
6
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
The Changeling Princess


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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 Anguish of the Unfaithful

Greater London attracted every sort of person one could care to think of, from every corner of the world. One could find high-quality items as easily as poor, genuine articles as easily as imitations, and even fake goods more elaborate than the real thing. Yet strangely, at least from the outside, the area seemed to boast that everything within could be taken at face value. Its people were divided into classes based on their birth and upbringing. It didn't matter how they might grasp for fame and wealth. Climbing the ladder was nearly impossible. It wasn't like the New World, where a millionaire might go bankrupt overnight, or a penniless man might suddenly strike gold. In an era when change was hurtling ahead at a dizzying pace, with locomotives running on the tracks and gas lamps lighting the streets at night, the Empire remained astute in protecting its class-based society as though such change didn't exist.

Lotta had never been to a country like this before. The drizzle and evening gloom blended together to gently smudge the colors on the street around her. There was little evidence of splendor borne of the wealth that was piled up here, and while some might claim proudly that it was more important that the area show its vast history, to Lotta, the whole place just looked timeworn. She wondered whether she looked like a beggar; it had been a week since her arrival, and the late autumn was colder than she had expected. She had quickly acquired a patched overcoat from a secondhand clothing store, which she was now huddling beneath. Her hair, tied up quickly atop her head, was starting to fall loose. But then, she had never cared to fuss over her appearance.

Lotta stood at a street corner, waiting still as a statue as she puffed on a rolled cigarette. Her attention shifted to a carriage that stopped at the building diagonally across from her. She had been looking out for this vehicle specifically, having casually drawn knowledge of its destination from its driver so she could get there first.

A young man in fine attire stepped out of the carriage. His high

white collar was complete with a tie in the same color, and the gallantry in his step was only enhanced by his black tailcoat. Everything about his appearance embodied class, from his top hat to the cane in his grip. Lotta swatted at the tobacco fumes in front of her so she could study his face. His refined features were typically aristocratic, and the hair that fell over his forehead looked like it was made of pure gold. There was no doubt that he was the man she sought.

The boy she had met in the southeast of America had led a gang of street urchins in the downtown area. She had heard that he had been captured and executed. That had been what she had believed too, until she'd come to London. Until she'd caught sight of him in this city and done some investigating.

Edgar Ashenbert, the Earl of Ibrazel. When Lotta had learned his name, it had made her increasingly doubt whether he really was that child. After all, what would a British noble boy be doing in some American slum? Having seen his face, however, she knew for sure that it was him.

"I bet the sneak stole his title and all."

Truth be told, she wasn't sure how to feel about him being the earl they were searching for.

"He the one who kidnapped Betty?" the large, unshaven man beside her asked.

"I dunno, but he's definitely Lord Ashenbert."

"Let's grab him, then. Make him squeal about where he's keepin' her."

"Not yet. We should do some more digging first."

The young man hadn't been alone in the carriage. He was lending a hand and a careful eye to a woman, who was alighting slowly. She was dressed to the nines. Once out, she didn't hesitate to link arms with him and kiss him, despite their being in public. After finishing their passionate kiss, the couple disappeared into the building.

Lotta was exasperated. Attaining a peerage hadn't changed him in the slightest.

"Unbelievable! How does he think he can get away with this?!"

It wasn't Lotta who had cried out. She stealthily turned her head to see a girl who had just emerged from and frozen in front of a nearby bookshop. She looked to be seventeen, perhaps

eighteen, years old. Her hair was a shade of dull auburn and worn loose, though its gloss and smoothness kept it from looking unseemly. She was dressed well but didn't seem to be nobility. In fact, she looked decidedly average. Her reaction spoke of someone who had just stumbled across their lover being unfaithful.

Lotta couldn't believe that the earl had seemingly respectable girls like her in his sights. Having said that, this one was pretty and gave off a slightly assertive air, which was just the type he was fond of.

Realizing that she was being watched, the girl turned and locked gazes with Lotta. Her golden-green eyes went wide as she seemed to remember how she had shouted, and she promptly hurried away, embarrassed. A gray cat rushed after her.

"Poor thing. He'll have her in tears," Lotta said.

"What, like Betty?"

"Betty wasn't the type to cry over stuff like that."

"Way I remember it, she cried over any tiny thing."

"Mm, crocodile tears." Lotta tossed her cigarette to the ground and folded her arms, falling into thought. Could the man she'd seen really be Lord Ashenbert? And was Betty really with him? Honestly, she found it extremely difficult to believe. While it was true that Betty had once carried a torch for him, she had been quick to casually wish death on him upon learning that he was a terrible philanderer. And although the earl was good at seducing women, Lotta couldn't remember him being particularly interested in Betty. Perhaps, then, he had found some other use for the girl? Assuming that was the case, Lotta knew she would be carrying a heavy responsibility.

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"Miss Carlton has arrived, my lord."

"Already? Where has the time gone?" Edgar had come home at dawn. He was now out of the bath he had taken after a quick nap, and having indulged in drink until late into the night, his mind had only just regained its clarity. It was time to remember his plans for the day. "What mood is Lydia in this morning, Raven?"

"Her usual, my lord," the servant replied, tying his master's

necktie. Though he presently worked at the estate, the dark-skinned Asian boy had been Edgar's loyal attendant since the earl was in America. He was asked almost every morning about Lydia's mood upon her arrival to work, but showed no sign of growing fed up with the question. In fact, he had never shown any exasperation toward Edgar at all, and would carry out the most ridiculous of orders without a word of protest. "However, she did ask me whether you had returned home late last night."

"Whyever did she feel the need to ask that?"

"She passed me while I was carrying a change of your lordship's clothes."

Edgar's brows knitted ever so slightly closer together. It seemed Lydia had interpreted his slow-paced morning to mean he had been out late, as if she suspected he had *not* spent the night at his estate.

"It sounds to me as though she is eager to see me," he said, if only because he wanted to clear the unpleasant premonition in his gut.

"That is not the impression I had, my lord," Raven replied sincerely.

Edgar knew that his servant could not understand the sensitivities of the human mind and its desire to avoid the unpleasant. Nevertheless, he was childish and slightly sulky in his rebuttal. "I am not mistaken. Things have been going extremely well between us lately. She is not as reluctant to accept my invitations as she used to be, nor does she respond in anger when I hold her hand. And when we are together, she sometimes looks as though she is hugely enjoying herself. We are more akin to lovers than we have ever been."

"That does not sound like any lover your lordship has had before."

Raven was right. Edgar ignored him.

"We even went to church together on a recent Sunday. *Me*, at church. Can you imagine? I did not say a word during the sermon, and then I went to her house for tea. I have been making excellent progress with Professor Carlton too. Naturally, I have yet to broach the subject of our engagement, but I do believe he understands my sincerity. Have you ever known a courtship to be so proper? Should things continue in this manner, I have no doubt that Lydia

will one day agree to marry."

"Yes, my lord," came Raven's half-hearted response. It seemed he could foresee a greater number of hurdles than his master.

Knowing Raven as he did, Edgar knew that the boy was liable to answer any of Lydia's questions honestly. Deciding that he required a warning, the earl turned to face him properly. "Oh yes, Raven. Last night I was at Mr. Slade's club playing rummy until the early hours—"

"I do not believe *Raven* is the one your lordship ought to be making excuses to," Ermine interrupted. She was Raven's half sister and a maid who wore male attire. Her tone was sharp as she approached their master. "What would you like me to do with the woman's handkerchief in your jacket pocket?"

"Get rid of it for me," Edgar said dismissively, sinking down on the sofa.

"I would have thought, my lord, that you would have cut all ties with other women after your proposal to Miss Carlton. I was under the impression that you were attempting to reform your character in order to gain her trust."

"I *have* cut those ties. My conversation with the owner of that handkerchief just so happened to become rather spirited. I have done nothing that deserves a guilty conscience."

"I rather thought you had overcome that habit of yours." She peered at her master, who was sulking like he was at least ten years younger. "Carrying on with your irresponsible behavior and pinning all your hopes on excuses to escape the consequences. How is it that you can so expertly maintain relationships with several women at once, and yet when it comes to just *one* with whom you might find true happiness, you become careless?"

Edgar felt a spark of irritation, likely because Ermine was right.

"I find it hard to believe that you *want* her to discover this. That you *want* to invite her loathing."

"As I recall, Ermine, you are my servant, not my governess." Edgar's response had its desired effect of immediately silencing her. Indignant, he got to his feet and made to leave.

"What are your plans for the day, my lord?" Raven asked, as dutiful as ever.

Edgar was reminded that said plans were precisely what he had been trying to recall before this debacle. When he finally *did*

remember, he let out a sigh. He had been intending to go out somewhere with Lydia. Things *were* going well with her, so he had no reason to change his plans. However, he was constantly asking himself whether he was doing the right thing. There was no doubt that she would be pulled into his fight if they stayed together, but the thought of giving up on her was completely disagreeable to him. He was prepared to do whatever it took to keep her by his side, even if it transpired that she wasn't capable of loving him. Whenever he tried to consider her best interests, he inevitably ended up prioritizing himself, throwing around the term "fiancée" in order to keep her trapped here…all while doing things that he really *would* rather she didn't find out about. He had no right puzzling over what was best for her like he was some sort of gentleman.

"I shall move forward as discussed. Ermine, fetch the housekeeper and go and see Lydia."

Fairies detested it when humans meddled in their affairs, yet they seemed keen on maintaining relationships with mortals. A fairy might hunger for human food and eye a farmer's livestock, only for its whims to change as it muddled the path of a nearby traveler. That same fairy might then bless another human with great fortune. What was it that made faekind so eager to be involved with humanity? Even fairy doctors, the experts on the subject, had come to the conclusion that this was just how they were. It was like a law of nature. Therefore, when fairy doctors worked to solve the problems that came from the two groups meeting in the middle, they did so without the aim of cutting the connection between them. It was quite possible that people wouldn't notice a thing were fairies to disappear from the world. It was already the nineteenth century. The majority of people thought of fairies only as characters in children's books. But no matter how many centuries passed, fairy doctors would continue to act as intermediaries between people and fae for as long as the creatures preferred to live near humans. That would remain true even on the occasions when the fairies' deeds would bring about heartbreak.

"A changeling?" Lydia murmured to herself. She was in her office at Edgar's estate, reading through the letters sent by people

who were having fairy-related troubles. The Earl of Ibrazel, Edgar Ashenbert, had hired her as his fairy doctor. Traditionally, the earldom came with territory in Fairyland, and its holders (who also possessed the title of “Blue Knight Earl”) had historically kept close ties with the fae. It was for that reason that many fairies also lived on the land that Edgar held in the human world. And so, Lydia dealt with the various related queries.

Normally, the earl himself would possess the ability to deal with fairy magic, but Edgar couldn’t even see the creatures properly, meaning Lydia had to act on his behalf. His territories were scattered all over the United Kingdom, and she had read through all sorts of letters. None, however, had so far touched on any subject as serious as changelings.

“It might just be a *suspected* changeling…” While she was reading, a gray cat had appeared and perched on her desk. It peered at the letter. “…although, it certainly *sounds* like the real thing.”

Nico hummed as he swished his bushy tail and crossed his arms. “A changeling in the Blue Knight Earl’s territory? I’d have thought one of the past earls would’ve prohibited that sort of thing. You’ve never had anything on the subject before.”

“Indeed. But if this is a serious request, then we ought to locate the human baby as soon as possible.”

Fairies would sometimes steal human babies and replace them with wood, stones, elderly fairies, or sometimes even their own babies. These were changelings. Fairies had all sorts of reasons for taking the children, ranging from being endeared to them and wanting to raise them to requiring a sacrifice to appease the Devil. It used to be common sense that one should affix a ward to their baby’s cradle so that the child wouldn’t be snatched by fairies, but that knowledge had more or less been forgotten in the present day.

Before anything else, Lydia wanted to know more about the region the letter had been sent from. Unfortunately, that meant asking Edgar. It was his territory, after all. Her spirits plummeted.

“What business do I have feeling despondent on his account?” She thought back to the events of yesterday and the listless, glamorous woman he had been with. The way he had kissed her. If that was how *lovers* kissed, then Lydia was an artless child in

comparison. Edgar's lips had only ever *grazed* hers.

"Chin up, Lydia. His behavior should hardly cause you any surprise anymore. The *real* surprise is that it took you this long to bear decisive witness to his frivolity. That's how I see it, anyway."

Nico was right. Lydia just needed to remind herself that there was nothing between her and Edgar, so there was no reason to be put out by what she had seen.

"What are we bearing witness to exactly?"

The familiar voice set her on edge. She placed her hands on her lap in a guarded gesture.

"Good morning, Lydia. You look as lovely as ever today. I am truly blessed to be able to see you every single day." Edgar smiled as he approached her.

"Your hair is still damp," she pointed out, hoping he would pick up on the fact that she was accusing him of having a late night.

"Perfecting my state of dress was the least of my concerns, such was my eagerness to see you."

"If you are tired, I would rather you rest than rush out to meet me."

"I am far from tired. I was playing cards at Mr. Slade's club last night, and things got rather heated. That's the long and short of it." He was referring to a gentlemen's club and probably trying to reassure her that there hadn't been a woman in sight. "You do hear of wives dissatisfied with the amount of time their husbands spend at such establishments, don't you? They get caught up in the fun and come home far too late. If you are concerned about that, then I can make you a promise. Never will I allow you to feel alone, not even once we are married."

"I am not concerned, and we shan't be married. You may spend your leisure time where you like, whether that be at the club or a lady's home."

"I fear you may have misunderstood something. I have eyes only for you and have decided to save my passions for you alone."

"You are wasting your time!" Her temper snapped. Lydia slammed both hands on her desk and leaned forward.

Edgar planted a kiss on her head.

I cannot allow myself to grow flustered over something like this! That is exactly what he wants! She took a covert, deep breath. Recently, she had learned that any attempt to push back against

him was simply interpreted as the playful act of a lover. The more overblown her reaction to his excessively familiar behavior, the more delighted he became.

"Something…hugely serious is happening in one of your territories!" Regaining her composure, Lydia redirected their discussion to professional matters.

"It cannot be as serious as this: I need to travel to Windsor today, Lydia. You will accompany me, won't you?"

His expression was so severe that she automatically asked, "Did something happen?"

"There isn't much time, so I shall explain everything to you on the train. Harriet will help you get ready."

Lydia turned to the door to see the senior maid with a dress in her arms, her imposing stature blocking the entire frame. When Edgar had the fairy doctor dress up like this, it meant he was planning to take her somewhere busy and show her off. There was nothing serious about it.

"No, thank you. I have work to be getting on with." Lydia backed away with the intention of escaping, but then she bumped into someone. She whirled around to see Ermine looking down at her.

"Forgive me, Miss Carlton. I must insist that you adhere to Lord Ashenbert's request." As polite as her tone was, Ermine's grip on Lydia's shoulder was firm and unyielding.

"You mustn't forget this either, Lydia." Edgar took her hand and slipped the moonstone engagement ring onto her finger. It was imbued with fairy magic. Possibly because the stone had awakened, its placement on her finger meant Edgar was recognized as her fiancé. As such, he was the only one physically capable of removing it. However, she distinctly remembered leaving it at home.

"Coblynau!" she called, locating the small mining fairy on her desk. He had taken off his three-cornered hat and was scratching at his head. "Was this *your* doing?!"

"Yes, my lady. The earl asked that I fetch him the ring." The coblynau was steward to the mysterious moonstone. He failed to understand that the pair's engagement wasn't genuine. In fact, he was eager to see them wed for the sake of the jewel in his care. "Is it anything to be upset about? I do think you ought to wear it while the two of you are in public together at the very least."

“You see, Lydia?” Edgar pressed. “I’d be happy to remove it again once we are back from Windsor.”

“That is a sneaky trick.”

“Come, Miss Carlton, let’s get you ready.” Harriet grabbed her arm firmly, sealing her fate. Just as she made to help Lydia out of her simple day clothes, she seemed to notice that Edgar was still there. “Might I ask you to leave the room, my lord?”

“Ah, I did wonder whether my presence would be unwanted.”

“Naturally, the presence of a pervert is *quite* unwanted!” Lydia shouted, her anger having reached its peak.

Follow the Thames upstream for a time and the landscape would transform into one more peaceful, where forests and water were plentiful. This town, home to a royal castle for generations, was much calmer than London. The trees carried the rich colors of autumn, which they cast over the river’s surface, creating a charming image that one could easily get lost in. The weather was perfect, with the sky a St. Patrick’s blue that resembled that of Lydia’s dress. By the time they were on the small boat taking them to the riverside manor, her temper had cooled somewhat.

According to Edgar, a friend of his was hosting an engagement party. Knowing that it wouldn’t do to scowl at such an auspicious event, Lydia had rounded up her bad mood and herded it into a corner of her mind. She glanced at Edgar. Their eyes met as though he had been watching her for some time, and his lips curved into a delighted smile. The gentle sunlight had her smiling back automatically. The way it glistened on the water’s surface was far too dreamlike.

The jetty they moored at led straight to one part of the manor’s garden. The swathes of lawn were already alive with the colorful attire of the party guests. Edgar and Lydia walked side by side. She was so absorbed in the gorgeous wonder around her that she took his arm without even realizing it. When she noticed, her first instinct was to let go, but she quickly gave up on that. Her dress trailed over the grass, and it was much easier to walk with his support. As she let down her guard bit by bit, she started to feel that being with him like this was quite natural.

Perhaps I am falling for some manner of trick…

Recently, her father had stopped voicing any criticisms of Edgar.

But then, Lydia never made any mention of marriage in front of him either.

"I find garden parties such as this one rather pleasant. The sky and the breeze are celebrating with us. What sort of party would you like for our announcement, Lydia?" Edgar asked.

She regarded his dazzling, golden hair and ash-mauve eyes. The extent of the joy on his face as he looked down at her suddenly seemed nothing but strange. It was as though her presence brought him heartfelt happiness; as though she truly was his adored lover.

"We would have to ensure that your fairy friends felt at ease to celebrate with us. That would entail preparing plenty of herby refreshments and fresh milk, I daresay."

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Sorry? Oh, I meant *no*! My mind was elsewhere."

"What a pity. You had my heart simply galloping there."

Lydia would wager that her heart was beating even faster. For some reason, she almost found herself believing that they *were* engaged and planning a party. It was an illusion she had caught herself falling for relatively often as of late. The depths of her heart would twinge unbearably.

"And here we have the happy couple."

Burying her bewilderment deep within her, Lydia followed Edgar in approaching the well-dressed couple.

"Congratulations on your engagement."

"Thank you, Ashenbert. I'm so glad you could make it."

Much to Lydia's surprise, Edgar's friend was the *man* of the couple.

"Please allow me to introduce my fiancée, the lovely Miss Jane."

Edgar greeted the woman next to him in a completely normal manner, and the compliment he bade her lacked any semblance of flirtation. It almost made Lydia wonder whether she was attending this party with a doppelgänger. She couldn't tell if his motives were pure, but then, attempting to seduce his friend's fiancée would have been totally outrageous, even for him.

"You must introduce me to your fiancée too, Ashenbert."

Lydia flew into a silent panic. Where had this man gotten the impression that she and Edgar were engaged? But she couldn't

deny it, seeing as she *was* wearing a ring. Having no choice but to force a smile, she took her turn greeting the couple.

"You haven't officially announced your engagement yet, have you? When is the party?" asked Edgar's friend.

"We have not decided on a date yet. To be perfectly honest, Miss Carlton's father has yet to grant us his permission."

"Oh dear. Does he not approve?" Jane probed.

"We are waiting for the right time to tell him. He seems to distrust aristocrats."

Just one in particular, actually.

"Yes, quite. It is easy to be misunderstood when one spends too much time in the company of women," Edgar's friend said.

I don't think he is misunderstood at all.

"However, I am confident that Professor Carlton may be convinced if I discuss the matter with him thoroughly," Edgar assured them. "You need only to place your trust in me, Lydia. I *will* manage to persuade him. Let us forget our problems for today and share in the happiness of this charming couple."

You *are the biggest problem I face!*

"Please do enjoy yourselves," Jane said. "Miss Carlton, I must confess that I myself am also middle class. I am anxious to be marrying above my station, and I am sure that our similar positions mean we might be able to draw strength from each other. Might I ask for your friendship?" She took Lydia by the hand.

The fairy doctor found herself nodding before she knew it. "Oh, of course…"

"Thank you. There is much I have yet to learn about how to conduct myself among aristocrats, and I really was so apprehensive."

Guilt pricked at Lydia's skin…until she realized that Edgar must have orchestrated this. All at once, she felt exhausted. He had wanted to do more than just dress her up and show her off this time. Slowly but surely, he was diminishing her ability to say no by removing the obstructions that lay before her marriage to him. He had even prepared her a friend to help her fit in with high society.

"If I may, Miss Carlton," Jane continued, "I would very much like to introduce you to some of my other friends."

Lydia decided to go with her. It would be a chance to get away from her scheming companion, if nothing else. The pair walked

away from the main bustle of the party, eventually entering a grove. Lydia wasn't sure what Jane's friends would be doing here, but it was as this doubt crossed her mind that they came across two young men holding wine glasses. They seemed to be drunk already.

"You are drinking far too much!" Jane exclaimed.

When she mentioned her friends, I thought they would be women…

"Ah, Miss Jane! Your friend there is very charming indeed."

"Why not join us for a tipple, madame?" The man took a step toward Lydia and grabbed her by the arm. The repulsive stench of alcohol clung to him.

"No, thank you. I must be going." She tried to move away from him, but he wouldn't let go, so she turned to Jane for help. To her shock, the other girl started walking away. "Please tell them to leave me be! Aren't they your friends?"

"Surely you can grace them with the pleasure of your company? They were looking for a nice young lady to drink with, you see."

"I beg your pardon? Why are you being so wicked?"

"I suppose I just find you disagreeable."

Disagreeable?

Jane disappeared into the trees, and Lydia's temper flared. She turned to the men. "Unhand me at once!"

"You certainly are feisty. But then, I rather like girls with spirit."

The man put an arm around Lydia's shoulder. Frightened, she struck out instinctively.

"Ouch! What was that for?!" Losing his temper, he pushed her away. Her forehead smacked against a nearby tree, and she cowered.

"Might I ask you to desist?"

Lydia looked up to see an elderly gentleman standing in front of her. His posture was perfectly straight, his face lined with wrinkles that gave off a sullen impression. One only needed to look at the younger men to make it clear that his dignity had overwhelmed them. "Never have I known a proud British gentleman to dare lay his hand on a lady like that."

His stern glare and a reluctance to cause a scene sent the men scuttling away. When the gentleman turned to Lydia, his tone was much kinder.

"Are you all right? Hurt? Ah, I wouldn't move if I were you. What

is the name of your escort? I shall fetch him."

Lydia would rather Edgar not become involved, but he was the only guest she knew. She certainly didn't want to cause more trouble for this kindly stranger than she already had. "Please accept my most sincere apologies. I came with Lord Ashenbert."

The gentleman frowned almost imperceptibly. "Ashenbert? Forgive me, but might I ask your name?"

"I am Lydia Carlton."

"Lydia! Is everything all right? Are you hurt?" Edgar appeared then, rushing over to them and distracting Lydia from the older man's thoughtful countenance.

"No, I am fine. I ran into some trouble, but this gentleman very kindly lent me a hand."

Edgar stroked her forehead anxiously as he thanked the man. "You've grazed yourself slightly. What happened? I saw Miss Jane return alone, so I came to find you."

"This young lady was pushed by one of her male friends," said the elderly man.

Lydia could only think that the whole palaver had something to do with the philanderer in front of her. "Have you ever flirted with Miss Jane in the past, Edgar?"

He stared at her. "Where did you get that impression?"

"I am sure you must have hurt her afterward. Why else would she have done something so unkind?"

"You are barking up the wrong tree. I am far too principled to flirt with the lover of a friend."

"Then explain to me what caused all of this!"

The elderly gentleman intervened. "Imagine, if you will, that you have spent your entire life dreaming of marrying into the noble class, only for your husband to be the younger son, who you have only just learned is due to be relocated to Egypt. The girls were claiming earlier that the bride-to-be's fate has unfortunately been sealed."

Lydia let out an exasperated sigh. Even noblemen had to earn a living, assuming they weren't the heir. The difference between the eldest son, who was set to inherit the land, title, and fortune, and his younger brothers was perhaps greater than she had realized. Jane must have found her disagreeable because, on the face of it, she was going to become a countess after starting from the same

position.

She somehow managed to get to her feet with Edgar’s help, but she felt just as wretched as her wine-stained dress.



And that *is enough to excuse such wickedness?* It was precisely why she found it difficult to be around such large groups. Growing up, Lydia had been used to people speaking ill of her behind her back, but she'd had far more opportunities to interact with others since coming to London. Edgar invariably escorted her to these events, and so people tended not to make comments in her presence anymore. Perhaps she had started taking it for granted.

"Forgive me for cutting short your relief, but I have a query of my own," said the elderly gentleman, earning a suspicious look from Edgar. "Are you no longer inclined to marry my granddaughter?"

Lydia immediately saw red again. "Edgar! You are…utterly unbelievable!"

"Hold your horses, Lydia. I'm afraid I do not know what this gentleman is referring to."

"Why? How many women *have* you proposed to?" she snapped.

"If I may, sir, I believe you are mistaken. Might I ask your name?" Edgar queried the stranger.

When the man introduced himself, Edgar's eyes widened slightly, and he straightened up at once. "His Royal Highness, the Grand Duke of Cremona… It was my understanding that you had defected to the Netherlands, sir."

Lydia had come across the Principality of Cremona during her history studies, but all she could recall now was that it was a small, southern-European state. If its grand duke had defected, it had presumably undergone a revolution, or perhaps it had lost a war. Lately, one heard of significant political changes happening throughout Europe, with many aristocrats from the affected countries defecting to Britain.

"That is indeed correct. Did you hear that from my granddaughter?"

"Unfortunately, I am not acquainted with your granddaughter, sir. I first heard your name after gaining my title, but I have no knowledge of your family."

"I'm afraid I find it rather difficult to believe that London is still abuzz with chatter about Cremona, seeing as it collapsed seventeen years ago. I have not made much fuss about my living in the Netherlands either. Now, about your intentions with Charlotte: I have heard nothing from you since you sent that

absurd letter promising to marry her. I come to Britain seeking information, only to discover you parading around your new ‘fiancée.’” Though the grand duke spoke calmly, there was no mistaking the absolute conviction in his tone.

“A letter? A letter signed by myself?”

“When we fled Cremona, fearing for our lives, Charlotte was but three years old. She was with her mother and father as they made for America. Their boat was shipwrecked, and as far as I knew, they had all perished. According to your letter, however, Charlotte was the sole survivor, and you decided to marry her and take her safely to your country.”

Edgar’s expression very suddenly turned grim.

Has this conversation perhaps reminded him of something?

“Am I to understand, sir, that you did not believe your granddaughter to be alive until you read that letter?”

“I had no means of knowing the truth.”

Edgar looked thoughtful for a moment before continuing. “In that case, why did a mere letter such as that convince you?”

“It was sealed with her signet ring. I would also like to ask about the meaning behind the doll that came with it. The one in the bridal dress.”

“A changeling,” Lydia murmured.

“I beg your pardon?” The grand duke turned to her.

“It’s a folktale well-known in Britain, Your Royal Highness. A fairy may take a human baby and leave a wooden doll, for example, in its place. There are instances of them leaving such items in the case of adults too, so perhaps the same happened to your granddaughter, sir.”

The fairies left something in return in order to abide by the laws of fairy magic. It meant the kidnapped human could be kept in their dwelling.

The sudden mention of fairies left the grand duke nonplussed. “Fairies? Is this some sort of practical joke by the so-called Blue Knight Earl?” He looked at Edgar. “Is this young lady implying that you kidnapped Charlotte in the same manner a fairy might? When I looked into it, I did indeed find evidence that a girl matching her description had been in America, and that someone had abducted her. And you, Ashenbert, are considered something of a marvel among London’s upper class for your rumored connection with

the fae. It took me some time to realize that the ‘Blue Knight Earl’ who had sent the letter was, in fact, a British earl by the name of Ashenbert. Would it not have been more polite to have signed off properly?”

Edgar looked somewhat distracted, and it was unclear whether he was listening to the grand duke’s stern words or not. It only seemed to confirm Lydia’s suspicions that he had an inkling as to what this was all about. After all, the grand duke had said that his granddaughter was in America. It was a huge country, of course, but Edgar’s surprise upon hearing the grand duke’s name could not have been explained by the older man’s title alone. As impressive as it was, the man had lost his territory, and the earl himself had originally been born to a duke. Moreover, Edgar had introduced himself as “Ashenbert” to Lydia before he had even claimed his title. She could well see him brandishing that name in America as a weapon of seduction. At the time, he had sought power, and he may have seen value in the granddaughter of a grand duke.

Despite her musings, Edgar was unwavering in his response. “This has nothing to do with me, sir. I can only offer my apologies for being unable to assist.”

He attempted to leave, taking Lydia with him, but the grand duke thrust his stick at the earl’s feet to block their path.

“What, then, have you done to my granddaughter, supposing you never intended to marry her? I do hope that nothing you have done will prevent me from seeing her again.”

“Sir, should you continue to make such allegations, I shall consider it an affront to my honor.”

When things escalated between two noblemen, it invariably meant more than a mere shouting match. As a commoner, it was beyond Lydia’s comprehension how even trivial matters could go straight past fisticuffs and result in the death of one of the parties. Nevertheless, the volatility of the situation was clear even to her. She pushed urgently against Edgar’s back.

“I’m afraid we must excuse ourselves. I shall be sure to thank you properly later, sir.”

Somehow, she managed to tear the earl away from the elderly gentleman. They stopped at the riverbank, where exhaustion came down on her all at once.

“Was there really a need to be so confrontational? I am sure His Royal Highness would have understood had you only explained yourself, and you might even have been in a position to lend him your assistance.”

Edgar turned to her. He looked most displeased. “I prefer not to stick my nose into other people’s business.”

“Other people’s business?! Someone misused your name!”

“Two years ago, before the name was mine.”

Lydia frowned at him. “I don’t believe His Royal Highness mentioned *when* he received that letter.”

Edgar averted his gaze. “He did. Perhaps you weren’t listening.”

He was doing a fine job of further rousing her suspicion. Unless she had misunderstood something, his words suggested that he knew more about the situation than what they had learned from the grand duke. “Two years” was too precise to be a mere assumption. If he was trying to hide something from her, it was likely preying on his conscience.

Maybe he really did *promise to marry His Royal Highness’s granddaughter. But why? To use her? Could she still be alive?* Lydia stared at the ground in silence, unable to give voice to her questions.

Edgar approached the river and wet his handkerchief. “He is quite capable of solving his problems by himself, I’m sure. We have plenty of adversaries already. We do not need to risk earning ourselves any more.”

He placed the cool cloth against Lydia’s forehead, making the graze on it sting. A few strands of her russet hair had come loose and hung around her downcast face, so he tucked them behind her ear with a finger. His touch left goose bumps in its wake, and she was suddenly reminded of what she had seen the previous night. She had grown used to Edgar touching her, but now she withdrew instinctively.

“I do not understand other people one bit. Miss Jane led me into those trees for the most foolish of reasons, and then there is you, who constantly conceals things from me.”

“What things?”

“In reality, you *do* know His Royal Highness’s granddaughter, don’t you?”

“You would doubt me too?”

“How many women have you promised marriage to in pursuit of your own interests?”

“I have only proposed to one: you.”

“You would dearly like me to believe that, wouldn’t you? How can I, when you have done nothing but lie to me since this morning?”

“In what way have I lied to you?” Edgar knitted his brow, as if trying to convince her that he was upset.

“You were not at the club playing games.”

“Yes, I was. You may check with Mr. Slade, if you wish.”

“I am sure you have already asked him to corroborate your story.”

“In that case, what *would* it take for you to believe me?”

“I shan’t ever believe you, because I *saw* it. You were with a beautiful woman whom you proceeded to kiss before entering her estate with her.”

There came a moment’s silence, during which Edgar’s expression showed no sign of changing. It was impossible to know what he was thinking.

“What you saw was…likely a kiss made in greeting.”

