his side and obtain the diamond at the same time. Regardless, her ironclad confidence that he would rather have the diamond than her irritated him. He had gone on to take his anger out on her, something that could only be described as foolish in light of his wanting them both.

Whatever he wanted, whatever he needed, he *would* obtain. As such, he had no intention of letting Lydia go. It wasn't a simple philosophy, but a given, and that was why he had been so surprised and exasperated at himself for shouting that Kelpie could keep the diamond. Edgar was a good liar, but he saw no sense in telling lies that weren't to his advantage. His parting threat certainly fell into that category, and yet it had escaped his lips anyway. Was that perhaps how he truly felt?

Still in a state of confusion, he got to his feet. "She isn't free of me yet, Raven."

"She *scratched* you, my lord." The boy offered his master a handkerchief.

It was yet another entry for the list of unexpected events to occur during their encounter. Edgar had been more cautious about getting too close to her lately, and she, in turn, had started letting her guard down—if partly out of resignation. But if it was a kiss he sought, he had already missed several opportunities more apt than the one he had attempted to take. What had been the purpose of his patience if he was going to squander it as he had done?

"I was unable to stop myself." Vexed, Edgar used his palm to wipe away the blood that oozed from his cheek. "Indeed, it must be the black diamond's curse."

Suddenly, Raven stiffened, his face turned toward the window. He was at his master's side the very next moment.

"Yer servant's no lost his touch, I see."

When Edgar turned, he found a young man with black curls sitting on the window frame as though he had been there all along.

“Hallo, Blue Knight Earl.”

“State your business, Kelpie.”

The water horse glared at the blond, though there was a thin smile on his lips. Not only did this fairy possess the white diamond that Edgar so desperately wanted, he had tried to pass it on to Lydia. He was the reason the earl was presently in such a deep pit of despair.

“What did ye do to Lydia?”

“I fail to see how it is any of your business.”

“Then ah’ll explain. Whatever ye did, it’s ’cause of *my* diamond.” Kelpie let out an exaggerated sigh. “I only picked it up ’cause I thought Lydia’d like it. I didnae know it was the very diamond ye were lookin’ for. So I come here to see what’s goin’ on, only for Lydia to run out with a red face and for ye to say somethin’ foolish about wantin’ her *and* the diamond.” He narrowed his jet-black eyes meaningfully.

The water horse’s beauty was at once devilish and perfect. That was why Edgar hated him so much. The earl’s appearance was his only weapon. Beneath his exterior lay a conniving, petty, selfish man who was prone to jealousy, and he knew that. It was his words and looks that allowed him to seduce women and secure allies, and he felt it to be somewhat dishonest. Therefore, he detested any man more attractive than himself. Humans had deep weaknesses he could exploit to humiliate them, but satisfaction was far from forthcoming when it came to fairies.

Lydia had only agreed to be betrothed to Edgar because she wanted to stay in the human world, but emotionally speaking, it was quite possible that she much preferred Kelpie to him. It was just another reason the water horse irritated him so.

“Lydia is my fiancée. Naturally, I would be loath to exchange her for a diamond.”

“She doesnae wanna be engaged to ye. That’s how she didnae think twice about tellin’ ye my condition.”

Precisely. That was also why Edgar’s anger was escalating. “Your point?”

“I can cut ye a deal too. Let Lydia go. Otherwise ah’ll be givin’ the diamond to the other lad who wants it. The young blond lad who knows how to use fairies.”

Ulysses. Returning Kelpie’s gaze evenly, Edgar considered his

options. He wanted Lydia and the diamond both. If he released Lydia from their engagement, he could have the latter. It would mean their relationship returning to a clean slate, but that didn't mean there would never be another chance to win her over. Or so he wanted to believe.

Unfortunately, he wasn't entirely sure. Suppose she learned that he had struck a deal with Kelpie *after* her proposal of a similar exchange had angered him to the extent he had made her cry? As forgiving as she was, it might just be enough to ensure she never trusted him again. Having said that, it wasn't as though she had ever especially trusted him. And there were countless ways in which he could have her agree to marry him regardless of her feelings.

"Well?" Kelpie was grinning. It seemed putting Edgar in a bind amused him.

The earl was still struggling to decide when his emotions got the better of him and he spat out a quiet, "Be gone."

"That's yer response?" Kelpie sounded intrigued.

"I shall *not* make a deal with you. Lydia is *my* fiancée!"

The water horse clicked his tongue and promptly vanished. At once, Edgar was overcome with an intense exhaustion. He placed both hands on the window frame where Kelpie had been sitting.

"What do you suppose I am hoping to achieve, Raven?" He was finding it difficult to make any rational judgments. The diamond had been inches from his grasp, yet he had let it go.

"There is no cause for concern, my lord. Kelpie may pass the diamond on to whomever he wishes. I shall retrieve it. As for Miss Carlton, however, there is precious little I can do."

Raven may well have been right. Edgar, more than his judgment in dealing with Kelpie, was worried about his failure to predict and control his own tumultuous emotions.

The Gorgeous Lady of the Harem

Nico twiddled his whiskers as he relaxed and inhaled the bergamot-scented steam. He placed his teacup, as fine and delicate as eggshell, gently back onto the table. Then, he reached for the almond cake. It was a little dry for his tastes, but he devoured it nevertheless, then cast his gaze around the room. It was filled with wax figures, their colored glass eyes opened wide as they surveyed the entranced man before them. The stranger was smoking a pipe.

None of the humans who visited this place were worthy of respect. Having said that, it wasn't as though they were hurting anyone, and none of them seemed to notice it when Nico helped himself to their tea. That was what had the fairy cat spending much of his time here.

"He can't be right in the head." Nico cast a glance at the man who was doing nothing but gazing at the figures before him.

"Might you be referring to me?" the man said unexpectedly. "I am perfectly sane. The same cannot be said for the gentleman who occupies the next room. He *speaks* to a *portrait*."

Nico hummed thoughtfully. "And you refrain from speaking to these waxworks?"

"Certainly. To do so when they have no means of replying would be a waste of time."

The fairy could agree with that, at least.

"I may stare at these women as much as I wish, and they pay me no mind. They do not see me. That is why I am able to watch them as they dress themselves in private, and whisper among themselves so quietly that one might imagine it is the wind."

And he believes the man next door to be less sane?

"My neighbor, however, believes the woman in his portrait to be utterly enamored with him. He seems to occupy a world of delirium. I have heard him say that two diamonds will ensure the return of that woman and allow him to obtain the world."

"Diamonds, you say?"

"If he is to be believed, the diamonds he speaks of are

especially glorious. One is white, the other black."

"Fascinating."

Could it be the same black diamond that Edgar was keeping in this very establishment? The earl seemed to be setting about a new, fishy scheme, and Lydia had been showing interest in diamonds recently.

I just hope nothing too untoward comes of this business.

Nico's frequenting of this establishment had been about more than the tea. He had come to keep a loose eye on Edgar and the diamond but had caught no traces of any recent visits by the earl. It therefore intrigued him to hear that this place housed *another* man who knew about and sought the diamonds.

"Does the gentleman in the next room visit on a daily basis?" Nico asked.

"It has been some time since I last saw him. Still, this establishment is louder than it used to be. I wonder whether there is construction work going on nearby."

Nico's ears twitched. He was surprised to learn that this man could hear the goblins' digging. Perhaps it was down to whatever he was smoking. Regardless, the sound had been bothering Nico for some time. It seemed to be drawing especially close today.

At that very moment, a hole appeared in the floor, and out popped a goblin's face. It looked around before muttering to itself, "I must have the wrong room."

"What are you and your lot playing at?" Nico demanded.

The goblin turned to him, its ugly face twisting, and it snorted. "What's a mangy cat like you need to know that for?"

Its contempt frayed Nico's nerves. Not only was he *not* a cat, but he was also a far more intelligent fairy than a goblin. Or at least, he tried to be. He waited for the moment the creature slipped back into the hole to turn himself invisible and dive in after it.

***

Likely because of the rain, Lydia was suffering both from a cold and a headache. She had gone to bed early that night and, as she drifted off, began to dream that she was back in Scotland. Her old house, which stood on the outskirts of the town, was surrounded by a vast garden. It was rich in the fairies' favorite plants and

attracted them in great numbers, whether they were stopping by or just passing through. From her second-story window, she could see the round rath that jutted up from the ground beyond the field of heather. The fairies tended to come from there and spend some time in their favored spots before returning.

Lydia gazed out at the mound from her window. “Well, here I am.”

She didn’t suppose she would ever return to London. The months she had spent there seemed like a dream to her now, as strange as it was to think such a thing when she was already dreaming. She had never spent a lot of time around men, and yet in the city, one in particular had attempted to seduce her and even proposed to her.

I wonder what would have happened had I stayed. Would she have married him? *No. Not* Edgar*, of all people.* She would have returned to Scotland eventually anyway. *I am perfectly content here, and not heartbroken in the least. I should take comfort in the fact that I left before I had a chance to fall in love with him.* A chance such as that would never have come about in the first place. Edgar was a man who seduced every last woman he came across.

Unconsciously bringing her fingers to her lips, Lydia reflected on what she guessed would be her life’s regret. He had begged her to understand him, even going so far as to declare he would let Kelpie keep the diamond. Of course, she knew he had been lying. Weaving falsehoods was his art. But she couldn’t understand why the memory should burden her with so much guilt.

“Are you crying, my lady?” came the coblynau’s voice. She couldn’t see it.

“I am doing nothing of the sort.”

“Bow tells me differently. I hear your heart is aching most terribly.”

Only when she lifted her hand to look did Lydia realize she was still wearing the moonstone ring. She must have forgotten to have Edgar remove it before she came home. And now she would never see him again.

“Please would you take the ring from my finger? Edgar agreed to call off our engagement.”

“I’m afraid it’s rather too early for that, my lady. You have fled into a dream, you see.”

“But I do not require it. I have no intention of marrying him.”

“I understand just how you feel, my lady. The Blue Knight Earl struggles to remain sincere. However, you mustn’t allow other women to surpass you! You are still his legitimate fiancée.”

At that, Lydia gave up. She might have hurt Edgar, but she bore scars of her own. He wanted to marry her so he could keep her around as his fairy doctor, but perhaps also so that she could comfort him in the place of another. And that was simply unacceptable. How many times had he lied to her, pretending that his feelings for her were genuine? He wasn’t hurt after all, and it incensed her that he had pretended he was.

“I beg you not to cry, my lady. Please leave this matter to me and my brethren. We shall ensure the Blue Knight Earl agrees to cherish you and you alone.”

Lydia’s head was pounding. The dream was beginning to fade, but she could still hear the coblynau’s voice as consciousness returned to her. However, it stopped short, and she fell once more into the darkness.

When Lydia awoke fully, her surroundings seemed to be alive with sparkling light. She quickly recognized it as the fault of the chandelier. Its countless crystals reflected multiple layers of the gas flames within every which way.

Wait a moment. My room has no chandelier. Hastily sitting up, she noticed that she wasn’t on her bed, but a long and narrow sofa. A thin curtain blocked most of her sight, but she could just about make out a large room bordered with extravagant furnishings beyond it. Finding it vaguely familiar, she made to stand up, only for the cloth wrapped around her body to hinder her.

“What in the world?” When she lifted her arm, she was greeted by the crisp rustling of metal. It was the gold embroidered into her sleeves and veil. Her attire was reminiscent of a princess from the *Arabian Nights*. Furthermore, she could now remember this room clearly. It was Edgar’s room at Madame Eve’s Palace.

For whatever reason, Lydia had taken the place of the blonde waxwork and was wearing its exotic outfit: a silk dress adorned with beads and embroidery. Her arms, legs, and hair were weighed down with gold and jewels, but the clothing itself was thin and light. She opened the curtain and examined herself in the

large mirror. She struggled to recognize the creature staring back at her, and it was then that she noticed she was wearing the black diamond.

"What on earth is happening?!"

"I see you are awake, my lady." A familiar bearded fairy was sitting on a dresser and smoking a pipe.

"Explain yourself!" she commanded the coblynau.

"The Blue Knight Earl's wax mistress has been driven out. This room befits only his true fiancée, and I do believe your ladyship was in want of a diamond."

Lydia had only claimed to want one out of a passing fancy. A fairy, however, would have been unable to recognize that. Kelpie had also taken her request seriously. Annoyed with herself, she tried to tear off her veil, but it was held fast by her tiara and hair ornaments.

"The Blue Knight Earl will find his affections stirred anew. I would advise your ladyship to try and understand his tastes in turn. It would appear he is rather fond of this style."

Lydia found she was unable to respond.

"Ah, before you voice your concerns, please know that my fellow coblynau who replaced your attire was female. I called on my brethren who were already in London to save those in Wales a long journey. There are many who choose to work here, as there are a great number of rare gemstones."

"I see," Lydia said flatly.

"As for the black diamond, we combined our expertise to temporarily seal the power of its curse. Returning it to its original state is a process that cannot be rushed, you understand. I must therefore ask, my lady, that you treat it with due care. Bow's protective powers are not unlimited either." The coblynau stood up to leave.

"Wait a moment!" Lydia cried hurriedly. "Are you just going to leave me here?"

"The Blue Knight Earl won't be long. I would hate to get in the way of your very important discussion."

"But—"

The coblynau vanished before she could finish her sentence. The very thought of Edgar's arrival threw her into a panic. She wanted to flee, but she couldn't be seen outside dressed as she

was. Her stomach felt especially bare, covered by only a single layer of thin cloth, and the entire outfit perplexed her. But it wasn't as though she had a change of clothes, and she had no idea how she was to get home.

Just then, the door at the other end of the room opened quietly.

He is here already?! Left with no choice, Lydia hurriedly let the curtain fall and returned to the sofa, hardly daring to breathe. It wasn't as though she had intended to feign being a wax figure, but that was somehow where she was now.

However, it wasn't Edgar who had entered the room. She could tell from the build of the silhouette. She didn't know who it *was*, but she would rather not be found. Her claim that a fairy had brought her here was prone to be met with disbelief, and the listener would probably infer instead that she was an eccentric woman who desired to join a lifeless harem. More than anything else, she could only imagine how Edgar might react if he learned she was apparently jealous of a waxwork.

As much as she wanted this stranger to leave, they instead slipped farther into the room. They were walking cautiously, as though unwilling to be discovered, and approaching Lydia step by step.

"Jean-Mary…we meet at last. Please forgive my tardiness, for not a day has gone by that I did not think of you."

Without having a clear view of his face, all Lydia could tell was that he was likely a middle-aged gentleman with a mustache. He, however, seemed to know the wax figure.

"I have loved you from the very moment I first laid eyes on you. You may have been chosen by my parents to marry me, but even then I could not wait for the day of our union to come. But then *he* claimed to have fallen for you at first sight also, and ruined everything."

Keeping her breathing as quiet as she could, Lydia was finally confident that Jean-Mary had been a real woman after all. But who was the man whose interference this stranger was lamenting? Was it Edgar? When had all of this happened?

"That scoundrel used his influence to steal you away from me. All I wanted was for you to realize that it was God's will for *us* to be wed. He had decided that for us long before we were born. I wonder whether you understood the grave importance of that.

For you see, had we been married, tragedy would never have befallen you."

Tragedy? I wonder what he is talking about.

"I suppose you must be angry with me, Jean-Mary. After all, I did harm your husband's—the Duke of Sylvanford's—reputation."

Sylvanford? Why, that's the name of Edgar's family...

"I am certain you must have worked it out by now. It was I who, working under the duke, hid the white diamond, effectively stealing it from the royal family."

Lydia couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"The House of Hanover had no rightful claim to the jewel. By all means, it should have belonged to our Prince. Ah, but I shan't bore you with that tired old story. If I may be frank, I am starting to question my loyalty to His Royal Highness. Yes, even after I let you die for his sake."

Lydia was desperately trying to make sense of the mass of information she had just been presented with. If Jean-Mary had married Sylvanford, that would make her Edgar's mother. Moreover, it was this man who had carried out the theft for which Edgar's father had taken the blame, which would suggest he was Lord Barkston. Meaning that Edgar had given the Nightmare to a wax figure of his own mother in order to trap the marquess.

"I believed that the duke's death would see you returning to my side. As I assisted in plotting against him, the thought never once crossed my mind that you might die as well."

I was a fool for jumping to conclusions! Jean-Mary was *precious to Edgar, but that doesn't mean she was his lover!* Lydia was overcome with a mix of exhaustion and irritation. *Why on earth did I let myself become so upset?*

"I beg your forgiveness, Jean-Mary. I was more than willing to give you the white diamond, if only you had asked for it." Barkston paused. "You may not have been the Prince, but I am sure you were deserving of it. Just think, you and I, in possession of both legendary diamonds and their power..."

Without warning, he put a hand to the curtain and took a step in Lydia's direction. With nowhere to run to, she froze in shock on the sofa.