“I may be naive about many things, but I can assure you that was no mere greeting.”

“Things may have unfolded in a certain way, but there was no meaning behind any of it. I left her estate immediately. The kiss was the end of it.”

“That is the least of my concerns!” Lydia stammered. “It isn’t as though I am *really* your fiancée!”

“Then why are you losing your temper?”

It was a pertinent question that she herself didn’t know the answer to. She had briefly been angry yesterday too, but had realized that it was none of her business once she had calmed down. It had been her intention to forget all about it, yet now that it suddenly had come back to her, she found that her irritation could not be stemmed.

“Is it so strange that I should lose my temper? I think it’s rather rude that, for all your gallivanting, you persist in your attempts to flirt with me. It is clear now that your pursuit of me was insincere after all.”

“My pursuit of *you* is anything but. However, you do not yet

reciprocate my feelings. How, then, can you find fault in me wishing for the company of a lady?"

"Do you mean to say that you would be satisfied with just *any* lady?"

"She was simply seeking something to stave off her boredom. I doubt she even remembers my name."

When he argued back, she only became angrier and less willing to accept his excuses.

"I understand. You lack the ability to pursue *anyone* sincerely." Lydia thrust his handkerchief back at him and started walking.

"Why must you be so obstinate? I have been open about how earnestly I feel for you, and I struggle to see how I might make those feelings any clearer."

"Obstinate? Those earnest feelings you speak of do not exist. *That* is why they are unclear!"

"Lydia!" Edgar grabbed her arm. It hurt, but more than that, she was overcome with a sudden anxiety that he was angry at her. Had her insinuation that he lacked sincerity been too cutting?

No. He really does lack any sense of commitment.

The way he behaved only eroded her trust in him. She tried to shake him off, but he held her fast. There was a challenge in his ash-mauve eyes as he looked at her. She glared back at him, feeling as though averting her gaze was somehow a sign of defeat. Edgar moved his face closer to hers.

Trembling, she managed to say, "Don't. Why would you do such a thing while you are so angry with me?"

Edgar seemed resigned as he half pushed her away, but he did not try to disguise his irritation.

"I... I'm going home," Lydia whispered, trying to seem less agitated than she was. Her dress was filthy, and she was in no mood to return to the party.

"Very well. Let's go home."

"I wish to go home by *myself*."

"I cannot let you do that. Not from Windsor."

"Then I shall go back with Ermine."

In all honesty, she didn't want to have Ermine accompany her either, as she would feel that Edgar still had eyes on her. But neither did she want their quarrel to go on for longer than it already had. She still needed him to remove the moonstone ring.

The Arrival of the Pirates

Edgar slipped out of his bedroom late that night and descended the stone steps on the north side of his mansion, taking them down to the cellar. The candle in his hand wavered from the draft coming in from an unknown source, making his shadow writhe like it had a mind of its own. He shielded the flame with his hand so as not to lose its light and unlocked the door at the end of the passageway. Passing through it, he entered into another hallway with a second door at the end.

The first thing he saw past that was a large sapphire, its cross of a star glimmering against a dark, indigo surface. That jewel, known as the Star of the Merrow, was imbued with fairy magic. The ancient longsword in which it was embedded had belonged to the first Earl of Ibrazel, the Blue Knight. This treasured weapon had been conferred to him, along with his title, by the King of England. It was because he had obtained the sword that Edgar had been recognized by Queen and country and had been able to make it this far. Without Lydia, his fairy doctor, it would have remained forever out of his reach. He might not have even survived long enough to lock eyes with its merrow guardians. The fairies had hidden it beyond a series of riddles to ensure that they granted it to the earl's true descendant and no one else. Alone, Edgar would have been unable to solve the puzzles. In the end, they had entrusted him with the sword even knowing that he was not descended from the Blue Knight Earl, believing that the bloodline had ended.

Edgar might have obtained the earldom, but that was the end of it. He did not possess the mysterious powers of the title's previous holders. While that hadn't concerned him at the beginning, it had started to emerge as a weakness when it transpired that his longtime adversary was relying on occult magic. This enemy was the Prince, a man who stood at the top of the organization that had enslaved Edgar as a child after murdering his family. The earl had led a number of his fellow slaves, including Raven and Ermine, in escaping from their captor,

but the majority of them had been killed in the process. Presently, Edgar plotted his revenge against the Prince while solidifying his position among Britain's aristocracy. His principal concern at the moment was Ulysses, one of the Prince's underlings. The young man was capable of commanding the loyalty of fairies and using them as he saw fit. Meanwhile, Edgar couldn't even *see* the creatures. How, then, was he supposed to hold his own against Ulysses?

Edgar lifted the sword and pulled it from its sheath. Its silver blade was perfectly sharp and polished without a mark in sight, making one doubt that it truly came from the Middle Ages.

"So *that* is the sword belonging to the Blue Knight Earl! It certainly is a fine article," came a disembodied voice. But Edgar knew this fairy, who had come to see Lydia.

"The coblynau, yes? I thought you tended to spend the night at Lydia's house."

"I tend to, yes, but this evening I spent too long drinking with the hobgoblins here, only for her ladyship to have left before me." A wine cork, which had no business being in this room, was twirling beside the candle Edgar had set down. It was the coblynau signaling his location.

According to Lydia, it was a small fairy with a reddish face, a snub nose, and a scraggly beard. It apparently dressed like a miner with a three-cornered hat, so Edgar imagined it was similar to the dwarves one might find in picture books.

"You are an expert on gemstones, as I recall. What are your thoughts on this star sapphire? The star in its center was supposed to have six points but took on a cross shape when I became earl. The three intersecting lines of the hexastar are meant to represent hope, trust, and destiny. Given there are only two, does that mean this sword is lacking something? Am *I* lacking something?"

"Not at all, for it is imbued with merrow magic. The star's light is said to have changed at certain times and under certain circumstances in the past. At the very least, I can tell you that nothing about the star is lacking. My dear earl, it is perfect. That sword will bring death to your enemies and good health to your allies."

Edgar was reminded that the sword could not spill the blood of

the Blue Knight Earl's descendants. Not only that, but in the Middle Ages, swords were considered holy. There were even superstitions that claimed holding one against a wound would heal it. Edgar pressed the blade's point into his finger experimentally. It pierced his skin, drawing a thin pool of blood. Even if it belonged to him now, perhaps the sword itself knew he was an impostor. However, he didn't need its approval. There was something more pressing he wished to know.

"Death to my enemies? Is that limited to humans?"

"Of course not. They say that the Blue Knight Earls of old used that sword to drive wicked fairies from their territories."

In other words, the weapon *was* effective against fairies. The problem was whether Edgar would be able to put it to use in that way. "Would you mind terribly if I tested it on you?"

The cork immediately dropped from the air, and the coblynau could be heard no longer.

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It wasn't uncommon for things to become awkward between Lydia and Edgar, but it was no excuse for her to be neglectful in her duties. That morning, she arrived at the estate on time just as she always did. Because of the trip to Windsor the previous day, she hadn't gotten any work done, but she was still keen to look into the issue of the changeling as a matter of urgency.

"Here we have the area in question." Tompkins, the estate's butler, spread out a map over the table. Lydia had asked him for assistance, given that she hadn't been able to face the idea of seeking Edgar's help. The butler tended to every administrative affair related to the estate in addition to managing the rest of its staff. He was a very busy man and, as such, Lydia felt sorry to take up even more of his time. However, Tompkins had gathered the requested documents without a word of complaint and was pointing to a small village among the coastal hills of Yorkshire.

"Is there anything significant about that place?" Many of the Blue Knight Earl's British territories had been transferred from other human lords who had found them difficult to manage. The village likely had a large fairy population that caused various problems, but there might have been more to it than that.

“They mine fluorite there. Blue John is the most famous British fluorite, but the kind mined in Yorkshire tends to be a purplish red. Rarely, it is said, there exists a type known as Freya fluorite, which glows from the inside as though there are flames within it. However, according to records, it has been three hundred years since any was discovered. It seems to be a rare variety indeed.”

“It seems they have been mining ordinary fluorite, but haven’t shipped any for over ten years,” Lydia said, reading through the documents.

“These days, they only mine a set amount each year. Even then, much of what they find isn’t valuable enough to sell. There are fewer miners than there used to be too. I daresay there is more money to be made moving to the towns to work in the factories.”

“Why have they put a limit on how much they can mine?”

“It apparently stems from a deal struck between the fairies and a previous earl. They may mine just enough to ensure that the villagers do not go hungry, taking into account that the crops may be poor some years. The village certainly isn’t wealthy, but it has never suffered famine. If they had mined to their hearts’ content, the veins of ore would have likely dried up long ago, creating a rift between the human and fairy villagers.”

But now there was a changeling in the village. Not only that, but it bothered Lydia that this was the first request for help she had received from this territory since she had started working at the estate. It seemed strange that a village could go without trouble for so long only for a changeling to appear out of the blue.

She was still mulling things over when the door burst open and Nico came barrelling in.

“I thought I told you to *stop*!” he cried, still running around on two legs despite how flustered he seemed.

Edgar followed. For whatever reason, he carried the merrows’ sword. “Come now, I promise I shall keep to the very end of your tail.”

“Can you not see how lovely and elegant it is? And you would cut it off?!” Nico dived under the tablecloth, his forelegs wrapped around his bushy tail.

“I shall have your favorite food waiting for you, Nico, if only you come out.”

“My tail is worth much more than food!”

“Surely it would simply grow back?”

“Perhaps, if I were a *lizard*!”

Edgar lifted the tablecloth without hesitation and readied his sword.

“Stop him, Lydia!” Nico yowled.

Lydia stood up with a sigh. “Edgar, I would appreciate it if you did not wave that thing around in my office.”

He lowered the sword and looked in her direction, his usual tender smile leaping to his face. “Good morning, Lydia. How is that bump on your head? Does it still hurt?”

Does he not feel any awkwardness at all following our quarrel yesterday?

Knowing Edgar, he probably didn’t.

“I have ascertained the identity of the two gentlemen who harassed you and have decided to teach them a lesson they won’t soon forget.”

Lydia didn’t dare ask what that meant. “Please don’t. There is no need for tit for tat. I have all but forgotten the incident.”

“Does the same hold true for our quarrel? Have you forgiven me?”

She stayed silent. Said quarrel was a different matter entirely.

Edgar frowned slightly. “I did think it was perhaps a little too soon. But fear not, for I vow to turn over a new leaf.” He held the sword vertically in front of his face. “I *must* perform this experiment for the sake of your protection, Lydia.”

Again, he turned to Nico, only for the gray fairy-cat to immediately vanish. The earl clicked his tongue.

“There goes my subject.” He paused to think, then swept his gaze over the room. It landed on Tompkins, whose shoulders twitched. “You have merrow blood, don’t you, Tompkins?”

“Well, I do, my lord, but there has not been a merrow in my family for generations. My lifespan will be that of a human’s, and should I be thrown into the ocean, I shall be guaranteed to drown.” The butler’s short-and-stout form, round, wide-set eyes, and thick lips were reminiscent of a male merrow’s. Apparently, he also had a fin on his back, though Lydia had never seen it. Tompkins backed away in haste, but quickly came up against the wall. “Is this an order, my lord?” he stammered.

Lydia was astounded that he might actually go through with it

were that the case.

"Naturally."

"*Don't*, Edgar!"

"What's all this ruckus?" A young man with dark curls was at the window. His human form had a rugged, mystical beauty about it, although in reality he was a ferocious water horse: a kelpie. For some reason, he had formed an attachment to Lydia and followed her to London from Scotland. He had been here ever since.

Edgar turned to the newcomer like a hunter who had found his prey.

"Kelpie, run away!" Lydia cried.

"Eh?"

But Edgar had already closed the distance between them. He immediately swung his sword. Kelpie made no move to avoid the attack, and the end of the sharp blade seemed to slash through him. However, he stayed sitting on the window sill, not showing any signs of pain. In fact, he grinned.

"Nice try, earl, but no human's gonna be able to kill us."

Edgar gazed at the sword and let out a disappointed sigh. He was muttering something about having felt it cut into the water horse.

"It's a lost cause. Though mibbe the auld Blue Knight Earl would've been able to draw out the sword's power."

Everything had happened so suddenly that Lydia had broken out into a cold sweat. She hurried to Kelpie's side. "Are you all right? You really aren't injured?"

He jumped down from the window sill. "Nah, ah've felt winds stronger than that."

Lydia touched him to check for injuries. While she would never have been able to touch a human man in this way, Kelpie was a fairy. If anything, she saw him as more of a horse than a person. Even as she felt the powerful muscles under his shirt against her palm, she had the sense she was touching the velvety pelt of an elegant steed. "You're right. There's nothing."

Edgar tugged on her shoulder irritably. "Would it trouble you at all *not* to touch another man in my presence?"

"You make it sound as though I am doing something quite indecent!"

"That is how it *looks*. One would not think him anything but

human by appearance alone."

"I would have no cause to touch Kelpie if *you* hadn't swung at him with that sword! If he had not been immune, what then? It is a *merrow* sword. It might even have the potential to kill him!"

"You care for him that much, do you?"

"Well…" she faltered. "He is a dear friend. Of sorts."

"You find fault with me for having lady friends, so why can I not do the same when it comes to your gentleman friends?" Now it seemed Edgar was grasping at straws.

"Kelpie is not a 'gentleman' friend, but a fairy friend. Suppose you were to dote on a pet canary. I doubt that would invite envy from anybody."

"Wouldn't it? If a peacock were to spread its tail feathers before you, I would immediately shoot it to death."

Lydia wished she could take his comment in jest, but the ash-mauve gaze she was presented with was most earnest.

"The very sight of your 'friend' is most offensive to my eyes," he continued, sparing Kelpie only the briefest of glances.

"Stop that, earl. It's like ye're tryin' to keep her on a leash."

"I would ask that you refrain from commenting. I am being perfectly reasonable in light of the fact that Lydia is my fiancée."

As far as she was concerned, he was being anything but. The leftover irritation from yesterday was beginning to rear its head again. Was he really trying to endorse their engagement after kissing an unknown woman and even being accused of promising marriage to the granddaughter of a grand duke? There was shameless, and then there was Edgar.

"Might I ask you to leave, Kelpie? I have something important I wish to discuss with Edgar."

"Huh? How've I gotta leave?"

Trying to refute her engagement to Edgar in front of the water horse would only lead to extra headaches down the line.

"Have some delicacy, would you? When two lovers wish to profess their adoration for one another, the polite thing to do is to leave them alone," said Edgar.

Lydia waited until Kelpie had reluctantly vanished before objecting to the earl's statement. "Edgar, I—" she began, determinedly curling her fists.

"Wait a moment."

“I shan’t. If you think you are free to dictate every last detail about—”

“Tompkins, you are dismissed.”

Lydia froze, her fists staying as they were. She had only just realized that the butler was still there, and now the embarrassment came crashing down on her.

“Yes, my lord. Please take your time.” Tompkins left, closing the door behind him.

Before Lydia could recall what she had meant to say, Edgar had taken one of her fists in his hands. “Lydia, first, I ask that you understand this. I do not intend to allow you to be taken by anyone.”

“You are mad. I can only think that you are undermining my faith in you deliberately.”

“Never again will you see me with anyone else. You have my word. I only ask that you take a more optimistic view of our marriage.”

“My qualms lie elsewhere, and you know it!” Though he held on to her fist, Lydia tried to take a step back, only for Edgar to take one forward.

“Do they? If it is jealousy you are experiencing, that would make our love mutual.”

“It isn’t jealousy. The problem is that you are a liar. I cannot trust a single word you say.”

“Who is the real liar? You have lost your temper because you are beginning to fall for me, and yet you refuse to accept it.”

His retort caught her off guard. She wanted to refute his claim, but she struggled to find the words to do so. Unable to look him in the eye anymore, she lowered her gaze.

“Accept it. Look at me.”

She had wanted to have a word about his brandishing of their engagement. Instead, it seemed he was about to wheedle his way out of it.

“If only you would do so, I would no longer hesitate. I am willing to steel my resolve this very moment.”

Lydia’s heart was pounding uncontrollably. She knew she was flushing. “What resolve? Are you saying that you feel some reluctance toward the idea of marrying me? I see! You must steel your resolve because you fear being beholden to a single woman,

despite the fact that her presence is useful to you."

"No. When I speak of resolve, I am referring to the resolve I need to protect you, as dear as you are to me."

How he could say that to *her*, of all people, with a straight face was beyond her. Lydia was no longer capable of thinking about anything but her need to get away from him. Otherwise, she was worried she might concede to his reasoning. Not wanting him to notice her agitation, she kept herself closed off to his words and rushed from the room.

Raven carefully picked up the merrow's sword from where it had been flung to the floor and put it back into its sheath. Edgar, still standing where Lydia had left him, noticed his servant from the very corner of his eye.

"I'm in an absolute fix, Raven," he muttered. "I have no means of fighting at my disposal."

The sword had proved ineffective. He had therefore been ready to think about how he might protect Lydia should she fall in love with him and wish to stay by his side. That resolve wouldn't grant him the ability to see fairies or fight Ulysses on equal terms. Rather, he didn't want to face the alternative: that he would have to keep Lydia at arm's length. There was something in a small recess of his mind that argued that he could *not* protect her without distancing himself from her, and yet he continued in his seduction attempts as though it might change something.

"It would seem that I lack the strength to let Lydia go. I wonder whether another man might come along to take her from me instead."

"Should that happen, would you be content not to do anything to prevent it?" Raven asked.

Edgar let out a deep sigh. In truth, the answer was "probably not."

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It was a picture book retelling a certain fairy tale, complete with gorgeous illustrations. Paul had lent it to Edgar with the caveat that it was aimed at children, although the tale within was representative of real folklore. It felt almost shameful that the earl

had to begin with a picture book to start learning about the creatures, but he had no other option. Books containing serious research on the fae did not exist.

One would be hard-pressed to find anyone who did not know this fairy tale from their childhood. It told of a beautiful fairy bride who requested a single promise of her husband. There was something that he was not to do, but by chance, he did it anyway, and his bride vanished. Dispirited, Edgar closed the book, for he too felt that a tiny misstep might mean Lydia would be taken away from him. Although it was his own fault that she had yet again closed off her heart to him, he felt that the blame lay with Ulysses. It shouldn't have been a problem that Edgar did not carry the Blue Knight Earl's blood, and it had only become so because of that boy's fairy-doctor powers. If not for Ulysses, the earl would never have lost confidence in his ability to protect Lydia. He had to be around fifteen, perhaps sixteen, years old, and yet he was so smug that Edgar would very much have liked to have beaten him to within an inch of his life. The feeling was likely mutual.

It concerned Edgar that he had no idea where Ulysses was now or what he was doing. The boy didn't seem to be in London, but it was unlikely that he had returned to America. Edgar suspected that he was keeping himself hidden somewhere and biding his time until his master, the Prince, could come to Britain. The earl had been unable to make a move for some time now, not knowing when the Prince might appear or whether Ulysses might be plotting something in the meantime. He simply didn't have enough information. Therefore, it was best that he answer a vital question sooner rather than later: how far was he willing to go in his fight against the Prince?

If he was willing to lose everything to see his enemy utterly destroyed, then he needed to consider whether he was prepared to shoulder the burden of leading Lydia into such danger. Assuming she would follow him that far in the first place, of course. He wondered whether his attachment to her might have been borne of his own impure habits, that he simply felt it a waste to distance himself from any young woman. Sometimes he found himself wishing that she would run out of patience with him completely, as though that might make things easier. And yet, when she showed the slightest sign of doing so, he was quick to

try to keep her with him. He was well aware of how illogical his actions were.

There was a letter nearby that he had yet to open, so he broke the seal and started reading in an effort to distract himself. Usually, when a letter mentioned fairies, he didn't bother finishing it. Those needed to be passed on to Lydia. This one, however, led him to unfold the paper further and read to the end; he had spotted mention of a changeling, and it had reminded him of his discussion with the Grand Duke of Cremona.

"I most humbly ask for your lordship's forgiveness for sending multiple letters. I was unaware of your lordship's advice, that one must not attempt to retrieve the lost child, and so I fear that my letter requesting your lordship's help might have offended you. I come from outside the village, having married one of its inhabitants, and am therefore unfamiliar with its customs. I was deeply agitated when the incident happened, knowing only that my child was stolen from me. The village has deep trust in your lordship's words, and I am sure there is a deeper meaning to them that is beyond the understanding of the common people, but presently I know only the unbearable pain of having my child taken. I struggle to understand why I must simply accept it..."

Edgar paused to ponder the doubt the letter had sown within him. He certainly didn't remember telling anyone that changelings mustn't be interfered with. Perhaps it was a persisting dogma laid down by an earl several hundred years earlier. However, the letter was written as though *he* had given that advice in the present day. He also thought back to the discussion about the Grand Duke of Cremona's granddaughter, who had been replaced with a changeling so that she could, allegedly, be wed to the Blue Knight Earl. Edgar wondered whether there had been someone else laying claim to the title before he had obtained it for himself. While such a man would not be recognized by the state without the merrows' sword, there would be nothing stopping him from professing himself to be the earl despite that.

I ought to investigate this. Just as Edgar was getting to his feet, his butler appeared before him.

"You have guests, my lord."

"Who?"

"I am afraid they would not give their names," Tompkins said

with an awkward frown. Raven came in behind him and went to whisper something in Edgar's ear.

The earl nodded. "There is no need to prepare any tea, Tompkins. These guests are unbefitting of my estate, and I shall be sending them home at once. Please ensure that no one else be allowed near the parlor."

"Yes, my lord." Tompkins went to carry out his instructions. If he thought the matter dubious at all, it did not show on his face. All that was left was for Edgar to show his unwelcome guests the door.

"Come, Raven."

His servant nodded obediently and accompanied him to the parlor, where they found a young man and woman. There was no sophistication in the way the girl had her coffee-colored hair tied up. She spoke as soon as her almond-shaped eyes caught sight of Edgar.

"Hello, Sir John. It's been a while."

"I go by Edgar now. And I am no longer a 'sir,' but a 'lord.'"

"Huh. Changed your name, did you? A fancy name to go with a fancy position?" The girl smiled, revealing her adorably dimpled cheek. The way she spread herself out over the sofa, however, as though claiming it as hers, was anything but adorable. The large man with the unshaven face stood next to her, his arms folded. Despite appearances, he was not her bodyguard, but her de facto younger brother. As Edgar recalled, his name was Pino.

The earl sat down in a chair, his eyes flicking between both of them. "Did you really come all the way from America simply to grace me with your presence? You haven't changed in the slightest, Lotta. At the very least, you seem to have grown into a man, Pino. I might not have recognized you if not for Lotta."

"Much obliged," replied the large boy. The expression of displeasure on his face seemed to be forced. And he *was* a boy. No matter how rugged he had become, he could not yet be twenty. Edgar would wager he was the same age as Raven.

"To what do I owe the pleasure? You may be pirates, but you were always very proud. You have certainly not come to blackmail an old friend, have you?"

Lotta scowled as though she had taken offense. "You mean you don't know why we're here?"

“I could not begin to guess.”

“You remember Betty, right?”

“I have yet to forget any girl.”

“Pretty sure we first met you right after the chief died. The chief raised me, Betty, and Pino as siblings, even though we’re not blood-related.”

“Yes, I know. You were your chief’s daughter, and Betty and Pino were two children he took in. You and Pino would sail the seas now and then, but Betty was rather unsuited to the life of a pirate. She lived in the town near the harbor with that hairdresser girl.”

“I wish she still did. Instead, she met you, and you ruined her fate.” Lotta’s shoulders drooped.

Pino stepped in to continue. “She should’ve never learned about that crest. If no one knew she was a princess, maybe she’d never have been targeted.”

Edgar recalled the crest in question, which had been engraved with a rose and a hawk. It had been expertly carved into a coin-sized red fluorite set in a gold ring. Said fluorite had a mysterious glow with a yellow tint to it that made it look like there was a flame flickering on the inside. It could even be seen in the dark. Edgar had just so happened to know the lineage that the crest represented. When he had still been with his parents, a duke and duchess, he had heard that the principality to which the crest belonged had fallen, and that the grand duke’s family had split up and fled abroad.

The origin of a crest-holder’s ancestry could be gleaned just by looking at the engraving. Noble children were expected to be familiar with not only their own crests but also those belonging to lineages overseas. That was how Edgar believed he had learned of that crest in particular, and he had gone on to share what he knew about the grand duke’s family with Betty. At the time, he had thought the ring was something picked up by the pirate chief during his adventures, not that it had belonged to Betty. However, ever since then, she had gone around proclaiming that she was in fact a princess.

A man had come to see her. He had caught wind of the rumors and claimed he’d been hired by the grand duke to help search for the scattered family. Leaving her adopted siblings behind, Betty had supposedly gone to the Netherlands to join her grandfather.

Edgar had assumed that she had found her happily ever after there. Supposing that wasn't the case after all, then what the Grand Duke of Cremona had told him at Windsor was probably true. The man Betty had left with had had no connection to her grandfather. Lotta had probably realized that only when one of the grand duke's *real* envoys had come to investigate the town Betty had lived in. Fearing for her friend's safety, she had made the journey to Britain.

"I heard the mastermind of this group that took Betty was called the Blue Knight Earl. We came over here lookin' for him, and what did we find?" Lotta asked.

"That *I* was the Blue Knight Earl. That must have come as quite the shock. However, you must be aware that I remained in that harbor town even after Betty left."

"You say that, John—sorry, *Edgar*—but you're a real schemer. For example: how the hell did you become an earl? You got yourself a peerage. The chances you're also involved in Betty's disappearance aren't zero."

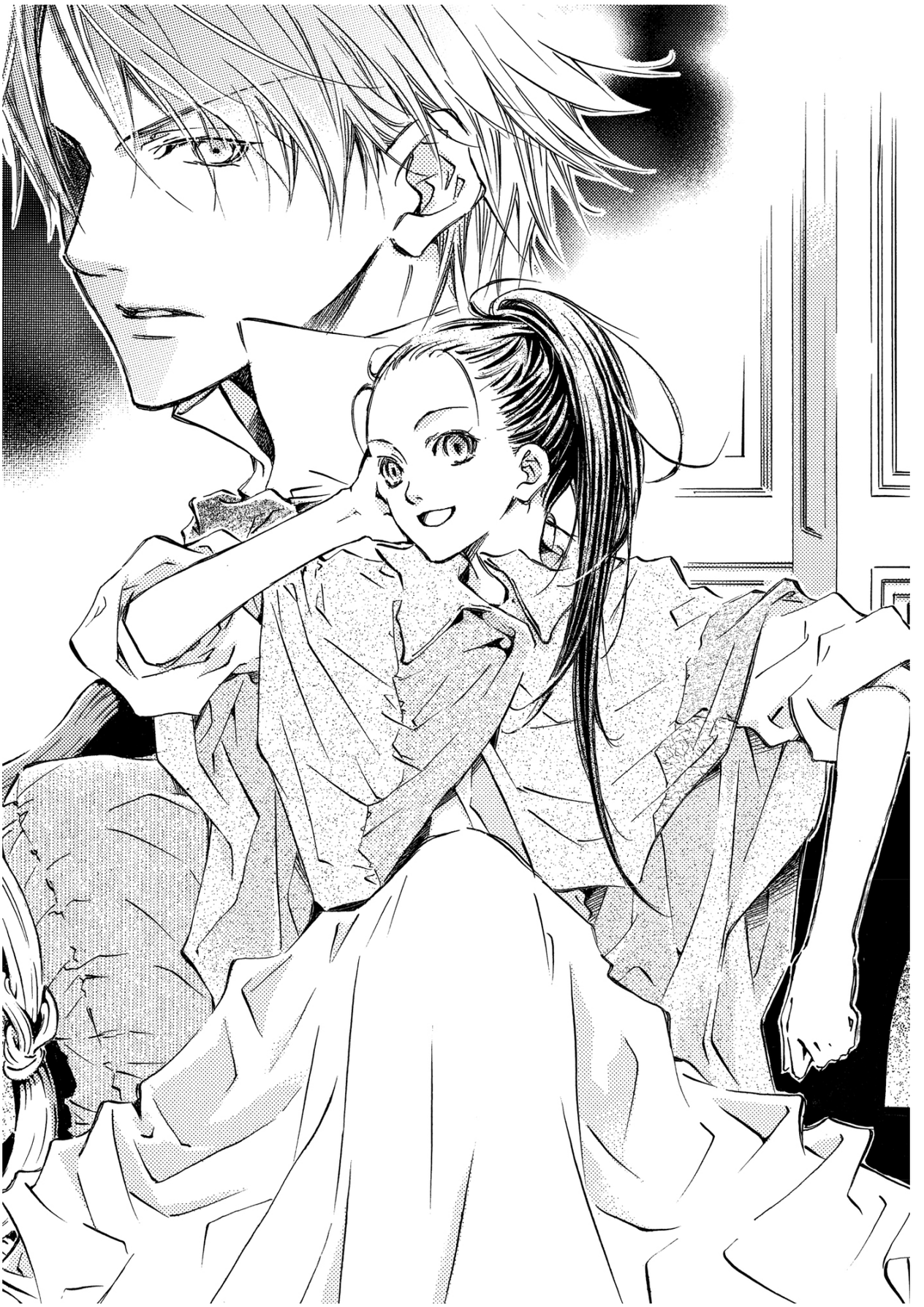
"I know nothing about what happened to her."

"Eh, I don't expect you to talk just 'cause we're old friends, though if I were you with this fancy house and title, I wouldn't want people knowing I'm actually some thief who was meant to be executed in America."

"You would threaten me?"

"It's called negotiating."

Out of patience, Edgar stood up. "I have more pressing matters to be getting on with, and I would urge you to leave before all humor in this farce is spent. I would rather not have old acquaintances become jetsam in the Thames."



“It’s not a farce. *You* told Betty that the ring’s owner was a princess. And then we find out you’re this Blue Knight Earl character too? It’s too much of a coincidence!”

A knife appeared in Lotta’s grip. Raven immediately made his move, leaping not at her, but at Pino, striking the boy with his fist and knee. The servant pinned the giant to the ground, twisting his arm to lock him in place.

Edgar grabbed Lotta’s wrist while she was still gawking at what had happened. “I suppose your plan was to have Pino attack me whilst Raven was disarming you? What a pity it didn’t work.” He took the knife from her. “Now that I think of it, Lotta, you and I have never held hands, have we?”

“What rubbish are you spoutin’ now?” she stammered.

“You always were rather unfriendly.”

“Who cares? You were with Betty.”

“She didn’t allow me to be with her for very long.”

“I don’t blame her! You tried to give her poisoned drink!”

“That is a distortion of the truth. I would be happy to enlighten you, at length, in my chamber.”

“Lotta!” Pino cried, still in Raven’s grip. “Try and lay a finger on her! Our mates won’t stay silent!”

“This may not be the best time for your jokes, my lord,” Ermine interjected.

“Mm?” Edgar asked, not letting go of Lotta.

“I have been informed that Miss Carlton departed on a ship bound for Yorkshire this morning.”

Without thinking, the earl released his grip on Lotta. “Yorkshire? Why Yorkshire?”

“She received correspondence about a changeling from a village called Wallcave.”

Remembering that the letter he had perused earlier was from the same territory, Edgar was overcome by impatience.

“Mr. Tompkins was the only one she told. Apparently, she had already informed you.”

“She informed me of *nothing*. Under no circumstances would I have allowed Lydia to make such a journey alone.”

“Mr. Nico was with her.”

“A cat? Fat lot of use that will be.” Especially one whose interests were limited to food and his own appearance.

Edgar watched vacantly as Lotta ran to help Pino up. In his mind, he compared the Blue Knight Earl who had kidnapped Betty to the one who had told the Yorkshire villagers to leave the changeling be, wondering if there was any connection. The grand duke had been sent a wooden doll after his granddaughter's disappearance—something which aligned with the folktales related to changelings. Supposing that event was at all significant, the probability that both incidents shared the same impostor was high.

"Tompkins! Do we have any documents on the village of Wallcave?"

Almost at once, the butler appeared with some papers.

"Wallcave's speciality: fluorite," Edgar read. "In particular, an exceptionally rare variety with a mixture of red and yellow hues."

"Just like the stone on the grand duke's signet ring," Lotta murmured.

"The remaining veins are few and far between," said Tompkins. "More importantly, my lord, I have just recalled that I have an unfavorable view of this village. When I sent out the notices that your lordship was to become the new Earl of Ibrazel, this was the sole territory from which I had no response."

A lord was little more than a faceless landowner. In Edgar's case, it didn't help that there hadn't been a Lord Ashenbert for hundreds of years and, when there had been before that, he likely hadn't visited his territories all that often. Edgar himself had yet to see the vast majority of his land. That all of his settlements, in which the fairy populations were high, had reacted favorably to his return despite this one suggested that Wallcave had long been a problematic territory...one which Lydia was currently traveling to as Lord Ibrazel's fairy doctor. What if she came across Betty's kidnapper?

"Tompkins. Lydia is traveling by boat, yes?"

"Yes, my lord. I was told that Mr. Nico dislikes the railway, so they tend to travel by boat unless it is terribly inconvenient. Fairies and iron do not mix, you see."

"From which pier and at what time did they depart? Are you able to look up the company and the service they were on?"

Tompkins left at once to gather the requested information.

Edgar turned to Lotta and Pino. "Where is your ship?"

“The Wash. They’re too fussy about who gets to enter the Thames.”

“Perfect. You can make yourselves useful. Pirates or not, I assume your ship runs at a decent speed?”

“Now you’re gonna make me lose my temper. Our ship could outrun a clipper.”

“I severely doubt that.”

“Shut up!”

“No matter. We are not after a clipper. I believe some teamwork is in order if we are to discover Betty’s whereabouts.”

***

The ship flew a flag that Lydia had never seen before. It was an eyeball in the center of a black background, and it rather disturbed her. The vessel itself was extremely fast. Its slender bow cut through the waves, practically gliding over the water. It was sailing alongside Lydia’s ship in the blink of an eye. She could see its crew, tiny at this distance, expertly manipulating the sails to make full use of the wind.

“That doesn’t look like a British ship, Nico. It isn’t flying a national flag. I wonder where it has come from?”

“It’s probably a pirate ship.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Lydia had just started smiling when a gunshot split the air.

On the deck of the other ship stood a figure with a rifle. The gunshot seemed to be a signal of sorts. The ship was now rapidly approaching, and the people around Lydia were screaming. They were running around as though there were some way to escape, and while others were instead trying to hide, that probably wouldn’t be much use either. Without any recourse, Lydia remained in place, gripping the handrail on the deck, looking this way and that for any sign of Nico.

“Nico! Where have you gone?”

He certainly has a talent for escaping…

The mysterious vessel was creating waves that battered the ship next to it. There was a violent lurch that sent Lydia toppling over. The sailors on the other ship, however, were moving around as confidently as if they were on dry land. They threw a collection

of hooked ropes at the passenger vessel, making it sway so precariously that Lydia could no longer get to her feet. Then the sailors began to board by using the ropes to cross.

The screams of panicked passengers continued. The ship Lydia was on was an ordinary passenger boat that followed the British coast. Its security personnel weren't used to anything other than settling disputes among passengers and catching pickpockets. They were far from equipped to deal with armed pirates.

In no time at all, the pirates had gathered together everyone on the ship, having barely met any resistance. A group of men surrounded the huddle of hostages. The young woman with the rifle over her shoulder had found a high platform to stand on.

"Sorry for the fuss. We promise not to hurt any of you. Just bear with us and we'll move along once our business is done."

A female pirate... Lydia only had a moment to feel strangely impressed before the pirate locked eyes with her. The stranger's hair was tied up at the top of her head and hung down her back. As she approached Lydia, that hair swung like a horse's tail, only coming to a stop when she did. Though her eyes had a slightly harsh slant to them, her upturned nose and dimpled cheek gave her an all-around charming impression. In terms of height, she and Lydia seemed to be about equal. For whatever reason, the fairy doctor was able to look back at her without fear.

"What's your name?" the pirate asked.

Wondering why it mattered, she replied, "Lydia Carlton..."

"Found her, Pino."

What in the world? She had barely finished the thought when she was hoisted up by a giant of a man. "What do you think you are doing?!"

He was unfazed by her struggling and held her fast as he jumped onto the plank and took her onto the neighboring ship. The rest of the pirates left the passenger boat in one big hoard, severing the ropes shortly before their vessel sped off again. Utterly confused, Lydia was made to sit in a cabin chair. By the time she had the wherewithal to look through the glass window, the other ship was nothing more than a black speck in the distance. The man who had carried her left the room without a word.

The cabin was surprisingly quaint, and its curtains and cloth

seemed to suggest it was meant for a woman. Lydia wondered briefly whether it belonged to the female pirate, but there was a more pressing matter at hand.

Why do they want me? Are they working with Ulysses? Having said that, the showy, forceful way in which she had been taken had given her a terrible sense of déjà vu. One which she, at first, tried not to think too hard about.

"Were you *really* under the impression that you could escape from me, Lydia?" The young man standing at the door with his striking blond hair and perfect smile was just the person she had been resigning herself to see.

"Edgar! Explain yourself at once!"

"To think you would run from me without even a word. I confess myself most offended."

"I merely left to carry out my duties."

"Let us discuss our future again in depth."

Why? "And I suppose such discussion is worth launching an attack on a passenger ship? Should the crew choose to report the incident at the harbor, you will be hunted down like a criminal—again!"

"Fear not, for I concluded my negotiations with the company ahead of time. As far as the crew is concerned, it was a surprise defense drill."

That sounded suspiciously like money had changed hands. "You are a complete and utter lunatic!"

"You should know as much by now."

Lydia had to admit that she did indeed. Exhausted, she let her head droop. Edgar got to one knee on the floor in front of her to peer at her face.

"Since we're on the topic, a young lady such as yourself traveling alone also fits the definition of lunacy."

"It is for work. Of course I would travel alone. Neither my age nor my sex should have anything to do with it."

"If it is for work, as you say, then you are bound by the wishes of your employer. This concerns one of my territories. Surely the sensible thing would have been to speak with me first?"

Lydia nodded, knowing he was right. She shouldn't have let her anger at him interfere with professional matters.

"Not to mention I have my enemies. To have you wandering off

to a far-off village during a time when I have lost sight of their movements concerns me deeply. Please do not do anything like this again."

Realizing the trouble she'd caused, Lydia began to feel guilty. "I won't," she murmured, eliciting a captivating smile of relief from Edgar.

While he may have been right about the carelessness of her actions, it didn't excuse kidnapping her from a ship. The pirates' attack had both shocked and frightened her. Edgar's bright smile shouldn't have been enough to wipe those anxieties from her mind, but she didn't have the energy to be angry with him anymore.

"This your gal's cat, Edgar?" The girl from before appeared, dangling a gray cat with long, hairy legs by the scruff of its neck. It looked entirely unhappy to be treated like an ordinary feline.

"Nico!"

When the girl let go of him, Nico got to his hind legs and quickly straightened his necktie.

"Allow me to introduce you, Lydia. This is the ship's captain, Lotta."

"A pleasure, Lydia." The pirate girl offered her hand, and Lydia was so lost that she took it without thinking. Lotta then called for the giant, who reappeared shortly after. "This is Pino, my younger brother. Sort of."

"Brother? Not your father?" Lydia asked blankly, earning a scowl from Pino.

"He's the same age as Raven," Edgar explained.

Lydia's eyes widened. She could believe it even less when she caught a glimpse of the earl's servant standing in the doorway. Their backgrounds may have differed, but that shouldn't have been enough to explain why Pino's arm was at least three times thicker than Raven's.

The huge boy's mouth twisted at an even more sour angle. "*I* look my age. He looks like a kid playin' dress up."

"May I strike him, my lord?"

"Certainly."

The next second, Pino was on the floor. "What the hell was that for?!"

"Calm down, Pino. You know you could never beat him."

“Leave it there, Raven,” said Edgar.

“Yes, my lord.” The boy lowered his fist, and Pino scuttled off with a click of his tongue.

At some point, Nico had appeared beside Raven, and presently he gave the servant a comforting pat on the leg. “It’s not easy when you’re much more than your appearance, is it?”

It was impossible to tell from Raven’s expression how he felt about receiving a cat’s sympathy, even if it was technically a fairy.

The Hidden Changeling

The link between the pirates and Edgar. The Grand Duke of Cremona's missing granddaughter and the girl named Betty. The Freya fluorite that could only be found in Wallcave. The mysterious impostor claiming to be the Blue Knight Earl. All of this information was relayed to Lydia at once, and for a while, her head wouldn't stop spinning. However, she now understood why Edgar had raided her ship in order to stop her from going to the village alone. Far from being his usual mischief, he had genuinely deemed it too dangerous.

Lydia stood on the deck gazing out at the sea. Its water had been dyed a blackish blue by the oncoming dusk. When the breeze was suddenly blocked by another body, she looked up to see who had joined her.

"We shall stop at the nearest port before it gets too dark." Edgar stood beside her as she leaned on the handrail.

"Are we not taking this ship all the way to Yorkshire?"

"I, for one, would rather sleep in a proper bed than doze in the bilge. We shall find lodgings by the port, then continue our journey by train tomorrow. I've told Nico he may stay on board with Lotta and her crew, who will be taking the ship the rest of the way. When we arrive at the village, we shall introduce ourselves as passing travelers."

As Lydia nodded, she felt their shoulders brush, reminding her of Edgar's claim that she was beginning to fall for him. All at once, her chest tightened again. Meanwhile, his smile was kind as he gazed at her calmly.

"This is getting me awfully nostalgic," he said.

"For what?"

"For when we first met."

Lydia frowned as the memory came to her too. "Now that you mention it, I suppose this is the second time you have kidnapped me by ship."

"Is it?"

You would remember were you not in the habit of forgetting

anything that inconveniences you.

"I can only recall spending a magical night at sea with you."

"Please consider your phrasing when you reminisce."

"It was destiny. The first encounter between two lovers. Do you not think so?"

"I do not think so, no."

"You will come around in time."

Not even in an eternity.

"Incidentally, things ended between Betty and me a long time ago. Do try not to allow your imagination to run wild should we find her."

Lotta had briefly mentioned that Edgar and Betty had been lovers when he was in America. It had made Lydia feel oddly restless. She knew it shouldn't have bothered her, but somehow it did, and she wasn't sure how to process the information. Instead of dwelling on it, she had decided to devote herself solely to finding Betty in her capacity as a fairy doctor.

"Supposing this really is a changeling case, the amount of time that has passed will make it even more difficult to find Miss Betty."

"Why is that?"

"The more time one spends in the fairy world, the more one becomes accustomed to it."

"I see. Well, I suppose it isn't necessarily a bad thing if she is happier there."

"You do not sound concerned in the least."

While Edgar was a lover of women, Lydia had the impression that he didn't tend to get hung up on any of them. She was fully prepared for things to just "end" between them, as they had with Betty. Not that anything had started in the first place.

"It is no mean feat for a human to detach themselves from the mortal realm," she said.

"In that case, I should like for you to accept my proposal, lest Kelpie try and take you away to the fairy world."

"Well, perhaps…I am not human."

Edgar peered at her, baffled. "What part of you is not human? Do you say that because you can see fairies?"

"A changeling may be a fairy baby that was left in place of the human child. When that happens, magic is cast on the changeling to make it indistinguishable from humans. However, there will

remain parts of them that are undeniably fairylike. Take my eye color, for example. It is most unusual."

"Many people have green eyes."

Lydia knew that, of course. However, depending on the light, her eyes could take on a sharp, almost golden hue that seemed to make people uneasy. More than the color, her eyes seemed to differ physically in that they were capable of seeing fairies. She wondered whether it was a result of fairy magic cast as a blessing of sorts.

"Now and then, it gives me pause for thought. What if the real Lydia lives in the fairy world and dearly wishes to come home?"

"But your mother was a fairy doctor, was she not? If she knew her daughter had been taken by fairies, surely she would have done something about it."

"Yes, I am sure of that. Father is always reassuring me that I am not a changeling too."

"You do not believe him?"

"It is difficult to do so when I feel so out of place in this world." Naturally, Lydia trusted her father, but there was a persistent part of her that found it easier to relate to fairies than people.

"What about me?" Edgar said suddenly. He sounded somewhat strained. "Could I not become the link that ties you to this world?"

"What?"

He gently placed a hand over the faint graze that remained on Lydia's forehead. He must have caught sight of it when the wind parted her hair. "Forgive me. I cannot bear the thought that I left such a wound on a young lady's face."

"It will heal in a matter of days. As a child, I suffered countless grazes like this one. Besides, you are not to blame."

"You would not have been at the party if not for me."

Lately, Lydia had the sense that Edgar had changed slightly. He was trying to be more responsible when it came to her, like he was her genuine fiancé. While she recognized that his present attitude differed from his previous flippant flirtations, it was still difficult for her to believe it was born of any true romantic feelings. When he put his arms around her like a lover, her body stiffened in resistance. And yet his embrace was more tender than it had ever been.

"May I ask something of you?" he said.

“What is it?”

“Give me your hand.”

She did as he asked, unable to guess what he was getting at until he placed the moonstone ring on her finger.

“The guardian fairy’s moonstone acts as a charm against evil, doesn’t it? We are about to enter a village in which a child has been spirited away. There is precious little I can do to protect you against the things I cannot see. That is why I ask that you wear the ring, at least until this business with the changeling is over.” He kissed her fingertip, then gave a relieved smile.

At some point, Lydia had grown used to how he kissed her hand like she was a proper lady. Specifically, she no longer felt the need to withdraw or react with anger or confusion, but the sense that the hand he was kissing didn’t belong to her remained.

“You aren’t shouting at me to take it off. Have you begun to realize your feelings toward me?”

Oh. I almost forgot.

“Remove it at once,” she tried. Predictably, it did nothing more than elicit a chuckle from Edgar.

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Leaving the small inn by the port behind, Edgar wandered over to a nearby pub. It was typical for a gentleman to select a watering hole based on his class, but this one followed the old style of simply having separate entrances. There was a partition beyond which he could hear the rabble of the working class as he ordered his beer. This side was quieter, its seats sparsely occupied.

After a time spent drinking alone, Edgar was joined by Ermine.

“May I join you, my lord?”

“Have you come to keep me out of trouble?”

“Yes. Should you become intoxicated, you would be prone to taking a woman back with you to the inn. You would be hard-pressed to lie your way out of it if Miss Carlton were to see you.”

“If you are referring to the recent incident, I did not lie.”

“I shan’t debate you on that point, if only to make my life easier.”

Edgar grimaced slightly as he took another swig of his beer. “It seems Lydia is disinclined to forgive so much as a light kiss.”

“Perhaps that is because it wasn’t as light as your lordship would have me believe.” Ermine seemed to be getting at the fact that hearing rumors was a far cry from witnessing something for oneself.

“I find myself in a deep pit of self-hatred. Lydia said that she feels out of place in the human world. That made me think that, unless I change, she may decide to leave for the fairy realm. Because of me.”

“Am I to take it that you have decided to show some self-restraint?”

“A riveting conversation does not fall under infidelity, does it?”

“If it is conversation you seek, I ask that you make do with me.”

“May I flirt with you?”

“If you like, my lord.” Ermine took his statement in jest. She knew that he would never attempt to seduce her.

“We haven’t had a drink together in a long time, Ermine. Raven’s never been fond of pubs, so he tends to wait outside.”

“He likely objects to being taken for a child.”

“Undoubtedly so. He is more sensitive about his youthful features than he lets on.”

“He was most put out, silently so, when one of the maids thought him fifteen.”

“That he was able to come across as being put out at all denotes great progress on his part.”

“Still, his face remains all but unreadable.”

Edgar laughed. Such trifling conversation afforded him a brief respite. At a time when he had no insights into the future, it felt all the more valuable. “I see no reason for that to change. But if I may say so, I think he is over the moon to have you back.”

“I wonder. He may find it difficult to accept that my hair and nails will no longer grow, and that my body becomes cool, like water, when I sleep.”

“Well, *I* am over the moon. Even if you have changed in some subtle ways, the main thing is that we are able to converse like this again.”

A faint smile appeared on Ermine’s lips, but something about it gave the impression that she felt slightly conflicted.

“What is it like?” Edgar went on. “Is it distressing for you to maintain human form?”

“Nothing feels any different from when I was human. I even forget that I am a selkie, and fairly often, at that. When I am close to the sea like this, however, I somehow have the sense that the waves are calling for me.”

“I see. I have no intention of tying you down; I only ask that you let me know when the time comes.” He knew that one day, she might gain full awareness of what she was.

Edgar was drinking more than usual, and the alcohol was wearing down his defenses. The bartender offered him a fresh pint, telling him it was for the fairy. Perhaps it was customary for the patrons here to treat the fae to some drink. While it might just have been a way to take advantage of drunk customers, Edgar found it to be an amusing quirk indeed. He tossed a shilling onto the bar in return without a word of complaint.

Now that he looked, the glass was emptier than it had been at first, though he certainly couldn’t recall drinking from it. Fairies hung closer to humans than one might think, which he had only learned since meeting Lydia.

Finishing her drink, Ermine stood up. “I think it is about time I take my leave.”

“You trust me to be alone now, do you?”

“I am not the only one keeping an eye on you.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but something about her bluntness made him reluctant to let her go. “Ermine, do you think it is all right for me to be with Lydia as I am?” Without fully registering what he was doing, he grabbed her hand. “I constantly endeavor to be sure that she won’t leave me. And yet, I fear that I shall be unable to accept her feelings if they ever *do* take a turn for the favorable.”

“I thought you had already gathered your resolve for such an outcome.”

“Me too, but every time I steel myself, my resolve immediately begins to waver. I have no means of protecting her, and yet I would drag her into my conflict. When I think that she might fall victim to something devastating, I feel close to acting in a way that risks drawing her ire.”

“You mean turning to another woman?”

In the worst case, everything would have been for naught. It was just like the tale in the picture book.

“I know full well that Lydia would despise nothing more.” He had to wonder why he was disclosing this to Ermine in the first place.

“Are you prepared for Miss Carlton to despise you to such an extent that she will never be able to forgive you?”

“Not in the slightest. But I fear that *that* is what it would take for me to let her go.”

All at once, Edgar realized that he wasn’t being himself that evening. Still, all he could do was stare at Ermine’s hand in his grip as she studied his face.

“Do you mean to say you require a woman with whom your unfaithfulness will invite Miss Carlton’s hatred to such an extreme extent?” She always seemed to know precisely what Edgar was getting at.

“Maybe I do.” He felt Ermine’s fingertips turn rigid with nerves. *I ought to laugh. Tell her that was in jest.* The problem was that he couldn’t be sure himself.

His servant took a considered breath. “And do you believe I possess the strength to decline?”

At last, Edgar let go. “That was in jest. There is no need to glare at me like that.”

She did not respond.

“Not to mention reprehensible. I fear I have had too much to drink.”

“You are wont to torture yourself a great deal, my lord. Why not simply work *with* Miss Carlton to solve your problems? We are not in America anymore. You ought to allow yourself to consider what might bring about happiness, rather than devote yourself solely to fighting.”

“Am I even capable of bringing a woman happiness? I have always struggled to maintain my feelings for any of my lovers. As for you, Ermine, I have done little more than cause you pain.”

“I believe that Miss Carlton would work to keep her beloved’s weaknesses at bay. That is the kind of young lady she is.”

“Perhaps, but I am not her beloved.”

“I dearly hope that will change one day.”

Hearing the door close behind him as Ermine left, Edgar let out a sigh. “I wonder what it is that I truly want.” He gazed at the beer in the fairy’s glass, which was draining before his very eyes. The

vessel then slid across the table.

"You seem to be in an awfully foul mood this evening, earl." A gray cat appeared in front of him, sitting on the table. It lifted the large glass with both paws to drink its beer.

"Ah, so Ermine was referring to *you* when she said someone else was keeping an eye on me."

"I am certain that Lydia would have been hurt had you laid hands on Ermine. That servant's always been fond of you, and Lydia knows it. Brushing it off as a whim wouldn't have been the end of it by any stretch of the imagination."

"Ermine does not hold such feelings toward me anymore."

"Now, you *know* that isn't true." Nico wiped the foam from his whiskers with a paw. "'Abhorrent' isn't strong enough of a word to describe what you were considering. Taking advantage of a woman's heart only to bring pain to everyone involved... I doubt Lydia would ever see you again."

"I wouldn't actually have done it. I couldn't have."

"For who's sake? Lydia's or Ermine's?"

"Both of them."

"You are full of lies, earl."

"Please do not divulge anything to Lydia that she does not need to know."

"I think I'm hungry for some fried fish."

"Very well."

"Having said that, I cannot make any promises."

The fairy-cat's brazen attitude irked Edgar, and he briefly considered stroking Nico's fur all over. However, he knew he was in the wrong, so he worked up the effort required to restrain himself. Hopefully Lydia's companion would rather she not hear of what had almost transpired either.

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"Is your lordship an academic?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. It's merely a pastime of mine."

"You say you are collecting stories relating to fairies?"

"Yes. I am thinking of writing a book on folklore."

Edgar had asked the villager to ride in his coach and show them to Wallcave's sole lodgings, spinning a web of lies in the process.

“I have to wonder whether one would hear such stories in a place like this.”

“Such stories can be found anywhere, even if only one or two. Women and the elderly tend to be the best people to ask.”

“But why choose Wallcave, my lord?”

“That much is coincidence. I do not often set out with a destination in mind, and I heard that the hilly country here is a sight to behold. I have my fiancée with me on this particular trip, so I thought it worth stopping by.”

“In that case, you will find there is much to see in this village. Those who come from the cities are often impressed by the mere presence of a mountain or cliff.”

Listening in on their conversation, Lydia had the sense that the villager was trying to avoid the subject of fairies. The scenery comprised waves of bare rock set into endless layers of hills, and these vast swathes of nature were pleasing to the eye. However, as they drew closer to the village, she found the lack of farmland in their surroundings rather odd. The fenced-off fields that should have contained piles of harvested wheat at this time of year were filled with nothing but withered weeds. Although fluorite was the village’s primary source of income rather than agriculture, the mines hadn’t been fruitful for a while now, making her wonder how the villagers were surviving. Perhaps they were solely dependent on money sent from those working in the cities.

While Lydia was lost in thought, the carriage had passed through the village, and now a tall stone building came into view. It gave off an entirely different impression than the homes they had seen so far. When they stopped in front of it, the villager explained that it was the lord’s manor and that its usual function was that of an inn.

“I take it his lordship doesn’t live here, then?” Edgar asked.

“His lordship rarely visits, as his territories are dotted all over Britain.”

“When was his most recent visit?”

“I’d have to think about that. I suppose it must have been two years ago now.”

Edgar shot Lydia a glance. She nodded back at him. They had both recognized that the village had been visited by the fraudulent Blue Knight Earl, and more than once.

“One moment, please.” With that, the villager disappeared behind the building. At length, a pair of women emerged.

“Lord Middleworth, I presume. Please follow us,” one said, repeating the false alias Edgar had given the villager.

The older woman unlocked the front door and gave a series of instructions to her younger associate. From the look of things, Edgar and Lydia would be their only guests that night.

“Would your ladyship be content with a room overlooking the sea?”

“I beg your pardon?” Lydia asked, suddenly flustered by how she had been addressed.

“We are not yet married, so might I ask that we stay in separate rooms? Preferably, my fiancée would have one with an anteroom for her lady’s maid. If it overlooks the sea, that would be more preferable still.”

Lady’s maid? Shocked, Lydia looked around and met Ermine’s gaze. The servant didn’t look perturbed in the least. While Lydia understood that it was necessary not to let on that she was a fairy doctor, she couldn’t help but feel that Edgar was enjoying himself a little too much with their fictitious personas. He had even had Lydia dressed in a gown befitting a noble girl, and she had no doubt that any onlookers would be convinced that she truly was accompanying her fiancé on a trip, complete with a lady’s maid. Still, to her, it merely felt like one big practical joke.

“Well, then, Mrs. Martha, please show her ladyship to her room.”

The younger woman nodded at the older woman’s instruction.

Mrs. Martha… Lydia recalled the name. It was shared by the sender of the letter regarding the changeling.

“I shall see you later, Lydia.” Edgar smiled at her before disappearing into his room with Raven.

As Martha continued to guide Lydia to hers, the fairy doctor tried to make conversation. “Might you be married, madame?” The young woman gave off a somewhat subdued impression that made Lydia wonder whether she might have been the mother whose child was taken.

“Yes, I am, my lady. I have lived in this village for a year and a half since marrying my husband. He is out working in the neighboring town at the moment.”

“Have you any children?”

“No, my lady.”

Perhaps Lydia had been mistaken. However, according to Edgar, the villagers had been instructed to leave the changeling matter alone, so that might have been why Martha was claiming to be childless.

Knowing her question might be regarded with suspicion, Lydia asked it nevertheless. “Are there any other couples in the village who are recently married?”

“No, just us. It is a small village, you see. Why do you ask, my lady?”

“Oh, well…” Lydia faltered.

“Her ladyship has been endlessly curious about the lives of young married ladies and gentlemen as of late,” Ermine interjected. “As her own wedding approaches, there is much that she has become anxious about. If I might ask that you do not dwell on any of the ways in which marriage might have inconvenienced you, it would be most appreciated.” Ermine’s quick thinking let Lydia breathe a silent sigh of relief.

“I see. Then I am afraid I might not be of use to you, my lady. I feel nothing but regret toward my own marriage.”

Could that regret have come from her child’s kidnapping? Or perhaps it was also the fact that her husband wasn’t physically there to support her through the ordeal.

Impervious to Lydia’s shock, Martha remained highly professional as she showed her to her room. “Over there is another room for your ladyship’s attendant. May I ask that you come to fetch the coals for the fire later?” she then asked Ermine. “I’m sorry, but we are short on staff.”

Making sure that Ermine had nodded, Martha went to pull the curtains apart briskly. When she made to leave, Lydia jumped in to stop her.

“I can see fairies!” she cried.

Martha turned around and gave her a dubious look.

“Might you be facing any difficulties at the moment? I can converse with them too, so I may be able to offer you assistance.”

The young woman turned very pale, very quickly. “If you really mean that, I implore you to leave this village as soon as possible, my lady, for your life could be in danger.” With that, she hurried

away.

"What did she mean by that?" Lydia murmured, perplexed.

"Perhaps she, and the entire village, have been warned not to speak of the changeling matter to outsiders, possibly on pain of violence."

"All so that they can follow the instructions of the fake Blue Knight Earl? If so, I doubt we shall find any villager willing to speak on the topic of fairies." Having said that, why *was* it so important that Martha not try to retrieve her lost child?

Ermine went to fetch the coals as the wind howled incessantly outside the window. The room itself was cold without a fire, but Lydia was in no mood to fetch her coat, instead setting herself down on the sofa. There came a strange rattling at the window, and when she looked up, she saw that Nico was outside rapping on it. Her companion had traveled by train with them after all, possibly because he was too anxious to let her out of his sight.

She opened the window for him, and he hopped down into the room. "This village is awfully quiet, Lydia. There's hardly anyone walking the streets, and I've yet to see a single fairy, which is surprising considering this is the Blue Knight Earl's land."

While many of the people were working outside the village, the fairies were a different matter. Now that Nico mentioned it, it *was* peculiar that there weren't any around. It was then that she spotted movement from a small, dark figure hiding away in the fairy-cat's tufty tail.

"Is that a friend of yours, Nico?"

"Mm?" Nico turned his head slightly and lifted his tail, where there was indeed a tiny, brown fairy. He completed the rotation and placed his paws on his hips. "What do you think you're playing at? That's *my* tail you're touching!"

"Oh? Oh, I'm sorry… I just saw an unfamiliar cat and grew curious."

"No, you didn't. I'm not a cat."

"You're not?!"

"Cats don't speak, nor do they walk on two legs."

"My, I suppose you're right!"

"And you are quite the dunce if you ask me."

It was a female fairy in a skirt and a cap. Though she resembled a brownie, she seemed slightly less intelligent, so she was most

likely a dobie.

“You mustn’t be so rude, Nico!”

The small fairy turned at the sound of Lydia’s voice. When their eyes met, she scrambled to hide herself in Nico’s tail again.

“Stop that!” Nico snapped. “This human won’t hurt you.”

“Wait, you can see me?” she asked Lydia.

“Yes, I can. I’m a fairy doctor.”

“A fairy doctor!” the dobie cried, rushing up to her and grabbing the hem of her skirt. “Please, you have to save my baby!”

“Your baby? I’m afraid I don’t quite follow…”

“My baby was put in a pot! Please, you must help or my baby will be boiled alive!”

Lydia frowned. Putting a suspected changeling in a pot was one way of determining what it really was. Sometimes, the fairies would bewitch one of their own to look human and leave it in place of the child they stole. In these cases, it was said that treating the changeling cruelly and breaking the spell to expose its true form would lead to the human baby’s return. Personally, Lydia wasn’t too keen on that method. There was no guarantee that the baby would be returned, and there were cases where it instead suffered cruelty at the fairies’ hands tit for tat. In essence, it was a method used by people who knew nothing about fairies, and a fairy doctor would never recommend it.

“Was your baby switched with one of the villagers’?” Lydia asked.

“Yes! But I never thought it would be put in a pot! It’s too horrifying!”

Since fairies hated iron, simply putting one in a pot in place of a cradle was cruel enough without the danger of being cooked. Lydia wondered whether Martha had picked up that knowledge somewhere and had put it into practice. However, seeing as she worked here, she was likely too busy at present to set the pot to boil.

“You ought to return the human baby.”

“I can’t! They would never let me!” The dobie wiped away her tears with Lydia’s skirt.

The fairy doctor gently picked her up and placed her on the table. “By ‘they,’ are you referring to your friends? Why would they stop you?”

“Because if I give the baby back, we’re going to be eaten by the worm!”

A worm? In other words, a large dragon that resembled a snake. Sometimes, they had lizard-like limbs. They were the most prolific dragon species in Britain and differed from those with wings.

“There is a worm in this village?”

“The worm creates the Freya.”

So that is where the rare fluorite comes from. Perhaps it came from the fire breathed by the worm. That would explain why it had a flame-like light.

“The worm is hungry for a human child. It said we must steal a human for it to eat. We had no choice but to exchange one of our own, but I wasn’t prepared for my baby to come to harm! Please, fairy doctor, you must do something!”

Going by the dobie’s explanation, Martha’s baby was with the worm.

“Has the human baby been eaten?”

“I don’t think so. Not yet. The worm takes its time turning people into rocks before it eats them.”

Even if the baby hadn’t been eaten yet, retrieving it would be no mean feat. Regardless, Lydia was reminded of the deal struck by the old Blue Knight Earl that should have allowed for the humans to mine as much fluorite as they needed. Surely the worm and its Freya would have been part of that agreement?

“How long has the worm been desiring human children? It’s a recent development, isn’t it?”

“Recent, yes! It was sleeping ever since it was felled by the Blue Knight Earl, but it woke up.”

“In that case, we ought to think of a way to put it back to sleep.”

“It isn’t possible. No one but the Blue Knight Earl can defeat it, and it was the new earl who woke it up, seeking Freya. He pays no heed to our requests anymore.”

There was no doubt in Lydia’s mind that this “new earl” was the same person who had told the villagers to leave the changeling matter alone. “The earl you speak of is an impostor.”

“An impostor? So, if the *real* earl comes, will he defeat the worm for us?”

As decisively as she had spoken a moment ago, Lydia was now unsure how to respond. Unlike the previous Blue Knight Earls,

slaying an enormous dragon would be far beyond Edgar, in which case she couldn't very well reassure the dobie that the true earl was already in the village.

"If nothing else, fairy doctor, please save my baby from the pot! I don't want my baby to be boiled!"

"Of course. Lead the way." For now, Lydia decided she would follow the small, nimble fairy.

The earl's manor was located a small distance away from the rest of the village. After leaving the building, Lydia had passed through a grove of trees and had been walking for some time since. The dobie stopped at the back door of a detached building that sat on the very edge of the village. Lydia peered inside, but there was no pot to be seen.

"Where is my baby? The pot was just there!" The dobie started to wander around on the dirt floor. "I put lots of potatoes in the pot to keep my baby warm because it's so cold!"