"Who are you?" the man sputtered. Lydia recognized him as the gentleman who had been with Ulysses in Hyde Park. "What are

you doing here? Where is Jean-Mary?" As he spoke, his eyes fell on the black diamond necklace. "That diamond belongs to us."

The marquess extended a hand toward Lydia. She tried to dart away from him, but he grabbed her shoulder and pushed her against the sofa. He clamped his other hand around her throat.

"Jean-Mary summoned me here after obtaining that diamond! We were to become masters to them both!"

With that, Lydia understood Edgar's trap. He had injected the gaps in Barkston's heart with dreams of the marquess's beloved. Barkston may have known Jean-Mary was a waxwork like all the others here, but this establishment blurred the lines between dreams and reality. Convincing himself that he had heard the woman's voice and understood her will, he had tried to bring her the Daydream, the diamond he was concealing for the Prince.

As Lydia fought back, the grip on her neck tightened, and her consciousness began to fade. Edgar made skillful use of his words to manipulate people. He took advantage of their weaknesses to turn them into architects of their own destruction. And he was good at it, which was why Lydia often found herself feeling used. His words, his actions, all appeared to be perfectly calculated. And yet, when she encountered him during a split second when his calculations had gone awry, the stark difference to his usual self left her awestruck.

"I would prefer that the diamond be destroyed rather than you be stolen away from me! Kelpie can have it for all I care!"

Had that just been another one of his lies? She knew Edgar would do anything to obtain the diamond that would restore his family's reputation. He had worked hard to ensure the steady progression of his plot to ensnare Barkston. Lydia couldn't be more important to him than that.

I would have expected a more skillful lie from you, Edgar.

"Help…"

And yet, like a fool, she had been analyzing it all this time, wondering whether it wasn't borne of shock from his inability to predict her actions.

"Help me, Edgar!"

Look at me. I am *a fool. Edgar set up this trap, and now I am to die because of it.*

Out of nowhere, her body was released, and she took

desperate gulps of air. When she dared to open her eyes again, she saw Edgar with his arms tight around the marquess's neck. Just when Barkston was on the cusp of passing out, the earl tossed him into the curtain, which tangled around his limbs and dragged him to the floor.

Edgar brought his foot down on the other man's body. "Jean-Mary asked you to bring her the Daydream. You failed. She has no use for you now." His tone was ice cold.

"You... Are you not Ashenbert? What are you doing here?"

"This is *my* room. The wax figure and the black diamond belong to me."

Barkston's eyes widened.

"I have need of the Daydream too. As I'd hoped, you very kindly betrayed both the Prince and Ulysses. However, you have proven yourself useless by falling at the last hurdle." Edgar grabbed Barkston by his collar and glared at him. "And now Ulysses is on your tail? I suppose it is only a matter of time before he finds you and puts an end to your existence, yes?"

"The Prince has his eye on you as well. Ulysses was mocking you, you know, saying that despite taking on the title of Blue Knight Earl, you lack any of the power associated with it. And yet you still intend to fight the Prince."

"It is lamentable that your lordship shan't be around to witness my victory. Death is the only fate that awaits you now, and it is in no mood to dawdle." With a ruthless smile, Edgar tossed the marquess away and turned to Lydia.

She shrank back into the sofa, trembling, though at least she was able to breathe normally now. Meeting his gaze pushed her into a fluster of embarrassment. Her state of dress was mortifying enough to drown out her relief at being rescued.

"I... It was the coblynau who dressed me like this! It said something about understanding your tastes and besting your mistress... It all left me dreadfully bewildered! It happened while I was asleep!"

"First a maid, and now an Arabian princess. I have come to see the charm that lies in a splash of unpredictability."

Personally, Lydia could not identify an ounce of charm whatsoever.

"Suppose you were Scheherazade, would you regale me with

fairy tales on a nightly basis? It would take but a single night, not a thousand, for me to become utterly besotted with you." Edgar kneeled and peered up at her. Was there no situation in which he would think it inappropriate to try and seduce her? "Regardless, I am relieved to see you are unharmed. The events of this afternoon had me fearing that I had lost your trust altogether, but then you called for me to save you. Might I take that to mean that you do not yet despise me completely?"

"I…called for you?"

"You did, not a few minutes ago. Just before I entered the room."

She didn't believe him. She might have been thinking about him, but that was the extent of it. He smiled at her as her face only grew redder and redder. Lydia averted her gaze, which fell instead on the marquess. He was pushing himself up, reaching into his jacket for his pistol.

"Edgar!" Lydia's cry sounded at the same time as the gunshot. Barkston's pistol, however, had ended up on the floor. The man himself was then sent flying and crashed into a small end table as he tumbled away. A dark-skinned boy was picking up the gun.

"Do not kill him yet."

"Yes, my lord," Raven replied, dragging the marquess up by his necktie.

"I still have some questions for you." Edgar turned to Barkston, one hand stroking Lydia's hair soothingly. "The Daydream was not the Prince's only goal in targeting the Sylvanford estate, was it?"

Barkston snorted, his face twisted with pain. "You know so little, and yet you would defy the Prince!"

"I should very much like for you to answer the question." Edgar produced a pistol and pressed it into the marquess's forehead.

"Ulysses will be coming to kill me sooner or later in any case. Your threats hold no power over me."

"I wonder about that. Every man knows that he will eventually die, and yet he would rather delay the inevitable for as long as possible."

The wide-eyed marquess met Edgar's gaze as he increased his pressure on the trigger. The hammer went up with a click. Barkston's eyes began to dart this way and that, but he kept his lips sealed. He might have thought that the earl wasn't actually

going to shoot him. Lydia was of the same opinion, so while she watched with bated breath, she witnessed the very moment Edgar calmly fired the gun. She gasped, but no bullet emerged. Barkston had frozen.

Edgar clicked his tongue. “To think I forgot to load it.” He took some bullets from his jacket and loaded the weapon with just one of them. Then, he pointed it back at the marquess and casually pulled the trigger twice like he was testing the gun. Both chambers were empty, but it resulted in a silent scream from Barkston, who hastily crawled away, only for Raven to push him back into position.

“You might not be so lucky on the next shot,” Edgar warned him.

“Please, wait! I am not responsible for what happened to the duke’s estate! His son…the boy who was born there! It was his fault!”

Lydia heard Edgar gasp quietly.

“You are saying that his son did something?”

“The Prince identified him as a child who was near ideal. More so, he claimed, than any child Jean-Mary might have borne me…”

“Ideal? What does that mean, exactly?”

“Jean-Mary carried the blood of Bonnie Prince Charlie.”

“The Stuart prince?”

“I have Stuart blood within me as well. The noble blood in this country has been thinning over time, so I was to marry Jean-Mary to strengthen it once more. The plan was set. Every last detail attended to, all for the Prince’s sake.”

Lydia was struggling to follow the conversation, and while Edgar looked thoughtful, he also looked deeply pained. More so than she had ever seen him.

“The Duke of Sylvanford lost everything because of his son. Because he stole Jean-Mary away from me. He could have averted tragedy, if only he had married another. If only she hadn’t birthed his son, if only said son hadn’t grown up in good health!” Words tumbled from the marquess’s lips one after another. Naturally, he didn’t have the first clue that the person he spoke of was standing directly before him. “Ashenbert. The quickest route to destroying the Prince is to kill Jean-Mary’s son.”

Lydia could stand it no longer. “What utter nonsense, simply

because you were spurned by your fiancée! How could you blame an innocent child when the Prince is the one at fault?”

Edgar glanced once in her direction as if to reassure her. “Lord Barkston, Jean-Mary had forgotten all about you. She did not question her parents when they told her she was to be wed to you, but nor did she hesitate when she was asked instead to marry the duke. In fact, it delighted her that she was to be referred to as ‘Her Grace.’ She was a typical noble girl: naive and satisfied as long as she was being treated like a princess.”

Barkston knitted his brow like he felt insulted. “You would dare speak as if you knew her?!”

“Only after the diamond was stolen and the Duke of Sylvanford came under suspicion would she remember you. And only then because she received a letter from you meant to console her. However, perhaps due to her feminine instincts, she sensed that you had an ulterior motive.”

“How… How can you know…”

“She confided in a friend of hers. I just so happened to overhear snippets of their conversation.”

Barkston’s eyes flew open as he stared up at Edgar. “Don’t tell me…”

“I hold no mercy in my heart for those who would assist the Prince. If it would destroy him, I would not hesitate to kill anyone. Whether it be you, Ulysses, or the duke’s son.”

Lydia was suddenly frightened that he really would shoot Barkston dead, and she rushed forward. “No!”

The pistol was presently pointed at the man who had framed Edgar’s family. But, once its work was done, she feared he would turn it on himself. She clung to his arm, desperate to stop him.

All of a sudden, the building started to shake with a loud rumble.

“What?”

Edgar grabbed her and pulled her down to the floor just as a nearby silver statue grazed her on its way to the floor. The marquess took the opportunity to flee, Raven hot on his heels. A large hole had opened up in the wall, and ugly little faces were peering out from the cloud of dust.

“Goblins!” Lydia warned the earl.

“He’s fleeing!” one cried.

“Yes, that’s him!”

“After him!”

They bustled out of their hole toward another wall, which they immediately started to dig into in pursuit of Barkston. They had soon disappeared behind it.

“Goblins? Are they under Ulysses’s command?” After helping Lydia to her feet, Edgar stared at the hole in the wall. “Was that shaking just now down to them too?”

“You mustn’t get too close, Edgar. Their territory lies beyond that hole, and it is not part of the human realm.”

“That would explain why the hallway that is supposed to be there instead looks like endless caves.”

“Ulysses must have ordered them to pursue Lord Barkston. Which means Ulysses knows his lordship has been hiding here.”

“And he might be putting in an appearance himself.”

Edgar was standing with his back to her now, and he fell into thought. He looked exhausted from the ordeal moments prior. He had claimed that he would kill himself if it would result in the Prince’s destruction. Ulysses said that he had been ordered to kill Edgar, supposedly because he was no use to them. But Lydia couldn’t help wondering whether the young man would rather capture the earl alive, if at all possible. Jean-Mary’s son was significant, but she was no longer present to produce another. And that left only Edgar. If her thinking was correct, she was certain that the earl viewed forfeiting his life as a viable move to play against the Prince.

“Please do not blame yourself, Edgar. What happened to your family was not your fault in the least.”

“Thank you, Lydia. I was almost certain you wouldn’t show any concern for me ever again. I am relieved.” Despite his words, he made no move to turn around. “In truth, Lord Barkston’s words did not shock me. I already had a vague suspicion that I was somehow at the root of their deaths.”

“You were targeted, but your existence itself was not the cause.”

“My father once told me in a fit of rage that I ought not to have been born. He took his hunting gun while my mother tried to protect me. I do not have a clear recollection of the events that followed. All I remember is both my parents, collapsed and

bleeding, as flames spread through the estate."

"It is all right to leave some memories forgotten." Lydia drew closer and gently touched his back. "You didn't deserve to witness such tragedy."

At length, Edgar asked, "May I hold you?"

She wanted to say yes, but a pinprick of fear made her hesitate. She worried that an embrace might not be the end of it. Before she had made up her mind, Edgar spoke again.

"If not, might I ask that you hold me?"

Very tentatively, she slipped her arms around him. She supposed she was holding him, but it was all she could do to hold on to his jacket, and she wondered whether it was even enough.

"Thank you," he said, placing his hand on hers.

Feeling a little better, she let her head rest gently against his back.



“Are you running a fever, Lydia?”

“A fever? Do you think so?” Now that he mentioned it, she *was* feeling a little woozy. She had gone to bed only to wake up here, and her health had been pushed far down her list of priorities. It seemed to catch up with her all at once when her head started to spin.

Edgar turned around and placed his palm on her forehead, frowning slightly. “You ought to go home. I shall escort you.” He removed his jacket and put it around her shoulders.

“I daresay it won’t be easy to leave.”

“Why not?” His frown deepening, Edgar opened the door. The space beyond it was blocked off by bare rock.

“The goblins have been digging to create a path. This room was in their way, and now the world of fairies and reality have been tangled together in this space.”

Edgar placed one hand on the wall and pushed the other through his bangs, clearly perplexed. “How can we leave?”

“Our only recourse is to wait for the goblins to return. These are paths created by fairies, and only fairies can see them. We shall have to strike a deal with them.”

“I suppose we shan’t have any company but each other’s until then.”

Lydia took a wary step back.

“I should like to make it clear that I do not intend to take advantage of that fact, despite knowing you are unlikely to believe me. There is no need to be so tense. You ought to have a lie-down on the sofa.” Edgar looked around as he spoke, rummaging through various cabinets. “I never thought anything like this would befall me in London of all places. There is nothing decent to eat in this room.”

Lydia hadn’t expected otherwise from a mansion full of wax figures. She did as she was told and lay down, rearranging the front of Edgar’s jacket to try and fend off some of the chill she felt.

“Are you cold? I am not surprised, in that attire. At the very least it is nice and revealing.”

Lydia hastily pulled his jacket down over her stomach.

“If I had known you were to wear it, I would have been fussier about the design.”

“Why *did* you dress a wax figure of your mother in such a

fashion?" It seemed a little disrespectful, to say the least.

"I couldn't allow it to wear anything close to what my real mother would have chosen. Had it resembled her too much, I would have found it far too nauseating."

Lydia wondered whether there might be more to it than that. Edgar picked up a number of decorative liquor bottles and some fruit, which also seemed to be nothing more than an ornament, and approached the sofa. Sitting down on the carpet, he opened a bottle of brandy and poured some into a glass.

"This ought to warm you up somewhat."

"Thank you." Lydia reached out for the glass tentatively, careful not to let their hands touch.

Edgar exhaled slightly. "You held me, and yet you cannot abide *my* touch."

"Well…"

"Is it because I kissed you?"

Her fever seemed to flare, and Lydia huddled in on herself. "If the goblins manage to catch up to Lord Barkston, Ulysses may very well kill him. And you have yet to draw the entire truth from him," she said, purposely changing the subject. She would rather not discuss kisses when they were alone together.

"I know enough. Including why the Prince is so called."

Much of what Barkston had said had flown over Lydia's head. She wasn't sure whether Edgar would be willing to share such core information about the Prince with her, so she found she was unable to ask.

"Are you unwilling to learn more about me than you already know?"

"Is it *right* for me to learn such things?"

"I have come to realize that there is nothing to gain by keeping secrets from one's fiancée."

Certainly, Lydia would likely be more appropriately dressed had Edgar been more honest with her. "I am not your fiancée," she reminded him in case he needed it.

He continued as though he had not heard her. "In 1688, James II went into exile in France. His grandson later invaded Britain, attempting a claim to the throne. That much you know, yes?"

"Yes." As she answered, Lydia realized she had heard the king's name very recently, when her father had been telling her about

the troublesome diamonds. They had been lost in the confusion of the revolution and James II's exile.

"The attempt by Bonnie Prince Charlie—that is, James II's grandson—to steal back the throne ended in a rout. I believe that the Prince may have a close genetic link to Jean-Mary, if not Bonnie Prince Charlie himself. Rather than the legend associated with those diamonds, he may be seeking them so that he can prove that heritage and lay claim to the title of Prince of Wales."

"The Prince of Wales?"

"The Stuarts no longer have any direct male descendants, but if one turns one's attention to female descendants, there are several links to royal and noble families throughout Europe. I have heard of a group that holds fast to the claim that these are the true claimants to the throne of England and Scotland. I do not think that the Prince is related to this group, however, else he would have dubbed himself the *King*."

"Does he intend to return to Britain, I wonder."

"If so, it would appear that he is planning a different approach to Bonnie Prince Charlie's."

If Barkston and Jean-Mary had married, it would have strengthened the Stuart bloodline. That was the plan the marquess had spoken of, the one he wished to carry out for the Prince. Although Jean-Mary had married the Duke of Sylvanford instead, the plot hadn't ended there.

"So, you have royal blood too?" Lydia asked.

"Yes, and not just from the Stuarts."

That must have been why the Prince saw Edgar as so "ideal." His royal blood was thicker than that of Barkston and Jean-Mary's potential offspring.

"Is that why you were targeted?" she pressed. "But what exactly did he mean to do with you once he had kidnapped you?"

"Create the next Prince, I suppose."

Create? "Why not have his own child succeed him? Even if he failed to produce a son, he kidnapped you, and you now detest him. Why on earth would he think he could make an heir of such a man?"

"Most likely, I was not meant to be a typical heir. The Prince's organization believes they have the power to control minds at will. Had I stayed with them, I would likely have lost my sense of self

and been molded into someone who thought and felt just as the Prince does."

Lydia was speechless. What exactly had Edgar seen during his time in America? Whatever unimaginable things he had been through, she was sure it must have been several times worse than the tragedy that had befallen his family. She doubted her embrace could ever be enough to truly comfort him.