"Someone's coming, Lydia!" Nico warned her.

Quick as a flash, she hid herself behind a post. An older woman appeared at the back door carrying a pot full of potatoes. If Lydia had to guess, she was Martha's mother-in-law. The potatoes were submerged in water. The woman placed the pot on the stove and lit it.

"Wait a moment!" Lydia jumped out from behind the post. Pushing past the woman, she thrust her hands into the pot, fishing through the potatoes until she felt soft cloth, and pulled the baby out.

"Who might you be?" stammered the woman.

"What on earth were you doing? The baby is soaked through! Not to mention you were about to cook it!" Lydia cried.

The woman frowned, looking from the baby in Lydia's arms to the pot and back again. "I didn't know there was a baby in the pot. My daughter-in-law asked me to boil these potatoes for her. To think it is soaked through and isn't even crying... I suppose there really must be something wrong with it." Taking her eyes from the baby, the woman sat hunched over in her chair.

The baby was slightly smaller than a human infant, and while that could be excused, its face was another matter. Its skin was dark and wrinkled, and its ears clearly pointed. The magic cast on

it to make it appear human was somewhat lacking. It was no wonder its mother suspected a changeling, when it had quickly taken on such an appearance. Its supposed grandmother, too, seemed perplexed and distressed.

The dobie had sunk to the floor and was crying, clearly disturbed by its child's near-death experience. Naturally, she remained invisible to the elderly woman. When she threatened to wipe her face on Nico's tail, he hurriedly yanked it away.

"Forgive me, madame, but while this baby may be a changeling, you mustn't be cruel to it. Please dress it in a clean change of clothes, and do not lay it in the pot."

The woman looked up again, puzzled. "Sorry, but who are you?"

"I am a fairy doctor."

"A fairy doctor? Yes, well, those who claim they can see fairies have an awful habit of taking their side. It's always about doing whatever it takes to please the creatures."

"That isn't true. There are cases in which fairies are punished for wicked acts."

"In that case, I should think that this baby—" The woman cut herself off. She must have remembered the advice given by the impostor, that the changeling be left alone. "If I might ask that you excuse yourself..."

"Oh, but—"

"Else I will call for someone. For your own sake, you ought not to announce yourself as a fairy doctor, nor attempt to meddle in any fairy affairs as long as you are in the village."

"Why not? Is that what your earl has told you? He is an impostor!"

"How could you say such a thing?!" The woman got to her feet, livid. "And in our home of all places! What do you think will happen to my family if anyone hears you?!"

Just then, Lydia noticed a pair of shadows standing in the doorway. They were two men, presumably villagers, and both had their arms folded.

"A fairy doctor, is it?" one of them said, glaring at her. "I didn't think anyone in their right mind would want to stay in our village."

"I don't know anything about this!" cried the woman. "This young lady came to my home uninvited!"

"We'll see about that. You sure no one called for her? I think

you’re gonna have to explain yourself to the mayor.”

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Edgar had Raven accompany him to the manor’s third floor. The lord’s room, which he stayed in during his visits, was likely on this level. If there were any clues to be had regarding the false Blue Knight Earl, that room was where they would be.

With the merrows’ sword in hand, Edgar checked each room one at a time. He had felt the weapon might prove necessary given that he was visiting a village that didn’t seem to recognize him as the earl. These days, it was rare to see a nobleman carry a blade unless he was a soldier, but that didn’t mean he was prepared to leave the sword lying around unprotected. Though many of the rooms he came across were locked, that was hardly an obstacle. He had just slipped into one that appeared to be a gentleman’s study, and now he surveyed his surroundings. The curtains were closed, leaving the room gloomy. A fluorite sculpture in the corner was letting off a faint glow. Edgar approached it while Raven lit one of the candlesticks, further clarifying its reddish-purple silhouette.

“Look, Raven. A swan about to take flight. Isn’t it marvelous?”

His servant said nothing to indicate agreement or otherwise, but Edgar hadn’t been looking for a response. He moved away from the sculpture and examined the desk, on which he found writing paper and seals bearing the earl’s crest. Then, he searched the contents of every last drawer. Most of them were empty. Raven opened a locked cabinet, which also proved suspiciously empty. Whatever inconvenient documents had once been here had either been destroyed or hidden.

Edgar walked over to the fireplace. Although it had been cleaned, there were some ashes in one corner where he found remnants of what appeared to be leather string for binding papers. He clicked his tongue. The next moment, his gaze suddenly stopped as it wandered over the rug. There was a yellowed scrap of paper poking out from one corner. Lifting up that corner, he retrieved the wayward document.

“What have you found, my lord?” asked Raven.

“It appears to have come from a ledger.” Edgar’s frown

deepened the more he read. The paper documented fluorite yield. The mineral was supposed to have all but run out, and yet it seemed there was still an inordinate amount of it being mined.

"We have company, my lord."

Edgar heard them too: several pairs of footsteps coming up the stairs. He wondered whether his story of being a traveler had aroused suspicion, causing the villagers to come and investigate the manor.

Raven went up to the door and made to lock it, but Edgar stopped him. "We have no need to run or hide. Let us lend an ear to their grievances."

The earl sat down in the chair belonging to the room's owner. The door burst open, and several men crowded inside. Raven stood beside his master and kept his hand on the knife at his hip, ready to strike if needed.

The elderly mayor led Lydia back to the earl's manor. She was ushered up the stairs, surrounded by several men, something she considered to be rather over-the-top. Though it was too late to do anything about it, she fretted that her admission to being a fairy doctor might cause problems for Edgar. One of the men went to check the room the earl was staying in before returning and whispering something into the mayor's ear. The elderly man nodded, then had Lydia follow him up the next flight of stairs. They stopped in front of a door, paused to listen for any sounds from the inside, then exchanged nods and burst into the room.

Lydia heard Edgar speak from inside. He sounded perfectly composed. "Where are your manners, gentlemen? Do you not know that it is rude to enter an occupied room without knocking?"

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"Does my presence here pose a problem?"

"Do I need to spell it out for you? This room belongs to his lordship!"

"Now, now, just wait one moment." The mayor entered then, admonishing the younger, hot-blooded men.

Lydia was all but shoved inside by the man standing behind her. When her eyes met Edgar's, she sensed that both he and Raven were struck by a flash of tension. Nevertheless, they said nothing as she took the seat politely offered by the mayor.

The elderly man stepped away from her and positioned himself in the doorway, a physical warning that no one would be attempting to flee. “Your associate claims she is a fairy doctor. I am told she tried to put one of the villagers’ babies into a cooking pot.”

“That isn’t true! I *saved* that baby! A child cannot be brought back by tormenting the changeling. The proper methods must be adhered to, else—”

“Changeling? What utter rubbish. The poor woman is only claiming that because her child happens to be a tad offensive to the eyes.”

Lydia had already had this argument at the mayor’s residence. “Why go to such lengths to insist that there is no changeling in your midst?”

The mayor ignored her and looked at Edgar. “Lord Middleworth, was it? I trust you have heard of the traveling thieves who claim nobility in order to avail themselves of a good family’s hospitality, only to pilfer their valuables? It strikes me as strange that you would rummage through these locked rooms while your companion causes a commotion in the village. I have half a mind to inform the police, but I will give you a chance to excuse yourselves willingly.”

“Unfortunately, you and your men are far more guilty of thievery than I am. It is probably best if the police are not involved for all our sakes.” A thin smile on his lips, Edgar stood up. Lydia recognized that this was him at his most dangerous. He was prepared to pursue his foe to the very last.

“Excuse me?”

“This is my manor. Everything within it belongs to me. It is my prerogative to take or destroy whatever I wish.”

With that, Edgar deliberately knocked a nearby precious vase off the desk. The shattering glass had one of the men reflexively pulling out a knife, only for him to be knocked down by Raven the very next second. He was then sent flying toward the wall.

“Do be somewhat lenient, Raven.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Edgar swept his gaze over the frozen crowd. “Are you aware of who I am?” He lifted up a sheathed longsword from the desk.

“The merrows’ sword,” Lydia murmured, watching as he pulled

it from its scabbard.

He held it up in front of the silenced mayor, making sure the older man could see its large star sapphire. “I am your lord, the Earl of Ibrazel.”

The villagers fell deathly silent. While this may have been their first time seeing the Blue Knight Earl’s sword, they should nevertheless have been aware of its sapphire, the Star of the Merrow. Its silky, deep-blue luster and clear cross-shaped star made it highly unique. The shock was visible on every man’s face.

The mayor took a deep breath as though trying to calm himself. “I have met his lordship several times, and I know him well. You are not him.”

Edgar gave an exaggerated shrug. “It would be safer were you to accept that the man you have been meeting with is an impostor, for you have now become accomplices to him. It will be assumed that you have been working with him in order to deceive me.”

Sword dangling, he walked out slowly in front of the villagers.

“You have informed my butler that the veins of *my* fluorite, which this territory is known for, have run dry, yet you are mining more than ever before. And you have the audacity to accuse *me* of thievery?”

Upon his return to the desk, he waved the yellowed paper in the direction of his audience and addressed the mayor.

“Am I to understand it that you have been selling the fluorite through illegal channels and sharing the profits among a portion of the villagers? I wonder which routes you are using, exactly. After all, the fluorite here is of a distinctive color that cannot be found anywhere else in the United Kingdom. It would be possible to obfuscate its origin, which is why I would like to hear about the man in charge of this intricate conspiracy: the thief who has stolen my fluorite and is claiming to be your lord, the Blue Knight Earl.”

“The veins *have* run dry,” insisted the mayor, “and as you have suggested, selling fluorite on such a large scale is impossible. That paper is little more than a note, and it is certainly nothing official. Search the entire village if you wish. You will find neither fluorite nor riches. We struggle even to make ends meet.”

An amused smile appeared on Edgar’s lips, as though he had come to understand something. That perfect smile adorning that perfect face resulted in an air of pure cruelty. Lydia could tell that

his patience had worn thin.

“I see you would continue to feign ignorance even when presented with the undeniable truth. You must have gathered quite the resolve, seeing as you would oppose your earl.”

“You are not our earl.”

“And you have displeased me greatly. I hope you will look forward to your trip through hell,” Edgar said coldly, looking for all the world like a tyrant from ancient times.

Indistinct Feelings

The mayor and villagers withdrew before any agreement was made. Edgar gathered Raven, Ermine, and Lydia in one of the manor's rooms.

"Now, what to do next…" he said.

"I would have thought you had a plan, given how you provoked them!" Specifically, Lydia would have expected him to have an idea of how he would expose the villagers' embezzlement.

"Such provocation requires one to shut off his thought processes. *Now* is the time for thinking. There are four of us, but they have a village full of men. We ought to avoid fighting at all costs," he explained.

"My only suggestion is that we seize the fluorite itself. They must be concealing it somewhere," said Ermine.

"It isn't as though we can go rifling through their houses," Lydia pointed out. "Besides, I believe our more pressing issue is the hostility we face from the villagers."

"Indeed," Edgar agreed. "I doubt they would go so far as to plot our demise, but I am certain we will face danger if we are careless in revealing their dealings with the false earl."

Having said that, Lydia doubted it would be enough to make him back down. He despised it when people stole what rightfully belonged to him. It didn't matter if those things were objects, privileges, people, or whether he was even aware of their existence before the theft. Anyone who crossed that boundary was dealt with mercilessly, just as he had sworn revenge against the men who had harassed Lydia at the garden party. She now wondered whether he saw her as little more than a possession too.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. The manor was supposed to be empty after the villagers withdrew. Even the maids had left, making it an inconvenient place for a nobleman to lodge indeed. No doubt the mayor thought it would encourage Edgar to return home, but it left no obvious answer as to *who* was at the door. The room's four occupants gazed at it curiously.

Then Martha entered, pulling a tea trolley. “Excuse me, but I’ve made you some tea.” She began to lay the table with bakes, scones, and sandwiches as though nothing was amiss. “I’m terribly sorry, but the cooks won’t be coming tonight. There will be no one to provide you with supper, so I’m afraid I shall have to ask you to make do with these.”

“That won’t be a problem.” Edgar watched her prepare the tea, a slight crease in his brow.

All of a sudden, Raven approached Martha and had her put down the pot. “Please get rid of it all.”

“Why?”

“We cannot accept any food we are offered in this place,” he said firmly.

It was then that Lydia realized why the others seemed so wary. Edgar’s servants were the only people he could rely on. The three of them had fought together to get where they were, and their fight was far from over. He likely knew they risked drawing the villagers’ ire, but every one of their adversaries’ moves was regarded with caution while they calculated their path to victory.

“If you are worried about poison, I would be happy to test these for you,” Martha said. “I can promise you they are safe. The mayor and his men might want you to leave, but they are not looking to turn this into a serious incident.”

“Edgar, this is Mrs. Martha Tyler, who sent us the letter regarding the changeling. I believe we can trust her,” Lydia told him.

Surprised, Edgar looked from her to Martha. “Is that so?”

The woman looked incredibly anxious, but still she nodded. “Please forgive me, my lord. I did not realize there was an impostor afoot. Otherwise, I would not have been so critical in my letter.”

“You believe me to be the true earl?”

“I struggle to think why else your lordship would choose to investigate this remote village. I was given your lordship’s address on a visit to the neighboring town, as I heard its lord had spoken with you in London at a function. If you are well-known in London, I can only suppose you are the real Lord Ashenbert.”

“Regardless, are you sure you wish to defy your mayor by lending us your aid?”

“On the contrary, I have nothing to gain from doing as he says.”

Lydia picked up a teacup. “Quite so. I think I shall have some tea. I’m rather hungry too,” she added, helping herself to a cookie. “My, it’s delicious!”

“I baked them myself.” Martha smiled, having visibly relaxed. If she had been curt before, perhaps it had come from the stress of knowing that no one in the village would take her side.

Edgar took a seat next to Lydia with an exasperated sigh. “Some tea if you would, Mrs. Tyler. I cannot allow my fiancée to act as my food taster.” He darted in to take the sandwich Lydia had been reaching for and tossed it into his mouth. “Incidentally, I must ask whether the village’s disinclination to act on the changeling matter is linked to the misappropriation of the fluorite.”

Martha seemed perplexed, so Lydia answered in her stead. “It most certainly is, but I think our hands are tied in relation to the changeling at the moment.” Not wanting to mention the worm or its appetite for children in front of the new mother, she settled on a somewhat vague explanation. “The fairy mother only replaced Mrs. Tyler’s child with its own because it had no other choice and is most upset. However, I shall see that things come to a happy conclusion, one way or another.”

Secretly, Lydia wasn’t confident it would be that easy. According to the dobie, the “Blue Knight Earl” was the only one capable of slaying the worm, but there was no chance that Edgar would be able to do it. Therefore, Lydia would have to take some sort of action herself. There had to be a way to exchange the babies again without needing to defeat the worm. Though a compromise, there was little else she could do.

As for the fake earl, it was impossible to think he was a simple fluorite thief, given he had awoken a dragon. There was only one person Lydia could think of with the power to do such a thing: Ulysses. She was confident that Edgar had also sensed his—and the Prince’s—involvement in this village. They had regarded the Blue Knight Earl as an enemy since long before Edgar had unexpectedly claimed the title, and he *must* have been eager to know what Ulysses’s goal was in impersonating the quasi-legendary figure.

As the sun began to set, the wind grew stronger. Given that the manor overlooked the sea, it was completely exposed to the

battering of gusts. It must have been very solidly built, for the candles inside didn't so much as flicker even as the windows shook. However, when the glass before the balcony made a strange sound that couldn't be attributed to the wind, Raven reacted at once. No sooner had he approached it than he flung the windows open.

"Argh! Wait!" the large pirate cried just before the boy could jump at him. The bloodlust surrounding Raven vanished immediately when he realized it was Pino. "I *told* you we should've just gone through the front, Lotta!"

"What, you were just gonna wait out there all night while no one answered the bell? Besides, this was the only room with light comin' from it." Lotta appeared as she spoke, hopping over the balcony's handrail.

"You two have impeccable timing, I must say." Edgar smiled as he beckoned them inside.

Lydia eyed him warily. She could tell from his expression that he had just come upon a scheme, and his schemes tended to be far too reckless to commend.

"What's this place all about, then? We didn't see a single villager on our way here," said Lotta.

"I have a confession to make, Lotta. They already know that I am the Earl of Ibrazel and that I have come to investigate the village."

"What?! What now? Did you find out what's happened to Betty?"

"No. I haven't procured a single clue. Speaking of which, I wonder whether we might borrow your cook."

"Edgar! We have bigger things to worry about!" Lydia urged.

"Maintaining one's nutrition is a matter of great importance no matter the situation." Edgar turned to Martha. "How much food and liquor is there in the manor, Mrs. Tyler?"

"I am sure there is plenty in the storehouse, but I shall go and look."

"Thank you." Edgar smiled at Lotta again. "We shall have a feast tonight. Fetch everyone from the ship."

"I'm not gonna complain if you're treatin' us to drink, but you've got other plans for us too, right?" She was treating him with due caution. It was obvious that she knew him well.

"We shall be playing a war game of sorts."

“I beg your pardon?!” Lydia cried. Everyone else seemed to know he was being serious and had their eyes on him as they waited for him to continue.

“This village has been captured by a fraudulent Blue Knight Earl who has taken my privileges for himself. We are going to launch an attack to recover it. The mayor is in touch with this impostor and should therefore possess information on Betty—information which we shall have him share with us in its entirety.”

Edgar must have been planning to make use of the pirates’ fighting power from the moment he had revealed his identity. There was little a group of four could do, but having an entire crew on his side changed everything.

“Let’s do it.” Lotta didn’t hesitate. She was here to rescue Betty.

“Then it’s settled. Let us prepare our strategy.”

The barrels of beer and wine had been carried from the storehouse to the reception room, where the jovial feast was continuing. The melody of Lotta’s ocarina held within it a hint of sadness, despite the festivities, and Lydia found herself captivated by its exotic notes. Even in the quiet room, located some distance from the hall, the sound carried clearly. It was the perfect accompaniment to the wind and the waves outside.

Lydia stood alone by the window, gazing at the moon. She could just about make out some voices down below, and when she looked, she spotted Edgar and Ermine. The servant was supposed to have gone out with a group of pirates to keep watch over the village and report back on any suspicious movements. It seemed that the mayor and his men had been bustling about and hiding the evidence of their embezzlement, but Edgar had decided to leave them to their own devices for now. His focus was on locating the fluorite itself, and interfering with the villagers at this point might have hindered his efforts. It seemed he wanted to have a firm grasp on everything before launching his attack and securing the village.

It looked like Edgar was currently receiving a report from Ermine. Lydia picked up snippets of their conversation and, when they were finished, Edgar lowered his voice.

“I’m sorry about what happened. I was not myself.”

“I had already put it out of my mind.”

He looked somewhat dissatisfied with her response. “With Lotta and Pino here, it feels as though we are back in America.”

“That is something I really would rather forget.”

“We suffered greatly, but we also had our fill of gaiety on evenings such as this.”

“It was enough to wipe all thoughts of hardship from our minds.”

The pair discussed versions of themselves that Lydia had never known. They spoke of a time when they were not master and servant, but equals. Or perhaps something even closer than that.

Edgar’s eyes were fixed on Ermine, but he made no move to touch her as he would have Lydia. Her heart throbbed. She wondered whether the feelings that connected them were something more sacred.

“I never wished for you to die.”

“My lord, that is something I chose for myself.”

“I always did what I thought best for both our sakes.”

“I know. The mistake was mine.”

Lydia held her breath as she listened closely. This seemed to be a terribly important conversation, but it ended there, and the pair went their separate ways. Lydia found she was unable to move, as though she had just borne witness to something incredibly precious. She understood little of what they had said. Indeed, they had done nothing but discuss the past, and yet she felt a stabbing pain in her heart—something even keener than what she had felt at seeing Edgar kiss that woman. She had never known Edgar to look so anguished, so desperate. And now she was taking a series of heavy breaths, for what reason, she didn’t know.

“Would you like me to fetch you a light, Miss Carlton?”

She jumped and turned, knowing her surprise must have seemed exaggerated. Raven was waiting for her reply in the doorway, seemingly indifferent to her agitation. From the looks of things, he had been passing by and noticed that she was occupying a room with the hearth as its only source of light.



“No, thank you,” she stammered. “Another light would distract from the moon. See how it reflects upon the waves? It makes it seem almost brighter outside.”

Raven approached the window and looked out over the sea. His tone remained as impassive as ever as he replied, “So it does.” Still, he remained gazing at the scene for a time, suggesting he felt *something*.

“I couldn’t help but notice you are not taking part in the festivities. Do you dislike drink?” Lydia asked, trying to dispel the mysterious, turbulent emotions in her mind.

“I can drink as much as I like and never become intoxicated. That being the case, I fail to see the point of doing so.”

“I see. Yes, I suppose it is uncommon to find someone who drinks *tea* to excess, for example.” She smiled at him, and he stared back in that distinct way of his, like he had discovered a rare specimen of some kind. In the early days, he had stared like that when she so much as started a casual conversation with him. He had always been treated as a tool meant for killing, so he must have found it curious that Lydia would smile and speak with him like he was a normal human being. She used to feel nervous around him, never knowing what he was thinking, but lately his deeply serious presence had felt somewhat reassuring. Unlike Edgar, who hid his true intentions behind a wall of lies, Raven was honest to a fault. That was true even when his expression was undecipherable.

“Now that I think of it, Raven, you know Miss Betty, don’t you? What kind of girl is she?”

He quickly averted his gaze, as though she had caught him by surprise, then said, “I could not possibly say,” and made to leave.

My question put him on guard. She was certain that, ordinarily, he would have answered her, but Edgar must have ordered him not to respond to any questions regarding women.

Lydia grabbed hold of his jacket before he could go. “I do not ask for the reasons you suppose. I need to know what she is like—what she looks like—if I am to glean anything from the fairies on her whereabouts.”

“He can’t tell you anythin’. He doesn’t pick up anything about women except that they wear skirts. That’s what Edgar told me ages ago, anyway.” Lotta had joined them.

Raven offered her a polite nod, but it seemed he did not agree with her assessment. “It was not a matter of struggling to differentiate between women, but rather that his lordship went through so many lovers that it was impossible to keep up.”

Lotta laughed. Raven frowned as she slapped his shoulder, apparently unsure what had elicited such amusement.

“You haven’t changed! By the way, your lord’s been calling for you downstairs.”

Raven darted past Lotta, who took his place next to Lydia at the window.

“Sorry my crew of dunces is so loud.”

“Oh, please do not think that I object to their high spirits.”

“Y’know, I thought you and Edgar were together without you knowing a thing about him, but it looks like I was wrong. You know about his past. Explains why you didn’t bat an eyelid when you were abducted by a pirate crew.”

Lydia wasn’t sure she had been as calm as all that. However, she had learned that the extraordinary became ordinary when one spent time with Edgar. “I do not know Edgar all that well, actually.”

“You two are engaged, aren’t you?”

“Not in truth. Our engagement came about due to complicated circumstances, but I have no intention of marrying him.”

Lotta made a half-hearted hum, as though she had known as much for some time. “I didn’t think you acted like you were engaged. I dunno about Edgar, but you always…seem sort of withdrawn, I s’pose.”

“I would like nothing more than to meet the woman around whom *he* might be withdrawn.”

Lotta chuckled, then turned a careful eye on her. “Look, I know I’m sticking my nose in. It’s just, I’m a bit worried about you. I watched Betty fall for him and get hurt because of it, see.”

Is she implying that the same thing will happen to me should I fall in love with Edgar?

“Miss Betty was hurt?”

“By Edgar, and he did more than just break her heart. *That*, she would’ve gotten over easily. They’d only just broken up when she said she was leaving America to go live with some Grand Duke. The three of us were raised together and didn’t care about where we’d come from or anything. We always said we’d never be apart,

and then…”

“Why did they break up? I cannot see Edgar ending a relationship willingly. Was it due to his unfaithfulness?”

“You don’t sound surprised. Has he been unfaithful to you?”

“Oh! Well, not exactly!” Flustered, Lydia waved her hands dismissively.

Lotta thought for a spell before saying firmly, “When Edgar has genuine feelings for a woman, he doesn’t try to seduce her. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Lydia was reminded of what she had seen between him and Ermine. Lotta’s words rang strangely true. Edgar thought it best for both their sakes not to accept his companion’s feelings. Wasn’t that what he had been talking about? Ermine had been one of the Prince’s female slaves. Edgar had kept his distance because he didn’t want to invoke the memories of what her former master had done to her. For his part, he may have felt that he would be unable to escape the Prince had he pursued too close of a relationship with her. Was he beginning to regret his decision? Closing himself off to Ermine had led to the loss of her humanity, after all.

“If he really loves her, he ought to tell her as much. It isn’t too late,” Lydia replied.

“I don’t think that’s ever gonna happen. I dunno what it is, but seeing those two together, it’s like they don’t have that option.”

The Prince might have been casting a darker shadow between them than she had imagined.

“So, did Miss Betty leave Edgar of her own accord?”

“Oh, no. She was determined to steal him back, so she tried to make Ermine drink poisoned wine.”

Lydia didn’t process Lotta’s words immediately. Then she stared at her, open-mouthed, not sure whether she’d even heard correctly.

“Still, seems Betty didn’t put in enough poison to *actually* kill her. Edgar picked up on it, though, and told Betty to drink it instead. She said that only a scoundrel would try to make his lover drink poison, so she broke up with him. I think they’re both to blame, personally, but he did treat her like they were properly together. I also don’t think poisoning someone’s a good way to deal with one’s jealousy. But I think Betty learned where Edgar’s

heart really lay."

Any perceptions Lydia had of Betty now seemed completely naive. Was Edgar perhaps attracted to women who lacked principles of any kind? Or maybe he saw no differences between the women he loved—they would always be second place to the one who truly occupied his heart. Anyone would do, as long as she could stay by his side and distract him from his loneliness.

Lydia was sure of this assessment. That was why she couldn't allow herself to be taken in by him.

"If you really have feelings for him, then I probably shouldn't be saying any of this," Lotta continued. "But if you don't, I don't wanna just sit back while you become another one of his victims. I bet it's fun to pretend he's courting you, and he probably treats you well. I feel like he's the type to push you away the moment you seek his commitment, though, and frankly, no woman deserves that."

No one had ever spoken about Edgar like this to her before. Lydia felt her heart sinking. But, strangely, she could also see the funny side of things. Lotta was completely right.

"I thought you were a close friend of his?" Lydia asked.

"I dunno. Apart from how he treated women, I always thought he was impressive. Like how he led the ne'er-do-wells from the slums to fight the adults in that nasty organization."

"If I might ask that you refrain from slandering me, Lotta..." Edgar had joined them.

"I was bein' nice about you."

"Only after you implied that no woman deserves me."

"Yeah, well, I said that 'cause it's true."

"I've been looking for you, Lydia." Deciding to cut off his conversation with Lotta before it got any worse, Edgar brushed past her and approached Lydia instead. He wore his usual smile, but when she recalled how he had looked at Ermine not moments ago, her chest grew tight.

"Did you need something?" she asked quietly.

He loves someone else. Not me. That is why he feels no qualms about kissing other women whilst claiming I am his fiancée. She should have known as much, but it was only now that the vague gloom in her heart had taken on a clear shape.

"I thought it was about time we set off, so I came to say

goodbye. Lotta, can I trust you to give your crew the necessary directions?"

While it was obvious that he was just trying to get rid of her, the pirate girl shrugged and departed without complaint. Left together in the low light, Edgar took Lydia by the hand before she could even think about slipping away. She thought she caught him glancing at the window.

"How long have you been here?"

"Not long," she lied.

Edgar's eyebrow twitched so subtly it was difficult to tell whether he doubted her or not. But he quickly dropped his gaze to the milky-white moonstone on her ring finger, his eyes softening at its pale gleam. "Its light seems all the brighter when you wear it. Gazing upon it like this, it would make one believe that you were predestined to possess it and become my wife."

What nonsense... Lydia tried to shake his hand away, but he wouldn't budge.

"Regardless, are you sure that launching an attack on the mayor's estate is a good idea?"

"Are you worried about my safety? You needn't be. They may have the advantage in numbers, but we are used to confronting our enemies like this."

Lydia couldn't help but wonder what sort of experiences it took to grow used to something so horrific. "My concern lies with the villagers."

"We shan't go further than we must."

He drew closer to her. Before she knew it, his hand was on her back, and they were as close to each other as two lovers. She faltered.

"Edgar? Edgar, I think...I would like to remain friends with you and nothing more."

He looked confused at the sudden statement. "Did Lotta say something?"

"No." Lydia paused. "I would just rather you stop referring to me as your fiancée."

"Do you mean to say that there is absolutely no possibility of you falling in love with me?"

"Um...yes," she found herself answering. Edgar's question had come across as so uncharacteristically hopeless that she had given

the reply she felt he expected.

"Very well."

He isn't arguing back? Lydia frowned, to which Edgar responded with a melancholic smile.

"If your feelings haven't changed by the time we return to London, I shall desist."

"Do you mean it?"

"You don't believe me."

"Of course I don't. You are the type of man who erases his former promises with a wave of his hand."

Edgar hesitated. "Well, I mean it."

He sighed as though something was weighing painfully on him, but Lydia couldn't believe it was the thought of giving up on her. It was something the man she knew would never have considered doing, and she could only think that he had acquiesced because he recognized how deceitful he had been in his flirtations with her. Knowing that Lydia might have overheard the conversation that had taken place beneath this window, he would have had no choice but to recall the emotions he had been feeling then and how they contradicted what he had been telling her.

"Even so, might I ask that, as my fiancée, you pray for my victory? At least for the time being. Is it not customary for lovers to share a kiss before the man goes out to war?"

When he made such requests of her, Lydia couldn't tell whether he was being serious or not. However, the mention of war left her feeling anxious. If the other side were to fight back in earnest, people could get hurt. Or worse. She wavered. A kiss on the cheek would do, wouldn't it? That was how it went in the majority of tales about knights. Her memories of such things raced while her mind remained stuck. If she hesitated here and something were to happen to Edgar, she knew she would regret it. At the same time, she was fairly sure that it was superstition to expect such kisses to bring actual luck. And round and round she went.

"Never mind. I know I am asking for too much." Edgar's lips curled into a small smile. Seeing Lydia tie herself up in knots over his request must have made him feel sorry for her. "You ought to retire for the night."

"You will be leaving shortly though, won't you?"

"It will all be over by the time you wake up."

Edgar's statement more or less guaranteed that she would struggle to get any sleep at all. Nevertheless, there was nothing she could do *but* wait and pray for his safety. This conflict was between humans and had nothing to do with fairies. Any interference from her would only cause problems for him.

"I shall see you anon."

"Do be careful," Lydia murmured.

Edgar nodded, but it took some time for him to let go of her hand. By the time he finally did so, departing with resolve in his step, it felt to her as though she had been the one gripping him tightly, reluctant to see him leave…all while knowing that falling in love with him would only lead to pain.

***

The dobies were hosting a party in the thickets of their home field. Nico had joined them, lapping away at a strong mushroom liquor.

"You say the fairy doctor came to help with the changeling, Mr. Nico?" asked the dobie whose baby had been taken.

"She is wasting her time. Not even the greatest of fairy doctors could do anything against a worm revived by the Blue Knight Earl," an older one remarked.

"Speaking of which, could you tell me more about this Blue Knight Earl fellow?" Nico's tongue swiped the drops of liquor from his whiskers.

"We don't know the first thing about him," said the old dobie.

"I saw him once, very briefly," the female explained. "I saw him when he was bringing the worm its bride."

"Its bride?" asked Nico.

"Yes. He woke up the worm, but he also brought it a bride."

"I don't suppose the bride in question was a young human female?"

"What else? Dragons have always liked human girls. The nobler her blood, the better!" grumbled the older fairy.

In other words, the grand duke's missing granddaughter had been taken to marry not the impostor, but the worm.

Talk about a disaster, thought Nico. Although, having turned her back on Edgar because of his unfaithfulness, perhaps the girl

thought the worm a preferable option. Its eyes wouldn't wander, for one.

"You saw him, then. What was he like?" the fairy-cat asked.

"His clothes were black!"

Nico waited for elaboration, but none came. "Is that all?"

"Like I said, I only saw him for a moment! You might be better off asking the worm's bride."

"Who, presumably, is with the worm. How am I even supposed to approach her to ask?"

"Sometimes, she leaves the lair in search of human food," the old dobie said, "and sometimes, we bring her some, the poor thing."

"So, I simply need to wait for her to leave?"

"That's right. In fact, we'll be setting off to bring her food at dawn, seeing as it's the spring tide. It means the worm's power will be weaker than usual, so the princess will be able to come closer to the lair's edge."

Nico jumped to his hind paws. "Dawn, you say? Wait here. I'm going to fetch the fairy doctor."

Lydia hadn't expected to sleep as she waited for Edgar's return, but at some point while she was resting vacantly on the sofa, slumber must have taken her. A bushy tail tickling the end of her nose in the dark woke her, and she sneezed, rubbing her eyes.

"Nico? Oh dear, I must have dozed off."

"Perhaps so, but Lydia, I know where the princess is!"

"Princess?"

"Betty, wasn't it? The girl kidnapped by the Blue Knight Earl? She was given to the worm as its bride."

Lydia sprang off the sofa. "Are you quite certain of that?"

"Apparently, she leaves the worm's lair once a month. We must hurry, else we shan't make it!"

"All right, I shall make haste. Oh, but I must return to my room to fetch my coat first."

The early morning was relatively cold. The room had a fireplace, but even then, she felt chilly after being roused from her nap.

"I'll be waiting for you in the hall," Nico said.

Lydia hurried up the stairs and rushed into her room. As she opened the closet, it struck her that the dress she was wearing

didn’t lend itself to ease of movement. She was dressed to look like a casual traveler, but seeing as Edgar’s true identity had already been exposed, there was no need for such pretenses anymore. Besides, it would likely get ruined the moment she set foot in the worm’s lair.

Pulling one of her own everyday outfits from her trunk, she threw the frillier garment she had been wearing to one side. Then she removed her crinoline and put her skirt on over her petticoat. As she began to fasten the buttons on her upper garment, there was a noise at the window.

“I shan’t be a moment, Nico!” She lamented her companion’s impatience until she turned and her eyes met those of a grinning water horse.

“Hallo, Lydia. Ye jist up and disappeared on us, so I came lookin’ for ye.”

“Kelpie! You mustn’t enter my room without warning! I’m changing!”

“So? Ah’m no stoppin’ ye, am I?”

“Have you taken leave of your senses, or do you not possess any in the first place?”

“What?”

He was a horse—a fairy-horse, at that—and so his idea of common sense naturally differed from that of a human. Lydia decided she ought to finish changing quickly rather than waste time lecturing him. It wasn’t as though he understood the difference between undergarments and outerwear.

“I smell smoke. Somethin’s burnin’.”

Lydia rushed to the window, still partway through doing up her buttons, but it was too dark to see anything. However, she heard the gunshot when it came.

Oh, I wonder whether Edgar and the others are safe…
Unfortunately, she could no longer afford to wait for them to come back. She needed to tell someone that she was going to search for Betty. She made to leave.

“Ye complain tae us about comin’ in here when ye’re changin’, but ye’ll walk outside afore ye’re even finished?”

For goodness’ sake. It was at times like this that Lydia felt all too keenly the inconveniences of being a woman. Why did she have to be dressed to perfection before spending even a minute outside?

It didn’t help that the buttons on women’s garments tended to be innumerable.

Flustered, she called out to Kelpie, “Would you fasten the buttons on my back for me?”

“Huh?”

“Quickly now.” She was having enough trouble with the fastenings on her sleeves.

Kelpie approached her, clearly reluctant. “What am I s’posed to do with these?”

“They are to be passed through the holes.”

“Bloody nuisance these are…”

“Lydia? You there?” The door flew open, revealing Lotta behind it. She stared at the strange man, who was not only in the fairy doctor’s chamber, but helping her change. Then, her eyes lit up with an unprompted realization. “Oh, sorry. I’ll be back later.”

“Wait, Miss Lotta!” Lydia cried. “You are mistaken!”

“Right, I know. I won’t tell anyone.”

“No, what I mean to say is that this is no ordinary man, but a horse! Please wait!”

Lotta stopped, clearly flummoxed.

“Oy, take care of this for us, lassie. My fingers aren’t made for this.”

“You mean me?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Lotta. But if you would…”

“I guess I could.” Lotta began to fasten Lydia’s buttons. “Oh, I meant to tell you, Edgar and the others have the mayor’s residence surrounded. The reconnaissance team saw several of the villagers hiding stuff, and we’ve dealt with that. The mayor, though, seems to be resisting a little, so I was gonna go give them a hand.”

“What was that gunshot just now?” Lydia asked, wondering if it had something to do with Edgar’s charge.

“A simple gunshot shouldn’t get you worried.”

Lydia had little choice but to believe her. “That reminds me, Miss Lotta! I might be able to speak with Miss Betty. Apparently, this will be the last opportunity for an entire month, so I am departing posthaste.”

“Betty? Really?!”

“From what I have heard, she is presently betrothed to the

worm. I cannot guarantee her freedom just yet."

"What does that mean?"

"Essentially, she is confined to a dragon's lair in the fairy world."

Lotta frowned for some time as she was confronted with a scenario she would only have expected in a storybook. At length, she nodded, understanding that the fairy doctor was being serious. "I wanna go with you. Pino'll be fine handling things by himself. Please, Lydia, take me with you?"

Lydia hummed thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose I can. With you, it will become clearer whether the girl truly is Miss Betty or not."

Lotta gave her a wink, then leaned out of the door and called for Pino. With that done, she turned and glanced at Kelpie. "Say, Lydia, you have a preference for looks over personality, don't you?"

"I most certainly do *not*!"

Lydia continued to try to explain to Lotta that Kelpie was just a fairy, but by the time they reached the coastal cliff, she still wasn't sure whether the pirate girl believed her. According to Nico, this was where the dobies had said they should come. Light had started to return to the sky, and they were just able to make out their surroundings without a lamp.

"Ye're after a worm's lair?" Kelpie was incensed. "Ye don't wanna be pokin' around those, Lydia. It's too dangerous. They breathe *fire*. It's no joke."

"Nobody asked you to come along," she pointed out.

"I gotta come along, afore ye get yerself eaten by the damn thing. It's no ordinary fairy. It's a bloody big dragon."

"If it's such a threat, I hardly see how your presence would make any difference."

"Ah've got my legs, don't I? The thing's huge. That means it'll be slow as anythin'."

Lydia wondered whether his escape plan included abandoning the unfortunate humans.

"Look, Lydia." Lotta was pointing at the water's edge beneath the cliff. "There's a boat down there."

There was no land between the cliffs and the water in this place, so to get to the sea, one had to descend a set of wooden steps built into the cliff face. A small boat had been tied up at the bottom of the steps, which had been built by the villagers.

"There should be a crevice in the rocks that leads to the worm's

lair. I suppose that's what the boat is for," Nico said, already making his way down.

Lotta followed him, obviously bemused by how he traversed them so easily on his hind legs. Lydia brought up the rear, and when they reached the small vessel, they found a piece of wood floating beside it. On closer inspection, it was a raft manned by a male dobie.

"Are you the fairy doctor?"

"Yes. Are you here to guide us?"

"You'll only be fitting two humans in this little boat," it said, glancing at Lotta and Kelpie, who stood behind Lydia. "Though I suppose the fairy-cat'll be all right."

"Ah'll swim." Kelpie dived into the sea without a moment's hesitation. When the spray from his impact with the water subsided, there was a jet-black horse in his place. Lotta's eyes widened.

"Please put these things on the boat too." The dobie handed them a woven grass basket filled with forage, such as mushrooms and berries. It must have been food for Betty. "Now, fairy doctor, are you any good at rowing?"

"I'm sorry? Will I have to row?" Lydia faltered and was relieved when Lotta offered to do it instead.

"I'll do it. I'm pretty good at it."

"Then please follow me."

The dobie's raft followed the cliff. The waves buffeting the rocks sent the humans' little boat rocking this way and that, but Lotta's expert manipulation of the oars kept its bow perfectly pointed at the dobie's makeshift vessel the entire time. At last, they came upon a boulder with a large, vertical crevice in its surface, into which the dobie steered its raft. It was barely wide enough for the human craft to fit through, but Lotta made it look easy.

The stone walls to either side of them felt oppressively close. Soon, however, the space opened up into a wide, limestone cave.

"Wow..." the girls gasped.

There was an angled opening in the roof, through which the early sunlight filtered and set the surrounding white rocky surfaces aglow. The stalactites were transformed into chandeliers, and the limestone pillars made the whole space look like a temple.

"Is this the worm's lair?" Lydia asked.

“Not yet; the lair is deeper. Ah, and I should mention that as long as we are on the waters, we are still in the human realm. The land, however, is the worm’s territory. So you mustn’t get off the boat.”

Just then, their vessel jolted. Lydia grabbed the edge, while Nico was sent tumbling and hit his head.

“Oh dear,” murmured the dobie.

“What is it?” Lydia asked.

“The worm is supposed to be asleep at this time of day.”

“Meaning…”

“It seems to know we are here. It’s best we run away.” The dobie turned itself in the opposite direction, then started to row at a fantastic speed toward the entrance.

Lotta clicked her tongue. Their boat would not maneuver as easily as the dobie’s raft. They were still mid-turn when the cavern shook with the movement of something massive, and stones started falling from above them.

“Get over here, Lydia!” Kelpie was standing on the water’s surface in his horse form. He reached out and took her coat in his teeth, plucking her from the boat and tossing her onto his back. And then he began to gallop between the waves.

“Kelpie! What about Nico? And Miss Lotta?” Lydia cried, though she knew Kelpie had only ever spared a thought for her. She clung to his neck, watching as a huge wave crashed into the small boat they had left behind. When Kelpie dived into a tunnel in the wall, it vanished completely from her sight.

The Blue Knight Earl’s Fluorite

Even in ancient times, when a lord held complete power over his territory and people, he likely would not have hesitated to use his full military strength to quell a rebellion. A lord used to be like the king of a small country, possessing his own armed forces. It was difficult to say how many lords still retained a private army, since there had been no civil war in Britain for some time. Either way, Edgar was not in possession of anything of the sort. For better or worse, however, he knew how to fight well beyond even the aristocrats of old. He had studied the ethos of chivalry but also knew how to wage war without honor. The important thing was to care only about one’s victory.

Beneath his cloak, Edgar had donned the merrows’ sword on his hip like a medieval lord. Meanwhile, a pirate’s rifle hung from his shoulder. From his top hat to his shoes, he was dressed like a fashion-conscious man on the way home from a soirée. His outfit clashed with both of his weapons. To be blunt, he looked ridiculous, and it was completely unclear who he thought he was. Nevertheless, it was his intention to fight not as the former leader of a gang, but as a member of the aristocracy.

He had made full use of the pirates’ might to infiltrate the houses of the villagers hostile to him while they slept. He had suppressed them without giving them an opportunity to resist, and now he had the mayor’s residence, in which a dozen or so men had barricaded themselves, completely surrounded.

It transpired that the number of villagers involved in the impostor’s conspiracy to profit from the fluorite was limited. Some of the other residents had long since been suspicious, and a handful of them had been more than happy to share what they knew with Edgar. As such, he was able to effectively quell the counterattack. His side had already discovered the names of those who were likely to resist until the end during the reconnaissance stage. Unfortunately, the men who were holed up with the mayor in his home still seemed far off from surrendering. While there was little stopping Edgar’s side from storming the residence, it

was possible that they would be walking in on men willing to die to defend themselves. The reason he was still observing from the outside was because he had been informed that those men were in possession of the gunpowder used to mine the fluorite.

The sky had just started to lighten, and soon, dawn would break. Raven approached him and whispered in his ear, “My lord, we found fluorite buried in the neglected fields. A fair amount of it too.”

“I suppose that counts as evidence. Any Freya?”

“Not among what was found. However, we have been told by some of the villagers that they have seen a fist-sized rock of it, mined very recently. It caused quite a stir as the first Freya to be found in centuries.”

Edgar wondered whether the mayor was hiding the precious rock or whether it had already fallen into the fake earl’s hands. “And they would have me believe the veins have run dry?” he muttered. “They will soon discover the punishment that befalls those who steal from *me*.”

He knew that the pirates would be running out of things to do, so he decided it was time to pile on the pressure. He led them closer to the mayor’s residence, stopping just a small distance away.

“Do you hear me? I have reclaimed my fluorite, although I would have expected there to be more than that mined over the past few years. Perhaps you have buried the spoils you ‘earned’ by selling it off under your floorboards? Know that continuing to conceal anything from me is a waste of time. Rather, I suggest that you yield and show yourselves at once.”

As expected, there was no response.

“No matter. Even if you do not value your time, *I* do, and so I shall be retreating. It won’t be long now until it comes out that, upon having your crimes discovered, you committed mass suicide. Or perhaps I shall make it so that you turned on and killed each other?”

Though the curtains in the residence were drawn, Edgar could just about make out a panicked stir of shadows through them. He beckoned to the torch-bearing pirates. “Throw those into the building.”

“You sure?”

“It is already dawn. We do not require them for light anymore.”

The pirate looked as though he wanted to protest until Raven snatched the torch from his hand.

“Fluorite gives off an even more attractive light than fire itself. Freya is a variety that is not found anywhere else on this Earth. Are you not curious to see in which colors it will shine?” Edgar smirked, his eyes growing dark. His expression would lead one to think that he was more than capable of burning down the building and the people inside it purely to satiate his curiosity. Even as he spoke, Raven was getting ready to throw the torch into the house, completely impassive.

But then, a number of villagers spilled out of the front door. “Wait, please! We surrender!”

“We only did what the mayor told us to! We didn’t know the earl wasn’t real!”

“We had no choice but to resist, he said, to hole ourselves up in his house! Since we’d taken our share of the profits, we’d be arrested otherwise…”

“But that doesn’t mean we’d rather die…my lord! Please don’t…”

“Where is the mayor?” Edgar asked calmly.

“Ran away by himself, didn’t he? There must be a secret tunnel somewhere. One minute he was there, and the next, gone!”

At that, the pirates surged into the building as one. They smashed glass, tore down doors, and shouted to drag out the mayor. Edgar watched them transporting the gunpowder outside as he stepped into the property himself. The pirates were gathering a group of villagers together, presumably those who had stayed behind but long since lost the will to fight.

“Hey, Sir John! Wait, I mean…uh…”

“Edgar.” The earl turned to Pino.

The large boy frowned, as though he considered the multiple names to be terribly confusing. “Whadda we do with them?”

“I would like to have a word with them at my manor.”

“No sign of the mayor.”

“I shall soon find the secret passageway he used.”

Edgar was suspicious of the cellar. As he passed through the kitchen and started to descend the stairs at its end, Pino spoke up again.

“Oh, almost forgot. Your fiancée went off somewhere with

Lotta."

Edgar froze. "She did? Where?"

"Dunno. Said something like they'd found a clue about Betty."

"Was anyone else accompanying them?"

"*I* wanted to, but Lotta asked me to keep an eye on things here," Pino grumbled. Despite his size and facial hair, his dependence on his adopted sister was very childlike.

"You haven't changed at all."

Pino's brow twitched like he sensed he was being mocked.

"Never would one see Lotta without you following along behind her. Your chief was planning to have you succeed him, was he not? But then he went around telling people that your weakness was your blind devotion to your sister."

Pino darted forward to grab Edgar by the collar, only for Raven to twist his arm back and hold it aloft. He clicked his tongue, seeming all the more annoyed at being forced to withdraw. "Lotta's more suited to bein' chief anyway. Yeah, she's a girl, but she's got more courage than some men I know, *and* she never loses in a fight. Everyone trusts her too."

"Be that as it may, I do not believe that your chief wanted Lotta to become a pirate. As long as you stay dependent on her, she won't be free to live as she wishes either."

"Huh? But she *likes* being a pirate. Don't make it sound like she doesn't. You don't know anything."

"I *do* know that you still have much growing to do. It is obvious to any observer. As for Betty… Well, I don't suppose there is much point in discussing that anymore." Edgar made to go down the stairs again.

"Oh, that's right!" Pino spat. "There was another man with Lydia. Didn't recognize him." He grinned as Edgar stopped again. "Not one of yours? Lydia seemed to know him well, at least. Looked like he'd just waltzed into her room like he belonged there."

Edgar turned, his hands balling into fists. "Did this gentleman perhaps possess dark curls and a large frame?"

"That's him, yeah. And he was just as good-looking as you."

"If you are under the impression that his existence is a threat to me, you are mistaken."

"Am I? Maybe I am. There're plenty of girls out there. I'm sure you'll find another, even if Lydia gets taken from you. You're just

pretending to be lovers, after all. It was the same thing with Betty, wasn't it? You were only with her 'cause you were bored."

It was a mystery to Edgar how he was able to keep from thrusting his fist into the boy's face. Lydia was *different*. Realizing that, however, he really didn't have an excuse for getting involved with Betty. That was why he couldn't push back against Pino. Edgar and Betty had been alike in many ways, but never had he felt more sincerely about anyone than Lydia. He cherished her wholeheartedly, and his desire to marry her was genuine.

"My lord, there is a hidden door here," Ermine announced, saving Edgar from his reverie.

Turning away from Pino, he hurried deeper into the cellar.

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"Turn back, Kelpie! We must help Nico and Miss Lotta!" Lydia cried, clinging to the water horse's mane. But it made no difference; he continued to gallop on.

"Nah, I don't wanna get eaten by no worm, thanks very much."

When the vibrations that had rocked the cave settled, Kelpie finally drew to a stop. Neither of them knew where they were anymore.

"A fine job you've done of getting us lost!" Lydia climbed off his back and focused her eyes on the gloom around them. They had come up onto the land. In other words, they were in the worm's territory. Though there weren't any sources of light nearby, she could make out a few details of their surroundings, likely because they were in the fairy world.

"I can sense water. We'll jist follow that and be back at the sea in no time." Kelpie had returned to his human form. He pointed down a tunnel.

"Wait a moment," Lydia said, only shortly after she had started to follow him. "Suppose we went *away* from the water. Would that lead us to the worm's lair?"

"Don't be tellin' us ye *want* to go there?"

"That's where we shall find the changeling baby, and Miss Betty besides. We cannot leave them."

"What about Lotta and Nico?"

"I am certain that Miss Lotta will be thinking along the same

lines. She came here to find Miss Betty." Lydia turned to walk in the opposite direction, only for Kelpie to block her path.

"We're no goin' anywhere near that worm. It's too dangerous."

"*You* do not have to come with me."

"Ye've never seen one afore. That's why ye're bein' all confident."

Out of nowhere, the ground shook. Kelpie grabbed Lydia and flattened them both into a hollow in the wall. The next she knew, a long, large mass of dark scales passed by them.

"What was that?"

"The worm's tail I reckon."

"Its tail? *Just* its tail?!"

"I telt ye it was bloody huge."

"Well, it seems to have gone, so you may let go of me." Lydia wouldn't be able to move until Kelpie dropped his arms from around her and stepped out of the narrow space.

"Aye."

"Don't touch me *there*!"

"Huh? I was jist gonna help ye stand up!"

"You must *not* touch my chest!"

"How no? Ye don't complain when I touch ye anywhere else!"

Still in his arms, Lydia struggled to her feet. As she turned, she struck him right in the nose, making him let go at last. "It's common sense! For humans, at least."

"Naw, now I know that's no true. Swimmin' around in that London lake at night, ah've seen humans in the bushes— Oi, wait!"

"I would rather not know!" Lydia quickly set off, too embarrassed to stay and listen.

"Don't be goin' that way, Lydia! Ye still wanna go to the worm's lair? Ye know ye willnae be able to do nothin'!"

"There *must* be a way to retrieve the baby without needing to confront the worm."

The easiest way to swap back a changeling was by negotiating with the fairy directly. However, cases where that actually worked were few and far between. Fae didn't often like to part with what they considered their possessions if they could help it. That left destroying the briar that grew in the fairy's den, breaking the spell that tied the human baby to the supernatural thief. This special briar was a magic component that was required for the den's creation. Getting rid of it would render all the magic in the fairy's

territory ineffective. That ought to allow anything and anyone belonging to the human world to return there.

"Where do you suppose the worm's briar is, Kelpie?"

"Ye lookin' to destroy it?"

"I believe it is my only option."

"Anyone who breaks a briar gets the full amount of its magic power unleashed on 'em. Ye think ye can get away from that when yer connection to the human world's so weak?"

She didn't know, but it was the least of her concerns at the moment. Breaking the briar would expose everything within this territory for what it was. Anything with a spell cast over it would return to its original form. That applied to the dobie's baby, whose spell would be broken, and both it and the human child should return to their rightful mothers. It applied, too, to Lydia herself. If she was a changeling—a fairy bewitched to take on human features—the spell would be broken. She would probably forget her name, the fact that she had been raised in this world…*everything* that had happened up to this point in her life.

"It's easy to go on and on about the briar, but it's somethin' really vital, y'know. That worm's gonna be protectin' it with its life. This is total madness. Ye listenin' to us, Lydia?"

"How do I appear to you, Kelpie? As a bewitched fairy? Or a real human?"

Though her question was earnest, he all but dismissed it. "Huh? I dunno. How's it matter?"

"Because if I am a changeling, I may well forget everything when I destroy that briar."

"I wouldnae worry about that. If ye do forget about bein' human, ah'll take care of ye. Ye'll still be ye, no matter what kinda fairy ye are. Even if ye look different, ah'm no gonna care none," he said, missing the point. "Wait, ye're not frettin' that ye won't be able to marry that earl, are ye?"

"Of course not! I'm worried about my father."

"Ye willnae be worried about him if ye forget about him."

Kelpie was right. Thinking about it, losing her memory of her life here might be relatively painless for her. Her father would grieve for her, but he had probably been prepared for the unexpected ever since she'd decided to become a fairy doctor. He was likely to accept any decision she made.

As for Edgar...

He was surrounded by women in whom he held a casual interest. Not to mention he had Ermine. Lydia was sure he would forget about her almost at once, as she would him, so there was nothing to worry about. Although, she had to wonder whether she *would* miss him if she weren't fated to lose her memory of him.

Kelpie's large hand cupped the back of her head, gently stroking her hair. "Don't be lookin' like that now. Defeatin' the worm is impossible, and findin' its briar is gonna be even harder. So let's jist go home. Ye might be a fairy doctor, but even ye cannae be a match for no worm. Ye don't gotta sacrifice yerself to save someone else."

Still, Lydia didn't want to give up without at least trying. "Should I forget about my human self, would you tell me what I was like? Just what you know about me is enough."

"Ye're still gonna go?" Kelpie muttered with a sigh, then ruffled her hair. "Aye, ah'll tell ye."

Just then, there came a shout. "Hey! This is no place for a tryst!"

Kelpie kept his hand on Lydia's head and pulled her closer warily. A girl the same age as her was peering around a rock at them.

"You are standing in the worm's path. I'll get told off if there's anything in the way."

"Oh, please excuse us. We have lost our way."

The girl was staring at the pair, clearly suspicious. "I don't understand how fairies are so good at disguising themselves as human. It's like you *want* to confuse everyone!"

"I'm a human," Lydia said. For the time being, she had no reason to believe otherwise.

"Humans don't come here. It took me a while to work that one out. I used to think there were people here to save me, but instead it's been a fairy every single time. So run along."

"Wait a moment. Might you be Miss Betty?" Pushing past Kelpie, Lydia took a step toward the girl.

"How do you know my name?" She had the same coffee-colored hair as Lotta. A charming girl, she had large eyes and a subtle mischievous air about her.



She and Edgar used to be involved, Lydia's brain reminded her without prompting. She tried to dismiss her conflicted feelings with a deep breath. "My name is Lydia Carlton. I came here with Miss Lotta to rescue you."

"Lotta? I don't believe you. She'd never come."

"I assure you she did. Isn't she your closest friend? She's very worried about you."

"We're not friends. Not since I betrayed her!" Betty cried, before lowering her gaze as though ashamed. Lotta hadn't mentioned any sort of feud between the two, and Lydia couldn't help but wonder what it was all about. She had only just opened her mouth to ask when Betty spoke over her. "You need to leave. Unless you're lying about being human, if the dragon finds you, you're dead."

"But Miss Lotta is somewhere in this cave as well. We were separated."

Betty's face snapped up, her brow creased with anxiety. "What? What if the dragon finds *her*? *You* need to track her down and get her outta here!"

"I shall need your assistance for that. You must know the worm's lair better than anybody." Lydia took Betty by the hand. "And you must leave with us." She felt Kelpie poke her back to tell her to drop it, but she ignored him and gave Betty the most confident smile she could muster.

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The path beneath the mayor's residence led to a small underground room that seemed to have been dug out of a rocky cliff. Edgar and his servants were quickly captivated by its reddish-purple shimmer that sent the light of their torches bouncing back at them. The room was filled with reliefs and sculptures of various sizes, all made from fluorite. Just like the statute in the lord's manor, their lines and curves exuded elegance and energy without exception. Whoever in the village was carving these, there was a real sense that their skills had been passed from master to student for generations. While fluorite itself was not expensive, it was likely these very skills that gave these pieces their value and allowed the village to flourish even with the limited resources it

produced. As far as Edgar had been aware, the tradition had died out at the beginning of the century when the supply of fluorite sharply declined.

He approached one of the reliefs and studied the signature in its corner, only it wasn't a signature at all. "Scarlet Moon?"

It was the name of a secret organization that had joined forces with Edgar in his fight against the Prince. Originally an artists' guild, it was said to have been transformed by two of its members: the lover and illegitimate child of Julius Ashenbert—the Blue Knight Earl of three hundred years prior. All of his descendants had been killed by the Prince, who feared the earl's return. The artists and craftsmen who remained regrouped with revenge as their focus, and it was they who had chosen the name "Scarlet Moon." The Gaelic translation was "Frandolen," a name shared by the half-fairy daughter of the original Earl of Ibrazel, also known simply as the Blue Knight. Julius Ashenbert had given it to his own illegitimate daughter as her middle name, a tradition that his descendants had continued. In other words, "Scarlet Moon" was a phrase that identified this hidden branch of the Blue Knight Earl's lineage, or so Edgar surmised.

"A descendant of the Blue Knight Earl must have worked as a sculptor in this village."

"The same seal is engraved on these pieces too. The majority of them seem to have been carved around the turn of the century," Ermine said, having inspected the artworks one by one.

Edgar took a moment to consider. "That must have been when he was here, then."

"My lord." Raven had picked up a stationery box decorated with fluorite. It seemed to have been crafted by the same hands as the other items, but unlike those, the scuffs and ink stains on it suggested someone had used it in a personal capacity. There were still letters inside it. They appeared to be positive appraisals of the sculptor's work. One signature in particular caught Edgar's attention: Cremona. It could have been none other than the grand duke.

There was nothing particularly noteworthy about the letter's contents—it praised the artisan as the others did—but made Edgar recall a fluorite work that had the Cremona crest carved into it. It was made of Freya, the elusive variety found only in Wallcave.

Therefore, it was quite possible that Betty's signet ring had been crafted by the Blue Knight Earl's descendant. Meanwhile, Cremona's princess had been kidnapped by someone *claiming* to carry the earl's blood. This entire incident might well have stemmed from the fluorite sculptor and the Freya signet ring. Edgar picked up the letter to search for the artisan's name.

"Ulysses Barlow…"

Ulysses?

"The man who saved our village." The mayor appeared from a door tucked away behind a cupboard. In his arms he held a hunting rifle. Raven stirred, ready to attack as soon as the opportunity arose, but Edgar sent him a silent signal to wait. "To be more precise, there were two brothers. The older brother was a sculptor. His younger brother, of the same name, came later. *He* was our savior."

"Savior in what sense?"

"Our village has always been overflowing with fluorite, yet the amount we are permitted to mine on an annual basis is limited. Even when we try to surpass that limit, the fairies simply hide the excess away. Only Mr. Barlow was capable of negotiating with the fairies and supplying us with the extra fluorite we required." The mayor seemed very eager to speak on the subject, likely because he felt it justified his actions.

"It is my understanding that the Blue Knight Earl had come to an agreement with the fairies that the villagers could mine just as much as they needed. What is this talk of requiring 'extra'?"

"Is it not obvious that a quota that was agreed upon long ago might no longer be sufficient for the present generation? We were struggling to make ends meet and at the end of our tether."

"Even then, the annual permitted yield of fluorite is not insignificant. Not to mention that mining too much of it would cause the veins to dry up in an instant. Surely you and your villagers understood that much? You ought to have made up for any shortfalls by your own hand."

The mayor ignored Edgar and continued. "Mr. Barlow made it so that we could mine as much fluorite as we needed regardless of the fairies' interference. We picked out the redder minerals and sold them as Freya for a high price. No one needed to waste their efforts learning how to sculpt. Break down the fluorite, find even

the tiniest shard with a hint of red, and one has instantly made much more profit."

"In other words, you have spent decades deceiving your lord and selling counterfeit goods."

"A lord who, as far as we were concerned, would never grace us with his presence. His lordship's assets are managed by a Mr. Tompkins, who knew we had run out of Freya. His suspicions would never be raised as long as we kept ourselves to ourselves. Counterfeit Freya has been circulating in the market since time immemorial. Mr. Barlow was very careful in his dealings with it to ensure the village itself would not become suspect."

"This Mr. Barlow is the same gentleman who pretended to be the earl?"

"And what is wrong with that? He carries the earl's blood."

"Illegitimately. He therefore holds no claim to the title."

"The village had need of the mysterious powers passed down through the bloodline. The title itself was secondary."

"What happened to the older brother, the sculptor? I would imagine that he wasn't best pleased with his sibling." The amount of devotion that went into his work was plain to see. He could not be a man who would stay silent as his brother smashed the material he used for his craft to smithereens.

The mayor responded only with a thin smile. It wasn't difficult to glean what that meant, given how suddenly the village's tradition of fluorite sculpting had come to an end. No doubt the younger brother was responsible.

"Mr. Barlow would pay regular visits to Wallcave to ensure the fairies stayed away from the mining site, as would his son, who inherited his mysterious powers. Following their instructions has led only to success. Until yesterday, that is."

"A couple had their child stolen and were subsequently coerced into staying silent. Meanwhile, a portion of your men shared in the profits for which they had made a great sacrifice. One could easily describe that as tyrannical."

"It was an unavoidable sacrifice, for we could not obtain the Freya by any other means. Mr. Barlow came to us two years ago and told us he could awaken a dragon that would produce *genuine* Freya for us. At last, we were once more able to mine the fiery mineral."

A dragon*?!* Edgar's confusion must have been clear on his face, because the mayor's lip curled.

"If, my lord, you are the true Blue Knight Earl, you need only to take up that sword of yours and slay the dragon, just as your forefather did." It was obvious that the mayor thought it impossible. "At that time, the villagers were unwilling to lose any more of their children to the fairies for the sake of obtaining Freya. They therefore beseeched the earl to slay the dragon. Our present lord has done the opposite, something which requires a great power that makes him fit to rule us. Mr. Ulysses Barlow is the only living man to have inherited the Blue Knight Earl's abilities."

Edgar wondered whether the Ulysses who had come to the village two years ago was the same one he knew. The same boy who was targeting his life as a close aide to the Prince. He didn't doubt that his adversary was descended from Julius Ashenbert's illegitimate child. The Prince had worked to eradicate that bloodline, but Edgar could see how Ulysses would have survived by swearing loyalty to his would-be killer. Perhaps the Prince had killed the other descendants *because* he wanted to ensure that his subordinate was the only one who possessed the earl's powers. He wanted the power to be his and his alone. All things considered, it could only have been the Prince who'd had the dragon awakened in his desperate desire for Freya.

"Where is the Freya?" Edgar asked. "I cannot believe that it has been passed over to Ulysses yet."

"Freya is a stone of immortality, but only he with the Blue Knight Earl's blood is able to make use of it. It will be useless in your hands, much like your sword." Pointing the end of his rifle in their direction, the mayor slowly retreated. There was another door at the far side of the room. He opened it, then spun around and fled.

Raven was after him immediately, and Edgar followed his servant. There was no doubt that the mayor had the Freya on his person. His loitering in the underground room was likely because he had been trying to secure it. Presumably it had been hidden past the door behind the cupboard.