"The organization always adhered to some beliefs that are…how should I put this? Strangely occult. Suppose the descendant of the exiled king were to return in an attempt to claim the prince's throne tomorrow. There is no scenario in which he would be successful. And yet we have the Prince tracking down those of royal blood to turn into his puppets. I would not be surprised if he truly thinks he is capable of something as absurd as creating the next Prince of Wales."

What Edgar was saying went beyond the realm of understanding, and Lydia was growing increasingly confused. It was all too outrageous for her to process with her feverish mind. She took a sip of her brandy and watched him absentmindedly. He had taken a pear and was deftly peeling it with a knife.

"It all makes one wonder about Ulysses. I never met him during the time I was in the Prince's captivity, but from what I gathered when people spoke about him, he was older than me. I had the impression that he had been there for decades. Perhaps his looks are deceptive and he really is in his forties."

It *was* strange to think that Ulysses had already been a vital member of the organization eight years ago, when Edgar had been kidnapped. Even though his features were exceptionally youthful, he must have been in his twenties.

"It would make sense if he is of a second generation," Edgar said.

"Meaning he is son to the original Ulysses?"

"That, or the Prince created him out of a boy possessing the skills to be a fairy doctor. If so, he might be just as much a victim as I am."

A boy sacrificed simply because he could talk to fairies. His individuality destroyed. Lydia struggled to make sense of it. Edgar, however, was likely pondering the fact that he may have shared the same fate to be reborn as the Prince. The enemy he was facing

was a man who would use such insane methods.

Edgar lodged a piece of pear on the end of his knife and held it out toward Lydia. She took it from the blade and gnawed on it. The refreshing sweetness soothed her throat, which had been feeling raw from the alcohol that she had forced down.

“Lydia, you previously said that you wouldn’t wish for a loveless marriage.”

His sudden words made her slightly tense again, but it soon became apparent that this wasn’t a seduction attempt.

“You are right to feel that way. It is common practice for the noble classes to wed for the sake of linking their houses. As long as they bear offspring, both husband and wife may be as unfaithful as they wish. While my father may have fallen in love at first sight with my mother and stolen her from Lord Barkston, he was merely laying claim to something he wanted. In that sense, I believe my parents were similar to most noble couples. However, should they have held love in their hearts for one another, I do not believe they would have spent a single moment in despair. That goes despite the tragedy that befell them and the woeful fate suffered by their son.”

While he spoke, Edgar had been leaning back against the sofa Lydia lay on, his face downcast.

“Whoever it is who earns your hand in marriage, I have every confidence that he will be a very happy man indeed.”

Lydia didn’t respond.

“He will be genuinely loved, and his household blessed. I don’t suppose that happiness is something I am capable of obtaining.”

She couldn’t shed any light on his doubts. In the first place, she doubted Edgar actually desired something so ordinary. Did he have any hopes for a future beyond exacting revenge on the Prince? He was at risk of exchanging his life for that goal. What was his interest in Lydia, then, beyond a fleeting dream of a future with her? But if that was truly what he dreamt of, then perhaps ordinary *was* something he genuinely sought, impossible as it was.

“Oh, how I wish I could marry you.” Edgar had slipped past her lowered defenses to take a lock of her hair in his hand. Listless from fever and alcohol, she watched, unmoving, as he let it flow between his fingers. “There was a young girl in America who died protecting the black diamond. With Master Jimmy racing off

ahead, Mr. Slade suggested there might be something intrinsic within me that captures the hearts of others. Indeed, I was the leader and the law in America. I had the sense that was what everyone *wanted* me to be. You, however, know that I am little more than a scoundrel and that my sole talent lies in spinning tales. You have seen me for what I am since the very beginning: a young, clueless man held together by contradictions. And yet you still sympathized with and assisted me. My only hope is that you and I remain on equal terms. You may withdraw your sympathy if you so choose. But I do not think I shall turn out like the Prince so long as I have you there to rebuke me."

Rebuke you for what? Your constant flirtations? Or...

"I feared that to show too much weakness before you would invite your disdain. I want you to think better of me than that. That is why I hid my plan to ensnare Lord Barkston from you."

Are you saying that if I accept your proposal, I might be able to save you?

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The vexing rumble of the goblins' digging pulsed through the ground. It sent tiny vibrations through the water that Kelpie could feel in his sensitive mane.

"What're those wee buggers up to now?"

Were they planning to hollow out the entirety of the earth beneath London? The holes they dug lay close to the boundary with the fairy world, leaving the mortal world intact. However, their current carelessness meant their activities were still having an effect on the human realm.

Mibbe it's on purpose, Kelpie thought as he gazed at the white diamond. Even at the bottom of the lake, it shimmered faintly.

"What am I s'posed to do with this now?" Both the goblins' master and the Blue Knight Earl were after it. The latter had already rejected the deal Kelpie had attempted to strike with him. "He really values Lydia more than this thing?"

That wasn't like the earl. If the rumors were to be believed, he had a new lover every week. As far as Kelpie understood it, he only wanted Lydia by his side for the sake of his collection. Since she wished to stay in the human world, their engagement was the

result of aligning interests and nothing more.

The transparent, tear-shaped diamond seemed to blend into the water. Only the faint glow of its outline showed it was still there. Despite Kelpie being a wicked fairy, the magic given off by the jewel was enough to make him feel dizzy. He continued to stare at it until a faint call had him lifting his head. It sounded like Lydia.

Swimming up to the surface, he took on human form as he climbed ashore. And then he listened. It *was* Lydia, he decided, approaching a grove where he found a human figure beneath a tree. Her dull, reddish hair fluttered in the breeze.

“Lydia? What’s the matter?”

“Kelpie.” Spotting the fairy, she rushed over and flung her arms around him.

“What? Is that earl bein’ nasty to ye again?” Feeling her tremble against him, he cautiously put his arms around her shoulders. The caution was necessary; he wasn’t used to dealing with humans he wasn’t about to eat.

“I can endure it no longer! I wish to return to Scotland!”

She felt desperately frail, striking Kelpie’s core with an affection the likes of which he had never experienced before. Eating people only satisfied his hunger for so long, but the comfort of Lydia’s touch never faded.

“Awright. So let’s go home.”

“But Edgar still refuses to call off our engagement. He plans to marry me against my wishes.”

“He’s a rogue through and through,” Kelpie growled, forgetting that he himself was guilty of the same.

“I simply cannot trust him. I know now that fairies—fairies like you—understand me far better than any human ever will.”

Kelpie brought his face closer to her chamomile-scented hair. He could sense fairy blood in her golden-green eyes. She had been blessed with the power of the fae. It was what made her a fairy doctor. Perhaps her eyes held a magic of their own. A sudden shiver raced up Kelpie’s spine.

“Lemme talk to the earl for ye, Lydia. If he still refuses to end the engagement, ah’ll tear his head off and—well, anyhows, ah’ll protect ye and make sure he cannae come anywhere near ye.”

“Do you mean that?”

He rather liked the thought of being relied upon. Lydia was being unusually endearing today, and he had no complaints when she leaned on him—something she wouldn't normally do.

"Have you still got that diamond?"

"Yeah. Ye want it?"

She responded with a small nod.

"I was gonna get rid of it." He hung the chain around her neck. It really didn't suit her, but nothing could satisfy him more than the smile she gave him. He had never seen her this happy.

All at once, Kelpie's vision twisted and Lydia vanished.

"Wha…"

A blinding flash of white light seared his retinas. Gradually, his vision returned to him. There was a young boy standing beside a tree a small distance away. It was the goblins' master.

"What the hell did ye do?!"

The boy grinned, holding up the diamond necklace. "Allow me to share with you this diamond's name. It is the Daydream. As with fairies, a gemstone's name represents its true nature. I merely drew out the power that dwells within it."

"Ye showed us a vision?"

"I didn't even have to do that. *You* dreamt it, or perhaps it was a manifestation of a deep desire. I did wonder what a kelpie was doing in London, but I see now that you are after that fairy doctor."

Kelpie glared at the boy. He was even daintier than the earl. It would take no time at all to slaughter him. If only he didn't possess the power of the fairies, Kelpie would have charged and gobbled him up at once. As it was, the water horse couldn't make any careless moves.

"Ye're fightin' against the Blue Knight Earl, right?"

The boy's face distorted violently at the sound of Edgar's title. "Yes. It is my duty to kill him."

"Kill him, ye say? How?"

"After making him suffer very, very slowly."

Kelpie had no reason to try and stop him, except for the fact that Lydia was so closely linked to Edgar. The water horse could sense this boy's connection to the fairies and could imagine him using them to his advantage. In that sense, he was even nastier than the stuck-up earl.

"Fine. But ye'll pay if anythin' happens to Lydia."

“Anyone who stands by the earl is my master’s enemy. The girl is no exception. If, however, you mean to say that they are going to part, I shall overlook her alliances. Any quarrel with you will only be a waste of my time.” With that, the boy disappeared.

Kelpie rushed over to the tree. There was a hole beneath a bush: a path dug by goblins. Was the boy already on his way to kill the earl? At this point, Kelpie’s only option was to get Lydia away from London—even if he had to force her. Transforming into a jet-black horse, he set off at a gallop.

The Goblin Labyrinth

“Hallo.”

Professor Carlton had been sleeping in his office at the university so that he could reorganize his lecture notes. The gruff greeting of a young man with curly black hair took him by surprise. He recognized the man, who had come through the window and was now sitting on the desk, as one of Lydia’s fairy acquaintances, daunting in both personality and build.

This was the first time they had properly interacted. The fairy’s entrance had been rather uncouth, but perhaps Carlton wouldn’t have minded so much had he not vaguely remembered that the creature had attempted to marry his daughter.

“Where’s Lydia?”

Pushing his round spectacles farther up his nose, Carlton began to gather up his scattered papers. “It is the middle of the night. I would wager that she is at home, asleep.”

“I looked and she’s no there. She loiterin’ around somewhere, mibbe?”

“Her ladyship is with the earl,” answered a new voice. Carlton watched as the young man approached his cupboard. The tourmaline crystals he kept there were rolling around in an unsettling manner.

“What’re ye doin’ here?”

The man pinched something and lifted it into the air, making the tourmaline float. “Her ladyship’s father has a collection of fine stones. This is a most comfortable spot for a mining fairy such as myself to spend his time!”

Carlton rested his chin in his hand, understanding that there was a fairy he could hear but not see. “Fine stones, you say?”

“See how detailed this granite is, sir!”

“Yes, I quite agree. I believe you and I would get on rather well indeed. I have found that even students of mineralogy are more inclined toward analysis these days and have little appreciation for the stark beauty of the minerals themselves.”

“Why, that won’t do at all! Minerals are all that is mystical about

the Earth itself! Jewels are wonderful, of course, but there is splendor to be found in every stone!”

Carlton gave an approving nod.

“Awright, so Lydia’s with the earl. But *where* are they?” The water horse violently shook the invisible fairy in his grasp.

“Please stop that at once! They are at the establishment, the one housing harems!”

“Harems?!” Finally realizing the situation was urgent, Carlton leaped to his feet. “What establishment?!”

“The earl has prepared a gorgeous room for her ladyship. I can assure you that their time spent together in that space will deepen their love!”

“Now wait just one moment! What is all this about a room?” It was the middle of the night. Lydia should have been in bed, and it was unthinkable that she was with Edgar.

“Harems? I know what those are! It’s where a lad traps his lassie so no other lads can steal her away!” cried the strange man.

“Is that right? I am so glad to hear it. That means there is no danger of anyone getting between the earl and her ladyship so long as she is kept there!” replied the invisible fairy.

“Where’s this harem thing, then?” the other demanded.

“The name is Madame Eve’s Palace. As for its location—”

“Show me.” He disappeared, leaving in his wake a wind that whipped Carlton’s papers into the air. Most likely, he had taken the invisible fairy with him, and the professor was left awestruck and alone.

As soon as his senses returned to him, Carlton rushed out into the corridor and went to see his assistant student in the reference room. “Langley! Where is Madame Eve’s Palace?”

“You wish for me to look up something else, Professor? Could I ask that you give me an order of priority for these things? I haven’t yet found everything you asked me for yesterday.”

“Consider this to be at the very top of the list!”

Only then did Langley look up. “Madame Eve’s Palace, was it?”

“I hear it is an establishment for housing harems. That is, similar to the inner palaces in countries where polygamy is legal. If my understanding is correct, the royalty and nobility of such countries may take whichever women they so choose to marry there.”

Langley recoiled slightly as his mentor placed both hands on the desk and leaned forward. “Oh, *that’s* what you’re talking about. The so-called harem palace, an establishment open to the upper classes, which might not even exist.”

“What can you tell me about it?”

“Isn’t it supposed to be in that lavish building at Charing Cross? No one has ever seen any high-class prostitutes entering or leaving it, and yet there have been sightings of dresses, ornaments…anything you can think of that a woman might need being brought into it. I have heard speculation that there may be women of high rank or women with…complicated backgrounds being confined there. Perhaps its patrons believe themselves sultans and are hiding their second or third wives away from society. All of this is pure hearsay, of course.”

Carlton staggered back from the desk.

“Why do you want to know about it, sir?”

“Oh, no reason in particular.”

What was Lydia doing meeting the earl in a place like *that*? A place where women were confined? He didn’t want to believe it, but Carlton wasn’t entirely confident in Edgar’s decency. Having said that, he knew that the earl was important to Lydia, for he considered her skills as a fairy doctor invaluable. It was something that set him apart from other men of his rank. Carlton also had the sense that he was the reason Lydia was still in the human realm.

By no means did any of that mean Carlton would allow his precious daughter to be someone’s mistress. If it became known to society that she had been damaged in such a manner, it would cause endless trouble for her future. The Carltons were not an upper-class family, but their good reputation went back several generations in their hometown, and all things considered, they did not feel that the gap between themselves and modern-day nobility was all that wide. Carlton could not sit back and do nothing while his daughter—whom he had worked to raise properly—and her future were at stake.

But what did Lydia think of it all? When that question popped into his head, Carlton found that his anger toward the earl was dampened somewhat. Perhaps he hadn’t been as strict on her growing up as he might have been, but she was still a kind girl at heart. In the eyes of society, which preferred ignorance and

obedience in women, she might have come across as a rather wild sort. But then, her mother had been much the same. That had caused men to give her a wide berth even after she'd come closer to adulthood, but it had never bothered Carlton. He would rather his daughter not be pursued by men who didn't understand her worth. For the same reason, he thought it likely that should she fall in love for real, she would follow her heart without seeking advice from anyone. The crux of his worry was thus: that Lydia might herself have *chosen* to become the earl's lover.

Thinking back, he had expressed discomfort over the rumors surrounding Edgar and his daughter, as well as the idea of her falling in love or marrying anyone. Naturally, it had been down to his egotistical desire to keep Lydia to himself, but perhaps if she felt he was averse to her finding love, she would find it all the more difficult to confide in him.

No. Carlton vehemently shook his head. Lydia was too young. She was still immature in several respects, and as reliable as she could be, she had limited experience with the world. A philandering earl would have little difficulty deceiving her. Lydia's feelings and the question of Edgar's decency aside, the earl was no fool. He would know that a whim would not suffice as an excuse for laying hands on Lydia. No matter which angle Carlton attacked the problem from, the earl remained at fault.

His mind made up, he returned to his office, snatched his jacket from its hook, and hurried from the building as fast as he could.

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The Nightmare was stirring. Lydia had drifted off to sleep and, before she knew it, been dragged into a terrifying dream. She dreamed she was trapped within the goblins' labyrinth, left alone to wander the dark tunnels. Sensing a presence immediately behind her, she turned to see Ulysses there. He held a knife to her throat and demanded that she hand over the black diamond. Then Edgar was there, explaining that he could not allow Ulysses to take the jewel. The boy concluded that the earl was happy to let Lydia die. That was the moment at which it felt like her body was being torn to shreds, and dizziness overcame her. Even after her "death," her dream allowed her to recognize that she had been killed.

Edgar apologized. Lydia was incensed. Did an apology excuse his sacrifice of her? But then, such a possibility had been eating away at her for some time. Edgar valued nothing more than exacting revenge against the Prince and avenging his lost companions. Why should he think anything of abandoning Lydia in the process? She had always known this would happen eventually. Every proclamation of love, every request to marry her had been an out-and-out lie. This was a terrible dream, and she was eager to wake from it.

She murmured a plea for help, at which she felt the moonstone on her finger glow to wash the nightmare away. The scene before her reset. Edgar was making a different choice. He was asking Ulysses to let her go, saying that he didn't need the diamond after all. Ulysses said that Edgar must die instead. The earl agreed, then pressed his gun to his own head. He apologized.

No…

Hadn't her moonstone, once belonging to a guardian fairy, freed her of the nightmare? Did that mean this was a good dream? It certainly didn't feel like it. Both outcomes were beyond horrible, and she would rather not be around to see either of them.

"Lydia."

In fact, that might have been her best option. It wasn't as though she *needed* to stay with Edgar. She had become involved with and engaged to him mostly by accident. She liked him and wanted to help him, but it was something of a stretch to conclude that these sympathies necessitated that they stayed together for the long term. He knew she didn't approve of everything he did, and that was why there were times he kept her at arm's length. Her sense of justice was very much common, and yet he had asked her to rebuke him when necessary. That was why he wanted her; he required her ordinary reason. Unfortunately, it was too much to ask.

So long as Lydia failed to understand him fully, to remain by his side would only strengthen her distrust of him. She would become wholly convinced that eventually, he would either sacrifice her or destroy himself. If her nightmares told of things to come, then leaving would be the best decision for both of them.

"Lydia? Are you all right?"

She woke up to Edgar's touch on her cheek. While she

recognized that she was finally free of her dream, it was difficult to perceive him as a part of reality. She found herself reaching out for him, trying to hold him as if to reassure herself that he was really there.

"It's all right. It was just a dream," he murmured.

Lydia let his fingers in her hair soothe her before she snapped back to her senses. "Oh, I... I'm sorry. My mind hasn't fully awoken just yet." She tried to pull back but found that her muscles had little strength in them.

"You don't need to wake up immediately."

The decision she had made in her half-conscious state came back to her. She ought to leave him. She didn't want to become his sacrifice, nor did she want him to become hers. And yet, now and then, she was struck by the sense that she didn't want to be apart from him.

"Get yer grubby hands off her!"

Though it shouldn't have been possible, there came a third voice. Lydia looked up to see a black horse launch itself from the nearby mirror.

"Kelpie!" she cried.

"Bloody goblins have dug holes all over this damned place. Anyhows, Lydia, let's get goin'." Having changed into human form, the water horse pushed Edgar to one side and yanked on her arm.

"Wait a moment! What about Edgar?"

"He cannae come with us. Ah've only got power enough to take one of ye, and that nasty lad telt us he'd leave ye alone if ye stayed away from the earl."

"By 'nasty lad,' might you mean Ulysses?" Seemingly vexed, Edgar got to his feet, but he made no move to stop Kelpie from lifting Lydia up.

"How should I know his name? I'm talkin' about the lad who's controllin' the goblins. He took that white diamond."

"Stop this, Kelpie! Let me down."

"No!"

"Edgar! Say something!"

"I should probably let ye know, Earl, that 'Ulysses' said he's comin' for ye. He went into the goblins' hole. I wouldnae wanna run into him if I was ye." With Lydia over one shoulder, Kelpie leaped into the mirror, giving Edgar no time to stop him.

Her vision went black. She found herself wondering whether Edgar had even *wanted* to stop this. Her cold had left her weak, so perhaps he thought she would hold him back.

Kelpie continued to race through the darkness. The wind blew past them furiously, and before she knew it, he had transformed into a horse and she was on his back, clinging to his neck. His soft mane brushed against her cheeks. She realized she was still wearing Edgar's jacket and the black diamond.

They were now traversing the closed-off space between the human and fairy worlds. Kelpie was breaking through the goblins' labyrinth. In a place swarming with wicked creatures and under the shadow of Ulysses's plot, Kelpie's back might have been the safest place to be. It struck her, then, that Edgar might have thought so too. She could only imagine that Ulysses had agreed to leave her alone because he was wary of Kelpie's power. He knew water horses were dangerous and not easily dealt with. This way, Lydia could protect the black diamond around her neck.

Had Edgar let her go merely to protect the diamond? Or had he meant it when he said that she was more important to him? The thought that his kiss might have been an act was too heartbreaking to bear.

This isn't fair, Edgar. Do you or do you not need me? She certainly didn't know the answer, but she *knew* she couldn't part from him without finding out.

As her resolve strengthened, the moonstone glowed faintly in the darkness. Gwendolen's ring was taking on light. It seemed to be sending a message: that Lydia was the guardian fairy to the new earl.

I am nothing of the sort. I am utterly disinclined to marry him. But she *was* his fairy doctor. And if he felt that he no longer required her, then he would have to tell her himself.

Lydia let go of Kelpie.

"Lydia?!"

She felt herself falling through the endless darkness, the pale light of the moonstone protecting her all the while.

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Left alone, Edgar approached one of the holes that had

apparently been dug by the goblins. Staying here would achieve nothing. Candle in hand, he decided that he would try entering the tunnel. It looked too small at first, but he discovered there was enough room for him to walk at full height. In fact, he had the sense that it was adapting to his size as he progressed. The craggy cave looked like it went on forever. When Edgar turned around, he could no longer see any trace of Madame Eve's Palace; there was a wall of rock immediately behind him. He understood then that a single step into the tunnel prevented him from turning back.

In which case, I have no choice but to continue on.

That was just what he did. No matter how far he went, he didn't encounter a single fork in the path. At one point, he marked the wall to the right with his knife. After continuing for some time, he came by the mark again on his left.

"Might this tunnel resemble a Möbius strip, I wonder?"

Edgar pondered whether he might have made a mistake in letting Lydia go, but it was too late to do anything about it now. It was as he was considering his options that he perceived a flicker of light in front of him.

Ulysses?

"My lord!"

The familiar voice rid him of his wariness. "Raven! I am glad to see you."

The boy immediately rushed over and knelt before him. "Forgive me, my lord. I thoughtlessly left your side and only now was I able to find you."

"Heavens, I have been through quite the ordeal without you."

"What happened, my lord?" Raven asked, his tone impatient but his expression grave. His eyes darted over his master as though seeking injury.

"I was left alone with Lydia, and she was dressed far too inappropriately. Not to mention her cold had weakened her constitution. Do you know how difficult it was to resist temptation?"

"Oh."

"I find that fever has the tendency to make a girl come across a good deal more seductive. The faint blush of her cheeks, the way her eyes glimmered as she stared at me… It was difficult to tell myself that she *wasn't* trying to seduce me. Only when I was

reminded of how she scratched me yesterday was I able to remain composed." Edgar stooped down so that he was at eye level with Raven, whose impassive expression had frozen in bewilderment. "Did you see it?"

"My lord?"

"Lydia's stomach."

The way the boy averted his gaze and said nothing pointed to a definite yes.

"Purge the memory from your mind." Though Edgar smiled thinly, he ensured that it came across as a command.

"Yes, my lord." Raven bowed his head.

"And here I was thinking I might be privy to something frightfully important." A bipedal cat in a necktie was standing behind Raven.

"Do not dismiss it so readily, Nico. While I might forgive my servant, any other man who may have caught sight of Lydia should be ready for me to gouge out his eyeballs."

"Where *is* Lydia, anyway?"

"Kelpie has taken her away from here. He informed me that Ulysses is also walking these tunnels. We witnessed the goblins chasing down Lord Barkston, so I think we may conclude that Ulysses had them dig this labyrinth around Madame Eve's Palace in order to entrap the marquess. He may as yet be unaware that we have entered the maze ourselves."

"I was able to drive Lord Barkston to his room—the one housing all those portraits—where I restrained him, my lord. However, it must have been part of the labyrinth, for the moment I left, I was unable to return," Raven said. Presumably, he had been found by Nico, who was now guiding him through the maze. What the cat was doing here was another question altogether, but it seemed that being a fairy allowed him to navigate these tunnels.

"Which way to the exit, Nico?" asked Edgar.

"I'm not sure there is one. Unlike Kelpie, I lack the brutish power to simply break a hole in the wall."

"It would seem that our only recourse is seeking out Ulysses." Edgar stood up. "Kelpie said that the white diamond has fallen into his hands. In which case…" He paused to think. "I believe I'd like to have a word with Lord Barkston."

"Is your lordship planning to use him?"

The earl hummed thoughtfully. “Raven, do you swear to trust me no matter what?”

“Yes, my lord,” his servant responded at once, though there was a question in his gaze.

“Then let us pay a visit to the marquess. Might you lead us there, Nico?”

“I should like to avoid running into Ulysses at all costs,” the fairy cat huffed. “Isn’t there a risk that he might be going to see the marquess too?”

“You will also be trapped in this maze unless he provides an exit. Isn’t that right?”

Though Nico put his hands on his hips and narrowed his eyes, he soon turned around and began to walk, tail swaying behind him.

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The goblins had formed a circle and were holding a banquet when Lydia fell into their midst. The room was poky and vaguely dirty, and it certainly didn’t seem to be a part of Madame Eve’s Palace. The goblins must have connected their maze to somewhere else altogether. They were half drinking, half dousing themselves in bottles of liquor as big as they were, croaking like frogs in their merriment. So drunk were they that they didn’t even notice Lydia until she got up and made to hide. A sudden hush fell over them, and the next thing she knew, several twisted faces had turned in her direction.

“Who are you?”

“How did you get in here?”

“I’m…” She faltered. “A fairy doctor. You ought not to get too close to me!” Unfortunately, in her current attire, she didn’t have the hawthorn she usually kept with her for warding off fairies. Nevertheless, the goblins backed away from her warily.

“A black gem!” one of them whispered suddenly.

Lydia hurriedly hid the necklace beneath her hands.

“Isn’t that the gem Master wanted?”

“It is?”

“What should we do?”

Sliding herself into the shadow of the hearth, Lydia removed

the necklace and hid it in the jacket's pocket. It wouldn't be enough to deter the goblins; she simply needed some way to deceive them.

Just then, there came a frail cry from the corner. "Help me!"

Lydia scanned the gloom till she came upon a boy, hunched in on himself and surrounded by goblins. His skinny frame and pale face were familiar to her: it was the foulmouthed boy she had met in Edgar's library. He looked up at her pleadingly and made to crawl toward her, only to collapse suddenly when his strength failed him.

Pushing the goblins aside, Lydia hurried over to him. "Are you all right? Master...Jimmy! Stay with me now."

According to Edgar, Jimmy had been captured by Ulysses. She tried to pick him up, but the goblins protested.

"Put him down!"

"Don't do that!"

"Ouch! Stop that!" she cried. One of the fairies had picked up a small shovel and was prodding her feet with it.

"The jewel..." the boy gasped. "They took me hostage...and wanted that diamond as ransom."

The goblins started chattering again.

"That's right!"

"That's what Master told us to do!"

"Yes! If you give us the jewel, we will give you the boy!"

Lydia hesitated. She wasn't sure what she ought to do. Directly or not, Edgar had entrusted her with the diamond. She couldn't hand it over to the enemy just like that. But she needed to ensure Jimmy's safety one way or another.

Ah!

Lydia looked down at the goblins as she got to her feet. She opened her palm, revealing a black, glowing stone. "This is what you want in exchange for the boy?"

"That's right!" they clamored and nodded.

"Very well." Lydia tossed the stone, and they scurried after it. In the meantime, she was able to help Jimmy up. "Come, quickly now. This is our opportunity to escape."

Just about managing to get him to his feet, she led him by the hand through the door. It didn't sound like the goblins were pursuing them, but she was determined to get Jimmy and herself

as far away as possible.

"Are you mad?" the boy muttered darkly, staggering as he walked. "Why would you give them his lordship's diamond?"

He was the one who had told her his kidnappers' demands. Lydia couldn't believe he had the nerve to speak to her like that, considering the situation.

"What I gave them was coal. It ought to take them some time to realize their mistake."

"Coal?"

There had been a bucket of it next to Jimmy. Lydia had covertly picked up a lump close in size to the diamond and shown it to the goblins, and they had openly agreed to exchange it for the boy's freedom.

"You tricked them?"

"Well…in order to save you."

The pair emerged into a dimly lit alley with buildings on either side. It was a dilapidated place indeed with its worn, crumbling brick and glass scattered over the ground. The windows that lined the buildings were uneven, their shutters and frames splintered and cracked.

However, they had not escaped the maze just yet; this place, too, seemed to be caught up in the twists of tunnels. Lydia stopped as she tried to catch her bearings, at which point Jimmy shook off her hand.

"Where is his lordship? I would have thought he was on his way to rescue me."

"Yes, he is. Everyone has been searching for you."

Jimmy frowned at her dubiously. "Did you *steal* the black diamond from his lordship?"

"I beg your pardon? What gave you that impression?"

The next thing she knew, he was threatening her with a glass shard from the ground. "You gained his trust, then managed to sneak it out of the estate."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"I had my suspicions that you were spying on him from the very beginning. Who *else* has the ability to see fairies but the man who kidnapped and held me captive?"

"Ulysses? No, I am not—"

"Give me the diamond—the *real* diamond. Do not think for a

moment that this pretense of rescuing me will work. You will *not* use me!"

"It is no pretense. You must believe me!"

"Who is to say you are not a fairy pretending to be human? The pieces fit, if we suppose you are working for *him*."

"No—"

"I will *not* be taken in!" Jimmy approached her, glass in hand.

She had no idea how to respond. But then, just like that, he stopped. He was being dragged away from Lydia by none other than Ermine.

"Cease this at once. Miss Carlton is no enemy to his lordship."

Taken aback, Jimmy let his arm fall loose in Ermine's grip. However, it seemed he was still far from trusting Lydia. "Why should I believe that? She is deceiving you too!"

Shaking his head like he was overwhelmed by confusion, the boy broke into a run. Ermine began to go after him, but when he turned a corner and vanished, she gave up and returned to Lydia. Pursuing him would mean abandoning the fairy doctor.

"Are you injured at all, Miss Carlton?"

"I am not, but I must ask: how did you find your way into this labyrinth?"

"I am not sure myself. I had just come to the area in which Master Jimmy was being imprisoned when I found my surroundings...twisting, I suppose. The alleyway, the buildings, even the air itself."

"That would be the fault of the goblins' digging. Wherever you were must have been drawn into the maze. Edgar and Raven are in these tunnels somewhere too, but so are Lord Barkston and Ulysses."

Ermine nodded quietly. "There were several members of Scarlet Moon searching for Master Jimmy apart from myself. No doubt they have been pulled in as well."

"Let us hope he runs into them."

"We ought to start moving ourselves. I daresay Lord Ashenbert will be requiring your assistance."



Will he really?

Jimmy's disparagement had left her entirely without confidence. Did her golden-green eyes and her ability to see fairies really disturb other people that much?

It matters not. I chose to stay here to carry out my duties as a fairy doctor, she reminded herself as she walked with Ermine down the alley. Her movements made the decorations on her attire rustle, and it was beginning to bother her. What did Ermine think of the way she was dressed? Did the servant suspect she had come to investigate Edgar's fidelity? And then there was the fact she was wearing the earl's jacket.

"I beg your pardon, Ermine, but I am not dressed in this manner of my own volition."

"I do not doubt it. I had assumed there was something of a palaver. That his lordship would lend you his jacket, however, *did* surprise me."

"It did? Why?"

"I would have thought his lordship would rather take the opportunity to admire you in that attire," Ermine remarked without any of the hesitation such a sensitive topic would normally require.

"I can only suppose I am not worthy of admiration," Lydia murmured.

"On the contrary, perhaps he was warding off the temptation to go beyond merely admiring you."

Irked, Lydia decided the subject required changing. As they continued through the tangle of alleyways, they were coming across more and more dead ends.

"The labyrinth appears to be shrinking," she remarked.

"I am afraid I'm not entirely sure what that means."

"It is as though the people within it are being led to its center." Likely because Ulysses was planning something there once everyone arrived.

While Lydia pondered this, a hole suddenly opened up at her feet. Ermine grabbed her hand immediately, but the ground was crumbling beneath both of them, and soon they were falling together.

They did not fall far. There was no real impact when they landed —Lydia's hands seemed to press softly against the ground—but

when she stood, the cold touch of a blade against her cheek made her stiffen.

Before them stood a pale-blond boy, grinning. “I have been looking forward to your company, my fine ladies.”

“Ulysses!” Ermine made to attack but stopped when the boy wrapped his arms around Lydia and pulled her back.

“I would warn you not to make a single move unless you want the earl’s woman to become a corpse. Ah, but perhaps you wouldn’t find that so disagreeable.”

Goblins were moving in to surround them. They were chattering as they kicked and trampled over Lydia’s feet. Her earlier deception had angered them. If there was anything to find comfort in, it was that Ulysses didn’t seem to know that she was concealing the real diamond.

“If it is a hostage you seek, you may have me. Relinquish Miss Carlton immediately,” Ermine said.

“You may play at being a hero all you wish. I mean it entirely when I say I *will* kill her. Then you can return to the earl in floods of tears, crying that you did all you could to save her. I am sure he would forgive you.”

“What utter claptrap,” Ermine spat.

Ulysses smirked and clicked his tongue. “Yes, you are right. The earl could lose a hundred lovers and would still not lay a hand on you. After all, you have been defiled by the Prince.”

His words were not enough to make a dent in Ermine’s impassive expression. Though she, Edgar, and Raven had all been the Prince’s slaves, Ermine’s suffering had been unique among them. Lydia’s heart clenched.