At the end of the underground passage, they came to a natural limestone cavern. The seawater ran into it, creating an inlet in which floated a small boat. They ran to the shore as the mayor

boarded and started rowing, but by the time they made it to the water's edge, he was already far out of reach. Just as Edgar was about to concede that there was nothing else they could do, something cut across his vision. More specifically, something enormous flew out in front of him and blocked his view of everything else. It was alive and seemingly in pain, thrashing this way and that. It drove itself into the cavern walls, the roof.

Edgar and Raven flattened themselves against the cave floor as the mayor, boat and all, was flung into the air. They then caught a glimpse of him sinking beneath the waters. The next thing they knew, the creature had opened its maw and was spitting out a gray mass. It then made a swift exit, as though its rage had suddenly calmed.

"What on earth was that?" Edgar asked.

"The dragon, I presume."

As he got to his feet, the earl had to stop himself from laughing. Since becoming the Earl of Ibrazel, he had encountered fairies that took the forms of cats, horses, and so forth. He had no reason to be surprised by the existence of *dragons* at this point. "It reminded me of a giant snake, or perhaps a lizard."

Just then, the gray lump the dragon had spat out spoke. "I will never take my life for granted again…" It lifted itself from the floor and started desperately smoothing down its fur, which was sticky with the monster's saliva.

"Nico! What are you doing here? I would have thought you would be with Lydia."

"*You!*" Nico sprang up onto his hind legs as soon as he caught sight of Edgar. "What were you doing, man?! Why didn't you kill it? Go and do it now! It's better off dead, I tell you! You've got the merrows' sword. You should be able to cut it up just like the old Blue Knight Earl! You saw how it swallowed me up, didn't you? That should be enough to enrage you!"

"You are asking me to kill…*that*?"

Edgar and Nico stared at each other for some time until the fairy-cat suddenly held his head in his paws.

"Oh, how could I forget? You're the Blue Knight Earl in name only! That thing will eat you alive!"

It was, of course, the truth, but it still irritated Edgar to hear it spoken so plainly.

“Damn it all! It tried to *swallow* me! Is there nothing I can do to get my revenge?!”

“Nico, where is Lydia?”

“Haven’t a clue. The moment we were within spitting distance of its lair, the worm appeared and we all got separated. I’ve been clawing at its tongue this entire time. I was damned if I was going to be its supper.”

“Is Lydia still in the lair?”

“I’d say so. I’m fairly sure she has Kelpie with her, if that counts for anything.”

The thought of her being accompanied by the water horse only served to perturb Edgar. Having said that, he supposed he ought to have been relieved given the current situation. “It was my understanding that Lydia came to find clues relating to Betty’s whereabouts. Whyever would she step foot in such a dangerous place as this?”

“Because Betty is *here*. Her kidnapper gave her to the worm as its bride.”

“Are you saying that Betty is betrothed to that oversized lizard?”

“Oh!” Nico stammered. “And now Lydia’s in the lair... You know what she’s like! There’s no telling what she might do to try and retrieve Betty and the stolen baby!” At last, the fairy was just about calm enough to worry about his companion.

The dragon was capable of crushing humans underfoot as unwittingly as people did insects. Edgar could not see how Lydia would be retrieving *anything* from it. However, when it came to fairies, she was liable to act recklessly due to the pride she held in her profession.

“Was Lydia already aware of the dragon before coming here?”

“A dobie told her about it as soon as we arrived.”

“Yet she saw fit to keep it from me...” Edgar had already come upon the reason for her silence before he had finished his sentence. Uncovering the mayor’s corruption had been well within his means. Slaying a dragon was another matter entirely. He bit his lip as he clutched the sword at his side. “Show me to the worm’s lair, Nico.”

“What? You cannot be serious.”

“I am not prepared to leave Lydia to her fate.” Nor was he prepared to leave her alone with Kelpie.

“Even if you go, you will be powerless to change it.”

Irritated anew, Edgar thrust his sword in Nico’s face. “I am the Blue Knight Earl.”

“This isn’t another human we are talking about. You won’t be able to bluff your way out of the encounter.”

“The knight slays the dragon to rescue the princess. It has always been so. And I have knighthood in my ancestry.”

“I don’t believe this.”

More than trying to convince Nico, Edgar was rousing himself. Ulysses may have inherited the Blue Knight Earl’s blood and powers, but *he* was the one with the sword and the title. In all likelihood, a part of Edgar believed that he could never become the true earl should he continue to sit back and let the pieces fall where they may. The College of Arms had him officially recorded as the Earl of Ibrazel. Though the sword had been entrusted to him, he had the sense that whatever ancient, unseen force bridged the gap between the human and fairy worlds was still testing his worthiness of the title. Did the head of the Ashenbert family *need* to have a blood connection to his forefathers? There had to be more to it than that, else the merrows would not have given Edgar their sword. Therefore, leaving the dragon to its own devices had never been an option.

“Fine. But can I get this muck off me first?” Nico asked.

“There’s no time for that,” Edgar said, prodding the tip of his sword into the fairy’s necktie and eliciting a resigned sigh from the furry creature.

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“A briar in the worm’s lair? Dunno anything about that. I’ve never seen any plants at all in this cave.”

Betty had shown Lydia to her “house.” It was a lone building, made from stone, tucked away within the cavern. Given how out of place it was, it was a stark reminder that they were in the worm’s magical lair.

“I said I needed a human house to live in. The very next morning, this building was here. Though it’s shaped like a house, everything’s made of stone. The bed, the chairs… I don’t mind it too much, though. The worm doesn’t like coming here, ’cause it’s

too small."

Lydia had asked Kelpie to go search for Lotta and Nico. Meanwhile, she helped Betty to push open the heavy stone door and found that the inside was just as the girl had said: stone everywhere.

"Miss Betty, I must ask whether you have eaten anything besides what the dobies have brought you from the outside."

"Nothing. There *is* no food, 'cause the worm only eats rocks. I thought I was gonna starve at one point."

In other words, Betty hadn't eaten any food from the fairy world yet, so she should be able to return to the human world by simply leaving the lair.

"You have nothing to fear, Miss Betty. You *will* be able to leave this place. We shall depart the moment Kelpie returns with Miss Lotta."

Betty looked unconvinced as she sat herself down on one of the stone chairs. "I feel like I'm here because God wants to punish me. I told a terrible lie. And that signet ring… Oh, that's right! The earl—he was after that fluorite, the flame-colored kind."

"The earl?"

"Well, the boy who called himself the Blue Knight Earl. He had to be younger than I am, but you wouldn't believe how pompous he was."

"Was he blond, by any chance?"

Betty nodded, and Lydia immediately realized Ulysses was the culprit. He must have brought Betty here on the Prince's orders two years ago, using the earl's title before Edgar had claimed it for himself.

Even now, Lydia wasn't entirely sure how the Prince and the Blue Knight Earl were connected. The villain had attempted to turn Edgar into his puppet, only for Edgar to take the Blue Knight Earl's title. Coincidence though it may have been, Lydia couldn't help but wonder whether it had granted Edgar some great advantage—or whether it meant he was destined to sink deeper and deeper into the mire of his fight against the Prince. Should it be the latter, she wanted to do something to prevent it. She had assisted Edgar in becoming the earl, believing the title would be an asset.

I cannot leave this to Edgar. I must *do something to hinder Ulysses.*

"He's a sorcerer!" Betty exclaimed. "He used the flame fluorite in

my ring to wake up the worm. And he said once the worm was awake, the village could start mining that same type of fluorite."

"I see. It was your ring he sought. To think you left America and your friends assuming you would be reunited with your grandfather, His Royal Highness…"

Betty's head snapped up and she stared at Lydia. It looked all at once as though she might burst into tears. "I am not the real Princess of Cremona. I'm just an ordinary pirate girl. That ring was *stolen*!"

"It wasn't stolen, Betty. I gave it to you." Lotta was standing at the open stone door. "I thought you'd been livin' with the grand duke all this time, happy as a clam at high water. Instead, you're trapped in this cave, all 'cause of that fluorite."

Lotta entered the house with slow steps, apparently alone. She must have stumbled upon this place while wandering the lair.

Then where on earth has Kelpie gotten to? More importantly, the ring had belonged to *Lotta*? Lydia kept quiet as she watched the pair converse before her.

"I *did* steal it," Betty insisted. "Well, at first I only meant to borrow it. But I took it without asking and showed it off to almost everyone. Then John told me the crest was from some royal family. That was when some man came around saying he was the grand duke's envoy, looking for His Royal Highness's granddaughter, the girl with the ring. My breakup with John was horrendous, and I felt awful. My dad was dead, and I was ready to throw away everything for the chance to become a princess. So I told him the ring was mine. I betrayed you."

"I did think you'd wanna be a princess, since you always said you hated piracy. The life suited me, though, so I considered the ring yours. But John told me later that you thought there was somethin' between me and Pino. Is that true?"

Clearly flustered, Betty turned her gaze to the floor.

"What a load of rubbish. We're basically brother and sister. Well, maybe more like two brothers, but…listen, though. Pino's always wanted to grow up as fast as he can. You ask him *why*, or I guess, for *who*, and he won't tell ya. But I caught him watchin' you more than a handful of times."

"That can't be true. He worships the ground you tread on."

"When he spoke about me, it was always 'bout who I'd beaten in

a fight, right? That's not how a man talks about a girl he's interested in."

Betty appeared too flummoxed to respond.

"Knew it. You were lying to yourself, going after these dainty little men who were Pino's complete opposite. D'you know how depressed he got every time he saw you with them? It's like the whole lot of you *like* suffering."

Lydia couldn't agree more. She sighed quietly. Betty claimed she had lost interest in Edgar because of his feelings for Ermine, but the truth was that both of them had been forced to conceal how they felt about the objects of their affections. And so it seemed that they had settled for each other. The same held true for Edgar even now. He was constantly seducing other women, seeking to distract himself from the one he could not have. But not one of them would be able to occupy the most precious spot in his heart. Lydia was no exception.

"You were hopin' John would help you forget all about Pino, weren't you, Betty? Hoping he'd make you his one and only, 'cause he was never going to get the girl he *really* wanted. But it didn't work. When that bloke came looking for the ring's owner, you were worried me and Pino'd get separated if he found out the ring was mine. You said it was yours to protect Pino."

"I'm not as kind as you think I am, Lotta."

"It's not that. I just know how you think. You can be selfish and manipulative, but you wouldn't betray a friend."

Burying her face in her hands, Betty began to sob. Lotta came over to hold her in a soothing embrace. Lydia was tearing up herself, and now she felt more determined than ever to rescue Betty from the worm.

Just then, the earth shook beneath them. There came a rhythmic crashing sound that seemed to rattle the cavern, and it was gradually getting closer.

"It's the worm," Betty murmured, her voice thick with fear. A cry sounded from outside the house, sending crackles through the air. "It's calling for me. I have to go."

"Where? To the worm?"

"I think it's angry since I stopped cleaning partway." Betty made to stand, but Lotta grabbed her arm.

"You can't go out there."

“I’ll be fine. It’ll yell at me and that’s it. Sometimes it threatens to eat me, but it’s never actually done me any harm.”

“You don’t hafta listen to it anymore.” Lotta shoved Betty in Lydia’s direction. “Keep an eye on her for me, Lydia.”

“Lotta, wait!” Betty cried, but her friend had already disappeared through the doorway.

“Hey, worm!” came a shout from outside. “*I’m* your bride now! Betty’s not even in the cave anymore!”

The other two girls gasped.

“What the hell is she doing?” Betty asked.

“We mustn’t go outside to check.” Lydia placed a warning hand on her. “It might anger the worm further. Let us wait and see what happens.” Keeping herself hidden, she peered outside. Above the rocks, there was a large, red eye that was focused solely on Lotta.

“*You?* And who gave you permission? I shan’t just take any wife. She must be young and of high birth.”

“Yeah, I know. The dragon kidnaps the princess in almost every fairy tale I’ve read. Thing is, *I’m* the real princess. Betty was just standing in for me.”

The worm’s eye widened, revealing the full length of its slit of an iris. “Is that true?”

“You couldn’t tell? She doesn’t exactly *act* like a princess, does she?”

Betty pouted beside Lydia.

“I *did* consider her a handful. She was slow to learn and quick to sulk.”

“I’m much better at housework than she is,” Betty muttered under her breath.

It seemed that Lotta was more than willing to be taken as the worm’s bride if it would secure Betty’s freedom. Lydia, however, was unwilling to leave anyone behind. At the same time, she recognized that this put them in a more favorable position. By taking Betty’s place, Lotta became the child who was originally exchanged for the wooden doll, and Betty would be freed from the worm’s spell. It still wouldn’t be easy for her to escape, having been under the influence of the lair’s magic for so long, but it would have been even more difficult, if not impossible, had she remained bound to the worm. Meanwhile, Lotta would only be able to leave if the worm’s briar was destroyed. After that,

however, she should have no trouble finding her way back to the human world. Lydia would still have to brave approaching the worm, but it would be worth it if it meant she could save everybody, including the stolen baby.

"You wanted to marry the Princess of Cremona, right?" Lotta continued. "Well, that's me, so you can forget all about Betty."

After a long pause, the worm acquiesced. "Very well. Come." Its large eye blinked twice, then thrice, before vanishing from the hole in the wall. The ground began to shake again as the creature's body swayed.

Lotta glanced over her shoulder at the house and gave Lydia a meaningful nod, then followed after the source of the tremors.

"You can't let her go!" Betty protested.

"She has a plan, and we ought to follow it."

"Is that plan for us to abandon her? 'Cause I won't!"

"Nor shall I. However, we must get you out of this cave first. It won't be possible for you to leave together."

"Am I supposed to trust you? I don't even know who you are! Lotta's friend? No, that can't be it. You're too proper."

"I'm..." Lydia faltered.

"She's a fairy doctor. A fairy specialist. She came all the way out here to rescue ye." Kelpie had returned. "Didnae find Lotta. Found this lad instead." The water horse tutted, leaning himself against the doorpost just as Pino stepped inside.

"Master Pino!" Lydia exclaimed. "How did you find your way here?"

"I got one of the crew to follow you and Lotta. He said he saw your boat go through that crack in the cliff. The village business is all sorted, so I thought I'd come and see what was going on. Got lost after I went through that hole, though."

The fight in the village is over? Lydia wanted to ask about Edgar, but she held her tongue. She didn't want it to sound like she was worried about him.

Pino turned his attention to Betty and slowly approached her. "I missed you. I was worried about you, y'know."

She didn't respond, keeping her gaze nailed firmly to the floor.

"Let's head back to America. We can visit the chief's grave, let him know about the wedding."

"What wedding?"

“*Our* wedding.”

“Huh? I don’t wanna be married to some pirate.”

“No?”

“Well…maybe it wouldn’t be *that* bad.”

“Great. That settles it.” An awkward smile came to Pino’s lips.

“Does it? I think you’ve missed a step.”

“What step?”

“You haven’t told me how you feel!”

“Och, Lydia, have we really got time for this?” Kelpie said suddenly, returning her to her senses. She had been quite absorbed in the impromptu proposal unfolding before them.

“Oh, perhaps not. Could I ask you to finish this conversation in private later?” she suggested. “And, Master Pino, I trust you can keep an eye on Miss Betty? I am certain you will be able to find the exit together.” She looked at Betty. “Master Pino has not been influenced by the worm’s magic, so you must trust in him as a safety tether as you follow him.” Next, she turned to Pino. “And you must pray, beyond all else, that you will be able to deliver Miss Betty to safety. You must keep hold of each other’s hands, and you must *not* lose your way. Should your resolve best the magic, your wish will be granted. It is one of the fairy world’s natural laws.”

Betty, who had been listening intently, nodded. “Lotta will find her way out too, won’t she?”

“I guarantee it. Picture yourself holding her hand as well. That image will become a spell in its own right, one that calls her back.”

She watched as the pair linked hands and left, ignoring Kelpie’s remark about their “bloody weird” proposal.

The Dragon’s Forest and the Magic Briar

The techniques passed down to save a human taken by fairies were innumerable, and each had a long history. Some held more weight than others. Even then, rates of success varied, and failure could result in losing that person for all eternity. There had also been countless examples of humans entering the fairy’s den themselves to retrieve a loved one. It was immensely dangerous, and people did not possess magic or the power to confront fairies. Determination was the only thing they had to rely on. And, for whatever reason, the powerful bonds between humans were the one thing the laws of the fairy world could not supersede.

Lydia was presently pondering the reason for this. Perhaps it was because fairies did not possess such bonds. In turn, that may have been connected to why they looked to steal human children in the first place.

The deeper into the cave they ventured, the farther the gap between its walls grew. Lydia continued, accompanied by Kelpie, growing tense at the thought that they were coming ever closer to the worm’s nest. She had envisioned finding Lotta and Martha’s baby, as well as destroying the briar, countless times. It was all she could do.

Without warning, she stopped in her tracks. “Do you hear something?”

“What?”

“A melody… Oh, that’s Miss Lotta’s ocarina!” She rushed off in the direction of the sound.

“Wait! What if she’s with the worm?!”

Ignoring Kelpie’s protest, Lydia dashed past pillars of limestone and deeper into the palatial structure. There she found Lotta, sitting atop a rock, playing her ocarina. Next to her was an enormous scaly wall: the worm’s flank. Its head was out of eyeshot, hidden deeper within the cave, but Kelpie was still wary enough to drag Lydia behind one of the pillars.

She peered around it in Lotta’s direction, then threw out a small pebble, hoping to catch the pirate girl’s attention. It worked. Lotta

stopped playing and glanced at the worm. Likely asleep, it wasn't moving an inch. She stood up stealthily, then approached the pillar. Her feet were chained and shackled.

"Oh! Did the worm chain you up, Miss Lotta?"

"Yeah. Said it was worried I'd run away since I only just got here. But it promised to take 'em off eventually." It was evident that the worm wanted to wait until the fairy magic had influenced Lotta enough that it would be difficult for her to return to the human world. "You should get outta here before it wakes up. It asked me for a song, so I played my ocarina and it fell right asleep. But it also wanted me to get its supper ready in the meantime. I gotta get busy breakin' these rocks. Dunno why it needs *me* to do that." It seemed Lotta was already tiring of her potential husband.

"Master Pino came after us, and now he is escorting Miss Betty out. We are here to rescue you."

"Ye'll no be able to cut the worm's chains," said Kelpie.

"That won't be a problem. Once I break the briar, he will have no power to confine those he took, chains or no."

"Briar?" Lotta asked.

"The worm should be keeping a briar in this nest somewhere."

"I'm guessing it values this briar? Hmm, it told me not to go past the forest. No idea what forest it was talkin' about."

"A forest? I suppose that must mean there are trees growing somewhere nearby." Searching for this "forest" seemed like a good place to start. "Please try to endure for a short while longer, Miss Lotta, and keep your mind focused on the person most precious to you. Pray that you will return for that person's sake."

"Got it. Are *you* gonna be okay, though?" The concern in Lotta's gaze gave Lydia's heart a jolt.

"I shall be fine," she stammered. "I am doing only what my profession demands of me."

"Who are you thinking of?"

"I'm sorry?"

"To get outta here, I mean."

Edgar's image flashed through her mind, but it was gone so quickly that she couldn't be sure. "My father."

"Huh."

Her father was a poor choice. They understood each other *so* well that his presence in the human world might not have been

enough to call her back. At the same time, the little fondness Lydia possessed for the human world was due to both her father and the fact that her mother had chosen to spend her life there. At this point in time, those were the strongest links she had.

Lotta seemed to be struggling to make her choice too. “I think I wanna meet my grandpa. I wouldn’t make a good princess, and I never cared about where I came from. I always valued the chief and the bonds I built up with everyone around me way more. But my grandpa’s been searchin’ for me all this time, right? It made me think I actually *do* wanna know who I really am, and about my parents. My grandpa hasn’t forgotten about me, and that’s why I wanna meet him.”

“I am certain that you will. That is precisely the sort of wish that will protect you from the fairies’ deception.”

Lotta nodded determinedly and grasped Lydia’s hand. The worm’s quiet snores had been setting the air atremble for some time, but now the fairy doctor realized that they had stopped. Unnerved, she looked around.

“Lydia!” Kelpie’s gaze was fixed on a point near the ceiling. A large eye was peering down at them, and the pillar did little to conceal them from it.

“Who are you? This is my court. None enter without my permission.”

Kelpie grabbed Lydia’s arm. “Let’s run for it.”

“Lydia, watch out!” Lotta cried. What appeared to be the worm’s tail was hurtling toward the other girl. If Kelpie hadn’t scooped her up and dodged, her bones would have been shattered just like the pillar and she would have been sent flying.

“Awh, fuck it all,” Kelpie cursed, clicking his tongue. He had tried to go back the way they had come, but that too had been blocked off by the worm’s body.

“Lydia! This way!” came a voice from a different direction.

Edgar! What is he doing here?! With no time to dwell on her confusion, Lydia darted for the narrow tunnel in which she had spotted him. Just as she and Kelpie dived through the gap in the rock, the worm crashed against it, making their surroundings shake. Fortunately, the large rock survived the impact. The worm’s claw appeared at the gap, trying to slip through, but the creature soon gave up, realizing there was nothing else to be done.

Everything fell into silence.

Lydia turned around, relieved. It wasn't just Edgar who had come, but Raven and Ermine too. The earl swept her up in his arms before she could say anything.

"Thank heavens I made it in time." Cupping her cheeks in his palms, he peered into her eyes. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

These were the times in which Edgar behaved as though they truly were betrothed. He acted so naturally that it made Lydia believe *she* was in the wrong for finding it strange. Shaken, she thrust her hands out in front of her, managing to disentangle herself.

"Nico told me where you had gone. You needn't have gone alone had you only confided in me."

"She's no alone. I came with her."

As though he hadn't heard Kelpie, Edgar continued, driving Lydia back against the wall as he did so. "You do not believe that my presence will make any difference when it comes to fairy matters, am I right? I can well understand why. Nevertheless, I have a responsibility to protect you, and I would be loath to use my ignorance as an excuse should something happen to you."

"You are mistaken."

Edgar seemed to sense that she wanted to make the point that they weren't engaged. "I also hold a responsibility for you as your employer. Especially when one considers that this matter involves my territory."

Lydia hesitated. "I'm sorry. I failed to foresee any of this. It was my intention to gather information and nothing more." Even as she spoke, she recognized that lowering her guard—even slightly—would invite Edgar to take advantage of it. He proved her right as he touched his fingers to her hair and gazed at her softly, his ash-mauve eyes filled with longing.

"Think nothing more of it. You are safe, and that is what matters. What I fear above all else is losing the ability to touch you like this."

It baffled Lydia to think that Ermine and Raven's presence did nothing to embarrass him in any way. The pair were waiting quietly as though all of this was quite normal. Only Kelpie seemed distressed in any way as he kicked the wall in disgust.

"Anyway, I found Miss Betty," Lydia said. "I entrusted Master

Pino with seeing her out safely. Miss Lotta has taken her place now, so all that is left is to rescue both her and Mrs. Tyler's baby."

"I presume it is now a matter of how we are to do that?"

Lydia's determination was steadfast, but she hadn't factored in the possibility of Edgar's arrival. "Did anyone else enter the cavern besides you three? And where is Nico now?"

"He *was* with us. I wonder whether he lost his nerve. The dragon almost swallowed him, you see, so he may not be willing to risk a repeat of that."

While Lydia sympathized with his ordeal to some degree, she still thought it rather cruel of the cat to flee before their business here was finished. Regardless, she set about considering whether she needed to change any details of her plan. Breaking the worm's briar shouldn't have any ill effects on other fairies. Ermine and Kelpie would be safe. Edgar and Raven were human and not under any magical influence. They would only need to head seaward to escape successfully. As for Betty, Lydia would just have to trust in Pino. She didn't know what the risk to herself might be, but she was the only one who could lay a hand on the briar. It was invisible to ordinary humans, and fairies couldn't touch it.

"I suggest we leave for the time being," Edgar said. "That will give us some time to gather our thoughts and come up with a way to save Lotta and the baby."

Lydia shook her head. "There *is* only one way, and I am not prepared to stop now."

"Lydia—"

"You should leave. All of you."

Edgar looked completely taken aback.

Kelpie laughed. "Ye think ye're a real master at tamin' lassies, earl, but ye'll struggle to tame this one."

"I am simply concerned for her safety."

"Don't be. As for us, ah'm done arguin' with her. She gets on my nerves with her 'do up my buttons,' and 'don't touch my chest,' but ah'll put up with that. If she wants to go to the worm's nest, ah'll be right behind her."

Kelpie!

Edgar responded just as Lydia knew he would. "Forgive me, but what was that about her buttons and her chest? Please do not tell me that you have laid hands on my fiancée without her consent?"

Naturally, he had gotten the wrong end of the stick. “Because if you *have*, you ought to know that I therefore have the right to kill you.” Edgar drew closer to Kelpie.

“Aye, mibbe ye have the right, but ye don’t have the skills.”

“Stop this at once!” Lydia positioned herself between them.

“Lydia. Our honor is at stake.”

“You have jumped to the wildest of conclusions!”

“My lord, I sense the dragon’s presence,” came Raven’s clear warning. All of them could now feel the vibrations of the creature dragging its belly across the ground beyond the split in the rock. The tension among them was palpable.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Kelpie muttered. “Och! I feel fire! Quick, run! It’s gonna breathe fire.”

Edgar grabbed Lydia by the arm and broke into a run. The whole group followed deeper into the tunnel; behind her, she could hear a strange *whooshing* sound and felt an intense heat. Looking over her shoulder, she saw an all-encompassing red glare.

Kelpie ground to a halt. “Ah’ll hold it off. Keep runnin’!”

“You are not immune to the worm’s flames either!” Lydia cried, trying to stop.

Edgar wouldn’t let her. “We shan’t waste your sacrifice, Kelpie!”

What an outrageous thing to say!

“Oy, ah’m not about to jist sit around and get burnt. Ah’ll run if it comes to it. Ye jist get yerselves as far away as possible first!” He must have noticed Lydia shooting countless glances at him over her shoulder. “Lydia, once ye’ve finished here, ye’d better come back to live with us in the Highlands. Don’t ye be forgettin’ that now. ’Cause if ye do, ah’m jist gonna drag ye there myself.”

His words followed her as they slipped into a side tunnel and he vanished from sight. After that, Edgar led her at a run through the cave, seemingly with no rhyme or reason. They only stopped when they felt there was no more danger of the flames reaching them. Lydia was too out of breath to say anything immediately. Raven and Ermine left to investigate their surroundings.

Edgar kept hold of Lydia’s hand while she was still catching her breath and demanded, “Would you care to explain yourself?” She wasn’t quite sure what he meant at first. “Is it really your intention to go and live with that beast in the Highlands?”

“I…” She wasn’t able to tell him that there was a risk she might

lose her memories. It felt as though to do so would be to set their parting in stone. Why that should scare her so much she didn't know, and it drove her so close to tears that she had to cast her gaze to the floor.

Her reaction seemed to confuse Edgar, who began to stroke her hair soothingly. "I don't mean to accuse you of anything. Never fear. No matter what might happen, my feelings for you will not change." Again, he was taking the opportunity to flirt with her. His proclamation was making it even harder for her to explain herself. "I mean that. Is that so difficult to believe? I still very much intend to marry you, no matter what that kelpie forced upon you."

His words utterly perplexed her. "What are you—"

"He may have tried to lay hands on you, but I do hope you do not consider yourself defiled because of that."

It sounded very much as though they were talking at cross-purposes.

"He did nothing of the sort!"

"It's all right. You cannot abide your fiancé kissing another woman, and so I daresay you would consider even the tiniest transgression to be tantamount to infidelity. However, should it have pushed you to agree to take Kelpie as your husband, one has to wonder why I expended all this effort to treat you in a gentlemanly manner."

Not only did he have little idea of the situation, he was now making laughable claims to have treated her with respect.

"You have entirely the wrong idea! Kelpie simply assisted me in fastening my buttons! He is a fairy, after all, not a human gentleman. Then I stumbled, and he… Well, that was it! There is nothing more to it!"

Edgar looked her in the eye as though trying to decide if he could believe her or not. "Is that true? Am I to take it that your innocence has not been harmed?"

"You ought to learn to restrain your imagination." Embarrassed and annoyed, Lydia's face had been drained of its color.

Edgar, meanwhile, drew her into his arms, seeming genuinely relieved. When he didn't let go after some time, she began to stir to show her discomfort, which was when he brushed a hand against one of the buttons lining her back. Anxiety rushed through her, and she froze. She didn't understand it. She had seen nothing

wrong in asking Kelpie to help her fasten them, and yet when Edgar touched a single button, it felt desperately significant.

"He may be some amalgamation of fairy and horse, but loosely speaking, he is still a man. I would urge you to spare a thought for your self-preservation in his presence. Next time, you should call upon me to assist with your buttons. When you want them unfastened, that is." The very moment he appeared to be showing genuine concern, it transpired that he was doing anything but.

"No, thank you!" Summoning her strength in both arms, she pushed him away. "Did you not promise me you were on the verge of desisting with this nonsense?"

"The time has not yet come for me to do so, as per our agreement. Besides, I would only desist if you were not to change your mind. And before you give your answer, I should very much like it if you thought carefully about whether you need me or not." He was suddenly being serious all over again. His expression was so earnest that Lydia felt rejecting him as thoughtlessly as she usually did really would result in him distancing himself from her. What if he never tried to touch her as a lover would again?

That would be for the best. I could at last carry out my work in peace.

Was it for the best? She couldn't even be sure that Edgar meant to keep his promise. Not that it should matter. She ought to respond to him in the way her heart dictated.

"Very well. I shall think carefully."

"In that case, let us return to the matter at hand. If Kelpie did *not* do anything to harm you, then what did he mean about taking you to the Highlands?"

Is that really so important? As usual, he had managed to change the subject at his own convenience and instead turned things back on her.

However, for once, he would miss his chance to pry an answer from her. A roar echoed through the cave, interrupting them. The next thing they knew, the ground was shaking again. These tremors were far more intense than the earlier ones produced by the worm's transit. Lydia caught a glimpse of Raven and Ermine rushing back to them, but she was quickly forced to cling to a nearby pillar, unable to keep her balance otherwise.

"Get away from there, Lydia!"

Edgar's shout made her look upward, where she spotted a deep crack in the pillar, placing it on the verge of collapse. She made to grasp his outstretched hand, but it was inches out of reach. There was a crevice opening up beneath his feet. Lydia watched as Raven crashed into Edgar, forcing him away from the rift that had now opened up completely and was making its way to her. A grip on her arm yanked her away from the pillar.

"Ermine!"

"Jump to the other side!" she urged. When Lydia hesitated, Ermine pushed her with full force. The fairy doctor whipped around, only to see her on the cusp of collapsing along with the cave's entire structure.

"Ermine!" Lydia could do nothing but shout. Her concentration was taken up with avoiding the falling rocks as Edgar dragged her into a cavity in the bedrock. She pushed herself against him desperately. Even when the cave had finally stopped shaking, her body did not.

Edgar got to his feet and peered over the sheer precipice that, moments before, had not existed. He called for Ermine several times, but the only response was his own voice, bouncing back at him from the walls.

"I shall go down to have a look," Raven said.

"The danger is too great. The tremors might start up again."

Telling herself that this was no time to be cowering in a corner, Lydia forced herself to stand. She needed to find the worm's briar. There was now another, Ermine, who would benefit from its destruction. For a moment, she was about to ask Edgar to accompany her, but then she stopped herself. She doubted he would want to leave this spot now, and breaking the briar was something only she could do. She ought to go alone.

Quietly backing away, she distanced herself from the pair staring into the abyss. Then she turned, choosing the path that seemed to have taken the least damage from the quake. There was no question that the worm had been the cause. It had ostensibly been aiming for the area into which the four of them had escaped. She had to wonder what it was so afraid of to relentlessly attack such tiny humans. In all likelihood, its briar was near. Her only hint was that it lay close to a forest, and it might not be an ordinary forest—one of trees—either.

As she hurried on ahead, Lydia put her mind to work. Then suddenly, a hand latched on to her shoulder from behind.