“Walk,” Ulysses commanded Ermine, his knife still pressed against Lydia. “You wish to see the earl, do you not? I can only assume, Fairy Doctor, that your wandering around in his jacket means he is somewhere within the labyrinth. And so I shall lead you to him.”

Ermine’s eyes were fixed on Lydia anxiously. She seemed to be considering her options, wondering whether she really ought to do as Ulysses said and risk putting the fairy doctor through a frightening ordeal.

“You need not consider me, Ermine.” Lydia couldn’t allow herself to be coddled. Not when they were dealing with someone

like Ulysses. Though she didn’t know the full extent of how the three had suffered under the Prince, she had not remained here just to be a burden to them.

Seeing that Lydia was undaunted, Ermine nodded and set off in the direction indicated by Ulysses.

Stronger than Diamond

“It would appear that this is it for me, Jean-Mary.” Barkston looked up at the portrait facing the chair he was tied to. “I betrayed the Prince. Should Ulysses find me, he will surely kill me. If only I had both diamonds. When you appeared wearing the Nightmare, that is what I believed you wanted of me. But it seems I merely fell into the enemy’s trap.”

The noblewomen in the portraits surrounding him each held a slight smile on their lips as they looked down at him. Otherwise, they were silent.

“Are you certain that marrying the duke is truly what you wished for, Jean-Mary? I was sure that you couldn’t have forgotten me, but while I intended to save you from him, I suppose you must have thought me a fiend rather than a hero.”

His efforts had probably been utterly meaningless to her. He had never been anything more than a suitor selected by her parents, and now she ignored him, showing that he wasn’t even worth her resentment. Despair welled up ever more intensely within him. It hadn’t been long since Jean-Mary had reciprocated his love here in this room. But he had been pulled from that dream the moment he had recognized it as an illusion, and now the portraits remained silent.

“The Barkston name is ruined. The time will come for the Prince to reach these shores, and a new revolution will begin. As His Royal Highness’s servants, my house was waiting for that day; now it will mark our end.”

Another voice spoke from behind him. “Am I to take it that the Prince was to select your house as one of his closest during his seizure of Britain? Not only is that beyond question at this point, but it would guarantee the downfall of your name. What do you suppose would happen should this nation learn of your conspiracy?”

Barkston turned to see the blond earl standing there. “If you resent me that much, why not kill me?”

If he had to die, this was not a bad place for it. This man was a

survivor of the Blue Knight Earl's lineage, a name that stood firmly against the Prince. Ulysses had told Barkston little aside from cautioning him about Edgar Ashenbert. The marquess nevertheless had the sense that the earl's history was more complex than it seemed at first glance. Ulysses, too, likely knew more than he had let on.

"Why kill you when there is still so much I require of you?" the earl asked.

"Whatever you require, I have no reason to comply."

"This is a fine opportunity for you. Swear your allegiance to me, just as you, or perhaps an ancestor of yours, swore loyalty to the exiled man who claimed he was the Prince of Wales."

This young earl was Jean-Mary's son—the child with the thick royal blood the Prince sought, and the child whom the Prince had failed to take into his grasp.

"The man presently in America is destined to die. At my hands, no less. *I* am your prince, not him."

As Barkston looked up at him, he was reminded of the old belief that the right to the throne was imparted by God. It was for that reason that, even now, there were those who demanded that the royal lineage retain its sanctity. The earl's blond hair seemed to have a holy sheen to it, his smile a well of benevolence, and his ash-mauve eyes a light of wisdom. If these were features born of high-noble blood, then perhaps the Prince had inadvertently designed one even greater than himself when attempting to create his replica.

From how the marquess stared at him, open-mouthed, Edgar deduced that the man had lost his defiant will. The earl had Raven loosen Barkston's ropes, and when the latter made to stand, Raven restrained him and forced him to kneel.

"What am I to do?" Barkston asked.

"You will retrieve the Daydream from Ulysses. If it is your belief that it belongs to the Prince, then you will understand that it therefore belongs to me." Edgar let his tone fall to a cold whisper. "I shan't stop you if you wish to be reunited with Jean-Mary afterward. Whether she will remember you or not is another matter, of course."

From rage or terror, the downcast marquess was trembling

slightly. “You are asking me to die.”

“Your life will act as testament to your loyalty. A fair price to pay, I should think. One life to salvage your lineage. Think carefully, now. You concealed the Daydream and deceived Her Majesty—a serious crime indeed. You may have had the opportunity to become a hero should the Prince usurp the throne, but you are a traitor to him too. Your final hope lies with me. Your death alone would satisfy neither the Prince nor Her Majesty, whereas it *would* be enough for me.”

“You are asking the impossible. There is no way for me to retrieve that diamond from Ulysses.”

“I see. Well, then I suppose Britain will soon find herself short one marquessate.” Edgar paused. “In fact, I shall see to it myself.”

Barkston studied the earl carefully. He wore the face of a man who had gathered the courage to lock eyes with a demon. “You are just like the Prince in every way. You are cut from the very same cloth as the man you ought to despise.”

“In that case, you must have realized by now that you have only one option.”

In order to manipulate someone, it was necessary to invoke fear within them, drive them into a corner, and then dominate them. It was the method favored by the Prince, and one Edgar knew well. He had invoked it in his resistance, and it constantly left him with the sense that he was becoming more and more like his enemy. He tried to remind himself that he was merely putting familiar knowledge into practice. It had no effect on who he truly was. However, as much as he worked to believe it, the doubts continued to haunt him. It was like a poison that gradually ate away at him. Regardless, he forged ahead to crush the final line in the marquess’s defense against his manipulation.

“Are we quite clear? It is your duty to deliver the Daydream to my palace.”

“Where is this palace?”

“I am referring to Buckingham Palace. I can think of no safer place for it, can you? If its delivery results in the restoration of the Duke of Sylvanford’s reputation, I shall forgive you everything. Your house will know glory under my rule. I suggest you inform them where their loyalties will lie from now on.”

Edgar had no idea whether Barkston had taken his promise to

kill and replace the Prince seriously. The marquess would have understood, however, that believing those words spoken by Bonnie Prince Charlie's successor was his only option. His wish, paired with that of winning over Jean-Mary, had to be the restoration of a British monarchy with deep ties to his own family. He seemed to decide that Edgar was the man who would fulfill his impossible vision; his eyes softened as though witnessing a dream. Then, his head slumped. Still kneeling on the floor, he brought a stiff hand to his chest.

"It will be done, Your Royal Highness…Prince of Wales."

"Go."

Edgar watched Barkston get up and stumble away. Once the marquess was gone, he was overcome by a wave of revulsion and slumped down onto the sofa.

"Are you feeling unwell, my lord?" Raven peered at him anxiously, possibly unnerved by the exchange he had just witnessed.

"No, I'm all right." Edgar himself was anxious. He was worried that his personality was already being invaded by that of his loathsome enemy. The foolishness of claiming the title of the Prince of Wales and Buckingham Palace had just struck him. Although he carried the blood of Bonnie Prince Charles, it was no more significant than the blood of the ancient princes and princesses from the Sylvanford side of his family.

However, when the thought struck Edgar that the Prince, a monarch of pure evil, might also answer to a great destiny linked to the royal family, the earl began to doubt whether total freedom was even possible. Having said that, his sole desire was to seek revenge against his enemy. At this point, even his earldom mattered little to him, let alone his royal blood. He had obtained the title of Earl of Ibrazel, and that ought to be enough. By the same token, he had dear Lydia. As long as she stayed by his side, he had nothing to be concerned about.

"I wonder whether Lord Barkston will be able to steal the diamond from Ulysses," Raven said.

"God knows. Still, he leads a house with a long and honorable history; I am sure he will manage *something* if it means delaying his inevitable death. Even if he fails to procure the diamond itself, he ought to have understood what he might do to earn my

satisfaction.”

Due to a lack of evidence, the Duke of Sylvanford had never been punished for supposedly stealing the royal diamond. The suspicion, however, remained attached to his name. Even if Edgar managed to bring the truth to light, he had no way of proving himself the duke’s son and reclaiming the title. Nevertheless, he wanted to protect his late father’s reputation.

Sensing another gaze on him, Edgar turned to face in its direction. The gray cat sitting in the armchair was watching him through narrowed eyes.

“Everything you just witnessed was an act, Nico,” said the earl.

“You had me convinced you were planning to become a prince yourself and start warmongering.”

“I would be a fool to solicit war without a military.”

“Ah, so if you had one…” Nico muttered, shaking his head. “I still only trust you about as far as I can throw you, you know.”

In truth, Edgar was close to sharing the fairy cat’s sentiment. “Are you saying you would disapprove of my union with Lydia?”

“If you must know, I never once believed you were sincere in wanting to marry her.”

“I am sincere.”

“Yet you do not believe your marriage will ever be realized, isn’t that right? You simply wished to indulge in a peaceful fantasy for a spell.”

“I wish for it to become more than fantasy.”

“Pray tell, then, why you have yet to lift a finger to that end? It will take more than the odd sweet word hurled in Lydia’s direction, even if she does decide to start lending them her ear,” Nico went on quietly, but firmly. “You speak endlessly of marriage without having given the slightest thought to her feelings or future. Too much more of this, and one will have to start pitying her.”

What was this of lifting a finger, of making an effort to be wed? Edgar had always thought that Lydia’s reciprocation was all it would take for them to marry.

“Is your point that I ought to abandon my quest for revenge?”

“Asking that of you would be meaningless. I cannot imagine you will become a decent man for as long as you live.”

Even a cat thought him a scoundrel. Edgar supposed he ought to let his spirits drop and undergo some serious reflection, but he

quickly gave up on the idea. Indeed, it would be fruitless. He could not win his fight with decency. At the same time, he understood that it would be difficult for Lydia's feelings to develop from sympathy into love if he stayed the way he was.

Nico jumped down from his chair. "I think it's time I step out for a bit. He's making an awful racket."

"Who is?"

"Kelpie. I can well see that a horse would struggle with all the twists and turns in these tunnels."

"Kelpie hasn't left yet? Then what's happened to Lydia?"

"I would like the answer to that myself, and that is why I'm going. If I could be sure he was just roaming about by himself, I would stay here."

What if Lydia was in danger? The sound of digging was still audible from deep within the walls. The room seemed to be twisting around them to a greater degree than before. Lydia had mentioned that this space lay between the human and fairy worlds, and it looked like something strange was happening. Edgar's immediate thought was that Ulysses was drawing near.

***

Carlton had been arguing with the doormen at Madame Eve's Palace for at least thirty minutes. Not being a member, he was denied entrance, and the doormen wouldn't even tell him whether Lord Ashenbert was affiliated with the establishment, let alone whether he was inside. Carlton pointed out that, were the rumors true and this was a harem house or somewhere women were being confined, then it would constitute criminal activity. But even then, he was only asked politely to leave. There was not a chink to be found in the establishment's armor.

"Suppose my daughter is in there?"

"There is no chance of that, sir."

"I should like to be allowed to confirm that for myself."

"If you would like to become a member, sir, it will require the fee and an introduction from an established patron."

Both doormen were rather brawny and possibly trained to use force when necessary. As polite as they were, their presence alone was daunting. If a man as lithe as Carlton was to try and break

through, they would merely pick him up and throw him out again.

Just then, the doormen's attention turned to a parked carriage nearby. One of them rushed over to open the door, only for a plump man with a black beard to step out.

"Welcome, Mr. Slade."

Carlton knew that name. He rushed over to the other man, opening his mouth before the doorman could force him back. "Mr. Slade? As in, the art dealer?"

The man turned around and eyed Carlton suspiciously. "That's right."

"My daughter is acquainted with Mr. Paul Firman, the artist. I know about you through him. Ah, my name is Carlton. My daughter is…under the employ of Lord Ashenbert."

"Oh! Might you be the fairy doctor's father?"

Slade had caught on quicker than Carlton had expected.

"My daughter has yet to return home. I caught word that she might be here."

"Miss Carlton? Here? I sincerely doubt it," Slade said, almost too quickly.

"Regardless, I would like to be sure of that for myself. Preferably as soon as possible. I wondered whether she might not be with his lordship."

"In that case, I can take a look for you."

It was quite possible that Slade's frequenting of this establishment was linked to the earl in some way. If that was so, Carlton wasn't sure his word could be trusted.

"Might I be allowed to accompany you?"

"I'm afraid that may not be entirely possible."

"Lord Ashenbert is inside, yes? I would like to speak to him directly. The rumor I heard suggested he had taken her—an unmarried woman—into this establishment with him. Whether she is here or not, I cannot let such a rumor go untested," Carlton pressed, putting his foot down.

Just then, there came an explosive sound from within the building. The doormen turned around in a panic before rushing inside. Carlton took the opportunity to go through the main doors, but there was nothing about the wide entrance hall or the stairs and their golden handrails that suggested anything was amiss. The chandelier, however, was swaying perilously. Slade beckoned

to Carlton. It seemed he wanted to investigate but was too anxious to go alone.

“This way if you wish to see his lordship.”

The carpeted hallway had not a spare inch for the decorations that covered the walls and ceilings. Casting a glance at a golden statue with gemstones in place of eyes, Slade stopped before a large door. He knocked but received no response. Not wanting to wait in case the room was empty, Carlton placed his hand on the knob.

“It won’t open. Is it locked?”

“The doors here shouldn’t be locked.” Slade tried the door for himself, but he also failed to open it.

The men then tried to break it down, which proved successful. Their excess momentum sent them rolling into the room, whose chairs and tables were overturned, and whose wall was marked with a hole that ate into the plaster of the chamber next door. Even the ceiling was flaking and in a dreadful state. But there was no one present.

“What in the world?” Carlton murmured.

There came another great noise that rocked the building. Servants were bustling this way and that in a panic as Carlton made off in a mad dash for the source of the sound.

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Lydia moved forward, the goblins surrounding her. She followed Ermine, all the while feeling Ulysses’s knife against her back. A goblin was leading the way at the very front of the party. The lamp in its hand lit their path through the gloomy tunnel. They eventually came to a dead end, their passage sealed off by rock. The darkness made it difficult to see behind them, but when Lydia peered into it, it seemed that the space they had passed through was already gone. The goblin labyrinth was gradually growing smaller.

Ulysses jerked his chin toward the wall in front of them, and the goblin hit it with his pickaxe. The rock fell away, revealing a door. The male fairy doctor had Ermine open it. The room beyond was covered in portraits, all of them depicting Jean-Mary. The resplendent room with its high ceiling was clearly located within

Madame Eve's Palace.

This must be Lord Barkston's room, Lydia thought as Ulysses dragged her inside.

"Please do pardon the delay, Lord Ashenbert."

"I had begun to think I might just as well take my leave." Edgar was sitting, one leg over the other, on the room's central sofa as though he were the chamber's master. He looked at Ermine, Lydia, and Ulysses in turn, but the lack of change in his expression made it impossible to know what he was thinking. Raven was beside him.

"Really? Surely the significance of this occasion would call for a little more patience?" Ulysses said.

"I do believe I sent Lydia home."

"It appears she found herself lost on the way. Having run into her, I thought it best that she accompany me."

"I fell from the horse," Lydia offered after a moment's hesitation.

Edgar sighed. It seemed he had grasped her meaning but failed to understand her motivation.

Would he rather I had left? Lydia's heart sank slightly. Although she knew Edgar had let her go, she had wanted to believe he still needed her.

"If I am not mistaken, my lord, you are in possession of the Nightmare," Ulysses continued. "I know that you stole it and used it as bait to lure out Lord Barkston."

Lydia tensed. Perhaps she really shouldn't have come back. Edgar had seen her off to keep the black diamond away from Ulysses, only for her to return with it still in hand. Yes, he *would* require a fairy doctor to combat his younger adversary, but perhaps it was a fight that could have been avoided had she just stayed away. There was little she could do now, at any rate; Ulysses had her squarely in his grip.

"Let us not mince words. I will give you the diamond," Edgar said.

Lydia noticed Ermine and Raven exchanging a glance. She assumed that the earl would attempt to seize Ulysses as he was distracted by the diamond. He might have been able to succeed if this space were real, but it wasn't. Ulysses was master of both this room and the goblins. She had little doubt that he would crush

this place and escape the moment he had his hands on the diamond.

"No, Edgar! You mustn't!" she cried out in desperation. "I'm sorry for returning here so thoughtlessly. It seems that I always ruin everything no matter what I do. Perhaps it is the curse. Regardless, you must *not* relinquish the diamond!"

"Saucy wench," Ulysses snapped, pulling her closer to his knife.

Seeing her chance, Ermine jumped in, pulled out the blade concealed in her boot, and slashed at him. She tried to get in between Ulysses and his hostage, but he still had a firm grip on Lydia's arm, which kept her locked in place. The next thing the fairy doctor knew, Raven had come flying in. Ulysses was unable to react before the boy's knife marked his heart. Splatters of blood flew into the air. But then Lydia saw the space contort around her and Ulysses. Raven quickly withdrew. She and Ulysses seemed to suddenly appear some distance away from the pair of servants, though she hadn't seen them move. The only one wounded was Ermine, whose arm was seeping blood.

Ulysses laughed, and Edgar looked visibly shocked.

"Do you understand now, my lord? Any attempt to fight me here is futile. If you wish for your companions to cut each other to smithereens, however, be my guest." Ulysses let go of Lydia then, as though he had tired of her. There was an icy edge to his tone as he continued. "Where is the diamond? I suggest you procure it quickly if you do not wish for this room to become a tomb to four distinct corpses."

"You would have me believe that you would allow us to live even if we *were* to give up the diamond?"

"If you give it to me without a fuss, my lord, then you have my word that I shall spare *your* life, even if I spare no one else's."

"You seem to be under the impression that I value my life."

"Once we return to His Royal Highness, you will have nothing but gratitude for me."

Although Edgar was a traitor whom he ought to despise, Ulysses addressed the earl with all due reverence. Rather than his current status as an earl or his former status as a duke's son, it was his royal blood that linked him to the Prince that inspired Ulysses's respect. Whatever orders the boy had from his master, slaying Edgar as soon as possible was likely not among them.

In any case, Lydia struggled to think of a way to save everyone without losing the diamond. As Edgar helped her up, he brushed a casual hand over her jacket pocket, the one containing the Nightmare. He must have suspected it was there, given that it was no longer around her neck, and wanted to be sure.

He turned to Ulysses. “I shall do as you wish, but only if you spare Lydia.”

“Edgar? What are you doing?”

“You may do as you please, whether that be to kill me or to return me to the Prince. Lydia, however, has nothing to do with any of this.”

Even as their master failed to mention them, neither Raven nor Ermine said anything in protest. Lydia noticed then that Paul and a number of men, who she assumed were from Scarlet Moon, were standing at the door. The goblins’ labyrinth was shrinking, and the humans inside it would be led to this room, which meant Ulysses would be able to kill them all at once. How Edgar could ask for Lydia’s life to be spared despite that was beyond her.

“Allow Lydia to leave,” Edgar said. “Then I shall tell you where the diamond is hidden.” It seemed he was trying to sneak her out along with the Nightmare.



“And why should I believe that?” Ulysses countered.

“I shall leave it up to you whether to believe me or not, but should you choose the latter, the black diamond will forever be beyond the Prince’s grasp. Recall, if you will, that you failed to locate where I originally hid it.”

Lydia had a vague sense of what she must do should she manage to leave the labyrinth with the precious diamond in her possession. Despite that, she would then need to bargain with Ulysses to ensure everyone’s safety. She wasn’t confident she could even manage it. What if he killed them before she could do anything about it? It was a dangerous gamble indeed. Even then, there was no guarantee the young man would accept Edgar’s conditions in the first place. And Lydia wasn’t even sure she ought to do what the earl wanted her to. She watched their enemy with bated breath, uncertain of almost everything.

“Do not be deceived!” Jimmy had stepped forward from his place beside Paul. He must have met up with Scarlet Moon. His cry was loud and desperate. “That witch is a trickster, Lord Ashenbert! She is working with the enemy! You mustn’t let her leave with the diamond!”

The boy knew she had the Nightmare. Because of his outburst, so too did Ulysses. Edgar immediately tensed and pushed her behind him. However, it wasn’t Ulysses who came charging at them, but Jimmy.

“Give his lordship his diamond back!” He grabbed at Lydia with far more strength than a boy his age should possess.

“*Don’t*, Master Jimmy!” Edgar shouted.

Lydia just about managed to push Jimmy away, only for the boy to locate and pick up a nearby paring knife. He glared at her as he wielded it.

Ulysses laughed loudly. “Oh, I *see*! Quite right, Jimmy. Kill her and protect his lordship.”

“Lydia!”

She turned at the sound of Edgar’s voice, only to find Ulysses standing there. He hooked his arms under hers from behind to restrain her, then turned them both to face Jimmy and his knife. It was at that moment that she saw the boy exchange a smirk with the young man holding her.

Something is amiss… Isn’t Master Jimmy a member of Scarlet

Moon? It was just as the thought struck her that she noticed the boy's eyes had turned red. They were the red eyes of a fairy dog. *He isn't human?!*

"You're a black dog?!" she cried.

As though disappointed he had been seen through, the boy clicked his tongue before transforming into a canine.

"You are Ulysses's stooge!"

The large, fuzzy dog turned its unnerving, fiery gaze on her. Black dogs were said to possess an ungodly strength that allowed them to tear a person limb from limb. She couldn't let it get close.

Ulysses gave it a command before she had time to search her knowledge. "Kill her."

The fairy dog kicked off the floor and leaped high into the air. There was no way for Lydia to escape now. Just then, a second shadow dove past in front of her. The black horse was even larger than the dog it clashed with.

"Kelpie!"

The impact from the fairies' colliding magic sent Lydia falling against Ulysses. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of a necklace chain in his frock coat's pocket. It was the white diamond necklace. She reached for it and snatched it as she pretended to right herself. When Ulysses fought to get it back, she frantically tossed it into the air. It went flying in a direction that was far from anyone's reach. A number of the men from Scarlet Moon started to scramble for it, but someone else managed to snatch it up first: Lord Barkston.

No, not him!

The marquess rushed out of the door, but there was no escaping this maze. Perhaps that was why no one bothered to pursue him.

Kelpie and the black dog were glaring at each other once more. Then they leaped at each other, the tension snapping. Edgar used the distraction to grab Lydia by the arm and pull her away from Ulysses. However, the rampaging horse's tail had whipped up a wind that flung them both into the wall. It was at that moment that a gray creature tumbled down right in front of Lydia.

"Nico!"

"If you're going to fight, at least have the decency to let me down first," the fairy cat stuttered as he stood up on unsteady feet.

It seemed he had been clinging to Kelpie's mane mere moments prior. Running his paws through his fur and straightening his necktie, he looked at Lydia. "Ah. I'm not too late, am I?"

"Where have you been, Nico?"

"What?" He turned to Edgar. "I wonder if you would be so kind as to save me the explanation?"

"I would, but I'm afraid there may be more pressing matters at hand," the earl said quickly, gesturing toward Kelpie.

The black dog had righted itself and was now growling threateningly in the water horse's direction. Then, it leaped again. Dodging the canine's fangs, Kelpie sank his teeth into its front leg, wrenched it clear from the floor, and sent it hurtling through the air.

"Don't be thinkin' that a pathetic mutt can stand up to *us*!"

Kelpie's teeth had torn through his opponent's flesh. The dog crashed into the wall, the impact sending reams of blood spraying in the opposite direction. For a split second, it transformed back into Jimmy, but then vanished. It must have lost consciousness.

Lydia barely had time to feel relief before the room started to shake violently. The walls and ceiling curved and creaked like they were about to collapse at any moment.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, my lord, but I remain the victor." Ulysses stood up. Despite his words, the loss of his dog seemed to have soured his mood. "This space and everyone inside it will soon be buried. I shall have to return later to dig up the diamonds, but I suppose beggars can't be choosers."

The boy vanished just as the room was filled with a powerful pressure that caused the windows to shatter. Edgar rushed in to protect Lydia's head. A fragment of glass fell and grazed him only slightly, but it was enough for her to lose her composure.

"Whatever shall we do?!"

"Am I right in thinking the goblins' tunnels are vanishing?"

"Ye are," Kelpie said calmly. At some point, he had transformed back into his human form. "Give us Lydia. I should be able to save her if it's just the one person ah've gotta think about. And it's no like I care about the rest of ye."

No one raised any objections to his suggestion. Only Nico opened his mouth, muttering something bitter about honesty being a virtue.

“No!” Lydia grabbed Edgar and refused to let go. Her mind was still struggling to make sense of things even now. “I refuse to go by myself! You must save *everyone*, Kelpie!”

“That’s no possible.”

“And you, Edgar, do not let go of me! It is too early to resign yourself to your fate. You cling to me constantly when I do not desire it, and I swear you will regret it if you choose to break that precedent now!” She wasn’t even sure what she was saying.

Edgar looked bewildered for a moment before letting out a small sigh and gently putting his arms around her shoulders. She was calmed in an instant, enough to realize that there must be a way of saving everyone.

“God’s sake, ah’m no powerful enough to open the exit alone.” Kelpie looked around, finding Ermine and Raven. “Ye got any spare magic knockin’ about, ye two? Mibbe that’s askin’ too much of a seal and a bird.”

The pair returned his stare blankly. Ermine had only recently been reborn as a selkie and still barely thought of herself as a fairy. Raven may have been possessed by spirits, but he was otherwise human.

Kelpie clicked his tongue. “Awright, so my only other option is a useless cat?”

“‘Useless’ is an overstatement. I am simply not built for brute strength.” Nico kicked the water horse’s leg. Kelpie responded with a light kick of his own, which sent the fairy cat flying into the air. His reflexes allowed him to land safely on all fours, but he still huffed angrily as he got back up on his hind legs.

Lydia suddenly noticed that her moonstone ring was glowing faintly. *This belonged to the Blue Knight’s guardian fairy…* “Oh, that’s right! Gemstones carry magic within them too. Perhaps this might be helpful in some way.” She held out her left hand.

Kelpie gazed at the ring thoughtfully. “It’ll probably break.”

“I would rather we all be saved than keep it in one piece. Come, Edgar, remove it from my finger.”

The earl seemed conflicted. He shook his head. “I wouldn’t want to annul our engagement.”

“That should hardly be a concern at present!”

“Whether present, past, or future, that ring is proof of our love. It wouldn’t do for it to break.”

Love? It was clear that arguing with him would be fruitless.

"If any gemstone will do, then how about this one?" He pulled the black diamond from the jacket Lydia was wearing. "It likely possesses enough magic."

"But that diamond means everything to you!" she protested.

"Did I or did I not say that I would rather Kelpie have this diamond than you be stolen away from me?" He tossed it to the water horse. For a split second, the gemstone seemed to stir in Kelpie's grip.

"Ye sure, Earl?"

"Quickly. We haven't much time."

"Mind it doesnae drag ye in now."

The next second, the diamond shattered, releasing the darkness within. It took the form of a large black panther, which sprinted through the air alongside Kelpie, who was back in his horse form. For a split second, Lydia thought she caught sight of a young, dark-skinned girl mounted on the creature's elegant back. It sped upward, leaving the nearby humans well alone.

Was that Jean? The girl who protected the black diamond for Edgar's sake?

Kelpie and the Nightmare broke through the ceiling and flew out into the night air. It was no illusion—stars glimmered weakly behind a thin layer of clouds. It was undeniably London's night sky. A cool air blew around them as the pressure, creaking, and shaking that had plagued their surroundings disappeared.

"The exit has been opened," Lydia murmured. "We are back in the human world." The wind chilled her, and she suddenly lost her balance. Unable to stand, she collapsed to the ground. The dark sky stretched out above her.

Perhaps it had been Jean's sentiments dwelling within the diamond that had protected Edgar from the full brunt of its curse. She watched as a small, heartfelt emotion seemed to separate from the Nightmare's back and ascend up toward the heavens. With that, she let her consciousness slip past Edgar's voice as he called for her, his arms as he tried to help her up, and his hand as it touched her forehead. She paid no heed to the urgency in everyone's voices as she was pulled into darkness.

A Quiet Premonition

Having collapsed as a result of her high fever, Lydia had no way of knowing that her father had rushed into Madame Eve's Palace, which was now fully situated in the real world once more. Nor did she remember the scatterbrained, nonconfrontational man forcibly snatching her away from Edgar and taking her out of the establishment. She had no knowledge of how he had despaired over her state of dress or of how Paul, upon coming to visit her, had tried to explain to him that Madame Eve's Palace was not a palace of harems, and that Lydia had been there in her capacity as a fairy doctor, to little avail. Even three days later, when her fever had finally broken and she was able to take some soup, she hadn't spared a thought for the events in the labyrinth or what might have transpired between her collapse and return home.

Her moonstone ring was not on her finger, but on her bedside table. She was just glad that it had been removed, not knowing that Edgar had hurriedly taken it from her when her father had burst in, and given it to Nico to take home.

Lydia was gazing through the open window when a gust of wind rushed in, bringing with it a few leaves. A short moment later, Kelpie appeared.

"Ye able to get up yet, Lydia?" Crouching, he fit himself through the frame to let himself into the room. "Why're ye still in bed? It's jist a cold, right? Ah'm thinkin' London's climate's gotta be poison or somethin'."

"I am feeling much better," said Lydia, sitting up.

Kelpie approached her, put his arms around her head, and pressed her against his chest. "Aye, yer fever's gone down."

It was a rather uncouth way to handle a lady, but the water horse's touch made Lydia feel like she was being cleansed by the brooklets that ran down from the Scottish Highlands. It was cool but comforting. He was a fairy too, meaning Lydia subconsciously had fewer reservations around him than she would a human member of the opposite sex. She didn't feel the need to push him away, and let him hold her, although that might have been due in

part to her current lack of strength.

"Oh, that's right. You rescued us, Kelpie. Thank you."

"Eh? Och, well, I wouldnae have been able to do it without that jewel. Anyhows, ye're very docile today."

"Am I?"

"Normally ye'd be all uppity and go on a long rant afore sayin' thanks."

That was because kelpies were members of the Unseelie Court, so it was unwise to show any weakness before them. This one, however, seemed to be an exception and generally safe. In any case, Lydia's mind was presently too hazy to think about anything complicated. In that moment, she was completely defenseless.

"Is it a bad thing to be docile?"

"Naw." Kelpie pushed a hand through his dark curls in an uncharacteristically bashful fashion.

"My request was a selfish one, and I am incredibly grateful to you for heeding it. It is because of you that everyone came home safely."

"Aye, it's a bloody wonderful thing that *everyone* is safe."

When Lydia had asked Kelpie to save everyone and not just her, she had been clinging fast to Edgar. The water horse remembered this, leading to the sarcasm in his response. Sarcasm that she missed. She was genuinely relieved that no one had been harmed, something that was reflected in the innocent way she smiled at him.

"That's the same smile," he said, referring to the one he had witnessed from the phantom Lydia created by the Daydream.

"I'm sorry?"

"Aye, and savin' that obnoxious earl has put a much bigger smile on yer face than when I offered ye that diamond," he grumbled.

"I wouldn't think too much of it," she stammered. "I'm not especially interested in diamonds, you see."

"'Sawright. I think I jist wanted to see ye smile anyhows." Kelpie grinned and tousled her hair before disappearing.

There was a knock at the door then, which was presumably what he was avoiding. It was the housekeeper, and she was looking especially stiff and stoic. She was there to announce the arrival of Masefield.

Her Grace is here to see me? Lydia quickly put on her dressing gown, debating with herself whether she ought to get out of bed or not.

"Please do not get up on my account, Miss Carlton. I came to wish you well. To make you push yourself would simply not do."

"Oh, well, I am feeling much better and it's only a cold, Your Grace." In the end, she remained sitting up as she bowed her head. "I am humbled by your concern, madame."

Masefield sat down gracefully on the chair the housekeeper had pulled up for her. "I have heard that colds are rarely serious. However, there was something I wished to ask you."

Lydia looked up, suspicious that Edgar had made another request of the duchess.

"Were you lured into Madame Eve's Palace and made to…dress up, shall we say?"

"Lured? Well, I wouldn't put it like that, but…in a way, I suppose I found myself there by mistake."

"That is not what the rumors say. You were there during the gas pipe explosion that destroyed a portion of the building, weren't you?"

Lydia nodded, gathering that a gas explosion was the accepted explanation.

"There are witnesses who saw how you were dressed when you were brought outside. Society is eager to know the identity of the girl held captive within such an establishment. Fortunately, it was nighttime, and no one recognized you. These things are often exaggerated, so I don't suppose you are in danger of being identified at this point, but I would like to make clear how much of a risk you exposed yourself to."

Lydia had started to break out in a cold sweat. Though the harems at Madame Eve's Palace were not formed of living women, society had no way of knowing that. Anyone who knew she had been there would likely conclude that she was a woman of ill repute. There would be no chance of her marrying if a rumor like that spread.

"While I realize this might be meddlesome of me, I ask that you heed my words regardless. There already exist rumors that Lord Ashenbert has been frequenting that place, and Professor Carlton visited me to discuss your relationship with his lordship

immediately after the incident. The timing was almost too convenient, you understand."

"He did?"

"When I brought the matter up with his lordship, I was informed that you and he had been there on fairy-related business. I understand that Mr. Firman and his lordship's servants were also present, but I must nevertheless state my disapproval of bringing the woman one hopes to marry to such an establishment."

"Excuse me, but what precisely did my father ask you about, madame?"