"And where might you be going all by yourself?" Edgar drew her back toward him. He seemed angry. "Not to mention you ignored me when I called after you."

Apparently, she had been so caught up in pondering over the briar that she hadn't heard him. Unable to look him in the eye, she kept her face downcast. She felt responsible for Ermine's fall, which she also surmised was the cause of Edgar's low spirits and resulting bad temper. It was precisely why she wanted to do whatever she could to resolve the situation.

"I am going in search of the worm's briar."

Edgar frowned at her in bewilderment, so she continued.

"It was always my intention to do so. Eliminating the briar will unleash all of the magic stored up in the worm's lair. The changed child and Miss Lotta will be set free, and the worm will be temporarily weakened, which may create an opportunity to rescue Ermine. I am certain that the dobies would be willing to assist in searching for her if need be."

"I see. Well, then I shall accompany you."

"I am going alone."

"You mustn't, nor can I allow you to do so. I have left Raven to take care of anything by that crevice, so there is nothing to worry about." His smile worked to soften his words. The eyes he looked at her with were so serious that anyone would think he really *was* in love with her. But his love did not belong to her. She wondered whether he even realized it himself.

It hit her then that she might have been on to something. Perhaps he had sealed away his most genuine feelings, deceiving even himself.

"Do you feel a responsibility to stay with me and protect me because you see yourself as my fiancé?" Lydia asked. "Because there would be nothing more ridiculous."

"I am *worried* about you. I wouldn't be able to bear it if harm came to you as well." The concern he felt at present should have been unbearable already. And it was not directed at Lydia.

"If only I had been the one to fall," she huffed, unable to keep it in any longer.

"Come, now. You are not to blame."

“Ermine would not have fallen had she not saved me.” She knew it was a useless statement now.

Edgar must have agreed, because there was a hint of exasperation in his sigh. “If *you* had fallen, you would have had no chance of survival. Ermine, on the other hand, might well make it.”

“That is not the cause of my concern.”

“Then what is?”

Wouldn’t he have *preferred* that Lydia have fallen instead of Ermine? Knowing that it would be fruitless, she did not give voice to the question, and continued walking. Edgar followed.

“You are wasting your time,” she warned him. “Leave me be. I might not be able to return to London in any case.” The be-all and end-all was that she wanted to be alone, reckless as it was.

“Is that perhaps what Kelpie was alluding to earlier?”

Lydia didn’t respond.

“I see.” When Edgar darted in front of her and stopped in his tracks, she almost walked straight into him. He caught her firmly in his arms. “Tell me everything, else I shall kiss you.”

She had certainly never heard of anyone being threatened with *that* before. As exasperated as she wanted to be, he had both her arms in his grip. Struggling would achieve nothing. He shifted so close that he was almost pressed up against her, filling her with a sense of danger that went beyond simply being kissed.

“I might be a changeling!” she blurted out.

“And?”

“When a fairy’s briar is destroyed, it breaks every spell in its vicinity. A human child who has been changed will be swept away back to the mortal world, but likewise, any fairy bewitched to take on a human appearance will return to its original form. If I *am* a changeling, I will transform back into a fairy and forget everything about my human life.” She spoke without pause.

Edgar had fallen completely silently and even looked as though he was trying to suppress rage. But then he traced a finger over her cheek and stroked her hair, perhaps more gently than he ever had. “It was rather devious of you to try and go alone without even divulging something so important to me, wouldn’t you say? Did you think I wouldn’t understand, since my knowledge of fairies is so lacking? Because I am the Blue Knight Earl in name only?”

“That…isn’t…”

“Then perhaps it was because the thought of our parting caused you so much anguish that you felt *unable* to say anything?”

Lydia stared blankly at him. His conceitedness knew no bounds. She decided not to dwell on the fact that she *had* thought it might be painful to part from him—for a fleeting second, at least.

“Even if you are a fairy, and even if you should forget every one of us, I have no intention of letting Kelpie have you.”

“You are human. You won’t even be able to see me anymore.”

Edgar cupped her cheeks in his hands as though reassuring himself that wouldn’t be the case. “I do not believe that you are a changeling. Not for a second.”

“Suppose I *am* human. I possess an innate connection to the fae. When I break the briar, I shall be swept up in the billows of its magic. I cannot be certain that my willpower will be enough for me to return to the human world. Even now, I do not feel as though such an outcome would inconvenience me all that much.”

“Do you *want* to become a fairy?”

Lydia wasn’t sure, but she knew it would save her from pain.

“Are you saying that I am not sufficient reason for you to stay in the human world? No matter what I do?” He sounded so deeply pained by the suggestion that Lydia’s heart ached. “I know next to nothing about fairies. I shall never be anything special to you. But if there is one thing I *can* do, it is to accompany you and not leave you to face this alone. Please do not tell me that you will forgo that, at least. When all is said and done, I want you to come home with me.” He planted a kiss on her eyelid, pushing her close to tears.

Somehow, she managed to keep from crying and pulled away from him. “There is no time to waste.”

Edgar nodded, took her hand, and began to walk with her. She could no longer bring herself to insist upon going alone.

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The seawater was nice and cool. It gradually soothed Kelpie’s pelt and mane as he recovered from his encounter with the worm’s flames. It wasn’t ideal, given that he was a freshwater creature, but it was certainly much more pleasant than being on land. He settled on the seabed, quietly reveling in the sensation of

his magic returning to him. As soon as he was back to full strength, he would have to return to Lydia's side. There was no telling what would happen when she destroyed the briar, and he wanted to be there.

As he sat lost in thought, he suddenly caught sight of movement beside him. The woman who had been lying there was slowly trying to sit up. "Awake at last, are ye?" he asked her.

It was the earl's female servant, the one who dressed in male attire. She gave Kelpie a dubious glance, then swept her gaze over their surroundings. As he recalled, her name was Ermine.

"I see it's true ye forget that ye're a selkie. Yer swimmin' was an absolute joke. That's how ye bashed yer head against a rock that'd sunk down and lost consciousness, like a human."

"What is this place?"

"We're on the seabed. Still under the worm's cave, though."

"And why are you here?"

"'Cause I rescued ye. If I hadn't, ye'd be sleepin' under a big pile of rocks."

She eyed him warily. He *was* a water horse, a type of fairy that was typically regarded as savage. Perhaps it was her instincts; kelpies were not at all fussy about what they killed and ate, so even their fellow fairies feared them. Ermine knew that *this* one was an anomaly, as it held feelings of fondness for a particular human that precluded eating her, but the selkie was still suspicious of his motivations in saving her.

"Why *did* you rescue me?"

"Ye want me to say so I could eat ye? Naw, leavin' ye woulda made Lydia angry. Ah'm no gonna say no to an arm if ye're lookin' for a way to thank us, though."

Wary that he might actually be serious, Ermine refrained from thanking him at all, but it didn't seem to bother him. When she tried to stand, she was still unsteady, so she sat back down.

"There's a lotta fire up there. It's probably safer to stay underwater for now."

"It seems there is a network of caves here under the surface."

"I wouldnae start wanderin'. It'll be even harder to return to the earl."

Placing her hand on a wall of rock and using it for support, Ermine made another attempt to get to her feet, this time with a

little more care. “Do you know which spot lies directly under the village’s center?”

“Why?”

“That isn’t for you to know.”

“Ye think ah’ll tell ye when ye’re bein’ cheeky with us?”

“I shall find it myself, then.” She set off, following the cliff face with faltering steps.

Kelpie stood up then, fancying that he had found an even more stubborn girl than Lydia. Apparently, this one submitted only to the earl.

It’s either that or...

Noticing she was being followed, Ermine looked back at the water horse and furrowed her brow. “Stay where you are.”

“I wanna go this way.”

“Then you ought to pass me.”

“Don’t wanna.”

Visibly annoyed, Ermine turned back in the direction she had been going and set off again. Kelpie did the same, very obviously following her.

“Why not return to Miss Carlton? Are you not concerned for her safety?” Ermine asked.

“Ah’m curious about somethin’.”

“And what might that be?”

“I saw ye fall, though no as closely as the others. Ye coulda got yerself outta there, even after savin’ Lydia. Ye fell on purpose.”

Ermine pressed on in silence.

“Did ye think ye’d be awright ’cause it was water underneath?” Kelpie continued, keeping pace. “Why, though? So ye could get to the center of the village? Ye could’ve jist telt the earl that without facin’ no danger. Or was there a reason ye couldnae? Ye wanted to get away from the earl and the raven wean without them gettin’ suspicious?”

The next thing he knew, Ermine had whipped around and was threatening him with a knife.

“Are you aware of the phrase ‘silence is golden’?”

“Ah’m no a selkie. Human weapons cannae kill us.”

“I would refrain from making light of selkies.”

“There’s nothin’ to be worried about. The earl’s no my pal.”

Ermine put her knife away with a sigh and continued walking. It

seemed she had resigned herself to Kelpie's company. She probably judged that he was unlikely to tell the earl about this, given he resented Edgar for forcing Lydia into an unwanted engagement.

Now and then, the selkie would rise to the surface and survey the surrounding terrain. Kelpie said nothing more to her, and for her part, she was ignoring him completely. This continued until they came to a spot where the seabed rose upward. There was the wreckage of a small boat in the shallower waters. She searched this area thoroughly, but it didn't look as though she was finding what she had come for.

Just then, Kelpie spotted a flame-like light from above the surface, likely belonging to torches. With a stern expression, Ermine positioned herself in the shade of a rock, careful not to create any waves with her movements. Then, she climbed quietly ashore. This was an area where the seawater encroached into the cave.

Kelpie spotted two male villagers on the rocky floor. At their feet lay a corpse. They must have pulled it from the sea; it was soaking wet, and a mixture of blood and water ran from its clothing, staining the white limestone beneath it red. Quick as a flash, Ermine jumped out in front of the men, knife in hand. She stabbed one of them before he even had time to work out what was happening. There was no mercy in the attack. She had pierced him straight through the heart.

The other man swung at her with his torch. The flames grazed her face, making her flinch and draw back. As she stumbled over the corpse behind her, the man grinned and swung the torch downward. She fell to her knees.

Kelpie watched the scene unfold. He considered it foolish for a lone woman to take on two men anyway, never mind the fact that she was injured. Upon realizing that Ermine couldn't stand immediately, the man with the torch turned and fled. Kelpie darted in to block his path, mostly likely on a whim. He grabbed the man's head and pushed him back toward Ermine, who was finally on her feet.

"Ye wanna let him go?"

"No, he has to die." Without missing a beat, she swung her knife at the man. He collapsed, blood spurting from the wound. Ermine

searched through his clothing impassively before drawing out a fist-sized, reddish stone and carefully pocketing it. Then, she slumped down, exhausted, beside a rock.

"Did ye really hafta kill 'em over a stone?"

"I would rather not have to listen to a lecture on needless killing from *you*." Ermine drew her knees up and held her knife to her chest tenderly. Some blood had splattered over her pale cheeks, somehow making her seem even more beautiful than ever.

Kelpie wondered whether she had killed the men because she feared them knowing too much. That was as much as he could work out, and he had the sense there was no point in him lingering further. Ermine had parted from the earl in order to obtain the stone, but it was clear that she was disinclined to comment on its significance. He turned to take his leave.

"I shan't do anything to make Miss Carlton's life difficult."

Ermine likely wanted to assure him that what he had just witnessed had nothing to do with him whatsoever, that it would offer him no advantage or disadvantage. Whether he took her words at their face value was another matter.

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"That must be the forest!" Lydia cried excitedly.

They had reached a cavern that was extraordinarily large. It was filled with countless towering stalagmites standing close together, which formed an ice-white forest that dominated the area and blocked any glimpse of the space beyond. The ceiling was even higher here than before, with most of it veiled by a steamy mist.

"Is the briar hidden within that labyrinth?" Edgar looked up at it, clearly not relishing the prospect of delving in.

"I am certain of it."

Water droplets hit the cave floor from above one after the other, their drips overlapping to make it sound as though the pair were standing in a light drizzle. It was the falling of these drops, pregnant with lime, that had built up this forest of pillars: a work of nature, created over an unfathomable stretch of time. It rendered Lydia awestruck.

Edgar approached one of the nearby collections of limestone and crouched by it. This one was still young, and it only came up to

his knee.

"What is it?" Lydia asked.

"I was just admiring it. It is nothing short of an exquisite sculpture."

She leaned in for a closer look and gasped. There appeared to be a baby inside the rock, all curled up. "It must be Mrs. Tyler's child!"

"Are you sure of that? It appears to have been petrified."

"That will be the worm's magic. But it is still warm. It lives! We must remove it from the stone."

Edgar got to his feet, frowning at the forest. "Did you mean to suggest that *all* of these pillars contain people?"

"I'm not sure. The dobie told me that the worm turns people into stone so it can eat them. Whatever the truth of the matter, there will be no way to save those who are already fully petrified." Lydia drew a cross over her chest as she gazed on the collection of pillars. "It must have been eating people like this and producing Freya for a long, long time."

The Blue Knight Earl of old had sealed the creature away in order to break that cycle and protect the villagers. In return, they should have understood that they would no longer be able to mine the precious stone. And yet...

"I cannot believe that they would begin sacrificing people again, all for the sake of money," Lydia said.

"Freya seems to have a use apart from its value, one which the mayor mentioned can only be wielded by someone carrying the Blue Knight Earl's blood." Edgar quickly changed the subject. "Incidentally, Lydia, do you know how to slay the dragon?"

"It cannot be slain. That is why I am seeking its briar."

"But there are countless examples of ancient heroes defeating dragons. Saint George, for example, although I suppose the dragon he faced had wings. Regardless, the Blue Knight Earl originally put the worm to sleep. I have been wondering how he did it ever since I heard about it."

The Blue Knight Earl had possessed mysterious powers. He had been able to travel between the fairy and human worlds at will, governing his citizens in both. If there was anyone able to defeat the worm, it would be the one carrying the ancient earl's blood. That was the dobie's sentiment, and Lydia agreed. Edgar, however,

seemed open to the idea of an alternative method.

“Dragons are large, powerful, enigmatic creatures. But everything has its weakness. The stories span the entire globe and have been told since time immemorial. The one who slays the dragon is either he who holds a special weapon or he who perceives its weakness.” Edgar unsheathed the merrows’ sword at his hip. It glinted in the light. “I have a weapon. A weapon suited to stand up to a dragon’s strength, and has indeed defeated the worm once before. And yet, I have been unable to harm a single fairy with it. But what if I were to ascertain the fairy’s weak spot? Any old fool should be able to cut it down then.”

“How do you suppose you will ascertain its weak spot?”

“A pertinent question indeed, but it would seem we have run out of time.”

“I’m sorry?”

Edgar swept his gaze over their surroundings. There came a sound like the wind rustling through tall grass. A series of subtle vibrations was making the stone forest shake. Lydia turned around in shock.

“The worm!”

A towering scaly wall was passing slowly before their eyes. The creature’s long, snakelike body had curled itself perfectly around the pair.



“Why didn’t you say anything?!” Lydia demanded.

“I didn’t notice it before it had us surrounded.” It was now clear why he had jumped to the topic of dragon-slaying as suddenly as he had. “We have no other option but to defeat it now, isn’t that so?”

Lydia wished he would view their predicament with a little more urgency. She wasn’t especially fond of snakes as it was. It was even worse now that the creature’s long, slithering torso was in plain view no matter which way they looked. She was breaking out in goose bumps.

The worm reared its head, looking down at them from on high. “Who are you? Why do you bear that sword?” Its voice sent more vibrations through their surroundings.

“This sword belongs to me,” Edgar said simply.

“You are not the Blue Knight Earl.”

“On the contrary, the man who woke you from your slumber is an impostor, and I shall not allow him to act freely any longer. I am here to seal you away again.”

The tight ring of the worm’s body loosened slightly around them. It seemed perturbed by the merrows’ sword.

“Let us flee, Edgar, while it still feels threatened,” Lydia urged him, but he clasped his sword as though ready to strike.

“No, I must do this. Else I shall never become the true Blue Knight Earl.”

“What are you talking about? You never sought anything more than the title.”

“Yes, and I succeeded in claiming it. *He* did not. And so I am the one who must see to it that the earl’s obligations are fulfilled.”

“Whom do you mean?”

The worm was still as it stared at the sword. It must have sensed the relic’s magic.

“Ulysses. He carries the blood of the Blue Knight Earl’s illegitimate child.”

“He *does*?!” Lydia blinked. “Then it is no wonder his ability to manipulate fairies is exceptional. He inherited those powers from the Blue Knight Earl himself.” A mere fairy doctor herself, she now felt less confident in besting him.

“I believe he would have made an attempt to claim this sword for himself. His failure likely led the Prince to believe that it no

longer existed. The reality is that *I* now possess it. That is despite the fact that I have no supernatural powers or any connection to the earl's blood."

"Edgar, look out behind you!"

The worm was striking with its tail. Edgar turned and evaded it, using his sword to protect himself. The weapon's tip grazed the creature's tail. There was a clang like metal striking rock; the worm's scales were too hard to have suffered any damage. It poised itself for a full-on attack, having determined that Edgar was unable to make use of the sword's power. Its sharp, front claws were closing in from above. The pair fled into the forest of pillars, just as the worm's front foot mowed down several of them. Now, the fairy raised its head high, trying to locate which of the countless stalagmites they were hiding behind.

"Stay here," Edgar said, making to leave their refuge.

"Stop this. You simply cannot defeat it."

"But if I do, you will have no need to destroy the briar. There will be no more risk to you."

"*You* will die!" Lydia cried, clinging to his arm.

Edgar merely smiled at her, clearly having made up his mind already. "I wish to make this sword my own. There would be nothing more shameless than for me to seek your hand in marriage without the means to protect you from those who misuse fairies and sorcery."

"You are being foolish. You would lose nothing by abandoning your whim to marry me."

The worm had found them. It bore down on them, its jaws stretched wide, and they ran. However, the forest came to an abrupt end, and they found themselves blocked off by a wall of rock.

"A tunnel!" Lydia shouted. They dived into it almost at the very moment the worm's fangs became lodged in the rock behind them.

"If only we knew its weak point," Edgar muttered, peering out from the tunnel's entrance.

Lydia gazed at the worm's body, but she couldn't even begin to identify such a spot. Presently, it was tackling the wall of rock and slamming the cave floor with its impenetrable tail, apparently trying to force the tunnel to collapse.

“Is the weak spot something that could be identified by sight?” Lydia asked, forced to sit down as the tremors grew more intense.

“It may be a scale of a different color, for example.”

“The Freya!” she gasped.

“Mm?”

“The Freya Miss Betty had was needed to reawaken the worm. Perhaps it has taken it into its body somewhere.”

Edgar nodded and considered the possibility. “Perhaps, but the Freya’s shade of red ought to be very easy to spot.”

So far, they hadn’t seen anything like it. Having said that, locating a red stone no bigger than a coin would not be easy on a beast of this size. Even just its underbelly and back were mostly out of view.

“Now that I think of it, they do say that worms have tongues made of flame. I had always thought it a metaphor for their fiery breath, but now I wonder whether the Freya is located on its tongue.”

It was only meant to be a suggestion. Edgar, however, gave a firm nod and got to his feet.

“Its tongue, yes? It is worth a try.”

“Wait a moment! I could be wrong, and if I am, it will gobble you up in a single bite!”

“I have faith in you.”

“Even so…”

Edgar turned, scooped up a strand of her hair, and pressed his lips to it. “Lydia, my desire to marry you is genuine. I must overcome this trial in order to earn the right to do so.”

He considers this a trial? Lydia wasn’t sure whether she would consider his victory over the worm proof of any love for her. Rather, he was following a train of logic that was typically male. Still, she understood that he was making an effort to change for her, a young woman who possessed abilities that set her apart from other people. He wanted to be able to master the sword so that he could truly protect her without having to rely on her skills.

Before she knew what she was doing, she had flung her arms around his neck. Reaching up on her tip-toes, she planted a gentle kiss on his cheek. Then, suddenly flustered, she pulled back, cheeks ablaze. “Don’t die,” she managed quietly.

“Thank you,” he responded after a pause. He did not tease her,

nor did he take advantage of her kiss. Perhaps he was just as surprised as she.

Edgar left the tunnel to face the rampaging worm. It stilled warily as it spotted him.

What if I am wrong about the tongue? Lydia thought, barely able to watch out of fear. As she averted her gaze, she spotted something sparkling in the tunnel roof and squinted at it. It looked like a pale-green sprout. *A plant? Could it be the briar?!*

Lydia glanced back at Edgar. The worm had taken up position, ready to strike him at any moment. If she broke the briar, its magic would weaken, and its movements should slow. That ought to help the earl in his fight.

With that, Lydia rushed for the cave wall. Pulling up her skirts and tying them up, she found her first foothold. And then she climbed, little by little, constantly close to falling.

The briar's narrow stalk was protruding from a gap in the rock face. She reached for it desperately, knowing this was no time to worry about its thorns. But just as she was close to grabbing it, her foot slipped and she went tumbling down.

Promises in the Fairy World

Edgar stared the worm down and strengthened his grip on his sword, whose blade was pointed at the floor. He kept a firm eye on its movements, knowing he would have to strike the moment it opened its mouth and lunged at him. If there was no Freya to be found, that would be it, and he would be swallowed whole. He wondered whether he was being reckless. However, Lydia had also been determined to destroy the briar, despite the potential danger to herself. What could he hope to achieve if he couldn't protect his assertive fiancée?

Perhaps he *had* originally approached her because he had seen a personal advantage in doing so. Now, however, he did not want to lose her, and there were plenty of reasons why. Her abilities, her stubbornness, her purehearted nature, her strong will, her sincerity… The fact that when he held her, her chamomile-scented form seemed so soft and delicate, and yet when he tried to get even closer, she would lose her temper and strike. That was why he had to face this beast.

The worm charged headfirst. Its jaws, however, parted no more than a fraction. Knowing this was not the right opportunity, Edgar ran. The creature crashed into a pillar, which began to fall in his direction, but he somehow managed to evade them. In his new position, he spotted Lydia clambering up a wall of rock.

What on earth is she doing? It struck him, then, that she may have found the briar. *Why doesn't she simply stay put?* But he knew why: she never did what he wanted of her.

Edgar sensed a presence above him and snapped his head upward. The worm's claws were looming over him. He rolled to one side, narrowly avoiding them. As he tried to get to his feet, the creature's maw stretched open before him. There at the tip of its tongue, he saw the red fluorite, flickering as though aflame.

There it is!

Unfortunately, he was just a second too late in readying his sword. The worm's sharp fangs lunged at him. But then, its movements suddenly slowed. Edgar took the split-second

opportunity to right himself, then lowered his center of gravity to avoid the monster's teeth. Setting his sights as he did so, he swung his sword at the tip of the worm's tongue and felt his weapon lodge into the fluorite just before it cracked and shattered.

Time seemed to stop for a moment. He had entered a world of frozen silence. The worm wasn't moving, and even the sound of water dripping from the cave roof had ceased. When the noise did return, he was faced with the beast's head slowly falling to the ground, and he scurried backward. The cave shook with the impact and the worm showed no more sign of movement.

Lydia sat up, wincing through the pain. She had struck her back when she'd slid to the bottom of the cliff. There had been a tremor and then silence. Now she squinted to try to see what had happened, but her surroundings were too full of dust and white smoke to make anything out.

Where's Edgar?

It was then that she saw him, rushing toward her and calling out her name. "Lydia!"

"Edgar! You *are* all right, aren't you?"

"Yes. The dragon is slain." He knelt beside her and peered at her with a sudden frown before lifting her hand in his. In her grasp was the wilted briar, but he shouldn't have been able to see it. Blood was oozing out between her fingers, and he opened her palm. Pain flashed across his face as he saw the punctures the thorns had left. "You uprooted the briar? No wonder the worm slowed. You saved me, Lydia." Then, he pulled her head in close to his breast, anxious about what the shrub's destruction might set into motion. "Let us leave posthaste."

Not knowing what would happen to her now, Lydia was just as nervous. "Do I still appear human?"

"You are no changeling."

"We shall have to see." She rose to her feet.

The coiled worm was still lying motionless where it had dashed its head against the tight collection of pillars, and now its body was beginning to turn to stone. The forest itself was letting out a subtle glow. It was a group of lights that rose upward like fireflies.

"Anything belonging to the human world will now return there.

Those are the souls kept here by the worm's magic." Lydia was still unsteady on her feet. She watched the rising lights in awe, almost forgetting herself until Edgar pulled her by the hand.

"I hear something strange." It sounded like waves or a powerful gust.

"Without the briar to ground it, the lair's magic is flowing freely. It is drawn toward me, the one who destroyed its anchor. If you are close enough to me to be affected by it, you might not be able to return home, the same as me."

"Claptrap. I belong by your side, no matter the consequences. That will not change."

Even now, he spoke like he valued their assumed engagement above practical matters. He was simply deploying his usual verbal trickery. Lydia knew that, but somehow his words offered her a valuable source of willpower in this magical world, especially when she didn't even know exactly *what* she was. As long as her resolve bested the fairy world's magic, her wish would be granted. That was a law of nature in this place. Perhaps she *would* be able to find her way home so long as Edgar was with her.

He led her by the hand at a run. The howling of the wind grew faster. They felt it first on their backs, something warm that whooshed past them. It carried with it the floating lights and Martha's half-petrified baby. The cave around them transformed in the blink of an eye. Though they had been heading back the way they had come, now they stood on an unfamiliar, narrow path by the edge of a cliff.

"What happened?" Edgar asked.

"It appears we have been caught up in a spell of illusion. Fairy magic tends to bewitch human memories and the five senses."

"Let us keep going for the time being." Edgar set off again, not allowing himself to be deterred. "I recently read a picture book about fairies, and I recall this tale: a man came to the fairy world to rescue his lover, who had been taken from him, and received advice from a generous fae. It said that he *must* keep moving forward to return to the human world, no matter what he might perceive with his eyes. And he mustn't let go of his lover's hand, not until the two of them were free. However, as though seeking to tear them apart, the fairy magic caused them to see myriad terrifying illusions."

“I know that story. At some point on their way, the man’s lover appeared to him as a terrible demon, and he let go of her. With that, they were separated for all eternity.”

“Was that how it ended?” It seemed Edgar had not read the story in its entirety. “Fairy tales have a way of making one feel hopeless, don’t they? However, I can promise you that I shall *not* let go. In order to break through this illusion, we must move forward, keep holding hands, and have faith in one another. That is what I was getting at.”

He was smooth-tongued indeed. His reasoning was correct, but none of it was as simple as he made it sound. Their chances of pushing through the illusory spell depended heavily on the strength of the bond between them. Distrust and anxiety would only befuddle their hearts further. Pino and Betty would be fine. Lydia, however, had never felt a true emotional connection with Edgar. She grew frightened as they traversed the narrow cliff edge, even as she kept her grip on his hand. He might let go of her at any moment. The question was *what* would make him do it. The thought of it scared her so much that she found herself wanting to let go first, if only so that she could get away from him. What if she transformed into a fairy? What if she looked warped and ugly from a human perspective?

“What is it?” Concerned by how she had slowed, Edgar turned to look at her.

“I am not confident my resolve will win out against the magic. I have no roots in the human world. I cannot even be sure that I came from there in the first place.”

“That is precisely why I am here. I shall become those roots, the tether that will grant you freedom from this world.” Though her grip on his hand faltered, he reaffirmed his. “Do not waver, Lydia.”

She wasn’t sure that was possible.

I am not the one who occupies your heart.

He had only just asked her to stand firm, and she was already struggling to do so. She had never truly trusted anything he said to her, but not because he was a philanderer. Even as she recognized her lack of trust, she wasn’t sure how to reverse it.

“Edgar, if you are going to let go of me, I ask that you let go now. Else I fear I shan’t be able to bear it.”

“But you would be able to bear it *now*? Perish that thought

immediately, for *I* would not be able to bear losing *you* regardless of the timing."

Such gentle sentiments had always led her into *wanting* to trust him, little by little. Even now, she wished that she could. She knew she had the potential to be more open with him, and that was why she wanted him to lead her home. But what did *he* want, truly? His resolve needed to be absolutely watertight, lest the illusion magic seep through the cracks.

"Don't trust him, Lydia. Ye'll only get hurt later." Kelpie was standing on the rocky tract above them in the form of a black horse. "Come with us. There's nothin' in the fairy world that'll hurt ye, as ye know."

He's right. The legs with which she stepped forward were growing ever heavier. She was only just managing to make progress, even with Edgar pulling her along.

"I don't care about no other human or fairy. Jist ye."

Is that really him?

Edgar was still walking, apparently unable to see or hear Kelpie.

Is he an illusion? Lydia's surroundings were shifting. Unable to continue, she planted herself on the ground.

Edgar put an arm around her and tried to pull her to her feet. It was then that she spotted a figure below them on the path at the bottom of the cliff. She strained her eyes. It was Ermine, collapsed and unmoving.

"Edgar! I see Ermine!"

He followed her gaze, and it seemed that he saw his servant too. She could feel an extra layer of tension in his grip.

"We must go and help her!"

Edgar hesitated. "No. There is nothing we can do for her now."

Lydia knew it was because he was still holding her hand. "You needn't worry about me," she said, concentrating on not letting her voice tremble. "You can let go, just for a short while. I shall wait for you here. I shan't move any inch till you return, so you can go and help Ermine."

Edgar stared at her for a short time, clearly wavering. "Can you promise me that?"

The pain losing Ermine would cause him would be immeasurable. Much more so than the pain of losing Lydia. "Yes." She nodded, whispering a silent farewell to him in her heart.

Edgar loosened his grip on her hand. Staring at the ground, Lydia sucked in a deep breath. She could feel the twists of magic surrounding them, ready to sweep her away the moment their connection was severed. Her eyes closed. Edgar's presence disappeared at once.

"What the devil are you playing at, Earl?! You can't let go!" Nico's cry brought Edgar back to his senses.

A strong wind enveloped him then, twisting around him like a tornado, preventing him from so much as opening his eyes. He reaffirmed his loosening grip on Lydia's hand desperately. Feeling he had a secure grasp on her, he pulled her closer, and held her in his arms. She had collapsed for seemingly no reason, and something didn't feel right.

Edgar peered at her face. "Lydia? What's the matter? Can you hear me?"

Her eyes remained closed, and she didn't so much as stir.

"Maybe you didn't leave quickly enough." Nico, now out of breath, had caught up to them.

Edgar was in the cave, and the seawater was closing in on him. There was no cliff to be seen anywhere. The sun had long set. Moonlight was filtering in and making the limestone sparkle, illuminating their surroundings. Ermine was not there, and he finally realized that she had been an illusion. The fairy's magic had almost made him let go of Lydia. In fact, he *had* let go, just for a split second. She had told him that he could—perhaps because she had known what it would mean. He shouldn't have stopped to think about rescuing Ermine. He should have *known* what would happen if he let go of her hand, separated his heart from hers, for even a second. He slumped to the floor, holding her motionless form in his arms.

"What are you talking about, Nico? Lydia is still here. She is breathing, and her heart still beats."

"That's not her, but an afterimage of sorts. Her soul is caught in the fairy world."

"Save her, Nico. Surely there is something you can do?"

"I'm a fairy. I can't pull her back to the human world." He put his paws on his hips and sighed. "I'm sorry. You should make haste and go. Get on that boat. The waters belong to the mortal realm."

If that was true, then this shore lay right on the boundary between the two worlds. It would have taken but one more step for the pair to make it back. Gritting his teeth, Edgar held Lydia even tighter, but she still showed no response.

"Leave that. You can't take it with you. It'll vanish the moment you let go."

"Then I shall stay here. And I shan't let go, not as long as I live."

"I suppose that's your prerogative." The coldhearted cat shrugged.

But Edgar meant it. There had been grief in Lydia's eyes when she had told him to go after Ermine and that she would wait for him. He wondered whether a tiny part of her had hoped he would realize she was lying. If not, that was all the more reason he *should* have picked up on the way she was tormenting herself. Their engagement had been a way to keep her close to him, but he had justified it by telling himself he truly intended to protect and love her. If that were true, he should have noticed her distress. This was a result of his indecisiveness, his inability to bear the merrows' sword, and his fretfulness over whether he was capable of keeping her safe.