The duchess put on a troubled frown. "Do bear in mind that your own feelings in this matter must be respected. You see—"

It was at that point that Lydia became distracted by a pair of voices from the hallway. If she wasn't mistaken, they belonged to Edgar and her father. They seemed to be having an argument at the front entrance that was loud enough to travel up to the second floor. In spite of the fact that Masefield was still talking, Lydia left the bed and approached the door. It sounded like her father was trying to turn Edgar away.

"I am told that Lord Ashenbert has been coming to see you every day, but that Professor Carlton has yet to let him up." The duchess leaned against the door and peered out toward the stairs like a girl eavesdropping on her parents. The pair listened to the commotion together.

"Forgive me, my lord, but I am not yet in a fit state to discuss things with you at all rationally. I would ask that you take your leave, because I would hate to do or say anything that I might later regret." It was rare for her father to be so stubborn, and it really drove home how much of a scandal the rumors might have caused.

"If nothing else, might I be allowed to know Miss Carlton's condition?"

"Her fever has broken. Your lordship need not be concerned for her health any longer."

"I would like to offer my sincerest apologies." The men weren't visible from where Lydia and the duchess were standing, but as Edgar's shadow on the wall bowed toward that of her father, a strange thrill ran through her.

“You have done nothing to apologize for. It was Lydia’s prerogative to carry out her work in this instance.”

“On the contrary, I feel I must bear some of the responsibility.”

“Well, yes. Illness aside, it was rather irresponsible to take her somewhere so dubious.”

“Indeed. And for that, I would like to apologize as well.”

“It is a matter of her future, you see. I know nothing of the types of women whose company you keep, my lord. I daresay you have experience dealing with the aftermath of such relationships, whether the women in question were married or not. Every nobleman possesses the skill he needs to cover up a scandal. I’ve heard that the women they tire of are sometimes married off to any Tom, Dick, or Harry who may pass by as a solution. I certainly hope you are not scheming to impart such a fate on my Lydia.”

“I can promise you, Professor, not once have I done anything inappropriate with her.”

Lydia supposed such things were subjective.

“I don’t doubt it. I am probably just imagining things… Ah, my lord, I fear I am insulting you. This is precisely why I thought it imprudent to speak with you. Let us end this discussion here, as it has already become fruitless.”

“Your concerns are quite understandable, sir. However, I—”

“The reason I have held my silence thus far is because I trusted Lydia and believed she would not be drawn in by your flirtatious nature. Now that it has come to this, however, I am reminded that she is still very much an inexperienced child. And you, I fear, are still too young to properly consider the effect your actions have on the reputations of others.”

Lydia suddenly realized that every muscle in her body had tensed. *Edgar is not at fault.* He had tried to keep her away from Madame Eve’s Palace. It was her own childish naivety that her father alluded to which had gotten her involved.

“Miss Carlton is a valuable employee of mine, and while it is true that I have openly shown affection toward her, I must object to the notion that I am attempting to ‘draw her in.’ In the event that my feelings might be reciprocated—”

“That is quite enough. Whatever your lordship might be about to say, I do not wish to hear it, nor do I wish to think about it. Regrettably, I find it most difficult to trust you.”

Edgar fell silent. Any attempt to continue his line of reasoning would only make the professor less amenable to his argument.

After a long silence, Carlton muttered wearily, “I ask that you allow Lydia to rest a while.”

“Please elaborate, sir.”

“I am sending her back to Scotland. My lord, under your employment, are there any dangers that Lydia might face that fall outside the remit of a fairy doctor?”

Edgar seemed to be groping for a response. Afraid he might concede her father’s point, Lydia found she could sit and watch no longer. She was running down the stairs before she knew it.

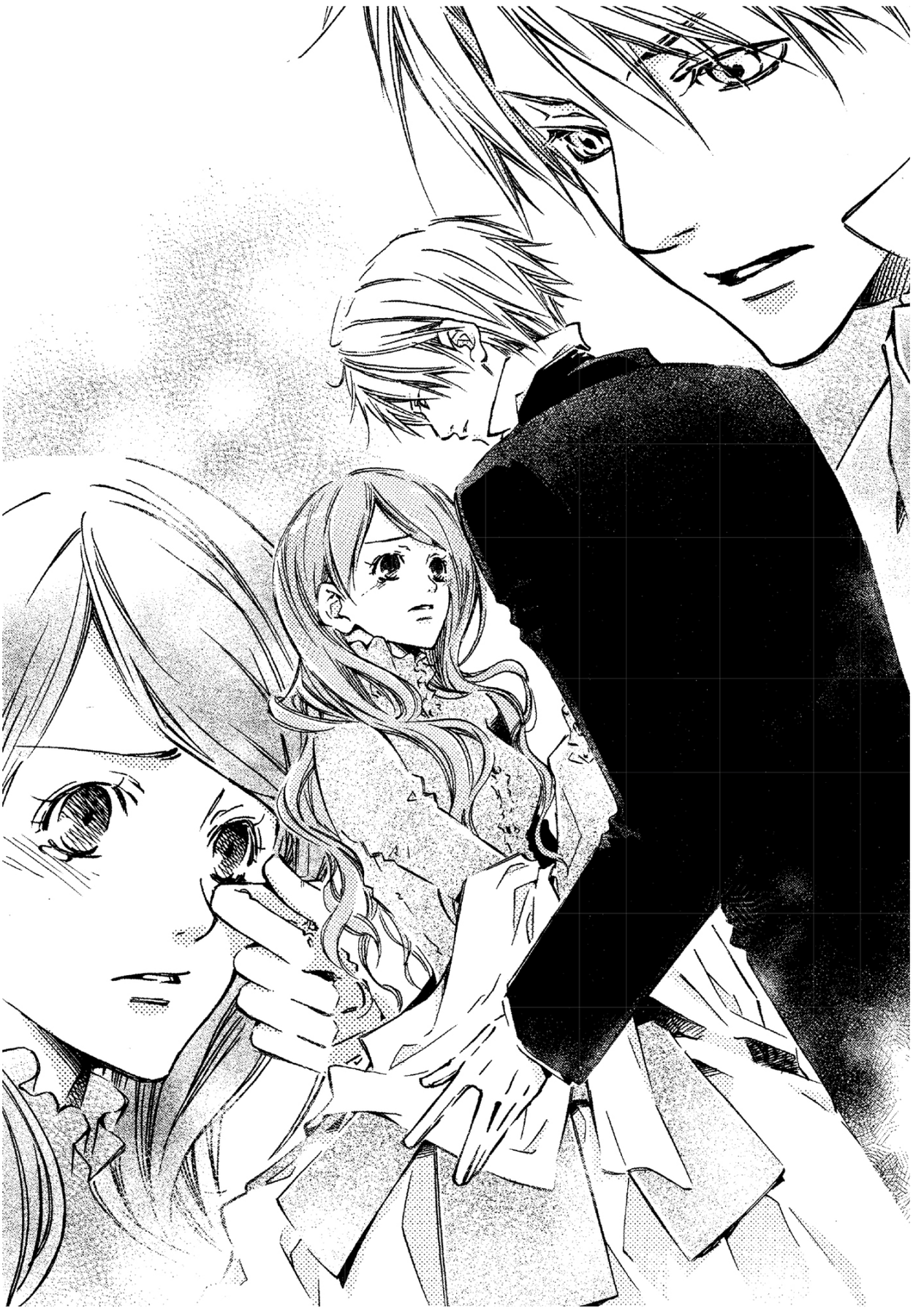
“You are mistaken, father! None of this is Edgar’s fault! I went to that establishment of my own volition!” She staggered, and her father quickly caught her before she could fall. “I’m sorry. I am entirely at fault. A fairy had me wear those strange clothes. It had nothing to do with Edgar. He tried to send me home, but I *chose* to stay. I knew there were wicked fairies about, and I felt that leaving would be unacceptable given my post,” she cried, desperate to convince her father. “I must emphasize again that Edgar is not at fault! Please do not blame him for any of this!”

“Yes, I understand, Lydia. But you must have been aware of your own inexperience at the time. You still have much growing up to do if you cannot carry out your duties without causing grief and trouble for others.” He looked at Edgar. “You think so too, my lord, do you not? Would you not rather Lydia resume her work when she is a little older?”

The troubled earl looked at her like his heart was being shredded into pieces. And yet he seemed to be having a hard time finding a rebuttal to her father’s argument. Lydia walked up to him. Her mind was a jumbled mess, her emotions unstable. She was crying, but she didn’t quite understand why. The clearest sentiment within her was her fear that Edgar might say he didn’t need her.

“Am I no longer required at your estate, Edgar? Will you tell me to leave London? I am well aware of my lack of experience. I know how much trouble I have caused. If not for Kelpie, I would have been utterly powerless, and now you have lost the black diamond. Despite it all, I did the very best I could.” She faltered. “Please do not say that you do not need me.”

“Lydia…” Edgar brushed his fingertips over her cheek, wiping away her tears. It did not feel affected or unnatural in the least; nor was it unwelcome.



The duchess had made her way gracefully down the stairs. “If I may, Professor, I do not believe that Miss Carlton is as childish as you make her out to be. Indeed, one will find plenty of adults who become so absorbed in their work that they struggle to consider much else.”

A perfect example, Lydia’s bewildered father scratched at his mop of hair.

Masefield smiled warmly at Edgar and the fairy doctor. “Lord Ashenbert?”

The earl returned Lydia’s anxious gaze, relief drawing his own lips into a slight curve. Then, he took her by the hand. “I would surely be beyond help if not for you.”

Relieved, she felt the tension drain from her limbs. As she leaned into Edgar’s arms, she began to wonder if she hadn’t gone too far with her words.

It’s the headache… I am merely out of sorts.

“It wouldn’t do for Miss Carlton’s condition to be aggravated by all this. Would you be so kind as to escort her back to her room, my lord?” Masefield asked.

“Certainly. Please pardon the intrusion, Professor.”

Carlton’s nod was somewhat absent-minded. Edgar offered Lydia his arm and began to walk her up the stairs.

“Were you trying to have Lord Ashenbert tell Miss Carlton to return to Scotland? I did not take you to be so unkind, Professor,” the duchess said once they were gone, although there was a hint of amusement to her tone.

Embarrassed, Carlton redirected his gaze to the floor. “I did not have much choice. Still, I feel very much the villain after my own daughter pleaded with me so, with tears in her eyes, no less.”

“Fathers are the natural enemy of any couple in love. I daresay you have learned that quite thoroughly yourself.”

“To try and claim otherwise would be dishonest,” he admitted. Having eloped himself, Carlton had always intended for Lydia to choose her future husband freely. He now realized that he was suffering from a bad case of sour grapes. Still, the duchess seemed to be implying that Lydia and the earl had fallen in love. Personally, he couldn’t see it. “His lordship merely sees Lydia as a novelty because he is unused to girls of her disposition.”

“Yes, that may well be true. At this point in time, at least.”

But not for all time?

“I must apologize, Professor. After all, you came seeking my advice on how to have Miss Carlton terminate her contract with his lordship in an amicable fashion…only for me to step in and render your efforts useless.”

“Not at all, madame. I fear I acted in too high-handed a manner. Any further and I might well have hurt Lydia.” Carlton looked at the earl, who had come down the stairs. The fact that he had not dawdled and returned almost at once was likely a show of consideration on his part.

In this country, the average gentleman’s stature differed according to his class. Noblemen and women tended to be slender and attractive, but this earl seemed to possess something beyond that. No doubt he could flirt with any girl he wanted and have her fall for him, and Carlton suspected this was one of those rare occasions where Lydia was not the exception. His daughter had previously mentioned that she would like to marry a man like her father. It wasn’t as though Carlton had taken those words all too seriously, but perhaps they were even further from the truth than he thought.

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Three days later, Lydia had fully recovered from her illness and returned to her office at Edgar’s estate. In fact, as her condition improved, she had come to regret the neediness she had displayed in front of him.

“Please do not say that you do not need me.”

Every time she remembered her words to him, it felt as though her body were being wrung out like a sponge. She wondered whether Edgar remembered them too. If he did, hopefully he had dismissed them as nonsense borne of an illness-addled mind. Though the embarrassment was enough to make her want to stay home, she knew that work would have piled up in her absence. Besides, after the lengths she had gone to to defend Edgar, she couldn’t very well give her father the impression that she was reluctant to see him, so she had left the house that morning with a purposeful spring in her step.

Now that she was holed up in her office, however, she let out a heavy sigh.

"My lady, I would advise you never to wear such improper attire again," the coblynau informed her lightly. "The earl has laudably said that he will refrain from dressing you up after his own tastes." His lack of concern was rather cheeky, given that he was the cause of much of the trouble Lydia had suffered.

"Oi, Lydia, have a look at this." Nico held out a newspaper to her. He had arrived at the estate some time earlier and, as usual, was enjoying the tea prepared for him by Tompkins. It seemed he had found a drinking companion in the coblynau, although Lydia couldn't recall them being especially friendly before.

"This isn't another one of those contemptible tabloids, is it?"

"No, it's *The Times*."

Lydia stepped over to fetch the paper from him. On the front page, she caught sight of the word "Daydream" printed in large font. She was reading before she knew it.

The royal family's hundred-carat diamond, the Daydream, stolen eight years ago during its passage from Rome to Britain, has been returned to Buckingham Palace. The diamond was delivered with an anonymous confession from its thief. The writer claimed to hold a personal grudge against the Duke of Sylvanford, who was originally tasked with returning the Daydream to British soil.

The article went on to say that the thief's identity was still unknown. However, Lydia found an unrelated report in one corner of the paper stating that Lord Barkston had been killed in an accident. Apparently, it was a case of spontaneous discharge as he had tended to his hunting gun. She found this hard to believe. Neither Raven nor Ermine had pursued the marquess when he had made off with the white diamond. Presumably, Edgar had already struck a deal with him. Or indeed, something a little more complex than that. The earl knew how to get the better of others, how to obtain their dirty secrets to dominate and manipulate them. When he wanted to control someone, he likely became as a king, if not a god. Supposing he'd had the marquess commit suicide after returning the diamond? It made Lydia doubt how well she really knew him. Was remaining in his employ truly a good idea? Still, there was a small corner of her heart that believed the manipulative villain was just a role he played and had little to do

with his true nature.

“Good morning, Lydia.”

She grimaced, the look remaining on her face as she turned to face Edgar. Nico’s article had distracted her from putting on the composed expression she had been practicing since early that morning.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Much. Thank you.”

He strode toward her, taking her hand in his even more casually than he usually would. “Being without you for so long made my heart ache.”

He must be the only man in London to whom three days is a long time.

“Let me see your face.” Sweeping her hair out of the way, he pressed his palm against her cheek. Why was he being especially forward today? His ash-mauve gaze was tender as he smiled at her, and she had no idea how to react. “Thank you so much for returning to me, my darling Lydia.”

She looked away, too embarrassed to maintain eye contact. “You’re welcome,” she stuttered.

“Do you know how utterly elated I was to hear you say that you wished to stay with me?”

So, he *did* remember. She supposed she was the fool for thinking he might ignore her words. Edgar pulled her by the hand into his embrace, making her body stiffen and her mind flounder even more. Slipping an arm around her waist, he peered into her face from up close. She could only hold on to his morning coat as she tried not to touch him directly.

“I said nothing of the sort.” Lydia caught the scent of his freshly washed shirt. At the same time, she had no idea that the chamomile potpourri she used would rub off on him.

“Perhaps not in those words, but the sentiment was there.”

“No, it…” She cut herself off. Yes, she had been expressing a desire to stay with him, just not in the way he was trying to interpret it.

“Ah, to have my love requited at last! Let us announce our engagement as soon as possible so that we may prepare to be wed.”

Lydia swallowed. If she let him get too ahead of himself, he

would have the plans firmed up before she knew it. Panicking, she somehow managed to find the strength to push him away. “You are mistaken! I knew I still had work to undertake as your fairy doctor, and so I decided that I couldn’t return to Scotland yet. Besides, I was under the weather! My fever had only just broken, my mind was in a haze, my emotions were hither and thither, and in truth I do not recall exactly what it was that I said.”

“You do not recall? You told Professor Carlton that you so desperately wanted to marry me that you were willing to elope if he did not give his permission. That you had already allowed me to kiss you and therefore would be unable to marry another man.”

“Now, I am certain I did not say *that*!”

“Then I suspect you *do* remember after all.”

She decided to concede that portion of the argument. “Claiming that I allowed you to kiss me is an exaggeration. You said yourself that what you did couldn’t be considered a kiss.”

“I see. In that case, I shan’t hesitate when faced with the next opportunity.”

Lydia’s fever was threatening to return. Chuckling at the way her cheeks flushed, Edgar sat her down in a chair.

“I’m sorry. Please do not be angry with me. I did not mean to tease you.” She feared he was now displaying a false sense of modesty to lower her guard. “When you tried to deflect the responsibility for what happened away from me, I found myself hoping that you might be beginning to fall for me as I have for you, even if only slightly.”