Lydia's heart was so kind and free that she would abandon her chance of returning home for somebody else's sake. These were the same qualities that drove her to work so hard connecting humans and fairies, and they were the reasons Edgar wanted her with him in the human world—the reasons he wanted to support her. He had told her as much over and over, perhaps so many times that it had transformed into a lie. He scooped up a lock of her silky, caramel hair. Nico had said she was just an afterimage, but he could not bear to leave her alone. He belonged by her side, as he had declared to her.

Edgar brought the hand he was still holding up to his lips. As he did so, his eyes caught sight of the moonstone on her ring finger. Its soft, milky light twinkled at him. He gasped.

Perhaps the ring has a hold on Lydia's soul?

It had belonged to a guardian fairy, and it was laden with a vow, that Lydia was his fiancée. Its power should have resisted anything that would pull her away from him.

Closing his eyes, he called for her. "Lydia."

In that split second, he felt her presence beside him once more.

He could see her blurry form behind his eyelids. She was standing stock-still, looking this way and that in confusion. *But she was still there.*

Lydia cocked her head to one side. She must have heard him but couldn't tell where he was. He could see the bewilderment on her face now.

"Edgar? Where are you?"

He felt her voice rather than hearing it. "I'm here. I'm right beside you."

"You're far away..."

Was that how it felt to her?

"I must say, Lydia, I'm rather hurt. To think you would lie in order to coax me into letting go."

"You needed to rescue Ermine." Her justification was offered in a feeble murmur.

"That was an illusion. I believe she was shown to me in order to test the sincerity of my love for you. You, however, did not need to complicate things by permitting me to let go. That was rather devious of you."

"Yes, I suppose it was."

"If I had known I would lose you, I would not have let go even if it sealed my death."

"I didn't want you to suffer."

"Then perhaps you do not understand how I suffer now. I have no intention of returning to the human world if I cannot take you with me. If this will be my resting place, so be it."

"You would not throw away your life for my sake."

"Then bear witness, at least until you are satisfied that I truly mean what I say."

Lydia suddenly looked flustered. Edgar did not know how she really felt. However, even on their very first meeting, she had been unable to abandon him, knowing he was in trouble. His only recourse now was to exploit that gentle heart of hers, and he would do it if it meant bringing her back.

"You are still here, Lydia. If we realign our hearts once more, we should be able to best the fairy magic, and you should be able to return. Let us go back to London together. Do it for my sake, if not for your own."



Lydia didn't respond immediately. *"I would like to go home..."* Her features crumbled, as though she was on the verge of tears. *"I wanted to go home with you, if only it was all right to place my trust in you."*

"Mm." Edgar still had his eyes closed. He could feel her heart in the darkness, and he held fast to her soulless hand.

"I didn't think we would make it, because our relationship is not genuine. Still, I thought if we were able to best the spell despite that and make it home, I would try to begin taking your words at face value."

"In that case, our hearts are indeed aligned," Edgar said. Lydia hesitated, but he continued regardless. "I shan't ever let go of you again."

With those words, the moonstone began to glow. Its light was so bright that it filled the darkness behind his eyelids with pure white. When he felt her fingers tightening ever so slightly against his own, he opened his eyes. She was still in his arms, and now she looked up at him. Her golden-green eyes were more precious than any jewel.

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"I just don't get it. One second I'm there, the next I'm standin' in front of the manor." Lotta's words were accompanied by a puff of smoke. She was soaking in a tub placed in front of the fire in one of the manor's rooms. In her hand was a cigarette.

"The changeling's spell was broken. When you took Miss Betty's place, the spell's effects transferred to you. When it was undone, you returned to the place you belonged." Lydia was drying her freshly washed hair with a towel.

"I wish we'd had it so easy. Me and Pino were chased by a horrible monster!" Betty poured some warm water from a bucket over Lotta's head.

The other girl lifted a swift hand to ensure her cigarette would not go out. "A monster, eh? Pino protected you, though, didn't he?"

"Yeah. He finally told me how he really felt. Could've been clearer about it, though." A bashful smile rose to Betty's lips.

"Could've done it about a hundred years ago too." Lotta grinned, and Lydia couldn't help but laugh as well.

The three friends had washed away the dust and dirt from the worm's lair and finally started to relax. Nico joined them then, holding a brush in his paws.

"Brush out my back fur, would you, Lydia?"

When Lydia had come to, she had been inside the cave, welcomed back by both Edgar and Nico. Her companion had been as filthy as a stray cat. When their eyes met and she inadvertently commented on the state he was in, he had seemed too shocked to even be angry, although that shock might have come from the fact that Edgar had been able to call her back to the human world so easily. Nico had made himself scarce very quickly then, declaring that he wished to go and wash.

The fairy-cat's gray fur had regained its sheen, and as Lydia brushed it for him in front of the large mirror, she gazed curiously at her own reflection. As it turned out, she had not transformed into a fairy. Did that mean she wasn't a changeling after all? Or had the moonstone prevented the spell on her from being undone, preventing her from returning to her natural form? Its powers were still a mystery to her. Recognizing her as the Blue Knight Earl's fiancée, it might have kept her in the form that he wanted her to be in.

Martha entered the room. Her child had been returned to her safe and sound. "Shall I top up the hot water for you?"

"Mrs. Tyler, please do not feel you must continue to work at this hour. Your child is waiting for you at home," Lydia said.

The mother's resolute gaze softened slightly when she looked at the fairy doctor. "It's all right; my child is asleep at the moment. Besides, I wish to thank you all, and his lordship. And I am not alone. Word has spread that the villagers don't need to answer to the mayor or that impostor anymore, and some of them have come to lend me a hand."

The news warmed Lydia to the very depths of her heart. She had been paid a visit by the dobie mother not too long ago. It had carried its baby in its arms and had come to thank her, clearly elated. It and its fellow dobies had left a large fish outside the manor to thank the Blue Knight Earl for slaying the worm as well.

Having said that, some loose ends still remained. Raven had returned shortly after Lydia and the others and reported dejectedly that he had failed to find Ermine. Edgar had assured

him that their only option now was to wait. The dobies were currently searching every nook and cranny of the cave at Lydia's request. If they didn't find Ermine, it meant she was capable of movement and would eventually return to Edgar's side by herself. Still, it was unnerving not knowing where she might be, and though the earl seemed perfectly composed at first glance, it pained Lydia to think how worried he must have been. They had both seen Ermine lying at the bottom of that cliff, but it had been nothing more than the illusory fairy magic seeping into the cracks of their hearts. However, the image had seemed so real that Lydia couldn't help but interpret it as a bad omen of some kind.

"Please feel free to make your way to the reception room once you have changed. There is some tea and light refreshment waiting for you," Martha said as she left. The news elicited cheers from Lotta and Betty.

Once Lydia had finished brushing Nico down to his tail, the fairy-cat inspected himself in the mirror. His eyes narrowed with satisfaction. "I'll be off, then. The dobies are having a feast."

"Be sure you don't drink too much." Lydia saw him off. When she turned around again, Lotta had gotten out of the bath and had her clothes back on. Betty was tying up her coffee-colored hair atop her head in its usual style, and she was rather good at it. Lydia could imagine that they had been doing each other's hair like this since childhood.

"Let me do yours for you too, Lydia. It's a pain when it's still wet, isn't it?" Betty put her hands on Lydia's shoulders without giving her a chance to protest, then sat her down in a chair.

"That's a lovely dress. Edgar's choice, right?" Lotta grinned.

Lydia was in the same expensive dress she had come to Wallcave in. Her other clothes had gotten filthy in the cave, and it was the only thing she had left to wear. Apparently, it made her seem as though she was trying to look her best for Edgar's sake. Having Betty style her hair was making the illusion worse.

Betty finished in an instant, having tied off her expert plait with a ribbon. "Perfect." She sighed. "You're too good for him, Lydia."

"You can say that again," Lotta voiced her agreement. "Though, seems he *has* pulled himself together a little bit. That's what it looked like to me when he brought you back from the cave, anyway."

Lydia blushed. Edgar had walked by her side and not let go of her hand once, not when they left the cave, not when they took to the waters, not when they came ashore, and not even when the manor came into view. It was as though he had been just as afraid of letting go as she.

"Just in case you might be subject to any misconceptions…" she began. But even as she spoke, she still felt restless. Something *had* felt different when they were making their way back from the fairy world that evening.

"I'm gonna be honest with you. Even when he was seeing a woman 'officially,' he would have loads of other female 'playmates' that he spent time with, and he never felt a lick of guilt. But it definitely looks like he's startin' to feel the guilt now that he's courting *you*. He's growing up, huh?"

"How do you know all this, Lotta?" Betty asked with a frown.

"I saw him and this woman go into a house opposite a bookshop in London. You saw that too, didn't you, Lydia?"

"Oh? Well, yes, I did, but…" How did Lotta know? In a flash, it all came back to her. There *had* been a young woman who'd looked at her when she had cried out. "Was that you, Miss Lotta?"

"Listen, Lydia, he came outta there right away, *and* he was alone. At first, I thought he'd had an unlucky run-in with the lady's husband. Now, though, I'm thinkin' he might've had a change of heart."

"Is that right?" she stammered.

"He went to some club after that. That's all I know, though."

Had Edgar been telling the *truth* when he'd claimed to be at Slade's club till the early hours of the morning? Even if he had, there was no telling whether he had gone there out of guilt for her sake. Either way, she did feel a little better about it all.

Once she had her boots on, Lotta sprang to her feet. "Let's go have some tea."

Lydia glanced at the window. There was a spectacular carriage waiting outside. She let out a cry when she saw who had just alighted from it, making Betty and Lotta rush over to peer through the glass.

"Who's that?" Lotta asked.

"That gentleman is the Grand Duke of Cremona!"

The two pirates exchanged a wide-eyed glance.

Lydia, Lotta, and Betty had positioned themselves outside the door to the reception room and were keeping their ears pricked for any sound from the inside. Though it seemed like the grand duke was present, they couldn't make out any specifics of the conversation.

When Lotta opened the door a crack, the sweet scent of baked treats wafted out to them, making Lydia all the more aware of her empty stomach. Unfortunately, she couldn't give in to temptation just yet. As guilty as it made her feel, she peered through the gap to observe the elderly gentleman exchanging a handshake with Edgar. Without warning, the earl turned to the door.

"Care to join us, Lydia?"

Lydia jumped, but she could hardly run away now that he knew she was there. She entered the room without a sound. The grand duke looked at her with a kindly gaze and, relieved, she curtsied. "I shall forever be grateful for your assistance at the party, Your Royal Highness."

"Think nothing of it. How is your head? Indeed, *I* am sincerely grateful to you. I hear you rescued my granddaughter."

Edgar must have summoned the grand duke. He had probably already given an explanation of the circumstances surrounding the Blue Knight Earl's impostor. However, Lydia was slightly concerned that he might not be convinced of his granddaughter's identity now that the signet ring was no more.

"Lydia, would you be so kind as to see Her Royal Highness into the room?" Edgar asked.

Now that she thought about it, Edgar should still have been under the impression that Betty was the princess. She faltered.

"Before I do, there is something I ought to make you aware of."

Lotta had expressed an interest in meeting her grandfather but, having grown up as a pirate, she was no doubt anxious that the grand duke might spurn her. Moreover, if he was confused about which girl was his true kin, it might spoil what should have been a heartfelt reunion.

"What is it?" Edgar asked.

"The truth is that the girls have...switched places in a way."

"Oh, yes. I know."

"I beg your pardon?"

“Although I have to admit that I myself was fooled for a long, long time.”

The door opened then, and Lotta and Betty stepped inside together. Neither of them said a word. Lotta was standing particularly still, as though hoping that her grandfather would recognize her despite no longer having the signet ring to prove her identity.

At first, the grand duke seemed flummoxed by the appearance of *two* young women, but his gaze quickly settled on one of them.

“On the right, we have Miss Lotta, and on the left, Miss Betty. Does Your Royal Highness recognize which is your granddaughter?” Edgar asked.

There was no hesitation in the grand duke’s step as he approached and took the hand of his true granddaughter. “It really is you, isn’t it?”

Lotta’s eyes widened in surprise, but then she lowered her gaze. “I lost the signet ring. D’you still think I’m your granddaughter?”

“You are your mother’s spitting image. There is no doubt in my mind. And then there is your name, Lotta. The entire family called you by that name.”

Edgar smiled at Lydia, who was a little confused. “She would have been around three years old when she was rescued. Old enough to give her own name, one should think.”

“But His Royal Highness’s granddaughter was not named Lotta,” Lydia murmured back.

“No, it was Charlotte. They spoke Italian in Cremona, so ‘Charlotte’ would become ‘Carlotta,’ which can then be shortened to ‘Lotta.’ No doubt at her age, she would only have recognized herself by the nickname she was habitually addressed by.” It sounded as though Edgar had realized that Betty and Lotta had switched places from the moment he had met the grand duke.

“Would you be so kind as to come home with me, Lotta? Our country is no more, but I have long believed that my entire family perished. I was overjoyed to learn you had survived.”

“I was raised by a pirate chief. I’m not worthy of being related to you.”

“The ones who raised you kept you safe for all these years. I hold nothing but gratitude toward them.”

The relief was plain on Betty’s face as she took a step back and

went to join Pino in the doorway. The heavyset boy had tears in his eyes, and his fiancée comforted him as she quietly led him out into the corridor. Edgar, too, signaled that he and Lydia should leave.

They moved to a different room where they were served tea and cakes, and Lydia was finally able to enjoy the period of respite she had been hoping for. Edgar sat right beside her, his eyes never leaving her. She took a sip of her milky tea but quickly put it down again when the longing heat in his gaze became too much for her.

"I wonder what Miss Lotta will do now. Will she be able to step down as leader of her crew without any difficulty?"

"I can't foresee any problems, supposing Pino and Betty marry, and Pino then takes charge of the ship. It belonged to the former chief, meaning it now belongs to his daughter."

Of course. Miss Betty has pirate blood. Lydia *had* been impressed by how the girl had held her nerve against the worm. She had gotten away with all sorts of things behind its back. It was suddenly like everything was clicking into place.

Lydia looked up, only to meet Edgar's gaze again. "Do you not have an appetite?" she asked.

"I would rather bask in the joy that your presence brings, especially when I thought we would never be together again."

Lydia was used to him flirting with her as soon as they were alone. This time, however, she felt strangely nervous, for she had talked herself into a corner. She had said she wanted to come home because she wanted the chance to take Edgar at his word. She wouldn't have been able to return to this world had she not placed an inordinate amount of trust in him. It was only a matter of time before this was pointed out to her, and she feared what that might mean.

"Lydia. Am I right in thinking that I need not consider ending my pursuit of you?"

She could no longer give him an outright rejection. When she stayed silent, he took the teacup from her hand and placed it back on the table. Not sure what else to do, she gazed up at him. Since she had known him, she had always thought him a philanderer who held no qualms about infidelity. She had never thought him capable of restricting his love to a single woman and maintaining those feelings. But supposing she was wrong? Perhaps he was

taking a gamble on Lydia, hoping to find out whether he *could* foster a serious relationship with her. It would be the same attitude he had taken toward Betty all those years ago. If so, then maybe he no longer felt bound to his feelings for Ermine. There was no reason he should *have* to take that chance on Lydia, but perhaps he had been inspired to do so by the beginnings of some form of romantic attraction to her.

As for Lydia, she had continuously rejected him because he had never seemed fully committed to her. If he was making the decision to commit to her now, then perhaps she had no reason to reject him any longer. Should he prove to be a man who could treasure a woman enough that he was blind to all others, she could well see herself falling for him. These were the thoughts that had occupied her when they'd worked together to slay the worm, and she had found herself wishing to go home and trust him. Those same thoughts remained in her mind now as she watched him leaning in her direction.

What will happen if I fall in love with him? She could see herself reflected in those gentle eyes framed by golden lashes. His well-proportioned lips were curved in a soft smile.

"There's no need to frown, surely?"

"I'm sorry?" Lydia's nerves must have gotten the better of her. She felt frozen and was sure she was still glaring at him.

"Close your eyes. There will be nothing to frown at then."

What is he planning? As if she needed to ask.

There came a sudden knock at the door, and the nervous strings keeping Lydia taut snapped, making her jump.

"Lord Ashenbert, my sister has returned."

Edgar stood up at Raven's announcement. He hurried to the door, where Ermine was bowing her head, and took her into her arms like he would a family member.

"Thank God. I was so incredibly worried. I am certain you would not have made it out had you still been human."

"Forgive me, my lord. I lost my bearings."

"Think nothing of it. It is more important to me that you are safe and well."

Relieved, Lydia got to her feet. "I'm so sorry, Ermine. You had just rescued me, only for me to put you in immediate danger."

"I did my duty. That is the long and short of it. I am simply

relieved to see *you* safe, Miss Carlton." Ermine must have abandoned her jacket, because she was now standing in only her shirt and vest. Her clothes were damp and gave off the scent of saltwater, suggesting she had fallen into the sea.

Lydia suddenly spotted the bloodred stain on her cuff. "Did you injure yourself, Ermine?" she asked, recalling that selkie blood transformed into a transparent, sand-like substance upon contact with air. The stain must have come from someone else. Someone human.

"I came across the mayor's corpse," Ermine said after a moment's hesitation, her eyes focused on Edgar. "Two villagers pulled it from the sea and were looting it. They attacked me when I called out to them, so I fought to defend myself."

"They must have been searching for the Freya." Edgar's expression was grave.

It seemed the Prince had ordered Ulysses to awaken the worm in order to obtain the precious stone. A piece of fiery Freya had been the worm's weak point—perhaps it was also a source of fairy magic, or something extremely similar.

"What happened to the villagers?" Edgar asked.

"Unfortunately, they got away from me."

"With the Freya?"

"Most likely."

Edgar sighed but then quickly shot Ermine an appreciative smile. "It sounds to me as though you have been in the wars."

His servant gave a slight shake of her head. It looked to Lydia like she was on the verge of collapsing.

"Ermine, you look rather unwell," said Lydia. The young woman's gaze had been wandering, and the fairy doctor thought she detected a hint of panic.

"You may retire," Edgar said. "You ought to get some rest."

With a final parting bow, Ermine left the room. Raven followed her, closing the door behind him.

"Do you suppose she is all right?" Lydia asked.

"I wonder."

Seeing the hint of concern surfacing on his face, the pounding of Lydia's heart suddenly turned painful. Perhaps she really ought *not* to fall in love with him. Edgar reached out for her, as though looking to pick up where they had left off. However, he looked

rather uncertain, and Lydia found herself inclining her face away from him.

He stared at her, his brows furrowing in anguish. “Are you tired as well?”

“Sorry? Oh, I suppose I am. It has been a trying day.”

“Indeed. You ought to take as much rest as you need.” With that, he turned and left.

Lydia stood stock-still as she watched him go, a strange disappointment welling up inside her.

Is that all?

She had expected him to be persistent in his advances, even if she had been clear in wanting him to stop. What was different about tonight that he was able to leave her so effortlessly? Hadn’t he promised never to let go of her again?

Lydia slumped back into her chair and drained her cup of cooled tea. Her breathing felt tight, like there was something lodged deep in her chest. Perhaps Edgar had been concerned about Ermine’s condition.

Yes…that may well be it. The thought itself seemed oddly detached from the plummeting spirits it elicited. She was reminded of the vision they had seen together and how Edgar had briefly let go of Lydia’s hand for Ermine’s sake. The same thing was happening now. However, he had been frantic to bring Lydia back to the human world, and those feelings could not have been insincere, else she would not have been able to return. That was why, tonight, she had wanted to consider her own feelings honestly rather than spurning them at the first opportunity like she always did. She had even been prepared to refrain from lashing out or squirming away should Edgar have sought a kiss from her.

“Oh, I am a *fool*! The greatest fool ever to walk this Earth!”

“What’re ye makin’ a fuss over now?” Kelpie let himself in through the window. Lydia immediately righted her posture, though she recognized it might not have been necessary for *his* sake.

“Nothing,” she replied.

Kelpie approached her, plopped his hand down on her head, and peered at her face. “So ye *are* human after all. That’s a shame. Ah well.”

“I almost forgot to thank you for protecting us. The worm’s flames didn’t hurt you too badly, did they?”

“What does it look like?”

“There doesn’t appear to be a mark on you.”

“Exactly. Drinkin’ tea on yer own, then? That’s a rare sight.”

Lotta was with the grand duke, and Betty was with Pino. All of them were likely reflecting on and recouping from the tumultuous events they had been through. As for Edgar, he was probably with Ermine. Lydia had been through just as much as everyone else, but she was alone.

I suppose I ought to be used to that by now.

“Everyone else has more important matters to attend to.”

“Ah’ll sit with ye, then.” Sitting himself down at the table, Kelpie grabbed a scone and tossed it into his mouth.

Lydia felt herself smile slightly at his outrageous lack of manners. The majority of her time was spent in the company of fairies rather than humans. Perhaps Edgar’s lack of persistence that night was a good thing after all. She didn’t yet know whether she would develop the desire to accept his engagement; she had only just started to consider herself his potential lover. But now that she gave more thought to the matter, she realized that any feelings that did emerge within her would remain forever unrequited. Even if they were to marry, and Edgar were to remain faithful, his heart would still be occupied by another.

I must be rational about this.

Lydia didn’t want to consider that she might have been better off staying in the fairy world, but she couldn’t deny the possibility. Her present loneliness wasn’t Edgar’s fault. The only thing that was certain was that she had genuinely wanted to return to this world with him, and that he must have felt the same way in the moment. Unlike the fairy world, however, this one was far more susceptible to change, as were the hearts of its inhabitants. Knowing that, perhaps Lydia didn’t possess the strength to consider that she might be in love with him.

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Long, long ago, the Blue Knight Earl had sealed the worm away at the behest of the villagers. As for the Freya, the creature’s weak

point, he had likely hidden it somewhere within the village. Two brothers possessing his blood would arrive generations later. They knew both where the Freya was hidden and that it could be used to reawaken the dragon. The older brother wanted nothing but to hone his sculpting, an art that could increase the value of fluorite. The younger brother's aspirations differed.

The Freya produced by the dragon was said to have a particular use. The mayor had called it a stone of immortality, capable of being wielded only by one carrying the Blue Knight Earl's blood. However, Edgar had no idea *how* to draw out that effect of the stone or if the mayor's claims were even true. Either way, it was clear that the younger brother had wanted to awaken the dragon so that it would produce Freya once more.

Sensing danger, the older brother had carved the sole fluorite capable of awakening the dragon into a signet ring, then sent it to the far-off Principality of Cremona. It had been one of his final acts before his sibling killed him.

Edgar had to wonder whether the Ulysses he knew really was son to the younger brother in question. It seemed he had been subjected to brainwashing and brought up in a highly controlled manner, but that gave no clue as to the origin of his blood. The only thing that was certain was that Ulyssess carried the Blue Knight Earl's blood but had avoided being slain by the Prince by swearing loyalty to him. That was how he had been able to locate the hidden Freya and use it to reawaken the dragon.

The remaining piece of Freya was no longer in Wallcave, as far as Edgar knew. The villagers Ermine had seen pocketing it had vanished. Should it fall into the Prince's hands, would it render him immortal? If so, that would prove rather inconvenient. Regardless, it seemed the deeper they dug, the more mysteries they uncovered.

Edgar still wasn't confident in his ability to face his enemies. Although he had slain the dragon, it had been mostly thanks to Lydia, and he remained unable to draw out the sword's true power against a fairy foe. He still wasn't sure what to do about the fairy doctor either.

He stood on the balcony, gazing over the ocean and the reflection of the morning sun glistening on its waters. Starting to feel a chill, he went back inside just as Raven arrived to tell him

that breakfast was ready.

"I shall be going to the village post office, my lord. Is there anything else you need from me?"

"The post office? What for?"

"Miss Carlton asked me to send a letter for her."

"Addressed to whom?" While Edgar knew he was invading her privacy, he couldn't stem his curiosity when it came to Lydia.

"To her father. She wished to inform Professor Carlton of her intention to take some time off to spend in Scotland."

Edgar was stunned. "Time off?" he heard himself ask.

"Miss Carlton said she was having an early Christmas holiday. I had thought you had given her permission."

Far from giving her permission, she hadn't even asked him. Edgar grabbed his jacket and made to leave the room.

"She left some time ago, my lord."

"You didn't stop her?" Though Edgar knew Raven wasn't at fault, he was struggling to grasp the situation and just wanted to know *why* this was happening. "I permitted no such holiday. Why did you not come to inform me of this immediately?"

"It was dark out. If she told him not to wake you, he wasn't gonna do it. He's so loyal to you that he's gonna listen to your fiancée too, you know?" Lotta had come into the room without so much as a knock despite the fact that its master was a member of the opposite sex. She thrust a scrap of paper in Edgar's face. "Here's her notice of absence. No excuses about not knowing anything now, yeah?"

He ran his eyes over his. "It's November."

"A month and a half till the end of Christmas. Looks to me like you've pushed her pretty hard. I'd say she deserves that long of a break."

Edgar slumped down on the sofa, having lost the energy to argue. "Why did she give her notice to *you*, of all people?"

"This whole thing was my idea. I said she should take some time off and distance herself from you for a bit. Then I said if she was gonna do it, she needed to do it before you convinced her to stay."

His jaw dropped. "I beg your pardon?"

"I was tellin' her how you'd pulled yourself together a bit. But then I thought, maybe you haven't actually changed *that* much

since you were with Betty. I think I actually made Lydia upset, which made me feel bad."

Lydia was upset? Edgar didn't understand. It certainly hadn't seemed that way to him.

"I guess you're not as smooth when it comes to women as I thought."

He glared at Lotta indignantly.

"Or is it just that you can't decide what you want with her?"

"Get to the point. I presume you have one, seeing as you are meddling in others' affairs like this."

"There were a load of fairies in her room late into the night. I could only see the one with the black curls and that cat, but the way they were actin', it looked like it was pretty busy. It made me wonder why *you* weren't there."

"I told Lydia to get some rest. I would have thought she'd be quite tired."

"Yeah, I mean, she's been to hell and back. She had to save me, Betty, and the baby all at once, and she had to do it alone 'cause the rest of us are useless when it comes to fairies."

Precisely. Not only had she shouldered all of that burden by herself, but she had been prepared to never return to the human world. It was why Edgar didn't want to be apart from her ever again. Since he lacked the ability to defend against fairies, being by her side was one thing he could do for her instead. That was when he suddenly realized that she had probably been alone last night.

"I thought you'd be with her, 'specially since you experienced so much danger together. You were the only one who knew exactly what she'd been through. I thought you'd flirt with her till she forgot all about all the horrible stuff and could get some sleep."

Edgar could do nothing but listen. It wasn't as though he had been entirely inconsiderate in leaving Lydia by herself. He had thought it a prime opportunity to get as close to her as he wanted to. However, the feeling that he wasn't yet enough for her had made him hesitate. He had failed to retrieve the Freya and didn't even know what sort of power it possessed. He didn't know how he could protect her from Ulysses, a man who possessed the blood of the *true* Blue Knight Earl. There was no guarantee that their future challenges would be as easily overcome as the worm.

He found himself at once unable to let go of her and unable to face her. When she had faced *him*, he had retreated.

"Lydia was tellin' me how she could only rely on fairies for company. She smiled when she said it."

She placed her trust in me—a human—in order to return…and yet found herself without a human for company. How could she not have been upset?

"She probably got picked on all the time for saying she could see fairies, but I reckon she smiled through it all like she did last night. I really wanna see her be happy with a man she truly loves. That's why I can't let you have her the way you are now."

"Taken on the role of her mother, have you?"

"Her friend. And she's not like Betty. You flirt with her like it's nothing, but she's only got two options now: rejecting you, or falling for you *hard*." Lotta did not mince her words. She was utterly furious with him.

He *didn't* flirt with Lydia like it was "nothing," but he still felt unable to refute the accusation. With that, Lotta left him alone.

"Will you go after Miss Carlton?" Only when Raven spoke did Edgar realize the boy was still there. He sounded slightly apologetic.

"No. I doubt I would be able to persuade her considering how things stand at present."

Raven gave him a bow before leaving the room.

Edgar had been confident that he and Lydia had come a step closer to understanding each other. His anxieties had increased by the same measure as he realized he might be about to change the course of her fate, leaving him with a crushing indecisiveness. Recognizing that indecisiveness, Lydia had tried to let go of his hand for his sake, even when it meant yielding to the fairy magic. He had vowed to himself that he would overcome the fae illusion in order to protect her, and yet she had still felt the need to lie to him—and it was entirely his fault. He wanted to protect her, but he was only hurting her. If nothing changed, she would continue to feel alienated from human society and one day leave his side altogether.

"What now?"

Edgar posed the question as though he had a choice, but he could not imagine trying to distance himself from her. His

thoughts instead jumped to how he could make it as though his mistakes from the past twenty-four hours had never happened. Lydia was only taking a leave of absence.

Surely that meant she was going to return.

Afterword

Hello. It is good to see you for another volume of *Earl and Fairy*. I'm sure it will be deep into fall by the time this book reaches your hands, but I'm writing this at the height of summer. Everyone else is taking their summer vacation right now, so I decided to go and visit a sunflower field for a change of pace. But going out on a summer day turned out to be a huge mistake. I drove for just over an hour to escape the heat of the town, and I'd expected the air to be a little cooler. Instead, I thought I was going to melt. Naturally, the sunflower field was right under the blazing sun without any shade in sight (I should have known better!), and that's how I ended up exhausted under the marquee. I even started to think that I can't keep living in an environment where nature is so harsh, which makes me wonder exactly when I got so weak. Anyway, I visited the field and was able to take in the endless rows of sunflowers. Satisfied with that, I had some sunflower ice cream and then went home.

As weak as I am, I still put my characters into some really harsh situations. Having said that, the worst *might* be yet to come for them. I just thought of this, but I bet if I asked the readers which character I should be tougher on, I get the feeling that all of you would answer with "Edgar." Or maybe I'm just imagining it. Especially with this volume, I could almost hear the shouts from you all denouncing him as a "massive idiot" (and other insults) as I wrote. Oh, I was just hearing things? Okay, then. If you can, I ask that you be patient with him for a little while longer. He might just have a change of heart one of these days…but knowing him, maybe not.

I've still got some space left for the afterword, so I'd like to use it to pass on some trivia (if you can call it that!) about the UK, as usual. So, let's see… How about a simple discussion about fashion? During this period, women would wear corsets and crinolines under their dresses. As you know, corsets are those things that squeeze your waist. Crinolines were created to replace petticoats and make a skirt bloom outward. They are made on a ring-shaped

frame of wire or whalebone, a bit like a lampshade or paper lantern. I wonder if that makes it easier to imagine? Or perhaps more difficult? I suppose it doesn't matter for us these days, but if you ever come to wear a dress for your wedding, you might have the opportunity to wear a modern version of the crinoline. If so, you should choose a dress with a classical design—like a princess dress—rather than a modern one. That's what I would recommend, at least. But then, while I know there are girls who dream about their wedding dresses, I doubt there are any who dream about getting to wear a crinoline.

On the subject of modern weddings and the Western outfits worn at them, most of them look just like the types that upper-class Victorians would wear on a daily basis. Even the men wear ties, waistcoats, and jackets. When it came to jackets back then, men would wear their morning coats in the morning, their frock coats in the afternoon, and their evening coats in the evening. It seems they changed clothes several times a day, and I'm not sure if that meant they were fashion-conscious or just had too much time on their hands. Of course, women would change multiple times too.

A gentleman could not be without his hat, his gloves, and his cane to complete the look. It was a time when menswear had little variety in terms of color, but I also like the colorful jackets and ties from before the Victorian era. There's no need for me to be so strict about period-appropriate fashion in the story, so I let my imagination run free. When it comes to novels, where words are all you have to describe things, it's better when there's some color to be had (that's my opinion, at least).

All that said, did you enjoy this volume as much as the others? I hope you did. I hear that Kelpie's going to have his first appearance on a cover, and I'm currently looking forward to seeing that. Thank you, as always, to Asako Takaboshi-sama for her exquisite illustrations. And to my readers, this volume came out earlier than planned, so there might be a bit of a wait until the next one. May you spend it peacefully.

Mizue Tani, September 2005



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