He looked somewhat dejected. No doubt he was attempting to draw her in again. “Was it mere hubris on my part? If not, I ask that you at least permit me a kiss on your hair.”

I know better than to fall for that! And yet, when Edgar scooped up a lock of her hair, his inquisitive gaze cast down at her, she made no move to protest. Though she did feel cheated when his kiss landed on the hairline by her temple rather than the ends of her hair, the pang of loneliness in his subsequent smile stopped her from saying anything. The earl’s plan had ended in success this time, but the more battles he fought, the more pain she seemed to sense from him.

“I saw Jean,” she said suddenly. Edgar looked a little nonplussed. “A fragment of her feelings for you remained in the

black diamond. She truly adored you, didn't she? Perhaps you did hold dominion over her heart, but her death was not forced by your hand. As young as she was, her desire to protect the man she loved was very real. That was what led to her sacrifice." Though Edgar's smile was unhappy, there was also a calmness to it. Lydia's heart began to thump, but, determined not to be distracted, she continued. "And I must apologize to you for failing to notice Master Jimmy's true identity. As a fairy doctor, I ought to have been more perceptive."

"*I* should have noticed. But, to be frank, I am relieved that Ulysses did not actually kidnap a helpless child."

Lydia herself was relieved that Jimmy's berating of her was inspired by his master rather than anything else. At the same time, she supposed she ought to reflect on how she might learn from the experience. Having her insecurities provoked shouldn't have been enough to cloud her judgment.

"I need to be keeping more of an eye out. It would seem that Mr. Slade and Scarlet Moon came under the fairy's spell. It planted in their minds the belief that Master Jimmy had always been among them. Ulysses took advantage of our lack of solidarity, but in a way, that ought to make it easier to compromise going forward."

"If I may voice one concern, Edgar, it is that although the black diamond is gone, I fear the Nightmare inside it may live on. When a gemstone builds up that much power, it has the potential to create something new. There are cases of jewels being outlived by that something, which has taken the form of a spirit."

"Does Ulysses know that?"

"I do not doubt it."

"I wonder whether the Prince sought the Nightmare—the spirit—that dwelled within the diamond rather than the jewel itself."

The Daydream was probably safely under lock and key with the royal family. There was a risk, however, that Ulysses had already taken control of the black diamond's spirit.

"But fear not," Edgar said, playing with a strand of Lydia's hair again, "for my fairy always brings me good fortune."

Why exactly did I decide to stay with him? Now that she thought about it, this entire ordeal had given her the perfect excuse to get away from him. It hadn't been too long ago that she would

frequently yearn to return to Scotland, and yet she had just wasted a golden opportunity to do so. Her work was one reason she had stayed, but she was starting to realize that it hadn't been the *only* reason. *I wonder...*

Lydia pulled back from Edgar, freeing her strand of hair. As it fell to her chest, however, it seemed lonely somehow, as though it missed the touch of his hand.

By sending Ulysses to Britain, it seemed that the Prince was attempting to lay the groundwork for the more occult components of his machinations. At present, his fairy doctor most likely had more pressing duties to attend to than deciding whether or not to take Edgar's life. That being the case, Lydia's help would only become more essential as time went on. And for Edgar, that was cause for concern. On his own, he was ill-equipped to deal with fairies and black magic. When they had been pulled into the separate dimension of the goblins' labyrinth (supposing that was the best way to describe it), Kelpie had been the only one with the means to rescue Lydia.

Fairy doctors built a bond of trust with the creatures, earning their cooperation to help solve a variety of problems. As much as she lamented her inexperience, Edgar thought she was quite the impressive doctor, given she had Kelpie's trust. As far as he was concerned, they had not been saved thanks to the water horse, but because of Lydia's knowledge and bravery in her profession. Having said that, he was beginning to feel conflicted about needing to depend on her from now on.

"Do you suppose, Raven, that I shall be able to protect Lydia?" Edgar asked. He had been mulling things over alone in his study when his servant arrived with a bundle of letters. "I do not want her to become a sacrifice. But I *do* want her near me. I require her skills as a fairy doctor, and more than that, her presence helps me to feel at ease. Being with her allows me to breathe more easily than I ever remember being capable of before. That is why I have been persevering in my attempts to capture her heart."

Raven was standing at attention as he listened. Edgar himself was struggling to process these conflicting emotions, so he had no doubt that his servant was completely puzzled.

"Lydia gives me what I need. But what can I give *her*? Keeping

her with me exposes her to nothing but danger. Not only do I lack the confidence that I can bring her happiness, but the stability of my own future is in doubt. Given the circumstances, is there anything more selfish than wishing for her hand in marriage? And yet, I do not possess the courage to let her go. I am at a loss."

Whether Raven understood or not, Edgar relieved himself of his mind's burden. He recalled what the duchess had said when they had left the Carlton household: that she had been intending to persuade him to dismiss Lydia. However, since the fairy doctor herself had expressed a desire to continue working under him, Masefield had instead chosen to pacify Lydia's father.

"When I thought that Lydia might be starting to fall for me, even just a little, I was, of course, overjoyed. But I also grew afraid. I realized that I have yet to pay much thought to what responsibilities I might have toward her as a gentleman."

"My lord, you have my complete devotion. I swear I shall protect Miss Carlton, so I ask that you do not turn your back on your desires."

Edgar's head shot up. His servant's response had taken him by surprise. "Have I *ever* ignored my own desires?"

"It has only just struck me that you might well have done. Is it not true that you have given up on the idea of *real* love for the sake of our fight? At least, that will become the case if you cease in your pursuit of Miss Carlton."

"I can name quite a number of women I have loved."

"None whom you loved for very long."

"For various reasons. Often because my infidelity was exposed…" As he spoke, he recognized the common point in—and perhaps cause of—his pattern of relationships. He was invariably relieved when his lover left him before she could suffer beyond recovery as a result of being with him. He let out a heavy sigh of understanding. "You may well be right."

Why is it that I am the only one who seems incapable of personal growth? Edgar gazed down through the window at Lydia, who was picking herbs in the courtyard. It was only now that he realized he was beginning to fear her involvement with him.

Afterword

You might have noticed by now that gemstones feature in every volume of this series. This time, we have the queen of all jewels, the diamond. The cliché is that it's a symbol of eternal love, but since this one was cursed, I'm guessing you weren't expecting too much in that department. What's that? The subtitle claims the diamond is imbued with love? Well, *technically* it was... (hopefully you'll let me off with that!)

Anyway, starting with Edgar, this series has a lot of characters who are members of the aristocracy. You might be surprised to find that you have a sense of familiarity with nobility as a concept. It's a system that doesn't exist in Japan anymore, but there are plenty of stories out there that feature it, hence the familiarity. That's why I didn't think there would be any readers out there who had never heard the word "earl," so I took the liberty of using it in the series title! But, thinking about it, there are several popular alternate readings for the hakushaku ("count" or "earl" in English) kanji, including *aaru* (as in earl) or *roodo* (as in lord). You may be thinking, "Well, how do you read the series title then?!" so I'd like to take this opportunity to briefly explain some things. If you already know this, please feel free to skip over it.

The order of hierarchy in British nobility, from top to bottom, goes like this: duke, marquess, earl, viscount, baron. Beneath that we have baronets and knights, but apparently they aren't (strictly speaking) nobility. Now, when you address or refer to people of these ranks, you have to use their proper titles. In English, you can politely refer to a commoner as "Mr.," for example, but this can't be used for nobility. In movies, you often hear "sir" being used. This can be used when addressing baronets and knights. "Lord" is used for marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons. If you are speaking to a woman, "Lady" is to be used in place of "Lord." A duke is referred to as "His Grace." While we're at it, a prince (addressed and referred to as "denka" in Japanese) is referred to as "His Royal Highness," and the queen as "Her Royal Majesty."

Therefore, hakushaku (as in the position) is to be read as *aaru*,

but when an earl is being addressed, it is to be read as *roodo*. I hope that makes sense. Having said that, there can be exceptions to the above cases depending on context. It seems there are subtle differences in meaning depending on how “Lord” is affixed to a name or an official title, or whether it comes with a “the,” but I’m not an expert, so I hope you’ll give this author a little leeway there.

On top of that, Edgar is addressed in various ways in the work. Officially, he should be addressed as “Lord Ibrazel.” But given how peculiar the name of his territory sounds, it seems that it has become customary to call him “Lord Ashenbert” instead. There are some nobles who hold several titles, so there are probably lords who take the title of earl and affix it to their family name in this way.

When you start speculating about these things, you might find yourself enjoying aspects that have nothing to do with the actual story, lol. There are probably other parts of the narrative that wouldn’t strictly be correct in English, but I hope you’ll understand that I’m establishing context and relationships between the characters using the nuances present in the Japanese language.

By the way, did you know that Edgar had the right to be referred to as “Lord” on his birth? Because his father was a duke, he would adopt the title below that, or the second-highest title possessed by his father, as a matter of custom. Either way, he would be addressed as “Lord.” That’s everything I have to say about the peerage for now. I hope it helped you feel more engrossed in the setting.

I am hugely grateful to Asako Takaboshi-sama for once again lending her wonderful illustrations to this volume. Your drawings always have me looking forward to seeing the book in its completed form. Thank you to all my readers, and thank you for sticking with me through the afterword. I hope you enjoyed this volume, and I look forward to meeting you again in another afterword.

Mizue Tani, July 2005

Bonus Translation Notes

Welcome, everyone, to another selection of translation notes for *Earl and Fairy*! Each new volume brings a ton of stuff we can talk about, probably more than we'll be able to cover for the entire series length! As always, if there's anything you'd like us to cover specifically in these sections, please don't hesitate to drop us a line in the discussion forums.

Titles

Something that's always relevant in translating light novels and other media is titles. This goes for both chapter titles and the subtitles that come with each volume (e.g., for this one, it's: *A Cursed Diamond Imbued with Love*). In both cases, you want the title translations to be snappy, but this is especially true for subtitles. Not only do they help to sell the book, but the cover designer only has so much space to work with when fitting the subtitle on the front. Japanese is (generally speaking) a more compact language than English, so the Japanese subtitle can often fit more information into its subtitle than the translation. That's why we have to be selective! What are the most important points to get across?

Probably the best examples of this are volumes three and four. The Japanese subtitle for volume three was: プロポーズはお手やわらかに (puropo-zu wa oteyawaraka ni). As literally as possible, it is: please make your proposal gently (which sounds a bit weird as a subtitle in English, like it's addressing the reader. Not so in Japanese). The last half of the subtitle (oteyawaraka ni) is somewhat of a stock phrase, meaning "please be gentle" (sometimes: "go easy on me"), but it's really the *o* and the *ni* that turn it into a request. Two tiny syllables that would need to be translated by a couple of words at least if we wanted to keep the nuance. The most important part of the subtitle, however, is the "proposal"—the romantic part, of course! In Japanese it gets put right at the beginning, which helps to emphasize it, but in English

it comes at the end. Translating the subtitle as “A request for a gentle proposal” might have been slightly more accurate, but at the cost of taking some punch away from the proposal itself. Trying to take all these factors into account, we decided to go with just *A Gentle Proposal*.

Similarly, volume four’s Japanese subtitle has one syllable doing a lot of heavy lifting: 恋人は幽霊 (koibito wa yuurei). As literally as possible: The Lover is a Ghost, where “the,” “is,” and “a,” all come from the “wa” in the middle there. It also comes across as a bit stilted and “translated” when left like that, like the person looking at the cover is supposed to know who “the lover” is referring to. That’s why we went with *The Spectral Lover*. It still conveys that there is a lover and that they are ghostlike in nature. Plus, it sounds like a title you expect to see on the cover of a book! As you can see, it was way easier to keep close to the original meaning and make a good title here compared to volume three. Translating titles comes with its own specific set of limitations that can make it both fun and challenging, but we always do our best!

The Aristocrat in the Room…

Japanese is pretty easy when it comes to writing nobility. You can mostly just stick a title on the end of a name and use polite speech to have your character address an aristocrat correctly. In English, however, there are whole spiderwebs of rules to follow. Without repeating what is already stated in the afterword, most nobles will be called “Lord” or “Lady [territory],” i.e., Lord Sussex, and it is only the children that will be called by their family name. In the team’s experience, most light novels with nobility systems will only use family names for their noble characters. *Earl and Fairy* is a bit of an exception, likely because it’s following the British system rather than the Japanese system. So we know that Edgar is the Lord of Ibrazel (territory), for example. There is also the Duke of Sylvanford. However, in most cases, noble characters are still presented with their surnames only, such as Barkston or Walpole. That is why we made the decision early on to go with “Lord [surname]” as a form of address, even if it isn’t strictly correct, because it’s as close to their proper titles as we could get without knowing their territories. Note that this is before the case of Edgar

himself came up in the afterwords!

Duke and duchesses are slightly more complicated, because they cannot be addressed with “Lord” or “Lady.” Usually, they would be referred to as the “Duke/Duchess of [territory],” and in this case, it’s not possible to substitute their surname as you do with lower ranks. This causes issues, especially with the Masefields, who are a duke and duchess, but whose territory we don’t know (Masefield is the surname). So sometimes we have “the duchess, Masefield” or similar in the prose, which might come off a little awkward. If you didn’t notice it up till now, though, that’s a good sign!

By the way, for various historical reasons, the Japanese nobility system that’s often used in light novels maps one-to-one with the system we’re used to in the west. In other words, each Japanese rank has an equivalent English translation. Had the stars aligned a little differently, the Japanese system might have come out with its own unique ranks, a different number of ranks, etc., making the lives of light novel translation teams way more difficult when deciding what terms to use. It’s an interesting point to consider!

Tidbits (with Examples!)

Just like last time, we’ve got a few tidbits to let you in on some of the smaller decisions that go into translating light novels. Let’s begin with a bit of a funny one (that might just be us!): sometimes when translating, a line will end up rhyming. Given how funny brains are, this can sometimes be distracting, especially when the scene is supposed to be serious! If this happens, and it sticks out, a minor rewording or reordering might be in order. Here’s a quick (made-up) example:

“He’s dead,” Edgar said.

It’s hard for your brain not to read that in a sort of rhythm, isn’t it? But if we do this:

“He’s dead,” said Edgar.

It immediately sounds a lot better! Incidentally, one of the chapter titles in volume five is *A Dream in Aquamarine*, which *almost* rhymes but we decided to stick with it in the end. Mainly because it’s not an outright rhyme, and partly because there aren’t that many good synonyms for dream that don’t change the

meaning too much. But it did give us pause!

Another one (which you may have heard of before) is the use of ellipses and stutters. Japanese uses them far more commonly than your average English novel. Some teams will leave them in more than others, but often we try to render them as prose instead. For example, a "…" at the start of some dialogue can be turned into: "Lydia paused." It's not that we want to erase ellipses in every instance, but their overuse can become distracting, so we fall back on these strategies if it's getting a bit too much. Stuttering too, might become "Lydia stammered," for example. Before it was pointed out to me (Alexandra, translator) by Tess (editor), I hadn't even thought twice about it. But then the next (English-language) novel I read, I realized there wasn't a single stammer to be found, and it honestly blew my mind a little bit! On past projects I had used them, generally whenever the Japanese did, but going forward I've been more careful not to go overboard. Usually, though, a team will have different preferences. Stuttering tends to be more accepted in light novels than original English works, and even more so in visual novels, where you have to consider that the player can hear the Japanese voice lines.

As our last little example this time, we have a line from the wonderful Edgar: "僕のリディア、会いたかったよ" (boku no Lydia, aitakatta yo; lit: My Lydia, I wanted to see you!). Lydia responds (internally) with: "僕の、は余計よ" (boku no, wa yokei yo; lit: The "my" was unnecessary). Now, calling someone else "my [name]" sounds a little wonky here in English, doesn't it? Usually you'd expect there to be an adjective in the middle there (the first thing that comes to mind is "dear," as in: my dear Watson). Of course, the point here is that Edgar sounds like he is claiming Lydia as *his*, which she doesn't take kindly to (for some reason!). In English, we decided on "darling" as our adjective, seeing as it fits Edgar and the audacity of the line. Aitakatta, which is literally "I wanted to see you," is more often than not more naturally translated as "I missed you." So Edgar says: "How I missed you, my darling Lydia," while her reaction was translated: "*I am nobody's darling!*" where we managed to keep her objection to his possessiveness. But of course, she couldn't overlook the use of "darling," either!

Snappy comebacks are an interesting topic in and of themselves, because a literal translation tends to make them

come out flat and awkward: the very opposite of what they should be! But that's a subject for another volume.

That's all we've got time for at the moment, but there are still a ton of topics we didn't get to, so this definitely won't be the last set of notes. We hope you enjoyed volume five and are just as excited as we are for the volumes to come!



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Earl and Fairy: Volume 5
by Mizue Tani

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